FASHIONABLE POLITICS

The discursive construction of ethical consumerism in corporate communications, news media, and social media

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For my grandparents

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1 Introduction

Questions of what 'politics' is – and what counts as 'political' in terms of practices and ideas – have been at the centre of public debate for some decades now. Bennett (2008, 2012) has described a development where traditional 'dutiful' citizens, concerned with institutional politics, party membership, and general elections, are mixed with younger, 'actualizing' citizens, who are more interested in expressive forms of engagement, direct action, and the politics of everyday life. Individual actions – which once would have been considered private – are today saturated with political meaning and often spoken of as expressions of, or engagement in, public issues related to social identities, economic inequality, or environmental sustainability.

A phenomenon that has risen to the foreground through this reconfiguration of 'the private' and 'the public' is a diverse set of ideas and practices to which I will be referring as *ethical consumerism*: the notion that global environmental problems and socio-economic inequalities can be solved through individual consumption choices and responsible corporate activities, rather than through regulations or public policy. We have seen an increase when it comes to the 'politics of products', as well as the politics of individual consumption practices and choices (Micheletti, 2003; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Today, consumers are often asked to 'make a difference' by choosing a certain brand or product which promises to 'save lives' or 'create change' in one way or another. Such initiatives are promoted by commercial actors, as well as civil society organisations and government agencies.

Actions included in the ethical consumerism repertoire might operate very clearly within the logic of consumer culture, or they might aim to radically reform it (T. Lewis & Potter, 2011b, p. 17). They vary between more traditional political consumption practices, such as *boycotting* – refusing to buy certain products based on political beliefs – to the increasingly popular *buycotting* – purchasing certain products based on political beliefs (Friedman, 1996; Sandovici & Davis, 2010). Other phenomena found within the ethical market are 'charitainment' – mixing entertainment and charity through the involvement of celebrities (Richey & Ponte, 2011) – and brands that promote niche products approved by a labelling certificate, such as Fair Trade (Fridell, 2007; Lekakis, 2013b), as well as different forms of corporate social

responsibility (CSR) programmes and communication (Brei, 2014; Hanlon, 2008; Hong, 2012). Another example is cause related marketing (CRM) which often builds on a partnership between a for-profit business and a non-profit organisation, simultaneously marketing both the brand and the cause (Hawkins, 2012). Social movement campaigns, culture-jamming, ad-busting, and different lifestyle choices, such as veganism, down-scaling, or organic farming, are also associated with the proliferation of ethical consumerism in different ways.[1]

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[1] The diverse ideas and practices discussed above have been researched under shifting names such as 'political consumerism' (Holzer, 2006; Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti, Føllesdal, & Stolle, 2003; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), 'radical consumption' (Littler, 2009), 'ethical consumption' (Adams & Raisborough, 2010; Lekakis, 2013a, 2013b), and 'commodity activism' (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). They have been the focus of interest in political science, as well as political communication research and social movement studies, where the focus has been on consumption as a new mode of political participation (Bennett, 1998, 2006, 2008, 2012; Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012; Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti et al., 2003; Micheletti & Stolle, 2012; Shah, Friedland, Wells, Kim, & Rojas, 2012; Shah et al., 2007; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Naturally, different forms of ethical, and political, consumption have also been in the spotlight for consumer studies and sociology, both in relation to consumer-citizens and social movements (Holzer, 2006; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). A critical approach is presented by T. Lewis and Potter (2011a), where diverse practices of ethical consumption are explored and problematized, ranging from contemporary anti-consumerism discourse, commodification of poverty in Fair Trade marketing, and the ethics of eating and drinking, to ethical fashion consumption and the re-vitalization of vintage and second-hand markets.

A number of different non-profit certifications created to guide consumers through the fair and green jungle, as well as more general anti-consumerism organisations, have also been the subject of academic interest. This includes, for example, the Fair Trade movement (Adams & Raisborough, 2008; Fisher, 2007; Fridell, 2007; Goodman, 2004; Lekakis, 2012, 2013b; Len Tiu & Heaton, 2006; Lyon, 2006), Good Environmental Choice (Micheletti, 2003), and Adbusters (Klein, 2001; Littler, 2005). Fair Trade has also been researched within the field of strategic marketing, with focus on, for example, consumer understanding of the Fair Trade brand (Len Tiu & Heaton, 2006), and the decision-making processes of Fair Trade consumers (Connolly & Shaw, 2006). Different commercial actors, such as Nike (Lury, 2004, 2011; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), Gap, Benetton, and Converse (Richey & Ponte, 2011), as well as Dove (Banet-Weiser, 2012b; Duffy, 2010; Murray, 2013), have also been subjected to scrutiny, specifically, when it comes to how these companies negotiate the relationship between their brand and diverse ethical concerns.

Ethical consumerism has also been researched in media and cultural studies. Jo Littler (2009) explores the phenomenon of 'radical consumption' through contemporary case studies of media texts. Drawing on work by Wendy Brown, she argues that ethical consumption can be understood as a 'crisis of moralism', indicating both a systemic paralysis of a wider system of modern consumption and gesturing towards the fact that, on a wider scale, no realistic alternative

This thesis focuses on discursive ethical consumerism and how these ideas are articulated in different communicative practices: corporate communications, news media, and social media. Drawing on critical discourse analysis as both theory and method – specifically, the relationship between language and power – I study how ethical consumerism is discursively constructed in relation to fashion consumption and the fashion industry in Sweden. I want to emphasise that it is the different discourses on ethical consumerism that are the object of study here, not the fashion industry as such. The focus on fashion should rather be understood as an example of how contemporary understandings of politics and consumption are made manifest in a particular context.

The study takes its starting point in corporate communications and looks at how branding strategies are used to communicate ethics and to construct the 'moral company' identity. It then moves on to journalism and articles from daily newspapers as a way to capture the news media discourses on these issues. Lastly, it examines the public discourses on social network sites, in the form of user comments on Facebook, where commercial initiatives on environmentalism, labour rights, feminism, and diversity in the fashion world are discussed.

My point of departure in this thesis is that ethical consumerism is not so much a reaction against problems that to a large extent are produced by the system of consumer capitalism – such as climate change and socio-economic inequality (J. Lewis, 2013) – as it is an essential part of today's consumer culture. It operates within the framework of neoliberal market-based solutions, where the promotion of ethical brands and consumer identities increasingly configures commercial actors as political subjects and fetishizes the very

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has yet been forged to a significant degree (Littler, 2009, pp. 2-3). Another significant contribution to this field is the volume on 'commodity activism' edited by Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012), which explores the complexities embedded in contemporary commodified ethical consumerism as a practice of political activism, as well as the forms and force of resistance organised in this context. The research presented here draws on traditions within media, communication, and cultural studies, and incorporates case studies of television, film, celebrity advocacy, consumer activist campaigns, non-profit branding processes, and commercial advertising. The editors suggest that to understand and situate commodity activism in modern societies, we must avoid 'the pitfalls of binary thinking that separate consumption from political struggle', but at the same time beware of the way it connects to new dilemmas of 'affective' or 'immaterial' labour.

notion of being 'an activist'. Ethical consumerism leaves the complex problems of the current moment to be solved by the individual and her 'freedom of choice', rather than being a collective responsibility for public policy. This means that it plays a part in a contemporary 'post-politicisation' of the public sphere where consensus, rather than conflict, is emphasised (Berglez & Olausson, 2013). The approach places the thesis within a tradition of critical studies of individualised branded politics and the neoliberalisation of contemporary societies (for example Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Carrier, 2010; Fisher, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Hearn, 2012).

There is a need for empirical examinations of the discursive elements that construct the market as the best solution for social injustice and climate change, and how these ideologically informed ideas are negotiated in the media and public discourse. Such research should, however, avoid a too 'media-centric' approach and instead try to take the complex relationship between media content and the audience into account (Berglez & Olausson, 2013; Koteyko, 2012; Olausson, 2011).

My research design is therefore inspired by scholars who highlight the need to analyse ethical consumerism in a broader political context and the need to investigate both 'the promise and the limits' that these ideas and practices pose for political engagement and action (Banet-Weiser, 2012a; T. Lewis & Potter, 2011b). If critical research only focuses on the content in commercial communications and marketing materials, there is a risk that we habitually dismiss all commercialisation of the political sphere as 'inauthentic' or as essentially de-politicising without actually taking the complexities and possibilities of the relationship between actors involved in ethical consumerism into account.

The main scientific contribution of this thesis is therefore the ambition to critically examine both the commercial underpinnings of discursive ethical consumerism and what happens when these ideas are 'decoded' and made meaningful by journalists and the public. This involves analysis of both the commercial appropriation and commodification of political issues and identities, and of the reflexive awareness of politically motivated consumers.

1.1 Ethical, political, or sustainable?

The relationship between consumption and politics is not unique for the current moment – the link between them has been more or less emphasised since the 19th century. Today, however, the relationship extends across more diverse areas and involves the conscious – and subconscious – association of a range of products and practices with certain values and political issues. My choice to use the term 'ethical' instead of 'political' to describe this phenomenon is not only a reflection of the popular occurrence of this term, in and beyond academia, but also a way to highlight a shift in the nature and state of contemporary consumer politics (T. Lewis & Potter, 2011b, p. 5). Movements concerned with the inherent politics of certain products, such as Fair Trade, organic farming, and animal rights activism, are not only becoming mainstream, they are also joined by a growing interest in the economic sphere, and ethical claims are linked to brands, products and services that previously did not adhere to such standards (Bossy, 2014).

Consumer capitalism's inherent logic of ever-increasing growth is based on a notion of infinity, while still operating in a material reality of finite natural and human resources, which means that the ability to 'damage and destroy' grows with the scale of the productive capacity (J. Lewis, 2013). The 'boomerang effect' of its social, economic, and environmental impact creates global problems which will – to some extent – be an issue for everyone, independent of class or nation. At the same time, managing these problems and the reflexive modernisation's 'struggle against itself' is increasingly connected to the commercial market, over which the institutional politics and nation states have little or no control (Beck, 1992).

The idea of ethical consumerism can thus be understood as one of the risk management techniques that both corporate and non-corporate actors engage in today. Incorporation of environmental and social responsibility policies into business practices, conceptualised as the 'Triple Bottom Line' of profit, people, and planet (Weiss, Trevenen, & White, 2014), shows that ethics, in one way or another, is a question for producers as well as consumers. The development plays partly on the corporate desire to avoid state or transnational regulation on certain issues and partly on the commercial motivation that a product without exploitative connotations is *profitable* (see for example Linder, 2006). Branding products and companies as 'green', 'fair', or

'sustainable' has a specific value in contemporary society, a 'sign-value' which can be turned into economic value (Arvidsson, 2006).

In this mainstreaming of ethical consumerism, 'sustainability' has become one of the key concepts used to define the balance between social justice, economic progress, and ecological interest – a definition that goes hand-in-hand with the 'triple bottom line'. In the texts studied in this thesis, 'sustainable fashion' is often used to conceptualise the way that ethical concerns are infused into the ideas and practices of both producers and consumers of fashion. What sustainability actually entails, and which part of the bottom line should be emphasised, is, however, often the subject of different interpretations. The ambiguity of the concept leaves it open for discursive struggle between different, sometimes even opposing, social actors and stakeholders who will try to make the audience see it from their specific point of view (Van Gorp & van der Goot, 2012). Therefore, it is also particularly interesting for communication and discourse scholars, as the incorporation of sustainability into different communication practices can tell us something about the ideological underpinnings of ethical consumerism, and how these ideas are shaped by, but also shapes, contemporary understandings of political engagement.

In many ways, the increased interest in ethical consumerism is intertwined with the political and economic logics of neoliberalism, specifically, the notion that market logics can be applied to areas of society previously not understood in these terms (such as education, health care, and politics). Through this development, the relationship between politics and consumption deepens and is increasingly manifested in 'political brand cultures' (Banet-Weiser, 2012a). Thus, one of the main arguments in this study is that contemporary ethical consumerism differs from 'traditional' political consumption in the way it is promoted by commercial actors and integrated into their branding practices. The 'citizen-consumer' of today is not only called into action by governments, social movements, and consumer organisations, but also by corporations and entrepreneurs in different areas. In addition, these commercial actors are themselves increasingly configured as 'moral and political subjects' (Lury, 2011); instead of being pushed towards more ethical behaviour and practices, the 'moral companies' of late capitalism are constructed as the ones who are at the forefront when it comes to issues such as environmentalism, social justice, and gender equality. The identities and practices that these companies put

forward come to represent 'ethicality' by making the idea of ethical consumerism visible to consumers (Carrier, 2010).

Consequently, the notion of ethical consumerism, as I use it in this thesis, encompasses production as well as consumption and is an inherent part of today's consumer culture rather than a reaction against it. This does not mean that the study seeks to expose the ethical claims of certain commercial actors as 'just' marketing, or to dismiss the political engagement of ethical consumers as 'just' a manifestation of social distinction. While it is important to take note of how the commercial appropriation of certain issues or political identities can be seen as 'a predatory form of extending corporate power' in late capitalism (Hanlon & Fleming, 2009), it is equally important also to remember that politics and consumption have never been clearly separate social spheres (Banet-Weiser, 2012a; T. Lewis & Potter, 2011b). The challenge is, as Banet-Weiser (2012a) suggests, to think more deeply about how different practices and phenomena makes sense as logical and 'authentic' forms of politics in the current moment, and for whom. One way to do this is to look at how these ideas are discursively constructed and made meaningful by different actors and in different communicative practices.

1.2   A discourse approach to ethical consumerism

Ethical consumerism matters as a site of inquiry for communication scholars because consumption choices and corporate practices become political through the way that different actors 'load' them with political content (Balsiger, 2010). As the diverse ways that *policy* becomes *choice* intensify, the opportunity to influence these choices becomes increasingly important for stakeholders in different areas, and this influence is often carried out through different mediated discourses. Thus, the discursive construction of ethical consumerism merits specific attention in regards to how certain understandings of political possibilities or limitations are defined or contested through discourse.

1.2.1 Why discourse analysis matters

Discourse can be regarded as the social action and interaction between people, as well as a social construction of reality through language, although the concept has been 'widely and sometimes confusingly used in various disciplines' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 18). Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) propose a general definition of discourse as '*a particular way of talking about*

and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)' (p. 1, italics in original), which indicates that discourses should always be analysed with regards to their relation to certain social actors or practices.

My understanding, and use, of the term 'discourse' in this thesis comes from the tradition of *critical discourse analysis* (CDA), as it has been developed by Fairclough (1995), but also Reisigl and Wodak (2009), Krzyżanowski (2010), and Carvalho (2008). CDA focuses on the signifying power of media and language: the power to represent things in a particular way and to influence knowledge, beliefs, values, social relations, and social identities. It is concerned with relations of class, gender, and ethnicity in media and communication, as well as relations between particular social actors or groups and their audience (Fairclough, 1995, pp. 2,12).

Discourse, according to a popular definition in CDA, is a form of 'social practice' where the discursive event is shaped by, but also shapes, the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s) which frame it (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). Drawing on its roots in linguistics, 'discourse' in the context of CDA refers to spoken and written language use, although it can also be extended to any other semiotic activity which produces meaning, such as visual images or non-verbal communication (Fairclough, 1995, p. 54). Another key notion is that discourses are fluid, or changeable, and that distinguishing the border between one 'discourse' and another 'discourse' is an intricate process. As objects of investigation, discourses are dynamic semiotic entities open to reinterpretation and continuation. As analytical constructs, they always depend on the analyst's perspective (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89).

The focus on language is not specific for CDA alone; rather, the school is related to the emergence of a 'critical paradigm' in media and communication studies, which is, in turn, part of a general 'linguistic turn' in social sciences and the humanities (Hall, 1982; Rorty, 1992). A foundation for the critical paradigm is the structuralist approach to meaning and language; things and events in the world do not have an inherent, single meaning that is transferred through language. Meaning is a social production, a *practice*, where language and symbolisation are the means by which meaning is produced. The world, Stuart Hall writes, has to be 'made to mean' (Hall, 1982, p. 67). As Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, pp. 8-9) put it:

> With language, we create representations of reality that are never mere reflections of a pre-existing reality but contribute to constructing reality. That

does not mean that reality itself does not exist. Meanings and representations are real. Physical objects also exist, but they only gain meaning through discourse.

The above passage describes an epistemological stance which is fundamental to CDA: that material aspects of society, such as economic inequality or environmental risks, can be 'expressed, constituted, and legitimised' by language use and in discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 10). Therefore, the interest in discourse is not limited to just language in itself – rather, it is the discursive construction of our social reality and its relation to different forms of power which are in focus.

1.2.2 Communication, power, and ideology

The notion that all discourse is both *constitutional* and *constitutive* (Fairclough, 1995, p. 55) – i.e. it both shapes and is shaped by society – means that discourse not only works as a way of understanding the world, but also forming it, in an ongoing process of negotiating meaning and relations. It is this process, the 'discursive struggles' over the relationship between consumption and politics, which is the focus of this thesis. This includes the 'ideological work' of language; how texts have particular ways of representing the world, how they highlight particular constructions of social identities as well as social relations, and how mediated communication both affects and is affected by power relations within society.

Media institutions and communication professionals hold a specific power when it comes to constructing *this* rather than *that* account of an event. The social practice of selection and combination of available frameworks of understanding – the gatekeeping and framing function of the media – produces a symbolic product which aims at a certain meaning (Hall, 1982). Therefore, it is no surprise that the 'signifying power' of media has been one of the main research interests within CDA (see for example Carvalho, 2005; Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2000). In today's media and communication industries, however, different commercial actors have an increased influence over journalistic representations, in addition to their own strategic communication on certain issues (Lischinsky & Sjölander, 2014). This development has influenced the research design of this study, specifically, my ambition to examine not just the news media, but also commercial communication and social media content.

Discourses on ethical consumerism, in this context, become *ideological* through the way that they hold certain understandings of the world as true, while obscuring others – a particular discourse on a topic (such as business discourse on sustainable fashion) aims to 'close' the otherwise polysemic meaning of texts so that dominant ideologies appear as neutral understandings of the world (Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1982, p. 75). The Gramscian concept of *hegemony* is often used to describe how certain assumptions about the world become 'common sense' and how this is an ideological process which obscures the possibility of alternatives (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 8). It is important to keep in mind, however, that language is not powerful on its own – language only becomes powerful and influential by way of the use that 'powerful' people make of it (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 88). Thus, the ideological function of discourse involves different social actors who struggle to influence the ideology of a society through interpretations and meaning-making of texts, events, or practices by detaching them from certain contexts and rearticulating them in others (Hall, 1982; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

This means, in relation to the research questions which this thesis seeks to answer, that different social actors will try to influence the idea of ethical consumerism – its possibilities as well as its limitations – through the use of language and in different communicative practices. They will also try to legitimate themselves, and their actions, through different discursive strategies (van Leeuwen, 2007). There are several kinds of institutions and actors that inform consumers about political and ethical aspects of the market and provide guides, platforms, and tools to facilitate choices based on this. Micheletti and Stolle (2012, p. 93) note that the messages that these institutions communicate carry notions of how to act out and perform political responsibility, as well as information about which issues are important and who should be concerned about them in regards to both cause and solution. This can include corporate communication, journalistic texts, and social media interactions.

1.3   Communicative dimensions of ethical consumerism

The activities of political claim-makers often involve communication played out in different text genres or social settings, and it is in these contexts that the idea of ethical consumerism is reinforced, negotiated, or contested. From my point of view, this means that there are three communicative dimensions of ethical consumerism that become particularly interesting: news and social

media as public forums; consumption as a form of identity performance; and the proliferation of promotional culture and branding practices in everyday life.

1.3.1 News and social media as public forums

The first dimension is linked to how the question of what constitutes 'politics' – and how political participation can be carried out – is essentially a question about how we view, and deal with, collective concerns in society. As with any other collective issue, the idea of politics is not formed solely on the individual level, but rather within a shared public sphere where a multitude of voices are trying to make themselves heard. It is from this starting point – the understanding that discourses on ethical consumerism involve contestations and negotiation when it comes to shared understandings of political practices and responsibilities – that both news and social media and their function as public forums become an essential area for research.

Fairclough (1995) argues that given the focal position of the mass media in contemporary social systems, their relevance to the study of sociocultural change should not be understated. Mediated discourses are important for the production, reproduction, and transformation of social issues and play a central role in the construction of 'authorized voices' and problems in social life, as they carry notions of both how the world is constituted and the possibilities available to change it (Carvalho, 2010).

Generally, this means that media presence is central for both consumers and producers of ethical commodities and that communicating to, or with, others in one way or another is an important part of their actions. Today, this communication often takes place on different social media platforms or social network sites – a development that has changed the way political debate, organisation, and campaigning work. While earlier organisation of consumer politics would have had to use existing media channels and established media logics to get attention and to rally up supporters for their cause, contemporary campaigns and protests are increasingly mediated through social network sites, which transform private actions into collective public actions (Parigi & Gong, 2014). Social media is also an increasingly important locus for debate and influence, through participatory practices of sharing and commenting on news and corporate communication on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (Freund, 2011; Hille & Bakker, 2014).

1.3.2 Ethical consumption as communicative performance

The second communicative dimension involves how ethical consumption practices can be understood as 'communicative performances' which carry meaning both through discourse and through the activities themselves. They have 'performative and propagandistic effects' which speak to a communicative dimension of lifestyle practices, with the potential to function as a 'rhetorical tool' for social change (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Through the use of consumption choices and personal style associated with certain issues or ethical identities, one can communicate politics simply by dressing or shopping in a specific way. In a way, the ethical consumer becomes the medium through which social change is communicated. Combined with the intense networking and socialising enabled by the aforementioned use of social media sites, these communicative performances also extend into an immaterial world.

That consumption can be regarded as a form of communication is not a new notion; rather, it has been proposed by scholars from the early twentieth century onwards (it has, however, also been contested, see for example Campbell, 1997). One of the oft-mentioned early works in the area is that of Veblen (1925), who suggested that the 'conspicuous consumption' of the new 'leisure class' was used as a way to communicate distinction and social position. Similarly, Carfagna et al. (2014) suggest that ethical consumerism involves a reconfiguration of ecologically oriented high-status tastes, central to certain individuals' identity projects. Drawing on Bourdieu (1984), they argue that this new 'eco-habitus' is in turn is fostered by a general valorisation of environmental or ethical 'consciousness' in society, although the 'eco-habitus' does not necessarily require high levels of economic capital, but rather, high cultural capital.

1.3.3 Promotional culture and ethical branding

A third communicative dimension of ethical consumerism is linked to what Davis (2013) refers to as the 'promotional cultures' in contemporary society, i.e. the way that promotional practices have become 'absorbed into day-to-day culture' in a widespread and systematic manner. Different forms of promotion colonise our culture in various ways, specifically, when the media, public spaces, and social relations become saturated by advertising (J. Lewis, 2013). Branding is one of the promotional practices that becomes especially important in the context of ethical consumerism. While not necessarily specific to the

contemporary moment, there has been a significant increase in the importance and proliferation of brands during recent decades (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004, 2011). Within promotional cultures, branding is an issue for both commercial and non-commercial actors, specifically in regards to organisational identities and to individual identity work on social media.

The rise of political brand cultures means that the cultivation of an 'authentic' ethical identity is becoming increasingly important for commercial actors (Banet-Weiser, 2012a), both when it comes to promotion and marketing of ethical goods or brands, and when it comes to responding to criticism and protest from consumers. One of the significant characteristics of today's brand is a changed view of the link between producer and consumer; it is no longer predominantly considered to be a relation of stimulus-response, but rather a 'relationship' between the different actors (Lury, 2011, p. 141). This relationship needs to be managed in different ways, depending on the brand identity. Simon (2011) describes how brands become increasingly vulnerable when they claim to be aware of, and responsible for, social and environmental issues. When brands 'open the door' and step into the sphere of politics, it produces a 'backdraft' which means that they cannot always control the politics and desires they want to exploit. In line with this argument, my ambition in this thesis is to examine the relationships between corporations and the audience in political brand cultures and what happens when the political claims of commercial actors are discussed by the public.

1.4   Research objective

This study tries to integrate aspects from all three communicative dimensions in the research objective and design. By analysing corporate communications, news media, and social media, the research objective is to *examine the discursive construction of ethical consumerism as a solution to environmental and social problems* in different communicative practices and text genres. I am interested in how different social identities and practices are established as ethical, authentic, and legitimate and how these discussions reinforce or challenge a neoliberal ideology based on market-solutions, entrepreneurship, and individualism. My interest in the relationship between ethical consumerism, corporate power, and neoliberalisation makes the way commercial actors adopt, address, or oppose the 'ethical turn' a logical first focus. I then move on to investigate the re-contextualisation of such corporate

discourses in the news and social media to see how actors in these public spheres make sense of branded politics and of the power to 'make a difference' through consumption. While departing from a critical theory perspective, which highlights the de-politicising aspects of commercialised politics, the approach seeks to facilitate an investigation of how ethical consumerism can carry both possibilities and limitations when it comes to political participation in late capitalism.

Even though ethical consumerism is a global phenomenon, it is not spread evenly around the world or within Euro-American societies. It is, however, particularly visible in Scandinavia (Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005, p. 248). In a majority of the Nordic countries, there exists a relatively high awareness of ethical consumption (Sandovici & Davis, 2010, p. 348), and almost half of the population between 15 and 85 years of age can be seen as political consumers (Micheletti & Stolle, 2004, p. 105). Thus, Swedish society should be a fruitful arena for exploring how these issues and practices have been conceptualised and adopted by both businesses and consumers.

1.4.1 Main research questions

Based on the previous discussion, I will fulfil the research objective by focusing on what I regard as three key concepts – *ethicality*, *authenticity*, and *legitimacy* – and how they are discursively constructed and negotiated in the texts analysed:

1. How is ethicality defined and discursively linked to representations of specific issues, identities, or practices that are constructed as more (or less) ethical?

2. How are 'authentic' ethical identities constructed for different social actors or consumer groups?

3. How are consumption practices and actions of corporations, or other actors, legitimised or de-legitimised in relation to different issues?

These questions will be answered using tools from the *discourse-historical approach* within critical discourse analysis (Carvalho, 2008; Krzyżanowski, 2010; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). The analytical categories in focus are the *discourse topics* in the texts (which form a conceptual understanding of the

content) and the *discursive strategies* used by different actors, in the form of self- and other-presentation, argumentation, and legitimation. From this starting point, this study proposes a critical view on the growing influence of ethical consumption as a preferred mode of action for social change in neoliberal societies and a deeper understanding of how such practices are shaped and negotiated in and through discourse.

1.5   Disposition

The thesis is organised as follows. Chapter 2 presents a theoretical framework for understanding the communicative dimensions of ethical consumerism in contemporary consumer culture, including discussions on concepts such as ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy in relation to ideology. In Chapter 3, the methodological approaches from which the study draws are introduced and discussed. This chapter also includes a presentation of the tools for analysis and the empirical material for the three different parts of the study, including selection criteria, general characteristics, and ethical considerations.

The empirical chapters that follows are organised according to three communication genres: Part I (Chapter 4) focuses on corporate communication, in the form of annual sustainability reports from three leading Swedish fashion brands, while Part II (Chapter 5) involves analysis of journalistic discourses of ethical fashion in Swedish newspapers. Part III (Chapter 6) focuses on public discourses and on discussions among 'ordinary people' in the form of comments to news stories or corporate posts on the social network site Facebook. In Chapter 7, I summarise the findings from the three different parts of the study and present my most important conclusions based on these findings. I also discuss the conclusions in relation the 'promises and limits' of ethical consumerism and formulate some suggestions for future research. The thesis ends with a summary in Swedish, where the key findings and conclusions are presented.

2   Communicating ethics in late capitalism

This thesis investigates the way that the idea of 'ethical consumerism' is discursively constructed as a solution to social or environmental problems, in different communicative practices. A main focus is the ongoing negotiations of political possibilities and limitations in a society where the politicisation of consumer choices and corporate activities are increasingly both promoted and contested. I see the discursive struggles over what it means to be 'ethical' and what kind of political potential there is in specific consumption practices as manifestations of ideological fights for dominance and hegemony in contemporary society (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). This approach means that I am interested in not only examining the ideological underpinnings of ethical consumerism, but also in what way these are confronted and contested in mediated discourses.

The following chapter aims to present the theoretical framework of the study. I will give some background to the popularisation of ethical consumerism and outline the theoretical perspectives used to analyse the empirical material. The chapter starts with a discussion of ethical consumerism in relation to neoliberalism and consumer culture and a consideration of the ways in which politicised consumption can be understood as either an extension or restriction of political participation. Furthermore, I discuss the communication of ethical identities (both for corporations and consumers) through practices of branding and self-branding. This is followed by a discussion of the mediation of ethical consumerism in corporate communication, newspapers, and social media. These parts of the framework also include presentations of the study's three key concepts: ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy. The chapter ends with a presentation of how the different parts come together in a 'circuit of discourse' that draws on the 'circuit of culture' model (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005; Scherer & Jackson, 2008).

2.1   Ethical consumerism, neoliberalism, and consumer culture

We live in a time where market logics increasingly colonise a range of new areas and social contexts – an appropriation which includes politics as well as

leisure and media. Many scholars argue that the marketization of new social settings is particularly characteristic of the current moment of 'late' or 'advanced' capitalism (see for example Arvidsson, 2006; Banet-Weiser, 2012a; Harvey, 2005; Lury, 2004; Lury, 2011; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). This discursive, as well as economic and political, advancement has not happened by chance or by natural development. Since the 1970s, there has been a persistent turn towards *neoliberalism* in political-economic practices all over the world, constructing it as a hegemonic mode of discourse. Neoliberalisation can be understood as an intentionally ideological project, aimed at changing not only economics, but also the 'soul' of society: social solidarity is dissolved in favour of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values. It proposes that strong property rights, free trade, and free markets are the best ways to advance human well-being and that an emphasis on freedom creates liberated, entrepreneurial individuals (Harvey, 2005).

The proliferation of ethical consumerism is inherently linked to this neoliberal shift in economics and politics and is connected to an immense concentration of corporate power that has emerged during recent decades. Neoliberalism has constructed a market-based populist culture which emphasises the liberty of consumer choice, "[…] not only with respect to particular products but also with respect to lifestyles, modes of expression, and a wide range of cultural practices" (Harvey, 2005, p. 42). This means that consumption and consumer practices become important not only for how we see ourselves and others, but also for how we view society and its institutions, responsibilities, and scope. The shift towards neoliberal ideology and economic practice includes marketization of public services, such as education and health care, as well as political action, and identities that, among other things, are manifested in ethical consumerism.

The transfer of power from government to corporations is a hallmark of the global neoliberal turn, and it impacts the way politics is acted out and understood. In keeping with this change, politics has, in relation to an increasing number of issues, been 'outsourced' from the voting booth to the supermarket (Simon, 2011). The effect is an extension of corporate power, which also means that commercial actors have increased opportunities to enforce their point of view within diverse social relationships and to have an impact on hegemonic understandings of how society should function. The economic logics that underpin ethical consumerism make it a 'natural' way of engaging in social issues in a neoliberal society, as it both reflects the

importance of market transactions as a fundamental aspect of people's lives and the importance of the autonomous individual and of that individual's freedom of choice (Carrier, 2010). Ethical consumerism can, consequently, be understood as an ideological construct of late capitalism, which proposes that global environmental problems and socio-economic inequalities can be solved through better, 'ethical', consumption choices and corporate activities.

2.1.1 Consumerism and consumer culture

Consumption has always been a part of human life and existence and will probably, in one way or another, remain so in the future. However, the impact consumption has on how we view society, and our role in it as citizens, has varied over time. Today, consumption plays a distinct part in how society is constructed, not least when it comes to economic and financial issues. Some, like Bauman (2007a), argue that consumption has, to a certain degree, replaced work as a driving force in the global North, while production is increasingly removed to low-wage countries and regions in other parts of the world. Though Bauman's description might be a slight simplification of the current situation, he does make an important distinction between 'consumption' and 'consumerism': the first consists of individual acts, while the latter can be viewed as an 'attribute of society' where the individual capacity for wanting, desiring, and longing is detached ('alienated') from individuals and recycled/reified into a force which sets a 'society of consumers' in motion (Bauman, 2007a). People and audiences are increasingly being constructed as consumers – and leisure, art, and public services as a form of commodities – rather than as citizens. These societies 'interpellate' members primarily in their capacity of consumers (Bauman, 2007a; Fairclough, 1995; J. Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005).

It is based on this distinction between 'consumption' and 'consumerism' that I refer to the diverse ideas and practices studied in this thesis as 'ethical consumerism', rather than 'ethical consumption'. It serves to mark the division between individual consumer practices and the ideological construct of ethical consumerism which is manifested in consumption, as well as practices of communication and marketing, such as branding of both commercial and non-commercial actors. In line with the neoliberal endeavour to extend market logics into all areas of society, consumerism is both an economic ideology promoted in relation to global development, where it is established as fundamental for international relations and the key to economic development,

and a political ideology where the role of the state is to create markets and market disciplines out of what were previously seen as public goods and services (Gabriel & Lang, 2006).

Furthermore, consumerism is also closely associated to the proliferation of 'consumer culture' which permeates contemporary societies in a range of ways. In relation to ethical consumerism, the most significant aspects of consumer culture are the marketization of what was previously state or publicly provided services; the expansion of shopping as a leisure pursuit connected to identity and personal expression; the ethical and political organisation of consumers (by both commercial and non-commercial actors); and the rise of brand culture and the inescapabilty of advertising in everyday life (Lury, 2011). All of these aspects are, in one way or another, linked to the politicisation of consumer choices and of 'the market' as such. As Carfagna et al. (2014, p. 159) put it, the hegemonic nature of consumer culture means that 'voting with your dollars' or 'changing a light bulb to change the world' become a common-sense form of political action in contemporary Euro-American societies.

2.2 Consumption as political activism

Consumer culture has been marked by active political struggle from the very beginning, with several early examples of organised political campaigning around consumption (T. Lewis & Potter, 2011b). The Co-operative Movement, as a principle of 'self-help by the people', emerged in the United Kingdom in the mid nineteenth century and began as a working-class reaction to poor quality of goods and excessive prices, while so-called 'value-for-money' consumerism appeared in its modern form in the 1930s. These early consumer groups played heavily on the containment of emerging powerful corporations and were concerned about the threat posed to consumers by increasing concentration and monopoly capital. Value-for-money consumerism has been a strong advocate for consumer rights against corporations, and many organisations have become authority voices on issues of transparency and consumer rights in several countries. So-called 'Naderism' (named after its figurehead, Ralph Nader) even went beyond the 'getting the best deal' vision and instead confronted the market itself (Lang & Gabriel, 2005).

The 'Naderism' movement did not have a very extensive reach outside of the United States. Instead, so-called 'alternative' consumerism has taken on

this role in Sweden, as in many other European countries. A core intention for this 'alternative wave' has been to make consumers aware of the global impact of Western consumption and to change shopping habits and the culture of consumerism. Born in environmental concerns and consumer consciousness, alternative consumerism rose to recognition first in Europe and later in North America in the 1980s. This development paved the way for other kinds of alternative consumerism in the early twentieth century. Issues such as animal rights, fair trade, and the social and economic vulnerability of workers in the global South became central concerns within the new social movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Lang & Gabriel, 2005; Lury, 2011).

Ethical consumerism stems from this wave of alternative consumerism. The relationship between environmentalism and consumption ('green consumerism') has, for example, gone through a significant change over recent decades. That Euro-American societies actually 'consume' the rest of the world due to levels of waste and pollution is not a new observation – what is new is the way that this statement is formulated. Before the idea of environmentalism gained attention, waste was more or less a technical question of administration, and effective removal. Today, this question is instead a moral problem for consumers to take responsibility for (Lury, 2011). That your consumption choices have an impact on the living conditions in other parts of the world, or on your own surroundings, has become an increasingly present idea in discussions of Western consumer culture. Being 'conscious' about this, and taking responsibility by being a 'green' or 'ethical' consumer, can mean purchasing more environmentally-friendly products or resisting consumption altogether (Lang & Gabriel, 2005).

The 'ethical turn' in consumer culture, and the mainstreaming of environmental concerns, has led to the development of niche markets in the late twentieth century, as many companies started to take note of environmental pressure groups, undertaking environmental audits and creating 'green policies'. Such environmental efforts often draw on the ecological modernisation theory, which proposes that global sustainable development does not necessarily mean a fundamental reorganisation of the core institutions, relations, and logics in capitalist societies. Rather, technological innovation and environmental reform programmes which address problems within specific modes of production can redeem some of the 'structural design flaws' of market economy as we know it (Mol & Spaargaren, 2000). Hence, a 'sustainable capitalism' is promoted, which today often includes not only

environmentalism, but also socio-economic issues, gender equality, and animal welfare.

An increased focus in both news and popular media on 'lifestyle' issues connected to 'fair' or 'green' consumption is another aspect of ethical consumer culture. Marketers and advertisers who gladly jump on the 'green bandwagon' (without necessarily trying to incorporate these values into the 'brand identity') also contribute to the trend, although it gives rise to critical voices concerning corporate 'green washing'. Overlapping with the environmental issues, an increased critique of materialism and over-consumption is promoted by anti-consumerism activists through 'media-savvy strategies' that address 'the consumer' as a political subject (T. Lewis & Potter, 2011b). This mainstreaming has, however, predominantly occurred through addressing the ethical consumer as a privatised, informed individual. This individualised mode of ethical consumerism as a political practice can be linked to discussions on the decline or expansion of political participation in late modernity, which has been the focus of much recent scholarship.

2.2.1 The promises of ethical consumerism

Seeing everyday practices as articulations of citizenship has been central in recent debates concerning new forms of civic culture and political participation. Such discussions often actualise different approaches, or philosophical levels, which distinguish *politics* from *the political* – i.e. the 'ontic' level of practices and institutions of conventional politics, and the 'ontological' level of antagonism, power, and conflict which provides the context for politics (Mouffe, 2005). The story of political participation today is either one of declining interest in traditional 'politics' – in the form of voting, party membership, long-time engagement in popular movements, and keeping informed on current issues through the mass media – or an increased interest in 'the political' – in the form of issue-specific networks, direct action organised through social media, and demanding political accountability from actors outside of institutionalised politics (Van Deth, 2014).

A key question for research in this area has been in what way consumption can be linked to new perspectives on citizenship. Ethical consumption has been viewed as one of the more visible forms of *personalised politics*, where individuals increasingly code their politics through personal lifestyle values (Bennett, 2012), and it is a form of participation that is celebrated by actors on both the left and right sides of the political scale (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

Micheletti (2003) has conceptualised the modern turn towards personalised politics as 'individualised collective action', a concept that combines self-interest and the general good. She connects it to practices of everyday activism, in turn linked to theories on sub-politics (Beck, 1992) which is characterised as 'politics emerging from below', in places other than formal politics.

Ethical consumerism has also been discussed as a reflection of a broader tendency to read political meaning into entertainment and individual expression (Bennett, 1998; Featherstone, 1987). Online activities, and the use of social network sites, have specifically been argued to impact and facilitate this changing nature of politics. They provide an infrastructure for networking, integrate otherwise separate activities in the private and public sphere, and facilitate self-organised participation through mobile media, which all together push political engagement towards more personalised, cause-oriented, and ad hoc forms (Bennett, 2012; Ekström & Shehata, 2018).

Environmental politics, health, child care, civil rights, and corporate social responsibility are all issues which have been linked to the rise of 'lifestyle politics' – an interest in politics and civic issues which is not acted out in traditional organisations, but rather, through a more individualised approach which includes shopping, entertainment, fashion, and self-improvement (Bennett, 1998, 2006; Shah et al., 2007). Lifestyle politics is said to be connected to notions of 'post-materialism' and an increased distrust in institutional politics (Bennett, 1998, 2012; Stolle et al., 2005). Uncertainty about whether traditional political engagement really leads to real change provides a ground for the notion that citizenship instead can be acted out through individual consumption choices, which might be experienced as more direct and palpable compared to collectivist participation in political decision-making (Bauman, 2007a). Consequently, communication from activist networks concerned with specific issues increasingly adopts a rhetoric that focuses on consumer choice, self-image, and public displays of social responsibility (Bennett, 2006).

It is not just the conscious consumer who is held up as a political subject in ethical consumerism and who is a central actor in this reconfiguration of political participation. It also involves commercial actors, who are increasingly positioned as 'making a difference' on specific issues. The caring capitalism of the current moment does not resist the claim of environmental or human rights advocates, but rather, precedes them by incorporating such values into their company culture. The development of corporate community programmes

in production countries and executive positions such as Sustainability Managers are some aspects of a value-oriented company culture that is emphasised both internally and in relation to other actors and stakeholders. Ideas about the 'moral corporation' have been spreading fast during recent decades, often realised in corporate social responsibility initiatives and branding practices (Lury, 2011), and can in many ways be regarded as part of an extended understanding of political engagement and practices.

Ethical consumerism can, from this perspective, be regarded as form of 'individualised responsibility-taking' which expands political action repertoires into the 'extra-parliamentary realm' and lowers the bar for participation (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Just like with social media activities, ethical consumption practices can be conducted in a self-organised, everyday manner, while still being connected to a sense of collective action through information campaigns, networks, and shared experiences. Research shows, however, that the lower thresholds of engagement in and through social media are still conditioned by the social backgrounds, habits, motivations, and identities of users (Ekström & Shehata, 2018). Similar limitations and restrictions can be seen in ethical consumption as political engagement.

2.2.2 The limits of ethical consumerism

In some ways, ethical consumerism can be argued to restrict, rather than open up, political discourse as well as action. To begin with, it is through *freedom of choice* that consumer power is exercised; for a product to be competitive on the ethical market, its 'footstep' must be perceived as positive, otherwise consumers choose another option (Lury, 2011, p. 165ff; Micheletti, 2003, pp. 12-14). Furthermore, ethical consumerism is underpinned by the assumption that individuals are not only free to choose, but also, given the right conditions and education, they are willing to choose without primarily focusing on self-interest; or rather, that the positive outcome of choosing the 'right' option will come to affect not only the producer, but also the consumer (through, for example, decreased pollution or the self-affirmative feeling of 'doing good').

Consequently, ethical shopping guides, trademarks, or activist networks often downplay conflicts and emphasise how changing the world is 'easy' when you focus on positive choices for social justice or sustainability (Johnston, 2007, p. 244). The positive connotations of 'buycotting' rather than boycotting downplays the conflicts and contradictions that are often found at the core of political issues and that enable or restrict participation. The

emphasis on free choice within ethical consumerism obscures certain social and economic power relations, where choice is not free for all individuals, but rather, is influenced by external factors such as class, economy, and gender (Bauman, 2007a; Fairclough, 1995).

Choice is a mechanism in upholding and reinforcing both individual responsibility and class distinctions, since the idea that choice is free for all suggests that people who make 'bad choices' are somehow responsible for their own failures. Thus, the focus on free choice restricts both the access to political participation for certain social groups and the actual impact of such choices. Individuals might appear to have the freedom to choose between a variety of lifestyles, consumption habits, and identities. In reality, though, these choices, and the political power exercised through them, are often restricted by economic, cultural, and social restraints (Lekakis, 2013a). Ethical choices and 'conscious' shopping practices primarily appeal to a wealthy and educated middle class (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Ferrer-Fons & Fraile, 2013). Class dynamics behind increasing ethical consumption as a form of political engagement may therefore risk excluding actors that lack in economic or social capital from the ability to influence policy and society.

When political participation becomes a question of individual choice, both for consumers and corporations, it limits the possibility for reform that does not have increased economic growth as its core motivation. It also tends to obscure the source of the problems that these choices are supposed to address. Alison Hearn (2012) claims that the discursive concentration around the individual's personal responsibility for collective issues leads to 'the self' becoming both the cause and solution when it comes to large-scale social problems in modern society. Free choice can therefore both create a 'fear of failing' and paralysing worries about choosing the right option and can be used as a smoke screen for shedding responsibility; if one is seen as actively choosing a particular option, one is expected not to complain when that option turns out to be inadequate (Gabriel & Lang, 2006).

It is important to stress in this context that the expansion of the notion of citizenship to consumers and corporations is also a process that is closely linked to struggles over power and influence, specifically in relation to hegemonic understandings of how society should function. Individualised politics that focus on free choice cannot escape the neoliberal frame – consumer organisations or rights advocates in civil society that promote a 'fair' or 'green' version of consumerism cannot really do so without still adhering to

its basic principles (Harvey, 2005). Instead, the focus on consumption choices feeds into the creation of niche markets, working, voluntarily or not, within capitalist premises. A majority of anti-consumerism groups and individual ethical consumers do not rebel against commodities; rather, they use them to protest by engaging in the appropriate type of consumption. Such practices also feed into a discourse of social distinction within 'hip anti-consumerism', separating the 'aware' individuals from the unaware masses through their consumption choices (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Heath, 2005).

Similarly, the emphasis on corporations as political actors becomes increasingly intertwined with the construction of corporate identities and marketing strategies and the cultivation of relationships between brands and consumers. Through the focus on consumption, and on corporations as the only actors with the power to actually 'make a difference', the political possibilities are limited and contained within a corporate discourse of profitability, marketability, and individual choice. From an ideological perspective, this means that ethical consumerism strengthens rather than challenges the neoliberal hegemony in our society, as it reinforces the importance of the individual and 'the Market' as the best place to find solutions to problems it has also created. Resistance has, so to say, become futile, as there is no 'outside' to the logics of contemporary consumer culture (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012).

2.3   Ethical brands and branding ethicality

The configuration of corporations as 'moral' and political subjects, which I argue is an inherent part of ethical consumerism, is related to the way both individuals and organisations, more or less unconsciously, have internalised the need to promote themselves in different ways. In today's 'promotional culture', new social settings as well as occupations are increasingly saturated with and shaped by promotional practices and functions, regardless of whether we look at the organisational, social, or individual level (Davis, 2013). One of the promotional practices that has become omnipresent is *branding*, and brands have come to serve as core components of both cultural and economic discourse. 'The brand', in this context, is more than just a logo or visual sign that serves to differentiate one company's product from another; rather, the brand provides a context for the use of products. Brands signify corporate identities, not just in external communication, but also internally – they 'sell'

the organisation, its values and goals, both to consumers and to its own employees (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004, 2011). Brands have also gained a clear economic significance – 'brand equity' is an increasingly important issue, and brands can be conceptualised as a form of 'immaterial capital', as the consumer attention they generate also generates economic value (Arvidsson, 2006). This development is also noticeable outside of the commercial sphere; branding has, for example, become a central issue for non-commercial actors and for entire countries who want to cultivate their organisational or national identities (Aronczyk, 2013; Vestergaard, 2008).

Lury (2004) highlights the communicative and performative dimensions of brands; that they can be understood as a 'medium of translation' which facilitates the supply and demand of products 'through the organisation, co-ordination and integration of the use of information' (p. 4). The brand is a 'new media object' that frames the activities of the market as well as the relationship between consumers and producers. Branding strategies serve to construct the 'organisational identity' of the company through association with certain ideas, values, activities, or actors. Therefore, they can also become highly ideological, through the way they link the brand to representations of, for example, national identity (as seen in recent commercials and marketing for Volvo, where the idea of the Volvo car is discursively linked to ideas of Sweden as a modern, multicultural, but still traditional, nation). Branding can also be used as a form of legitimation in both public communication and everyday interactions (van Leeuwen, 2007), as it can both legitimise and de-legitimise practices and ideas with which the company either wants to be associated or from which they want to dissociate themselves.

Branding is a dynamic process of exchange between the company and the consumers, as the latter can use, abuse, or reuse the brand and its products in new and unexpected ways. Through this communicative function, brands have become part of the global popular culture, as they make it possible for individuals to 'perform' a certain social identity through the use of branded products and the cultural connotations they embody. It is the significance of the brand – its 'sign-value' – that becomes the main use-value for many consumers today (specifically in young, urban, social settings), as they help individuals to negotiate their own subjectivity and the social positioning of the self in everyday life. By evoking the neoliberal frame of freedom and personal choice, brands 'enable and empower' consumers to act and feel in a particular way in order to become a particular person (Arvidsson, 2006).

2.3.1 Brand cultures and CSR as authentic politics

In relation to ethical consumerism, the brand works both to identify and legitimise the company itself as an ethical actor and to empower the consumer to act ethically in everyday consumption practices. Banet-Weiser (2012a) speaks of emerging 'brand cultures' where politics is increasingly understood through the language and logic of the market, and consumers who 'shop for change' are encouraged to see themselves as activists. This means a shift away from individuals who participate in (collective) *consumer movements* towards those who identify as (individual) *consumer activists*. This shift can be seen as a logical consequence of a society where individual consumer choices are emphasised as the 'literal stuff of politics' and where political goals, such as collective justice, often are characterised as 'old-fashioned' and ineffective modes of politics (Banet-Weiser, 2012a, pp. 140-141).

A key notion here is 'authenticity', and a key question is to what extent there is such a place as 'outside' consumer capitalism, where politics (and people) can exist without any interference from corporate power. Being 'real', as opposed to 'fake', is often linked to the difference between non-commercial and commercial actors or settings, specifically in relation to politics. The general view is that authenticity is lost when profitability is gained, something of which the 'moral corporations' of today are painfully aware. Many of the legitimation strategies in corporate communications strive to bridge this gap between 'being real' and 'appropriating' ideas, identities, or movements in a way that strips them of any political potential. As Banet-Weiser (2012a, pp. 10-14) cautions, however, an unreflective dismissal of any kind of 'commodity activism' as inherently non-political risks simplifying the way that the authentic and the commodity self are intertwined, and increasingly both expected and tolerated, in contemporary consumer culture.

Political branding requires feedback from consumers – it builds on the performative character of brands and interaction between producers and consumers in building communities (Banet-Weiser, 2012a; Lury, 2004). From this perspective, the consumer activist becomes an individual who 'co-produces' political brand culture through everyday life and routines, rather than opposes or protests it. Consumer activists 'govern the self' through participation in brand communities, and this participation accomplishes something for the consumer, as well as the producer. Saving the environment through consumption is, for example, often a satisfying practice. Consumers might therefore still feel like they are 'doing good' and performing political

'consciousness' through their ethical consumption choices, even though they are, at the same time, aware and savvy of 'greenwashing' or 'whitewashing' practices (Banet-Weiser, 2012a, p. 146). Branded political communication also provides activists with an alternative access to, and impact in, both mass and social media, as they address individuals in a language that is more easily accessible than conventional ideological terms (Bennett, 2006). Furthermore, political brand cultures might make it possible to hold corporations accountable for their environmental or social impact through the way that their brands become symbolical targets for activist groups and political campaigns (Klein, 2001).

Banet-Weiser (2012a, pp. 146-147) argues that it might therefore be futile to debate whether branded politics are 'authentic'. As with any sociopolitical movement, it is characterised by contradictions; it represents a movement from 'authentic' politics towards 'a politics of authenticity' realised through branding. Rather than just 'appropriating' politics, which assumes that there existed a moment in time where politics and commercialism were inherently separated, branded politics is defined in terms of the brand 'from the ground up' (Banet-Weiser, 2012a, p. 128). Following this argument, ethical consumerism might not be an inherently de-politicising idea; it is, however, a form of politics that limits the potential for meaningful participation in some ways, while it brings new possibilities in other ways. The interesting question, then, becomes: in what way does it make sense as 'authentic' politics, and for whom? To put it simply, it should be possible to keep two thoughts in our head at the same time and to research two parallel processes: both the expansion of corporate power into the realm of politics, and how this creates space for political action and identity both for corporations and consumers in a branded political culture.

In line with this reasoning, Hanlon and Fleming (2009) suggest that any critical study of the commercial activities involved in brand culture – what has become known as *corporate social responsibility* – must regard this phenomenon as 'more than propaganda' and instead place it within the context of the changing nature of capitalism, which seeks its legitimacy outside of the traditional realms of business. Companies within diverse areas today enhance their 'corporate values' both externally and internally, and these values are increasingly related to issues outside of the actual business operations. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, where companies use issues such as environmentalism or poverty both to sell products and to further their

brand, has consequently become a ubiquitous aspect of the corporate world (Hanlon & Fleming, 2009; Lury, 2011).

At first sight, the claim that corporations should 'take responsibility' in different ways might be seen as a challenge to capitalism and to the accumulation of capital. Hanlon (2008), however, argues that CSR should rather be understood as a further 'embedding' of capitalist social relations into society, and that this is an outcome of economic and political changes during the last decades, rather than a driving force of social change in itself. CSR is a sign of a crisis of capitalism, as similar concerns with the ethics and responsibilities of corporations have been at the centre of public discourse in other times of economic unrest, for example, in the 1920s and 30s, as well as in the 1970s. It is an attempt to 'resolve' the contradiction that occurs when the neoliberal blurring of state and corporate interests, together with an increased emphasis on the marketization of individuals, encounters an oppositional discourse of public lamentation about the loss of morals, ethics, community, and meaning for individuals (Banet-Weiser, 2012a, p. 145). Intertwined with the idea of ecological modernisation, recent economic instability and crises have birthed a 'caring capitalism', promoted by what Slavoj Žižek calls 'liberal communists' who believe in the power of profit and that capitalism, unbound by the restraints of the state, will deliver social progress (Hanlon, 2008, pp. 157-168).

CSR can thus be regarded as the 'quintessential expression' of political brand cultures, as it is an embodiment of how corporations translate political and social causes into business logic; concern for labour rights, or funding cancer research, is seen as 'added value' which is profitable both in economic and symbolic terms (Banet-Weiser, 2012a, p. 144). The strong link between CSR and profitability is also manifested in the way contemporary consumer activists often emphasise the economic gains of adhering to ethical standards. Though they differ from those who claim that the only responsibility of a corporation is towards its shareholders, both are ultimately united by their 'appeal to the bottom line' (Hanlon, 2008, p. 159).

2.3.2 Self-branding activists

Since political brand cultures build upon an ongoing exchange of information and an organic relationship between producers and consumers, it is not only commercial actors who strive to 'reimagine' themselves in a branded context. Modern consumption has been argued to change both what people buy and the

very ideas and meanings around consumption – specifically when it comes to the construction of identity and individuality. To choose what to consume is to actively create and define one's personality, based on the idea that what you buy represents who you are (Elliott, 2004; Johnston, 2007).

Contemporary consumer activism is therefore closely linked to practices of *self-branding*: to a reflexive 'project of the self' and a distinct form of affective, immaterial labour that communicates identity through consumption choices, brand awareness, and the symbolic meaning-structure of (sub-) cultural affiliation through signs and codes (Hearn, 2012). As Davis (2013, p. 5) points out, it is no longer just commercial organisations who make strategic decisions to promote specific things about themselves – different 'promotional practices' are increasingly adopted and internalised by ordinary individuals as well. Today's consumer society encourages people to turn themselves into 'promotional commodities' and to present themselves to others through choices of clothes and other consumer goods, as well as on social networking sites, in CVs, or on blogs. In many cases, self-branding individuals strive to attract both attention and profit, as the branded self becomes increasingly important for professional advancement and success (Hearn, 2012).

The 'commodity-self' also converges with the emphasis on individualism and choice in neoliberal societies, rather than the alleged grey conformity of mass society. The ability to identify and decode the 'semiotic puzzles' (which may or may not be perceived by others), that give meaning to consumption, creates a sense of uniqueness for individuals in consumer culture (Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 69). This uniqueness, however, assumes the existence of recognisable social identities. Drawing on Bourdieu (1984), what consumers seek is not individuality, it is social distinction, and this distinction is achieved by being different in a way that makes us recognisable as members of an exclusive club (Heath, 2005). Therefore, a main driving-force of capitalism is not conformism, but rather the quest for distinction and status imposed by the competitive structure of hip consumerism. From this perspective, ethical consumption becomes a way to communicate difference from the 'un-ethical' majority society – a difference that can be de-coded and shared by other consumers that belong to the same group and possess the same cultural knowledge.

2.3.3 'Brandable' ethics and the construction of ethicality

In the context of political brand cultures, CSR practices, and self-branding, there are two aspects of ethical consumerism that merit some special attention: first, the way that some political issues are perceived as more 'brandable' than others, and second, the way that specific representations and practices are made visible and recognisable as more 'ethical' than others – i.e. how 'ethicality' is constructed.

In regards to the first aspect, the question is that of which politics easily lend themselves to branding: which issues can be 'sold' as part of a brand identity and community and which are too offensive or controversial? Branded politics gives an indication of how 'safe' a specific political issue might be, since it is based on market logics. It only has the ability to encompass issues that have a large enough consumer base and that add value without alienating a mainstream audience. This means that political brand cultures involve a 'contrasting process' where some politics are excluded, since they do not make sense within the logic and vocabulary of the market and cannot be turned into commodities (Banet-Weiser, 2012a, pp. 147-148). An example of this is how veganism has grown in popularity in Sweden (and many other countries) during recent years, both as part of corporate branding practices and as a social identity for consumers. This upsurge of interest in 'plant-based' diets and food products is, however, predominantly linked to environmentalism and the issue of climate change, rather than the radical animal rights politics with which veganism previously has been associated.

While some political issues are rendered invisible by political branding, some are made specifically visible, and recognisable, as 'ethical' in different ways; or, to be even more specific, particular *representations* of them are put forward as ethical and are linked to specific identities or practices. Based on the concept of legibility – which entails rendering complex and variable realities as instances of conceptual categories – Carrier (2010) speaks of 'ethicality'. Notions such as 'non-exploitive production', 'organic', or 'cruelty-free' are all conceptual categories; they do not exist outside of human thought and classification. Thus, to make these categories visible to consumers, those who want to sell 'ethical' products, or brand themselves as ethical, must satisfy the need for legibility through images, or representations, which capture or manifest those conceptual categories.

The relationship between the representations and the conceptual categories is, however, often reversed: what has been an example of a category might

come to define it. Just as we learn what other conceptual categories mean by seeing repeated and consistent representations of them, ethicality becomes defined by the images or descriptions used to communicate the ethical identity of certain brands, products, or consumer groups. Carrier exemplifies this by referring to the marketing of Fair Trade coffee, where exotifying images of 'empowered' coffee-growers come to signify ethicality. At the same time, such representations fetishize the ethical product by obscuring, or excluding, other social relations and production conditions within the context of coffee cultivation. From a CDA perspective, this means that the representations of ethicality take on an ideological function, since they shape people's perceptions of what it means to 'be ethical' as producer, brand, and consumer. In turn, however, the discursive construction of ethicality is shaped by material and economic factors, since some issues lend themselves towards branding more than others, some social groups are more attractive as potential consumers than others, and some business practices are more profitable than others.

What is marketed and sold as 'ethical' therefore becomes not change per se, but the identity of being an aware and conscious consumer activist or brand. This is often done through addressing a 'conscious', yet fashionable, consumer in ways that traditional consumer movements might have overlooked. The proliferation of 'celebrity-brand activists', for example, builds on a reciprocal relationship between the cause and the celebrity, where both use each other to promote themselves (Hearn, 2012). Branded politics makes 'boring' issues, such as climate change, visible and exciting for mass audiences; the use of celebrity advocates, bohemian glamour, and popular culture artefacts can be seen as an effort to 'sex up sustainability' (Banet-Weiser, 2012a, p. 151).

Fisher (2007) refers to a 'commodification of activism' where global movements such as Fair Trade might de-commodify the product by re-embedding it in a political context, but simultaneously take part in a discursive shift that commodifies the experience of ethical consumption and makes ethicality into a commodity in itself. This re-commodifying process can be viewed as in line with the logic and rhetoric of consumer culture and the proliferation of identity-based niche markets. Transforming buyers from 'customer' to 'activist' also generates a certain, at least imagined, economic value, and the discourse of inclusion which proclaims that 'anyone can be an activist' helps to legitimise brand culture as democratic (Banet-Weiser, 2012a, p. 163).

2.4 Mediated ethical consumerism

While the performativity of political brand cultures means that what it means to be an ethical brand, as well as an ethical consumer, can be communicated in and through consumption, fashion, and lifestyle choices, these notions are also mediated in diverse ways. Just as other concepts, ethical consumerism is often defined or negotiated through media discourse, both in traditional news media and in participatory practices on social media platforms. This means that the political possibilities that ethical consumerism offers are conditioned by media representations and the particular discursive constructions that are (or are perceived as) dominant in a specific historical-cultural context (Carvalho, 2010). Researching mediated discourse is therefore central if we want to understand processes of social change linked to ethical consumerism and the crucial role that the media and its relation to corporate promotion play in contemporary life (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005; Fairclough, 1995).

2.4.1 The media and corporate legitimation

The way that concepts such as ethical consumerism are discursively constructed in, and through, the media is significantly impacted by the professional culture of journalism and the preferences and options available to media professionals. Journalism can be seen as a discursive re-construction of reality, which depends on professional 'balance' ideals, news value standards, event-orientation, and access to available or official sources. It also depends on the discursive competition between different social actors, when it comes to constructing a specific account of an issue or event (Carvalho, 2008; Carvalho & Burgess, 2005). Thus, media discourse both impacts, and is impacted by, the social credibility and social authority of diverse interest groups. This means that media discourse on ethical consumerism, for example, involves an ongoing 'discursive struggle' between differentially empowered groups who want to influence the public's opinion on the matter (Carvalho, 2010; Carvalho & Burgess, 2005).

The focus on power is important here, as the 'communicative power' of different actors is unequally distributed and depends on factors such as organisational, economic, and political power (Lischinsky & Sjölander, 2014). Elite groups, such as large corporations, increasingly develop strategies to manage the media through promotional practices and communication professionals as a way to sustain their positions of power in society. Such

strategies are often aimed at the public, although they also involve 'inter-elite' competition and conflicts that might exclude the audience altogether (Davis, 2007). When it comes to issues such as environmentalism, the voice of business and industry has become an increasingly prominent influence on the tone and focus of public discourse in recent years. Still, many companies know that their own communication on the issue (such as annual sustainability reports) is often considered to be biased or lacking in transparency, both by journalists and the public. Alternative strategies are therefore needed to ensure that the corporate perspective is reflected in media and public discourse (Lischinsky & Sjölander, 2014).

Mediating messages through seemingly independent sources is one way to boost the credibility and impact of a specific company's environmental or social responsibility claims. This is often done by providing journalists with press releases or other promotional copy which closely resembles journalistic writing, which, due to the organisational and economic restraints under which many journalists operate today, can make it into news copy more or less unchanged (Lischinsky & Sjölander, 2014). Such strategies have, for example, led to the integration of a 'neoliberal environmentalism' into media discourse and social life, which emphasises market logics as the best solution to climate change. Stories that draw on this corporate rhetoric often frame the changes that are needed to mitigate climate change in the form of individual lifestyle and consumption choices or emphasise the profitability of sustainable business practices. This means that they often re-contextualise sustainability within corporate discourses and, in line with the ecological modernisation paradigm, reproduce neoliberal economic logics as the only perceivable method for climate change mitigation (Koteyko, 2012).

Much of these corporate activities, whether in the form of press releases, reports, or marketing campaigns, as well as in the form of influence on public and journalistic discourse, centre on the need to legitimate corporate actions and the system of consumer capitalism. van Leeuwen (2007) has identified four categories of legitimation which are often used in public communications as well as everyday interactions: *authorisation* (based on the authority of experts, tradition, law etc.); *moral evaluation* (based on references to value system and morals); *rationalisation* (based on references to the goals and uses of institutionalised social action); and *mythopoesis* (based on narratives and storytelling that reward certain actions and punish others). These legitimation strategies might be explicitly stated or they may just underpin certain texts.

They can also be clearly separated or working together – generally, though, legitimation always concerns the construction of specific institutional orders as legitimate and necessary.

Such legitimation discourses can be expressed in and through language, as well as in more multimodal fashion; both in references to the company's 'core values' and engagement in certain issues, and in visual representations of ethicality in the form of landscapes, animals, or people. As van Leeuwen (2007) notes, the notion of 'legitimation' offers answers to the question of 'why' – why is society organised in a specific way, why are certain practices necessary or even moral, and why are there no alternatives? Analysing the legitimation strategies used by corporations, as well as their critics, in different communicative practices can tell us something about the interconnections and interdiscursive relations between ethical consumerism as a social practice and the ideological arguments that legitimise or de-legitimise it.

2.4.2 News media as a public forum

For many people, the media is the primary source of information and understanding when it comes to social issues and current events that might have an impact on others as well as themselves. Media has a key function as a 'public forum' for political debate and for attempts to create consensus on how actions and events should be interpreted. It has the potential to both shape and reflect culture, politics, and social life, which means that the public understanding of political issues is shaped by mediated information, at the same time as media might influence policy making through by expressing public opinion (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005; Nambiar, 2014). The media plays an important part when it comes to the formation of public spheres and collective identities, and a basic understanding of many influential media and communication theories is (even though they might differ substantially in other ways) that the media has the power to, in one way or another, influence the public understanding of a specific issue's nature and importance (Nambiar, 2014).

When it comes to climate change, for example, the media has played a central role in the social construction of the issue over recent decades. Media coverage has been a key factor for raising awareness among the public, both when it comes to the risks associated with environmental pollution and the responsibilities in addressing the problem (Carvalho, 2010; Carvalho & Burgess, 2005; Olausson, 2009). The discourse on climate change in Swedish

print media has, in contrast to the case of the US, been characterised by an underlying certainty about its existence and effects. Thus, stories on climate change have predominantly been framed by calls for collective action – either as mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions or as adaption to the effects of climate change. Responsibility for mitigation was earlier framed as a transnational concern, specifically for industrialised countries, while the responsibility for adaptation was attributed to local and national realms (Olausson, 2009). This framing has shifted over recent years, and news media today increasingly focus on local and individual responsibility for mitigating climate change (Olausson, 2011). Public discourses on climate change also actualise a 'post-politicisation of the public sphere', where conflicts and disagreements are obscured by a focus on consensus, especially when it comes to the construction of capitalism as the only imaginable way to organise society (Berglez & Olausson, 2013).

It is not only the public's understanding of certain issues that is influenced by the media; the power to act is also articulated through media representations of particular 'subject positions' for individuals, which guide people's perceptions of their own (potential) political agency (Carvalho, 2010). This means that the construction of the 'consumer activist' identity partly depends on actions and practices that are linked to political awareness and participation in media discourse on ethical consumption. Looking at the framing of climate change in Swedish news media, for example, we see that an increased focus on calls for action on the personal level has also influenced the audience's understanding of the issue and their own role when it comes to cause and solutions. That climate change is caused by human actions is, to a certain extent, a 'common-sense' understanding among Swedes, and emphasis on individual responsibility for mitigating its effects is intertwined with calls for policy interventions (Olausson, 2011).

In recent years, the 'agenda-setting' effect of the traditional (mass) media has been challenged, specifically by the rise of social and 'alternative' media. Audience fragmentation and an abundance of choices for people who want to either personalise their media content or avoid news about current affairs altogether characterises the new media environment (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017). The development is also linked to a decreasing identification with, or attachment to, political parties, civic groups, or other, more overarching, group-based contexts for receiving and interpreting media messages. Furthermore, the audience has increasing opportunities not to just

select or avoid media channels, but also to create or contribute to content themselves (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

It could be easy, then, to argue that media discourse has lost its power when it comes to telling people what to think about and how to think about it. Research shows, however, that traditional news media still play an important role as agenda setters, at least in Sweden and similar countries in Northern Europe. Specific news outlets might have lost some of their authority and impact, but the collective media agenda still has a strong influence on the public's understanding and assessment of social issues (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). The rise of social and alternative media might have created new opportunities for individualised selection, but much of what is read, shared, and discussed on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter is still content generated by traditional media outlets. While individual stories or 'hashtags' that are trending in social media might influence the focus in mainstream outlets, it is still predominantly the other way around – mainstream media play a significant role for the social media agenda (Newman, 2011).

2.4.3   Social media and the 'backdraft' of branded politics

Social media has undoubtedly become an increasingly important area for political debate and expression over the last decade. This is the case for many social issues and ideas about policy or participation, and the relationship between consumption and politics is one of them. New media platforms and social networking sites offer opportunities for different actors to shape the discourse on ethical consumption and corporate responsibility from diverse perspectives.

Using the participatory practices and networking opportunities of social media can be part of the 'tactical action repertoires' used to mobilise consumers outside of the actual market place (Balsiger, 2014). Social media can function as a public sphere in which private practices – such as consumption – are transformed into public actions loaded with political meaning (Parigi & Gong, 2014). It can also give voice to other actors than those in traditional media and might therefore empower marginalised people to speak for themselves. Social media can serve as an arena for underprivileged groups and actual producers from the global South to influence or suggest new modes of representation. Despite restrictions in access and technological knowledge, platforms such as Facebook can enable a more direct connection

between producers and consumers and a growing knowledge-based relationship between these actors. In practice, however, it is predominantly the relationship between consumers and different organisations that has been cultivated through the interactive features of social media (Polynczuk-Alenius, 2016).

Social media is also important for commercial actors who wish to influence public understandings of the market's ability to solve social, economic, and environmental problems. Similar legitimation strategies found in corporate reports or in interactions with journalists might be put to use in social media communications and interactions with (potential) consumers. Corporate actors who claim to embrace certain political issues, such as female empowerment, might also use the participatory culture of new media platforms both to market their own brand and to co-opt the creativity of and feedback from consumers (Duffy, 2010).

Social media can, however, also be an arena where companies and brands are held accountable for their actions, especially when individuals and consumers share and comment on news stories or posts, which become 'viral' and spread through diverse networks. Such organised, or un-organised, protests might become even more dangerous for brands that previously have claimed some sort of ethical identity or legitimacy. This means that the corporate involvement in politics creates a 'backdraft' that has to be managed, and this endeavour for control is often played out in social media. Examining the interactions and discursive struggles on platforms such as Facebook therefore offers an opportunity to understand 'what people are saying to brands and what brands say back' when it comes to ethical consumerism (Simon, 2011).

2.5   Ethical consumerism and the circuits of discourse

Based on the discussions above, it seems clear that the discursive construction of ethical consumerism depends on interdiscursive relations between texts produced in both corporate communications and news media, and on the influence of more overarching social processes. It does, however, also depend on how the ideas put forward in such texts are interpreted and made meaningful by the public, for example, in social media.

To make sense of these relations and influences, this thesis draws on a modified version of the 'circuits of culture' model (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005;

Scherer & Jackson, 2008) and focuses on the interrelated 'articulatory moments' of production, representation, and consumption that are adopted into a 'circuits of discourse' model (Figure 1). This model includes the moments of production, representation, and consumption, at each of which meaning is constructed, contested, and renegotiated in an ongoing discursive process (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). The model also includes the different communicative practices on which this thesis focuses. The point is to examine how the abstract concept of ethical consumerism assumes concrete manifestations as it moves throughout different texts and the interdiscursive relationships between different communicative practices.

Production

Corporate
communication

Journalism

Consumption

Social media

Representation
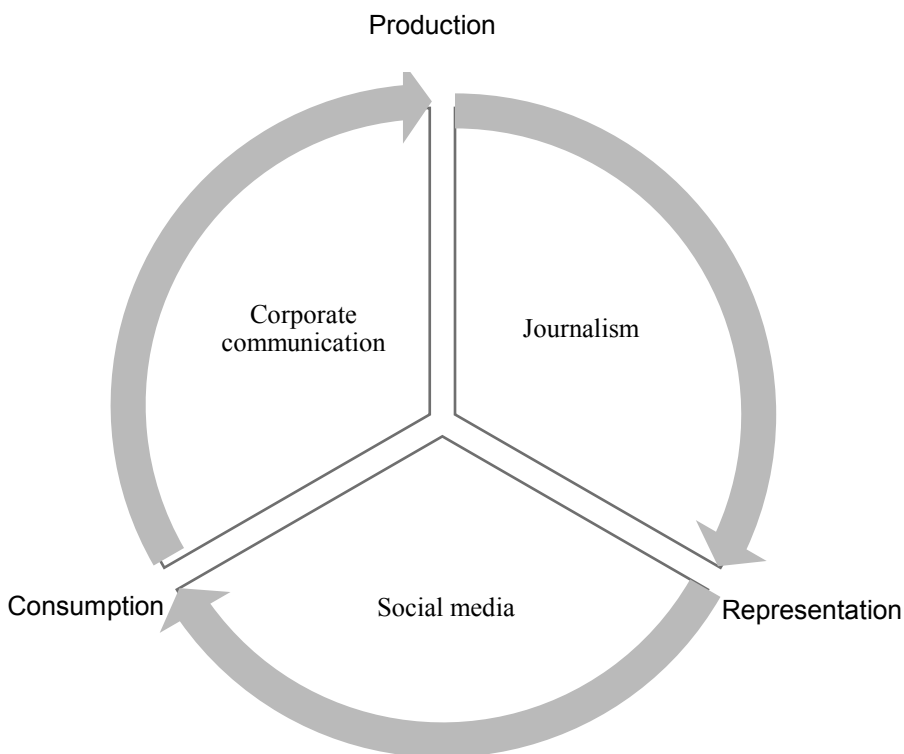
Figure 1 The 'circuits of discourse' model, adapted from du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997 (in Curtin & Gaither, 2005), to include both 'articulatory moments' and discursive practices.

The moment of production entails the organisational, economic, technological, and political contexts in which texts are produced and how they come to be ideologically informed. Producers often 'encode' messages based on the identification of specific target groups and the perceived needs, desires, or fears of these audiences (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005; Curtin & Gaither, 2005). The study at hand takes this moment into account by acknowledging the sociohistorical and political-economic contexts of production, as well as the aims and objectives for key social actors behind different texts (Scherer & Jackson, 2008). Producers of texts include both fashion corporations and journalists, as well as the participants in the online discussions analysed in the last empirical chapter, and the context-dependent specifics of text production the different communicative practices are discussed in the introduction to each of the three empirical chapters.

The second moment of the circuit is the discursive process of representation where meaning is generated and negotiated. This includes the circulation of these representations in news media, corporate communication, and in social media interactions. The important thing to remember here is that meaning is not static, but rather, is created through discourse and a relational process of communication between producers and consumers (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). Representation involves examination of the ways that readers are positioned to interpret texts in a specific way, by means of the linguistic and visual codes and symbols which frame them (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005). In this study, this means close analysis of texts and the way that political identities, practices, and ideas are represented in them. This includes the 'modes of subjectivity' related to class, ethnicity, or gender that are actualised for ethical consumers. The construction of such social identities depends on difference and is therefore also inherently related to power, as it involves the definition of who is included and who is excluded in a certain social context or practice (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). Since corporate identities are inherently important for ethical consumerism, and are continuously renegotiated in the relationship between corporations and consumers, the analysis incorporates both consumer and brand identities.

The third moment in the adapted model entails the consumption of texts and the ways that they are 'decoded' by the audience. In this study, this means taking the consumer discourses on ethical consumerism into account and looking at how the branded politics of commercial actors are interpreted and contested by the public in relation to ongoing ideological debates. While

production and representation focus on how texts carry certain 'preferred' meanings, these meanings are never static, and there are no guarantees that messages will be interpreted in line with the original intentions (Scherer & Jackson, 2008). Meaning can be resisted or subverted by the audience and is negotiated within the social interactions in daily life (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005).

Since the participants in the online discussions are both producers and consumers of texts, this means that the analysis involves the 'consumption' of both the corporate or journalistic accounts of events and of the interpretations produced by others in the comments to such texts. An important note to make is that the moment of consumption does not mark the end of a linear process, but rather, a 'point' in a circular one (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). In line with the conceptualisation of a 'circuit' of discourse, consumption (of commodities and texts) becomes a form of production through the cooperative performativity of brand culture and the participatory cultures of social media.

The circuit of discourse framework serves to guide the analysis of how the discursive construction of ethical consumerism moves through several 'articulatory moments' within the specific context of fashion production and consumption (Scherer & Jackson, 2008). This study strives to contribute to both the theoretical and the empirical understanding of the communicative dimensions of ethical consumerism by examining the interrelated moments associated with production, representation, and consumption in corporate communications, news media, and social media. In addition to how neoliberal notions of freedom, individual responsibility, and an emphasis on market logics as the 'solution' to political problems are reflected and reproduced in discourse, this study also examines what happens when these notions are interpreted and made meaningful by the public.

3 Methodology and research design

The main focus of this chapter is the methodological approach and research design for this thesis. This includes a presentation of the analytical tools necessary to structure, examine, and understand the empirical material, as well as some general characteristics of the texts analysed. First, I discuss the research design and the tools of the empirical analysis. Second, I present the materials under scrutiny in the three empirical chapters and discuss them in terms of selection criteria and general characteristics. Third, I discuss some research ethical considerations, specifically in relation to the material in Part III. Fourth, and last, I discuss the limitations and contributions of the study in terms of validity, reliability, and generalisability.

3.1 Research design and analytical framework

The aim of this study is to examine the *discursive construction* of ethical consumerism in different communicative practices and text genres. Hence, it deals with questions of how texts construct reality in a certain way, as well as how they relate to each other and to dimensions of power in social, political, and economic relations. This suggests a need to analyse both overarching themes and topics in texts, as well as specific and detailed accounts of linguistic means and lexical choices. Based on this, the methodological framework draws on the discourse-historical approach (DHA) within CDA (Carvalho, 2008; Krzyżanowski, 2010, 2015; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009), and the analytical tools used are mainly from this line of research. Analytical categories from van Leeuwen's (2007) work on legitimation strategies in public discourse and interactions are also included.

3.1.1 Inspiration from the discourse-historical approach

One of my main influences from the discourse-historical approach is the effort to *historically contextualise* the phenomena that is being studied. This can be done through analysis of the diachronic changes that specific discourses on a topic undergo during a longer time period (see, for example, Carvalho, 2005, 2007; Carvalho & Burgess, 2005). In this study, the historical contextualisation is provided by the theoretical overview in the previous chapter, which

describes how ethical consumerism is linked to the historic development of neoliberal policies, political brand cultures, and processes of convergence between 'the private' and 'the public' (Banet-Weiser, 2012a; Bennett, 2012; Harvey, 2005; T. Lewis & Potter, 2011a; Lury, 2011; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). In addition to this, each part of the empirical analysis starts with a discussion of historical developments in the particular communicative practice and text genre that is examined.

As a point of departure, the DHA distinguishes between 'discourse', 'text', and 'genre'. Discourse is 'a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practises' that are situated within specific field of social action, and related to a certain macro-topic (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89). In line with the general view within CDA, discourses are considered to be both socially constituted and socially constitutive – i.e. the way we talk about certain topics or issues is shaped by economic and material factors, although the ongoing negotiations and meaning-making through discourse also shapes the conditions for these factors.

It can also be hard to distinguish between one discourse and another – the boundaries between them are fluid and changeable and should maybe be considered as empirical questions rather than predetermined dividing lines. In this study, the object of investigation is the discursive construction of ethical consumerism, although this might intertwine with, or flow into, other discourses depending on the context and social field. An example of this is the frequent discourse on sustainable fashion in the analysed material, which I regard as an actualisation of a more overarching discourse on ethics and consumption.

Further, argumentativity and pluri-perspectivity are constitutive elements of discourses – which means that the discourse depends on who is talking and the validity or truth-claims from social actors with different points of view. We could, therefore, speak of an 'industry discourse on sustainable fashion' or an 'anti-consumerism discourse on sustainable fashion', depending on the source or perspective.

Texts are parts of discourses – they 'objectify linguistic actions' and make speech acts durable over time in a way that bridges the production and reception situation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, pp. 89-90). Carvalho (2008, p. 163) writes that 'texts always build on previous ones, taking up or challenging former discourses'; in DHA, this is referred to as *intertextuality*. Another major aspect is *re-contextualisation*, i.e. the process of transferring given elements to

new contexts – for example, moving the issue of political participation into a discourse of consumption. Such transformations might also include elements of *de-contextualisation* – removing an element from a specific discourse or context – for example, removing the role of government policy from political discourse. *Inter-discursivity* signifies that topic-related discourses often are linked to, or draw from, other adjacent discourses in various ways (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 90).

Genres, on the other hand, are a specific way of using language in connection with a particular type of social activity or a 'field of action' which has a particular function within a discourse (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 90). An opinion piece in the press, for example, belongs to one genre, while a political manifesto belongs to another, and a TV commercial to a third. A specific discourse on a topic can therefore be realised through a range of texts and genres, which might have distinct functions.

Given the object of study in this thesis, there are many fields of action, communicative practices, and genres that could be interesting to examine. Awareness-raising campaigns from issue-specific lobby organisations, or labelling certificates such as Fair Trade, could, for example, be an alternative. Government communication and policy documents related to politics and consumption, as well as statements, propositions, or visions from political parties, would be others. I have, however, chosen to study discourses on ethical consumerism in corporate reporting as a field of action, specifically in the genre of sustainability reports. I have also focused on journalism and journalistic genres, such as consumer guides, business news, and opinion pieces in the printed press. The third field of action under scrutiny is social network sites and public discourse in the form of user comments.

These fields, communicative practices, and specific genres have been chosen based on theoretical interest as well as methodology. An important part of the research design of this study is the intention to examine how the idea of ethical consumerism is re-contextualised as it moves between different practices, texts, and genres, and its interdiscursive links to other topic-related discourses. Since I regard ethical consumerism as an ideological construct linked to the expansion of corporate power and neoliberal ideology (as well as practice) in contemporary societies, it is logical to turn attention towards commercial actors and their adaption, or resistance, to the 'ethical turn' in late capitalism (Part I). The field of corporate reports and the sustainability report as a genre is chosen based on the criteria that these are texts where such issues

are frequently discussed. As a genre, they also play an important part in the integration of certain values, social identities, and practices into the brand identity.

Furthermore, I examine the interdiscursive and intertextual links between this genre and two forms of public discourse: the printed press and news journalism (Part II), and social network sites and user comments (Part III). Both these communicative practices, and the specific genres, are characterised by their role as 'public forums' for the debate about ideas and understandings of the world and how society should function. Therefore, they provide opportunities to examine what happens with the corporate discourses when they are reinforced, negotiated, or contested by other actors and differing perspectives.

In line with the endeavour of DHA to incorporate many different types of texts and genres into the analysis, this approach can be thought of as a form of snowball sampling, where the texts selected in the initial phase lead the researcher to other texts outside the initial material. A more detailed discussion of what constitutes the chosen genres can also be found in the introduction to each part of the empirical analysis.

3.1.2 Two levels of analysis: thematic and in-depth

When it comes to the actual empirical and analytical work, Reisigl and Wodak (2009, p. 93) suggest that the outline should be three-dimensional, in that the analysis starts with 1) identifying the specific *contents* or *topics* of a discourse; then 2) investigating the *discursive strategies* used by social actors within that discourse; followed by 3) examining types, or *linguistic means*, in the texts and the context-dependent tokens, or *linguistic realizations*. Krzyżanowski (2010, p. 81) has developed this suggestion into a model consisting of two levels of analysis: an overviewing *thematic analysis* of discourse topics, followed by an *in-depth analysis* of argumentation and related linguistic features. I find this two-level approach useful for this study since it gives a clear and concise structure (see Figure 2).

Question 1: What is talked about in the texts?

- Level of analysis: Thematic analysis
- Key analytical category: Discourse topics

Question 2: Who is present, or talked about, in the texts?

- Level of analysis: In-depth analysis
- Key analytical category: Strategies of self- and other-presentation

Question 3: How are different 'discursive struggles' actualised in the texts?

- Level of analysis: In-depth analysis
- Key analytical category: Strategies of argumentation and legitimation

Figure 2 Analytical structure, with main analytical questions, level of analysis, and key analytical categories for analysis in Parts I, II, and III.

3.1.2.1 Thematic analysis

The first, thematic, level of analysis aims to map out the contents of the texts and ascribe them to the particular discourses to which they might belong. The main analytical issue in these initial sections, then, is to examine what is talked about in the texts: which issues and practices are discussed in relation to ethical consumerism? The point of this initial 'mapping' is to get an understanding of the context in which ethical consumerism is discussed, in relation to the central concepts of ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy. It is the analytical category of 'discourse topics' that is key to this level of analysis – a category which refers to an aggregated dimension of information that 'conceptually summarise[s] the text, and specif[ies] its most important information', as well as forms a macro-structure which language users employ in order to understand the text globally and to review it (van Dijk 1991, p. 113 in Krzyżanowski, 2010, p. 81).

I have analysed the texts in terms of how discussions on the overarching 'macro questions' of ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy actualise more specific 'discourse topics' and how these in turn relate to different 'subtopics' (Krzyżanowski, 2010, 2015; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Zappettini, 2016). It is

important to note that the analysis concerns discourse topics, not text topics as such, and that the aim is to decode the 'limits' of discourse by defining the fundamental topics embedded in the texts (Krzyżanowski, 2010). This means that the discourse topics of a specific text might not correlate to the text topic of the actual story – a discourse topic in an article on the Stockholm Fashion Week, for example, might be the 'politicisation of fashion' rather than the actual events or the fashion shown on the catwalk. More specific subtopics related to this are the relationship between fashion and feminism and the notion of empowerment.

The identification of discourse topics was conducted through inductively decoding the meaning of texts through several exhaustive readings. When it comes to the sustainability reports and the discussions on social media that are analysed in Parts I and III, sentences, paragraphs, and whole comments were coded into different thematic categories. In the case of newspaper articles in Part II, this type of analysis was conducted through a rather clear, semantic, top-down hierarchy, starting with the headline and then looking at features such as the preamble, sub-headers, and the overall attitude of the story (Krzyżanowski, 2010).

3.1.2.2 In-depth analysis

After the initial mapping of the discourse topics is conducted, it is time to look at the deeper structure of texts and the specific linguistic means employed to create meaning. Thus, the main part of each empirical chapter strives to answer questions two and three in the analytical process presented in Figure 2: who is present, or talked about, in these texts, and how are different discursive struggles actualised? When it comes to this level, *discursive strategies* in the texts are in focus. The term 'strategy' refers to '[…] a more or less intentional plan of practices […] adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 94). In short, this means a more or less conscious 'construction' of reality by social actors (Carvalho, 2005), who use certain linguistic devices to present themselves, other actors, events, and phenomena in a specific way. Table 1 contains an overview of the discursive strategies that have been analysed in the material.

I have focused on the discursive strategies used to construct certain ideas, practices, or actors as more or less ethical, as well as how this ethicality is constructed as authentic or inauthentic. This includes strategies of *self- and other-presentation*, i.e. the representations of social actors, as well as

argumentation, i.e. how actors argue for or against certain ideas or ideological positions. Furthermore, I analyse *legitimation* strategies used to legitimise (or de-legitimise) social actors or institutions. It is, however, not always possible to separate the analysis of social actors from the analysis of argumentation and legitimation strategies; the characterisation of certain actors or phenomena often draws on specific argumentation schemes as well as predications and nominations. The reverse relationship is also true: to attribute someone (or oneself) with certain negative or positive traits or qualifications can also play an important part in argumentation and legitimation. Therefore, the in-depth analysis presents the results to these questions in an intertwined, rather than separate, manner.

The analysis of who is present, or talked about, in the text involves strategies of self- and other-presentation; more specifically, strategies of *reference/nomination*, i.e. the discursive construction of social actors, and *predication*, i.e. the discursive qualification of social actors. There are a number of linguistic devices that could be interesting for this kind of analysis. I have chosen to focus on some specific ones: membership categorisation, i.e. the construction of 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomies; metaphors and metonyms used to depersonalise or naturalise actors; and functionalisation, i.e. if actors are referred to in terms of what they do or their role within a specific context or practice.

When it comes to devices to qualify actors, I look at how social actors are attributed with negative or positive traits, which might be stereotypical or evaluative, i.e. qualifying as good or bad, and how actors are assigned implicit or explicit predicates, i.e. characterising statements about the actor, such as what s/he is, does, or is like (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 2009). Thus, the analysis asks questions such as: how are social actors, both individuals and groups, referred to linguistically by themselves and others? What characteristics and features are attributed to different actors or phenomena? Which functions or roles do they claim for themselves, and what functions or roles are they ascribed? Are fashion brands, for example, described as 'exploiting' or 'empowering' workers in production countries? Are ethical consumers characterised as 'conscious' or 'pretentious'?

Table 1 Discursive strategies analysed in the material, drawing on Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 2009), van Leeuwen (2007), and Machin and Mayr (2012).

Strategy	Objective	Devices
Reference/nomination	Construction of in-groups and out-groups	• Membership categorisation (us vs. them) • Biological, naturalising and depersonalising metaphors and metonymies • Individualisation vs. collectivisation • Functionalisation
Predication	Labelling social actors more or less positively or negatively, deprecatorily or appreciatively	• Stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits • Explicit predicates or predicative nouns/adjectives/pronouns
Argumentation	Justification of positive or negative attributions	• Topoi (formal or more content related)
Legitimation	Legitimation of institutions, practices or actors	• Authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, mythopoesis

Specific attention is also paid to argumentation strategies in the texts. What I am interested in here is the question of how different 'discursive struggles' are actualised in terms of conflicting (ideological) positions, i.e. how texts work as 'sites of social struggle' for dominance and hegemony, where differing ideological positions, assumptions, or arguments are manifested (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89). My main interest is how different social actors argue for or against such positions and how they 'fill' the arguments with conflicting contents and meanings.

A key analytical category for this form of analysis is topos (plural topoi), which should be understood as '[...] certain headings of arguments which, in a way, summarise the argument while also providing it with a necessary "skeleton" which is fleshed over by respective discourse contents' (Krzyżanowski, 2010, p. 85). To put it more clearly, topos can be seen as a concept that 'brackets' recurring themes in a text and summarises them under a common headline or form of argumentation (Vigsø, 2018 forthcoming). The *topos of profitability*, for example, works as a 'point of reference' in discourses on ethical consumerism, which can be 'filled' by both negative content (greed) and positive content (good-for-business-means-good-for-society).

Topoi situates the argumentation within a specific area, while still allowing for different perspectives within that area. They can be universal, or 'formal', as well as more context- or content-dependent in relation to the empirical material and the research questions. Previous research from the discourse-historical approach has, for example, identified *topoi of world citizenship*, *solidarity*, and *non-fixity* in discussions on transnationalism, Europe, and identity (Zappettini, 2016), as well as *topoi of danger and threat*, *humanitarianism*, or *numbers* in discourses on immigration and racism (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). It should be noted that I have taken an inductive and content-driven approach to topoi in this study – which means that I have identified topoi during the analytical process, rather than searched for pre-defined argumentation schemes in the texts.

A fourth focus is the discursive strategies which serve to legitimise institutions, actors, or ideas. Drawing on van Leeuwen (2007), the analysis focuses on four key devices: authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis. *Authorisation* deals with how the question of 'why?' might be answered with 'because so-and-so says so' – i.e. how certain institutions, ideas, or actions are legitimised by referring to authority figures. This can involve the 'personal authority' of specific persons, because of their status or

role, or the 'role-model authority' of opinion leaders whose example others can follow. It can also involve references to the 'impersonal authority' of laws, rules, and regulations, or the 'authority of tradition' ('we have always done things this way'), as well as 'conformity' ('this is what everyone else does').

Moral evaluation legitimation is based on moral values, rather than authority, and actualised by references to 'good' or 'bad' or evaluative adjectives such as 'normal', 'natural', 'healthy' etc. 'Naturalisation' is actually an important part of moral evaluation, which implicitly replaces specific morals with the 'natural order' of things. 'Abstraction', where certain practices are referred to by concepts which link them to moral values (such as 'taking responsibility' rather than 'being forced to oversee production conditions due to a severe accident'), or 'analogies' that compare one actor or practice with others, are also used.

Rationalisation is another key device for legitimation, which functions as an opposition to moral evaluation. 'Instrumental rationalisation' legitimates practices or ideas by referring to their goals, uses, and effects, while 'theoretical rationality' refers to legitimation based on truth claims – 'the way things are' – rather than morals or usefulness. Finally, *mythopoesis* is used to legitimate through storytelling, where the protagonist is either rewarded for engaging in proper social practices ('moral tales') or punished for failing to do so ('cautionary tales').

3.2   Empirical material from three communicative practices

The following sections present the selection processes and the three sets of empirical material for the different parts of the thesis. It starts with a discussion on the printed press material and presents the initial sampling of newspaper articles that led to the focus on discourses on ethical consumerism in the fashion world and the selection of specific companies that are recurring actors in these texts. The presentation of the steps in this process is then followed by a discussion of some general characteristics of the corporate reports from the chosen companies and the selection process for the user comments analysed in the third empirical chapter.

Note that the presentation of empirical material in the following sections mirrors the selection process and initial analytical steps of the study, not the structure of this thesis. During the time I was working on the project, it became clear that from a theoretical point of view it makes more sense to present the

results with a slightly different structure than that of the working process. Therefore, the empirical chapters are organised so that the analysis of corporate sustainability reports is presented first (Part I), followed by the printed press and newspaper material (Part II), and then the user comments from social media (Part III).

3.2.1 The printed press as a starting point

Based on an ambition to get a feeling for a 'general' view on ethical consumerism, as well as relevant cases for closer analysis, I used the printed press as an starting point, both for the analysis and for the selection of material in corporate communications and on social networking sites. The development and 'life' of most public issues is often tied to representations in the mass media, which can be regarded as 'a crucial site for the definition, and re-definitions, of meanings' when it comes to social and political issues (Carvalho, 2005, 2008). The initial analysis of the newspaper material enabled both the identification of a specific industry/social field where questions of consumption and politics were discussed and the identification of certain companies that were recurring actors in these discussions.

The first set of empirical material thus consists of journalistic texts that focus on ethical consumerism, specifically, 31 articles published in some of the leading Swedish newspapers during 2014. The initial systematic collection of data, i.e. newspaper articles, was carried out through the online database *Mediearkivet* (the Media Archive), which provides access to full-text copies of all major Swedish newspapers from the early 1990s up to today.

The articles were gathered from five daily newspapers, as well as all their different supplements (Sunday magazines, sports magazines, and so on). The selection of newspapers was based on account of range (they are all within the market top ten of daily newspapers), as well as format. *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter* are quality morning papers, while *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* are evening tabloids. The fifth paper, *Dagens Industri*, was chosen on the basis of its financial focus.

Time limits for the material were set to the most recent full year (at the time of data collection), i.e. from January 1 to December 31, 2014. A specific set of search terms was used in order to capture different aspects of ethical consumption in different journalistic genres. My search strategy started with some basic key terms (such as 'political consumption' and 'ethical consumption'), which led to the inclusion of more terms found in sample

articles (for example, 'ethical shopping' or 'sustainable lifestyle'), as well as terms inspired by the initial literature overview (for example, 'fair trade' or 'green consumption').

A key question here is the issue of avoiding data collection that is overly dependent on the key terms used. Another issue to consider is the representativeness of the articles in terms of what is included and available in the database. A third issue is an issue of language; since the data is collected from Swedish press, any quotes or excerpts have to be translated, a process that might affect a non-Swedish speaking reader's understanding of the interpretation and analysis.

Since critical discourse studies is a research tradition interested in qualitative analysis of texts, a lower word limit of 500 words was applied, so as to exclude text that were too short to serve as a good base for qualitative analysis. Another reason for the word limit was that it simply functions as a first step in downsizing the empirical material to a manageable amount. The initial data collection resulted in a text corpus consisting of, all in all, 2,279 newspaper articles. A first review of the material, excluding non-significant hits and doubles, resized it to 305 articles. This data set will henceforth be referred to as the 'base corpus' for the analysis of the printed press, from which the specific social field (the fashion industry), which the thesis explores, was selected.

3.2.1.1 From a 'large' to a 'small' corpus: selecting the field of fashion

As a second step in the selection process, I did an inductive general screening of the articles in the 'base corpus' to find a more specific social field on which to focus the analysis. This was then followed by a third step, where those articles that specifically focused on ethics or politics in relation to this field were selected. The selection process is illustrated in Figure 3. The first overview of the material showed that organic food, agriculture, and increased popularity of a vegetarian lifestyle were recurring topics. When it comes to food production, a notable subtopic was ethically and sustainably produced wine, which was highlighted in several articles.

Base corpus		**Large corpus**		**Small corpus**
305 articles (on consumption and political issues)	→	63 articles (mentioning fashion)	→	31 articles (on fashion and political issues)
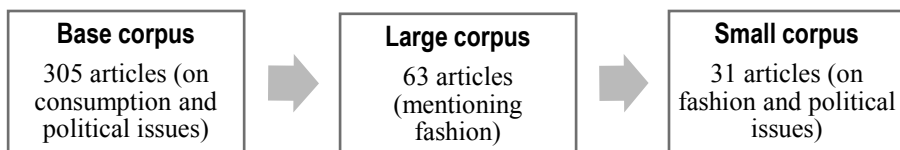
Figure 3 Steps of the selection process from 'base' corpus to 'small' corpus from the printed press.

Another major recurring topic identified in this step was discussions on political issues related to the field of fashion (both as a cultural form and a manufacturing industry), which became the focus for the analysis in the thesis. Besides its popularity in the material, there are three important reasons for this choice. First, fashion is a cultural industry where lifestyle and stylistic expression are important, in fact, they are 'central to the production of self-identities, a way of marking the body with meaning' (Gibson & Stanes, 2011).

Second, fashion is a manufacturing industry which encompasses a lot of the characteristics and problems of late capitalism, specifically, in relation to labour rights and environmental impact of both production and consumption of fashion. The 'fast fashion' business model, which is based on fast turn-over and an optimised supply-chain, has been especially criticised in this context.

Thus, thirdly, fashion has also been the target of several ethical consumption campaigns, specifically, with focus on the use of 'sweatshops' in the industry. Consequently, it has also been subject to previous research, which addresses questions of 'fast fashion', 'eco-fashion', and 'sustainable fashion' from different perspectives (see, for example, Beard, 2008; Johnson & Im, 2014; Li, Zhao, Shi, & Li, 2014; Lundblad & Davies, 2015; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Niinimäki, 2010; Smith & Bortree, 2012; Thomas, 2008; Weiss et al., 2014; Winge, 2008).

All articles in the base corpus where fashion trends, the fashion industry, or fashion consumption were mentioned in the text were identified and selected for analysis. This second step resulted in a 'large corpus' of 63 articles. The third step in the process consisted of excluding all articles where the relation between fashion and political issues was not a major characteristic of the story. The criteria for this selection was that the headline or subheading in some shape or form should reference the connection to politics (in the form of social or environmental issues). This resulted in a 'small corpus' of 31 newspaper articles, where all five newspapers are represented (see Figure 4). It is this corpus of articles that is analysed in Part II. An important note here is that I only analyse the main body of text in the articles – extra features such as lists of online organic clothing stores and different labelling schemes for commodities, etc., are not included in the empirical material.

These articles frame ethical considerations or political ideas as a major influence on contemporary fashion, both in terms of consumption and production. Some illustrative examples of headlines are: "Green is the new black" (*Aftonbladet*, April 30, 2014); "The recycling trend is in vogue" (*Dagens Industri*, February 20, 2014); and "The common thread is politics" (*Dagens Nyheter*, August 22, 2014). The focus is not always on ethical choices concerning the actual consumption of clothes – it might also be on using style and fashion as a way to express opinions about, or support for, certain political issues.

The seven articles from *Dagens Industri*, however, generally address the production and business side of ethical fashion, due to its financial focus. *Aftonbladet, Dagens Industri*, and *Svenska Dagbladet* published the most articles on the theme of fashion and ethics, in a very broad definition, and *Expressen* is the least visible in the research results, with only three articles in the corpus. This is not very surprising, since both *Aftonbladet* and *Svenska Dagbladet* have well-known fashion journalists in their staff, and, until the end of 2014, *Aftonbladet* also published a weekly fashion-oriented lifestyle supplement.
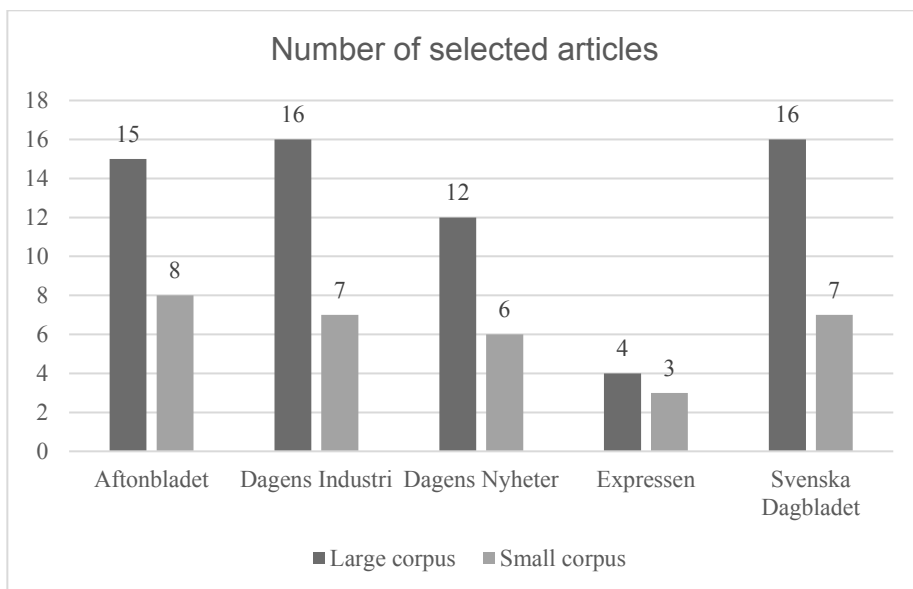
Figure 4 Number of articles per newspaper in the large corpus (N: 63) and small corpus (n: 31).

3.2.2 Corporate communication in sustainability reports

The second set of material consists of corporate communications, in the form of the annual 'Sustainability Report' from three major fashion brands in Sweden: H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex. These three companies were selected based on their presence in the texts from the printed press and on their own communicative efforts in relation to sustainable fashion. KappAhl and – perhaps, above all – H&M are important actors in the newspaper discourse, both when it comes to being talked about and actively participating in the discourse. Lindex have, much like H&M, also presented themselves as a leading actor in Sweden when it comes to sustainability engagement in recent years.

The empirical material consists of the annual reports in which these three companies present their sustainability programmes and initiatives. These reports might be referred to with different terms, such as 'CSR-report', 'climate report', or 'sustainability report', depending on the company and the time of release. As a first step, all available reports (at the time of data collection) were downloaded from the official websites of the three companies

in question.[2] This corpus consists of, in total, 31 reports; 14 from H&M, 8 from KappAhl, and 9 from Lindex. The introduction to Part I includes a basic analysis of diachronic changes in terminology in these reports, based on the occurrence of the terms 'CSR' and 'sustainability' in the texts. This was done with the help of analytical tools available in Nvivo, a software for storing, organising, and analysing qualitative data.[3] The main focus for the analysis in Part I, however, is the most recent report (at the time of data collection) from each company. The reports analysed from H&M and Lindex thus cover 2015, while the KappAhl report covers September 2015 to September 2016.

There are many similarities when it comes to structure and themes in all three reports, and overall, they are much alike in scope and focus, although there are some differences which should be pointed out. First, the report from KappAhl stands out from the others, since it is a joint financial and sustainability report. Both H&M and Lindex, on the other hand, present 'stand-alone' sustainability reports, separate from their financial statements. This means that the material from the latter two is explicitly focused on their sustainability programmes and sustainable fashion as a concept, while the material from KappAhl includes more diverse content. Second, the report from KappAhl is published in Swedish, while H&M and Lindex publish their reports in English and address an international readership. This means that extracts from KappAhl have been translated by me, while others are quoted in their original language. For more contextualisation and a discussion of this genre of corporate communication, see the introduction to Part I.

3.2.3 Online discussions and consumer reactions

The third set of empirical material consists of user comments collected from the social network site Facebook. The selection of comments is based on the three issues that I identified as central in Part I and II: environmentalism and climate change, labour rights, and feminism and cultural diversity in the

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[2] H&M (2017) 'Sustainability reports', available at http://sustainability.hm.com/en/ sustainability/downloads- resources/reports/sustainability-reports.html

Lindex (2017) 'Rapporter', available at http://about.lindex.com/se/sektion/hallbarhet/ rapporter-nyheter-och-pressmeddelanden/

KappAhl (2017) 'Hållbarhetsrapport', available at https://www.kappahl.com/sv-SE/om-kappahl/hallbarhet/hallbarhet/hallbarhetsrapport/

[3] QSR International (2018) 'What is Nvivo' available at ttp://www.qsrinternational.com /nvivo/what-is-nvivo

fashion world. The comments are posted as responses to posts or articles on the official Facebook page of either a newspaper, magazine, or a fashion company, which focuses on these issues. The data was collected with the help of Netvizz, a data collection tool which extracts and archives content from Facebook for research purposes (Rieder, 2013).

I analyse discussions related to three 'trigger events' (all occurring in 2016 or 2017), each representing one of the central issues. The 'base corpus' of comments was collected through a three-step process. First, I searched for articles in the Swedish metropolitan press (time period 2016-08-01 to 2017-07-31) that focused on either environmentalism, labour rights, or feminism and cultural diversity in relation to fashion. The search was done through the database *Mediearkivet* and led to the selection of the three events which represent the central issues:

- The decision of fashion companies H&M, Lindex, and KappAhl to start charging their customers for plastic bags – which, up until June 1, 2017, had been free of charge – as part of their sustainability efforts. The joint initiative was launched under the name 'One Bag Habit', prompted by the Directive (EU) 2015/720 on packaging and packaging waste. The initiative aims to raise awareness among consumers about the negative environmental impact of plastic and to reduce consumption of plastic bags.[4]

- A Twitter post from Sasja Beslik, Head of Sustainable Finance at the bank Nordea, on May 31, 2017.[5] In this tweet, Beslik claims that an increase of only 5 SEK on the price tag of H&M clothes would mean that the company could pay textile workers in Bangladesh a 'living wage'. The tweet prompted a lot of online discussion and a number of articles in Swedish newspapers about wages and working conditions in the textile industry.

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[4] One Bag Habit (2017) 'För en mer hållbar påskonsumtion', available at www.onebaghabit.se (accessed 2017-09-07)

[5] Beslik, Sasja (2017) https://twitter.com/sasjabeslik/status/869819825383780353 (accessed 2018-05-11)

- The launch of two 'norm critical' advertising campaigns during the fall of 2016, which both highlighted diversity and gender equality in relation to fashion and society. First, the H&M commercial for the 2016 Autumn Collection, which features a mix of women of different ethnicities, sizes, ages, and gender identities;[6] and second, the fall campaign from Åhléns, which focused on clothes and power and how the normative division between men's and women's fashion can be understood as part of structural gender inequality.[7]

Second, I looked for articles discussing these events on the official Facebook pages of the particular newspapers or magazines (where such articles had been published in their printed edition). If the article was posted on the page and had prompted discussion among users, the comments were collected for analysis. Third, posts from Swedish fashion companies related to either the One Bag Habit initiative or the norm-critical commercials from H&M and Åhléns were found through searching the official Facebook page of the company in question. If these posts had prompted discussion among users, the comments were collected for analysis. The 'base corpus' for Part III (Table 2), collected through the steps described above, consists of 10,486 comments, distributed over the three central issues: 6,100 comments on environmentalism, 1,431 comments on labour rights, and 2,955 comments on feminism and diversity. The sources of the comments are four fashion companies, seven newspapers, and five magazines.

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[6] H&M (2016) 'She's a Lady', available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-RY6fWVrQ0 (accessed 2017-09-07).

[7] Åhléns (2016) 'Bryt klädmaktsordningen', available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iv_hHjEDl8A (accessed 2017-09-07). The campaign was curated by Philip Warkander, PhD in Fashion Studies at Stockholm University, and featured famous Swedes dressed in 'female coded' clothing (men) and 'male coded' clothing (women). The word 'klädmaktsordning' draws on the Swedish notion of 'könsmaktsordning', which is used to illustrate the structures and processes that underlie and reproduce men's social dominance over women. This notion, in turn, is related to concepts such as the 'gender system' (Hirdman, 1991), often used in feminist scholarship.

Table 2 'Base corpus' of comments per source and central issue in Part III.

	Environmentalism	Labour rights	Feminism & diversity
H&M	186	0	0
KappAhl	360	0	0
Lindex	768	0	0
Åhléns	0	0	2,307
Aftonbladet	1,527	0	0
Amelia	0	0	18
Bon	0	0	4
Elle	0	0	9
ETC	0	51	32
Expressen	508	0	431
Göteborgs-Posten	0	219	54
Metro	2,319	201	0
Resumé	0	0	18
Rodeo	0	0	16
Svenska Dagbladet	432	0	66
Veckans Affärer	0	960	0
Total	**6,100**	**1,431**	**2,955**

3.2.3.1   A corpus of 'original comments'

The base corpus described above was reduced to a more manageable size by excluding replies and only focusing on what I call 'original comments' (i.e. comments without any replies, or the first comment in a comment thread). The reason for this focus is simply that more than 10,000 comments was too extensive for the type of close reading that a discourse analytical approach calls for. Of course, this means that the possibilities to examine the interactions and turn-taking between users in comment threads are somewhat limited in the following analysis. However, since interactions and turn-taking are not the main analytical categories for the study, this should not be a major problem.

The corpus of original comments consists of 1,843 posts. Table 3 shows the distribution between source type and central issue in the data set: the environmental question generated the most original comments (1,055), followed by feminism and cultural diversity (502), and lastly, the labour rights question (286). For the environmental question, as well as labour rights, it is the newspaper or magazine articles that prompt the most comments. For the feminism and diversity question, most comments were reactions to posts on the fashion companies' own Facebook pages. It is this corpus of 1,843 'original comments' that has been analysed in Part III. I have used tools available in Nvivo to store, organise, and structure the material, as well as to categorise and analyse comments according to attitude and content.

Table 3 The corpus of original comments for Part III, per source type and central issue.

	Environmentalism	Labour rights	Feminism & diversity	Total
Fashion brand	171	0	360	531
Newspaper or magazine	884	286	142	1,312
Total	**1,055**	**285**	**502**	**1,843**

The analysis of online discourses in the form of Facebook comments can, to some extent, be understood as merging text and audience studies. Online spaces offer unique possibilities for the researcher to act as a 'fly on the wall' while studying user interactions and content, and through these texts gain extended insight into lifestyles, opinions, relationships, and online cultures (Sveningsson Elm, Lövheim, & Bergquist, 2003). There are also expanding possibilities of harvesting and analysing large amounts of personal data from social media platforms, search engine history, and online interactions between individuals (Zimmer, 2010). These opportunities actualise some research ethical considerations, which will be further discussed below.

3.3   Reflections on research ethics

The Swedish Research Council provides an online collection of rules and guidelines,[8] as well as the publication *Good Research Practice* (Hermerén, 2011), which is meant to guide researchers on ethical matters. General ethical rules regarding plagiarism, keeping research data in good order, and sharing results with the research community are, of course, as applicable to this study as to any other. When it comes to the empirical material, however, there are some specific ethical aspects that need to be considered. The corporate and journalistic texts analysed in Parts I and II can be considered as 'public' and thus rather uncontroversial as objects of analysis. Still, some measures have been taken to ensure the ethical standard of the study. Names of specific persons have, for example, been excluded from the presentation of the analysis, since these actors are analysed in their role as representatives of different organisations, social actor groups, or different discursive strategies, rather than as individuals. Therefore, they are referred to as 'the interviewee, 'the CEO', 'the journalist' and so forth.

Due to the type of empirical material in Part III, there are some specific questions which have to be discussed in more detail when it comes to this material. This involves both the notion of *informed consent* and the notion of *personal information*. 'Informed consent' simply means that participants who are studied within a research project have the right to know that they are studied (including how and why) and that they have the right to either agree to this or to decline participation. The question of 'personal information', on the other hand, becomes important when the research project involves the handling of sensitive personal data such as race, religious believes, or political views. As a consequence, the rules from the Swedish Research Council stipulate that research that 'involve humans' or deals with 'sensitive personal data' must be evaluated by an Ethical Review Board (Hermerén, 2011, pp. 48-49).

Both of these terms could be argued to be applicable to Part III, since it involves collection and analysis of comments from individuals who can be traced through their Facebook accounts and that might include political views or other personal information. In line with the overarching *criterion of protection of the individual*, which states that individuals participating in research 'should be protected from harms and wrongs' (Hermerén, 2011, p.

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[8] The rules and guidelines can be found at http://www.codex.vr.se

18), I therefore need to consider the risks that a participant in the online discussion might feel violated, or exposed, if the analysis in Part III were to make his/her political views or other personal information available to others in a way that they would not feel comfortable with. The ethical questions are whether it is necessary to obtain informed consent from the participants in the online discussions, and how the personal information in the collected comments will be used and displayed in the analysis.

3.3.1 Ethical social media research

Studying the Internet, or social media, means that a whole range of ethical concerns are actualised, though in a way that do not always adhere to general definitions and codes (Giaxoglou, 2017). Field specific guidelines from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee thus promote a 'bottom-up', case-based, *process approach* to research ethics (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). In the following sections, I will therefore discuss the risks specified above related to the data collection, handling, and analysis of the Facebook comments in Part III. The considerations presented here revolve around the public/private division, the notion of human subjects, and the relationship between the data (texts) and individuals.

3.3.1.1 *Public or private information?*

Traditionally, empirical data collected in 'the public sphere' has not really been regarded as problematic when it comes to research ethics. The data for Part III can be characterised as 'found', or *unobtrusive*, as it is produced and available on social platforms regardless of the researcher's involvement (Giaxoglou, 2017; Lomborg, 2012b). It is public in the way it is 'already there' and easily accessible. As Sveningsson Elm (2009) points out, however, it can be tricky to make the distinction between 'public' and 'private' spheres on the Internet – it is more a question of different *degrees* than a strict dichotomy. There might be both public and private dimensions of a specific online milieu, existing at the same time and in relation to each other. Furthermore, easy access does not necessarily mean ethical access – there is a difference between the status of an online milieu as 'public' in terms of access and the question whether the users *perceive* it as public or private (Giaxoglou, 2017; Lomborg, 2012a; Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Zimmer, 2010).

Lomborg (2012a) speaks to the 'perceived privacy' of users, i.e. the expectations they may hold 'concerning the privacy of their online activities,

their control over personal information, and their protection from harm' (p. 23). This is one of the major ethical discussions when it comes to social media research today (see for example Giaxoglou, 2017; Lomborg, 2012a; Zimmer, 2010; Zimmer & Proferes, 2014; Östman & Turtiainen, 2016): can we, as researchers, really expect people to consent to 'participation' just because the content they produce is available to us online? In some cases, 'yes' seems to be the answer to this question, although with some hesitation. Giaxoglou (2017) points out that Facebook's data policy explicitly inform users that content they post or share on the site may be downloaded or re-shared by others, both on and off Facebook. Based on this, informed consent from users should not be necessary when collecting data from a public profile page or group, as 'users would be aware of the fact that their shared content is in the public domain' (p. 233).

Of course, one can always discuss how 'aware' people really are of the public nature of their posts and interactions with others on sites such as Facebook. As pointed out by other scholars (Lomborg, 2012a; Zimmer, 2010; Zimmer & Proferes, 2014), having a 'public' Facebook page or Twitter stream where you share personal information, ideas, and interests, does not necessarily mean consent to have this data harvested and studied by researchers. The actual meaning of the terms in the data policy might also be lost on the user, or the policy might not even be read at all. The existence of such policies does, however, at least give some manoeuvring space for social media research from an ethical (and legal) point of view. In the case at hand, I would argue that since the data consists of comments posted on the official page of a newspaper or fashion brand, the 'perceived privacy' should be relatively low, in comparison to, for example, when a user shares/comments a newspaper article in their own, or a friend's, newsfeed. Since the discussion on these corporate pages mostly involves people who are not otherwise linked to each other (on or off Facebook), there should be a general understanding of the comment threads as 'public spaces' among most users.

3.3.1.2   Am I studying texts or people?

Social media research also poses challenges, since it is not always clear whether we are studying texts or studying users; online texts are editable and rest on 'continued user engagement', which means that they are inherently connected to individuals (Lomborg, 2012b, p. 221). The texts in question are also linked to vast amounts of personal data, which means that principles

related to research on human subjects might be necessary to consider (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

In this case, however, the primary object of study is *texts* in the form of online comments. In line with Hagren Idevall (2016), I regard the content of the user comments as part of a collective meaning-making process, rather than expressions of individual opinions. No personal information, social networks, individual profiles, or discussions prompted by sharing an article among friends are analysed. In addition to this, I have not followed any specific person's activities or postings in the comment sections or on Facebook in general.

Nonetheless, there is still a strong link between the texts I analyse and the people behind them, which creates a potential risk when it comes to anonymity, vulnerability, and personal information. Looking at the dimensions of risks in Table 4, though, the study leans towards a *low-risk* rather than *high-risk* design: the data does consist of several thousand posts in total, and it is obtained via a computerized process, rather than through interviews or ethnographic observation. The platform from which it is collected (i.e. Facebook) is also one with privacy settings that the users themselves can control. Lastly, as mentioned, the research is focused on discourse patterns and meaning-making in texts, rather than specific people and their lives.[9]

The only dimension where the study leans towards a more high-risk design is the methodology, where the qualitative close reading and interpretation of texts might cause problems. As both Lomborg (2012a) and Hermerén (2011) argue, however, ethics is a two-way process which, within the context of furthering our collective knowledge about society, involves safeguarding both personal information and the researcher's right to analyse and interpret empirical data. This means that I strive for the 'interpretive authority through rigorous and constant practice', which Markham (2012, p. 15) addresses, and to present the analysis in such a way that individual opinions or traits do not overshadow the more collective, or generalised, discourse patterns and struggles.

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[9] A similar model and discussion can be found in Sveningsson Elm et al. (2003). Based on that model, the study at hand would not fall into the category where 'informed consent' from discussion participants would be necessary.

Table 4 Dimensions of research and level of risk (Giaxoglou, 2017).

Dimensions of research	Low-risk	High-risk
Types of data	Large scale or 'big' data obtained via computerised programs (e.g. java, API protocols)	'Small' data obtained via ethnographic observation methods, interviews, surveys, online ethnographies,
Methodology	Quantitative	Qualitative
Site/Platform	Sites/platforms with privacy settings (e.g. Facebook)	Sites/platforms without privacy settings (e.g. early days of MySpace)
Research focus	Focus on large scale trends, focus on discourse patterns, focus on texts	Focus on persons and their lives

3.3.1.3 Distancing the data from individuals

Still, some of the information in the Facebook comments analysed might be considered sensitive, especially if it were possible to trace it back to a specific individual. Therefore, three steps have been taken in order to 'distance' the data from the user as far as possible, so as to minimize the risk of harm (Lomborg, 2012a): anonymization, translation, and thematisation.

First, the data has been stripped of any identifiable personal information, in this case, the name of the person who wrote the comment. The tool used to harvest the data (Netvizz) removes the username connected to a comment and replaces it with a randomised identification number. The fact that this is done automatically, and not manually by the researcher, helps to further the integrity and anonymity of the users. The identification number (ID) is specific to each user, so that the researcher can trace turn-taking between individuals within the comment threads if necessary.[10]

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[10] Recent changes to the Facebook API have, however, limited this possibility.

Second, the translation of quotations (from Swedish to English) can also be considered a way to distance the texts from the individuals. Though the translations of course have been done with the intention to safeguard the original meaning, some deviations from literal translation are sometimes called for to convey the cultural specificities of a statement. Translation therefore makes any direct quotations or examples presented in the analysis harder to find through online searches.

Third, the presentation of the study's results also involves an aspect of anonymization. The discussion in Part III does not, in detail, reveal the specific post where one would find a particular comment – instead, the analysis is focused on general patterns connected to discourse topics and macro questions, rather than posts. This makes it slightly more complicated to make the connection between an individual and a statement/quotation in the analysis, since it takes more of an effort to search for the user by looking up the original post on Facebook.

Based on the discussion above on the public/private division, the notion of human subjects, and the distance between the data and individuals, I have made the assessment that informed consent is not necessary when it comes to the study conducted in Part III.[11] Essential steps have been taken to assure the anonymity and integrity of the individual participants in the online discussions under scrutiny. While ethics is not a static concept with fixed meaning – as shown throughout this thesis – and the issues discussed here are neither completely resolved, nor absolutely unproblematic, I still have done my best to live up to the ethical standards within the scholarly community and the specific considerations of doing social media research, throughout the research process.

3.4   Limitations and contributions

In this section, I will discuss some of the limitations that the choices and the approach outlined above might imply, as well as some of the contributions of the study at hand. This includes issues related to validity and reliability, as well as a discussion on the development of the methodological framework and the

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[11] This is in line with general practice, as a similar study was dismissed by the Ethical Review Board with the comment that 'text analysis is not considered to be research on humans' (Hagren Idevall, 2016, p. 34).

research design. I highlight questions of alternative methodological approaches and the inclusion of different communicative practices and text genres.

One main concern when discussing limitations is always validity – am I studying what I say I am studying in this thesis? The research objective, as well as the specific questions and theoretical framework, speak of 'ethical consumerism' as the object of study. This is, as discussed, a rather abstract or broad notion that encompasses a diverse set of ideas and practices. The choice to focus on fashion does mean that the conclusions drawn from the analysis are specific to this context and might not be applicable on a general societal level. Had I chosen to focus on the food industry, for example, other discourse topics, strategies, and actors might have been more dominant than the ones found in the fashion material.

The history of the critique of 'sweatshops' and mass consumption of fashion means that both the industry and the consumers have a particular relationship to questions of ethics, sustainability, and consumer activism. Fashion is also a context where questions of identity and self-branding are inherent to the culture, and it constantly seeks to find new influences and phenomena in the surrounding society, from which 'trends' can be created. I argue, however, that while these factors make fashion a very particular context, they also, at the same time, make it a particularly good context for researching the relationship between politics, communication, and consumption.

Another factor that needs to be highlighted is the application of the DHA framework and the methodological approach of the study. Working with this thesis has been an ongoing process, where the research design and the methodological tools used to analyse the material have developed over time. From the beginning, I had the intention to follow the DHA framework more closely and to make a diachronic analysis over a longer period of time. However, as I developed the idea to include material from several communicative practices (rather than just news media), the historical timeline was no longer an option, due to the time limitation of the project itself. Looking back at the research process, there are also other methodological choices that could have been made, which might have led to a deeper understanding of the phenomena studied.

The most obvious example is the analysis of online discussions in Part III, where the empirical material consists of several thousand user comments. The kind of close reading and detailed analysis of specific linguistic means and realisations in texts that critical discourse analysis calls for does, in some ways,

limit the analysis of this kind of material due to factors such as time and the general features of the comments. As discussed earlier, the need to downsize the material also led to limitations when it comes to interaction between specific users, turn-taking in discussions, and other aspects which would have been possible to analyse through a more quantitative approach.

The DHA approach also carries with it questions of validity when it comes to interpretation – as a part of the CDA tradition, it is necessary to consider the 'frame' or context problem which becomes actualised in any discourse analysis (Gee, 2004). How much context should, or can, one include in the explanation of why one interpretation is more valid than another? Specifically, how much does the inclusion or exclusion of context(s) influence the interpretation and 'meaning' of utterances or texts? One of the main affordances of critical discourse analysis is that we can highlight the ideological function of language by changing or widening the contextual frame of texts and utterances, so that underlying meanings become manifest. It is, however, also possible that others may challenge these meanings by bringing in context that we have not considered.

When dealing with this issue of validity when it comes to interpretation, the most important factor is transparency – to be open with the framework and theoretical perspective which guide the interpretations and to argue for why the particular context that is considered is relevant to and important for the particular research question, as well as for those who are engaged in the discourse that is being studied. I have tried to abide by these guidelines by being open and transparent when it comes to the theoretical approach of the study and as distinct as possible when it comes to the application of the methodological categories and tools for analysis.

Being reflexive as a researcher also means being open to further development of the analysis and to alternative interpretations. The structuralist view on language on which CDA draws is not based on the positivist notion of one 'truth' that is attainable if we falsify all other alternatives. Rather, different 'truths' could exist at the same time (though this does not mean that all truths are just as valid or important).

While the limitations and questions discussed above of course impact what kind of conclusions I can draw from the analysis, as well as the level of generalisation of those conclusions, there are also some specific contributions of the study that I want to highlight. The first is the choice to apply critical discourse analysis to such a massive amount of material. This might, as

mentioned above, be considered a limitation in some ways. In other ways, it is also a strength. Qualitative text analysis in general, and CDA in particular, is sometimes criticised for making general assumptions based on a limited amount of empirical material from a very specific time, genre, or outlet. The thorough (and time consuming) process of data collection and selection, and the initial analysis of a larger number of texts in both Part II and Part III of this thesis, contribute to counteracting such criticism. Although the presentation of the analysis in the end might focus on a limited number of texts, these texts actually represent the type of texts and discourses that this study aims to examine.

Similarly, the inclusion of different communicative practices and text genres is also an important aspect of this study. If not undertaken in a reflective manner, CDA can be accused of taking the ideological function of texts at face value, rather than considering the active meaning-making of audiences. The inclusion of several fields of action and text genres in this study should therefore be seen as an attempt to take reception into account. In line with the focus on power in CDA, this study starts with analysis of corporate discourses on ethical consumerism and the ideological underpinnings of the sustainability reports under scrutiny. This is then followed by analysis of what happens when journalists, other industry actors, or private individuals make sense of such discourses.

While the analysis of social media interactions is still text analysis, the focus on this particular communicative practice does give some insight to the audience perception and interpretation of branded politics and of the discursive struggles that are actualised by the mediation of ethical consumerism. Thus, I argue that the decision to analyse the intertextuality of corporate communications, news media, and social media is one of the main strengths of the study at hand. This approach gives insight into how different discourses move between genres and communicative practices and how they are reinforced, negotiated, or contested depending on the context and the active social actors. With this having been said, it is now time to turn our attention towards the empirical chapters, where the methodological approach and tools discussed in this chapter are put to use.

4 Part I: The corporations

In line with the argument that the idea of ethical consumerism is an extension of corporate power in the consumer culture of late capitalism, the need to critically examine corporate discourses on these issues seems clear. A number of scholars have argued that ethics are becoming increasingly important for corporations in today's political brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012a; Hanlon & Fleming, 2009; Lury, 2011; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Adhering to ethical standards, or promoting specific 'core values' linked to certain issues, are ways to tap into the concerns of 'conscious consumers' (which serves to strengthen both the sign value and economic value of the brand) and to mitigate the need for state, or transnational, policies or regulations which could potentially limit the growth of the corporation. The concern for ethics can be expressed in the field of marketing, either by highlighting different labelling certificates or 'quality' guarantees attached to a product or brand, or by alluding to ongoing political discussions in other social arenas. Another possibility is media relations and genres such as press releases or interviews, where ethics can be invoked to further the brand or to respond to both explicit and implicit criticism.

In this chapter, it is the field of corporate reporting that is in focus – specifically, the genre of sustainability reports. I regard these texts as not just compulsory products produced to satisfy the demands from investors, critics, or concerned consumers, but also as important for corporate branding practices and identity work. The following analysis focuses on annual sustainability reports from three Swedish fashion companies – H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex – and how these companies discursively construct their brand identity in relation to ethical consumerism, as well as some of the underlying discursive struggles related to the 'fast fashion' industry, fashion consumption, and empowerment through fashion. The main analysis focuses on the 2015-2016 reports, one from each company, where special attention has been given to CEO interviews or introductory statements and the descriptions of the goals and visions of the three companies. As part of the contextualisation and discussion on sustainability reporting as a communicative practice, some general characteristics of all available reports from H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex (2002-2016) will be discussed below.

4.1 Sustainability reporting as communicative practice

An annual sustainability report is a specific kind of text, which merits some introductory words. They are generally produced with consumers, business partners, and potential critics in mind, and they are supposed to address specific issues and concerns which these stakeholders might have in relation to the company's operations. According to the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), a good sustainability report enables organisations to 'measure, understand and communicate' their sustainability work and be more transparent about their environmental and social risks and opportunities:

> A sustainability report is a report published by a company or organisation about the economic, environmental and social impacts caused by its everyday activities. A sustainability report also presents the organisation's values and governance model, and demonstrates the link between its strategy and its commitment to a sustainable global economy (GRI, 2017).

Previous research shows contradictory conclusions when it comes to voluntary corporate sustainability reporting. Some studies highlight the aforementioned potential to make corporations more accountable and transparent, while others question the limits and scope of sustainability reports and emphasise their potential role as legitimacy tools used to 'greenwash' corporations through vague, or even false, claims and unmet commitments (Cho, Laine, Roberts, & Rodrigue, 2015).

What is clear, however, is that there is a close connection between businesses' sustainability engagement and the history of corporate reporting practices (Milne & Gray, 2013). Specific sustainability reports are rather recent phenomena within the general practice of corporate reporting. In the early days, impacts or activities outside of the financial area might have been sporadically included in conventional annual reports, often spurred on by stakeholder pressure, media coverage, legitimacy threats, or accidents. The businesses which reported on potential risks were primarily prominent firms within specific areas, such as oil or mining companies, or those who suffered from reputational damage, and these reports mainly addressed environmental concerns (Higgins, Milne, & van Gramberg, 2015; Milne & Gray, 2013). From the 1990's onwards, so-called 'stand-alone' reports started to appear, and since then, they have gone through a mainstreaming process of significant proportions: 95 % of the world's largest companies produced a specific

sustainability report in 2011, compared to only 35 % in 1999 (Higgins et al., 2015). This development is reflected in the empirical material collected for this study, where H&M is the company with longest history of reporting. Their first available CSR report was published in 2002, while Lindex started to produce stand-alone reports in 2006. KappAhl started reporting on 'environment and responsibility' in 2008, although their sustainability efforts are still part of the general annual report (even though this is divided into two parts, where the first one focuses on sustainability and the second on finances).

Just as sustainability reporting practices have spread across diverse industries, the early focus on environmental impacts has widened to include other issues, as well. The mid/late 1990's saw a growing interest in 'health, safety and environment' reports, which tended to be based on the 'triple bottom line' (TBL) concept, which includes social, environmental, and economic aspects (Higgins et al., 2015; Milne & Gray, 2013). This gradual extension of the reports is also visible in the current material, where core issues such as the environment, community engagement, and employee matters are joined by social justice issues, empowerment practices, and later concerns, such as animal rights. They also show how the inclusion of new issues is linked to differences in terminology, which previous research has pointed out. The term 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' were rarely used in the late 1990's or early 2000's, and instead, concepts such as 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR), or the aforementioned 'TBL' concept, were in vogue (Milne & Gray, 2013). This is evident in the material, where the early reports from H&M are called CSR reports, rather than sustainability reports – the change was made in 2008, around the same time that Lindex also started reporting on sustainability. A terminology analysis of the 31 available reports from all three companies (2002-2016) shows this turn in clear numbers; in 2008 the term 'CSR' was mentioned 113 times by H&M, 10 times by KappAhl, and 119 times by Lindex. In 2015, the number is zero for both H&M and KappAhl, and there are 19 mentions of it in the Lindex report. 'Sustainability', on the other hand, has risen from 229 mentions in the 2008 H&M report to 416 mentions in 2015. For KappAhl, the numbers are 1 mention in 2008 and 103 in 2015, while Lindex has 4 mentions of 'sustainability' in 2008 and 173 in 2015.

4.2   Inside the sustainability reports

A thematic analysis of discourse topics and subtopics in relation to the macro questions of ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy in the 2015/2016 annual reports shows that the three reports are very much alike when it comes to content (Table 5). While there are a range of specific issues with a political significance in the reports, there are three that stand out as central to ethicality in all three reports: first, environmentalism (specifically, different problematic aspects of fashion production and consumption, which contribute to global climate change); second, labour rights (specifically, the issues of 'living' wages for textile workers, the working environment and security in factories, and the relationship between the company and other industry actors such as unions or suppliers); and third, the issue of beauty standards (specifically, how fashion can make people feel inadequate or self-conscious by promoting unattainable ideals). In addition, the notion of 'sustainable fashion', both as a design concept and as a way to mitigate problematic aspects of the industry, is a recurring topic when it comes to defining ethicality (specifically recycling, clothing care, effective production processes, and use of more environmentally friendly materials). The idea of 'closing the loop' in the fashion industry and fashion consumption by recycling and reusing in a greater magnitude than has yet been done is a prominent subtopic in these discussions.

Authenticity is mainly discussed in relation to the core values of the company and how these guide the actions and interests of the organisations, specifically, in CEO interviews and descriptions of the companies' sustainability programmes. Discussions on brand identity and values also include references to organisational culture and how this is influenced by specific values, non-hierarchical relationships, and diversity among employees. The many mentions of transparency through audit reviews, reporting principles, and commitments that are part of the companies' sustainability strategies are also part of the discussion of authenticity.

A main discourse topic where legitimacy is discussed revolves around corporate responsibility and the initiatives, programmes, and collaborations which the companies have implemented or plan to implement in the future. The positive impact that the industry, and these brands specifically, have in production countries is another recurring topic which is used to legitimise their actions.

Table 5 Summary of discourse topics and subtopics discussed in relation to macro questions in the sustainability reports.

Topics related to ETHICALITY	Topics related to AUTHENTICITY	Topics related to LEGITIMACY
The environmental impact of fashion production and consumption Subtopics: *Water management, pollution, cotton farming, emissions, chemicals, transportation, waste, climate change*	**Core values of the organisation** Subtopics: *Personal values, business ethics*	**Corporate initiatives and collaborations** Subtopics: *Cooperation and partnerships, recycling initiatives, future plans and commitments*
Labour rights in production countries Subtopics: *Fair 'living' wages, right to unionise, working conditions, industry relations, human rights*	**Organisational culture** Subtopics: *Working environment, employees, diversity*	**Positive impact in production countries** Subtopics: *Economic development, job creation, education, empowerment, charity*
Fashion and beauty standards Subtopics: *Unattainable ideals, self-esteem, self-expression, empowerment, inclusiveness, marketing*	**Sustainability strategies and transparency** Subtopics: *Audit reviews, reporting principles, commitments*	**Increasing knowledge among consumers, suppliers, and workers** Subtopics: *Awareness raising, information, labelling initiatives*
'Sustainable fashion' as concept and design Subtopics: *Recycling, clothing care, streamlined production, materials*		

Economic development, education, and charitable projects 'beyond the value chain' are often highlighted in such discussions. The many initiatives and actions taken by the brands make them part of the solution rather than the problem – it is the consumers or different 'partners' who need to be educated about better, more sustainable, shopping practices, as well as production practices and responsibilities for specific actors, to mitigate any potential negative impact of the industry. Therefore, the efforts to increase knowledge among these actors, through awareness raising and labelling certificates, is another prominent discourse topic when it comes to the legitimacy of the industry and the brands' sustainability efforts.

4.3   Constructing the moral corporation

In the following section, I will focus on how H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex construct themselves as 'moral corporations' (Lury, 2011) in their reports, i.e. the representation of social actors on a more in-depth level. The analysis shows a general orientation towards four micro-discursive strategies in the corporate self-presentation: the characterisation of them as a) value-driven; b) responsible; c) global leaders; and d) educators. These, in turn, are articulated through the use of strategies of nomination and predication, as well as strategies of argumentation (*topoi*), which construct and qualify the companies, or other social actors, in specific ways. The self-presentation highlights a range of ethical concerns and the promotion of specific values and practices, which play an important part in the corporate discourse on ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy.

4.3.1   Driven by values, not profit

A first micro strategy in the analysed reports is the characterisation of H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex as built upon – and driven by – moral values and concerns for certain issues, rather than by the quest for economic value and profit. This strategy is realised through recurring invocation of the *topos of corporate values*: being 'value-driven' is a predication used when the companies speak of their own organisation, and specific values are referred to as an inherent part of their company culture, guiding the way they do business. There are, however, differences among the companies when it comes to which values are highlighted and what kind of issues they are linked to. The interview

with the CEO of H&M, for example, starts with questions of how sustainable H&M is and what sustainability means to the CEO:

Extract 4.1

Just as when my grandfather founded H&M in 1947, we are a company with a long-term view and strong values. Our sustainability commitment is deeply rooted in our culture. We are well aware of what a gift it is to grow up and live in a democratic state that respects the environment and human rights, and it is in this spirit that we also want to operate globally – today and tomorrow. I believe that the future success of any company, including H&M, depends, amongst other things, on efficient and long-term sustainability work. We are genuinely interested in how healthy H&M will be for future generations (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 3).

What this statement does, as a whole, is situate H&M in a specific national context and characterise the company, and its employees, in a specific way. The line of argument in the CEO's answer is that H&M is a company driven by the promotion of certain values, rather than the quest for profit. Ethicality is constructed by discursively linking the company, and the notion of sustainability, to democracy, environmentalism, and human rights – these are the issues and values that are highlighted as fundamental to Sweden as a country and that constitute 'the spirit' of H&M and their sustainability programme. Later on in the interview, the questions of 'living wages' in the textile industry and the global impact of Western consumption are discussed in relation to the morals of the company. The focus on these issues reinforces their position as important to the company and to its CEO. Being ethical is also linked to a certain sense of modesty, as the CEO is 'well aware of' how it is 'a gift' to grow up in a country where these values are respected.

The authenticity of the corporate values is constructed with the help of the tree metaphor ('deeply rooted in our culture'), which enforces the characterisation of concern for sustainability as an organic, natural, aspect of H&M, which is embraced from the ground up rather than enforced by top-down management. The reference to the grandfather in the first sentence also serves to legitimise the authenticity of this self-presentation through the authority of tradition, which reinforces the predicative adjectives and nouns ('a long time view' and 'strong values') as inherent and fundamental attributes of the company, rather than something adopted due to external influences. The

repeated use of the nomination 'we' in the statement serves to represent H&M as an organisation with shared values and beliefs, where everyone is characterised as 'genuinely interested' in what way the company has an impact, both now and in the future.

Just like in the case of H&M, *corporate values* are invoked in the opening statement from the Lindex CEO, and being driven by values linked to environmentalism and labour rights is highlighted as characteristic of the company:

> Extract 4.2
>
> Lindex offers inspiring and affordable fashion, made by people who loves fashion, retail, service and sales. We support UN Global Compacts ten principles. For us it is clear that in order to maintain successful, we need to operate within the planetary boundaries as well as safeguard/acknowledge human- and workers' rights and act to fight corruption and unethical business practices. Lindex is a vision and value driven company and to act sustainable is one of our key values that influence everything we do on a daily basis. (Lindex Sustainability Report 2015, p. 5)

The CEO describes Lindex as a company which both 'acknowledges' and 'safeguards' issues such as human rights and worker's rights, and that 'fights' against the unethical business practices of other, unnamed, actors in the industry. This predication strategy excludes the company itself from the 'unethical' actors, which creates an 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomy. The use of analogy, or comparison, thus serves to legitimise the ethicality of the company, and its identity as a moral corporation. Implicitly, it also constructs Lindex as a role model for others to follow – a form of functionalisation which assigns the company a specific role in the context of ethical fashion consumption.

Just like in the H&M report, the predicative adjective 'value-driven' is used as a qualifying attribute of Lindex, and 'to act sustainable' is emphasised as something inherent to the company culture ('influence everything we do on a daily basis'), rather than something which is added on or imposed by outside forces. This shows how the notion of authenticity is constructed and legitimised in the self-presentation of these brands, as they present their sustainability efforts as an outcome of core values, which they have been cultivating continuously over the years. There is also another focus in this interview than in the previous example: the link between economic success

and sustainability is intensified to a larger degree than in the H&M report. The CEO claims that acting sustainable and in accordance with their values is something Lindex does 'in order to remain successful', an argument which invokes the *topos of profitability* and links this to the moral identity of the company. Hence, being a 'value-driven' brand also makes Lindex a profitable business, and the role-model authority of the company also includes Lindex as financially successful and a good example of how to combine ethicality and profitability.

While both H&M and Lindex describes their sustainability work as, at least to some degree, springing from the core values and culture of the company, the equivalent in the case of KappAhl is traced back to a concern for the consumer, rather than any inherent 'spirit' of the company itself. Compared to the other two companies, it is the wellbeing and feelings of the consumer which stand out as the main issue for KappAhl. The CEO interview mainly focuses on the company's recent re-organisation and the 'central role' that the customers play for Lindex, rather than environmental concerns or the company's social impact in production countries (although environmental consciousness is something that is said to characterise their customers, and KappAhl's sustainability initiatives are mentioned).

Nonetheless, values are important for KappAhl, and ethics and principles play a big part in the presentation of their goals and visions. A 'fundamental value' for KappAhl is that 'all people are beautiful just as they are', and this is presented as something the company has promoted 'ever since it was founded over 60 years ago'. Thus, similar strategies of legitimation through tradition are used here, as in the other reports. Furthermore, an important part of how the *topos of corporate values* is realised is in the argument that KappAhl's values have a positive impact on the consumers:

Extract 4.3

WE WANT TO STRENGTHEN WOMEN'S SELF-IMAGE. We want women to feel good about themselves. And we are driven by the belief that when you feel good, you look good. We know our customer well. She loves clothes and wants to feel attractive and feminine. But also comfortable. That's why we work with a fit and offer clothes in many sizes. We praise the diversity of body shapes and work hard to create flattering cuts for different body types (KappAhl 2015/2016, part 1, p. 8).

The statement above, which initiates the description of KappAhl's fashion concept, characterises the company as 'driven by' a certain belief, or certain values, which emphasise the well-being and self-confidence of their customers. KappAhl promotes notions such as 'equality', 'diversity', and 'inclusiveness': values that can help women 'feel good about themselves'. This characterisation of the company draws on a contemporary feminism where opportunities for empowerment, self-expression, and pleasure are highlighted in relation to cultural industries such as fashion or music, at the same time as it acknowledges, and plays off, a critique of the fashion industry's homogeneous, or even exploitative, attitude towards the female body. It also legitimates the company as a role-model for others. Although gender equality, healthy body ideals, and diversity within fashion are issues that H&M and Lindex also include in their reports, it is KappAhl who specifically emphasise them as their core values and overall mission.

4.3.2 Being responsible for people, profit, and planet

Corporate values are often invoked together with another recurring argumentation strategy: the *topos of taking responsibility* which, in this context, is used to reinforce the positive characterisation of the companies. The conditional claim here is that H&M, Lindex, and KappAhl work with sustainability because they acknowledge their responsibilities when it comes to 'people, profit, and planet'.

The reports analysed can, as a whole, be seen as part of this self-presentation, as they serve to present the corporate sustainability efforts to the reader in an honest and undisguised way. References to being 'open' and 'transparent', as well as mentions of audits, surveys, tests, and risk analyses that the companies perform, are more detailed realisations of the argumentation scheme. Presenting themselves as responsible serves to counteract an implicit critique which sees the industry as dishonest and trying to hide its potential negative impact in different areas.

Taking responsibility is regularly invoked in relation to issues such as working conditions and wages, cotton farming, water management, and marketing. One way for the companies to show responsibility in these areas is to acknowledge that there are problems within the fashion industry and that they need to address these problems in different ways:

Extract 4.4

> We believe that respecting human rights should be a fundamental part of any successful business. We have operations and suppliers in countries where human rights breaches may occur. The human rights impacts of our business can take many forms – from our customers' data integrity to fundamental human rights along our value chain. As a result, we recognise our responsibility to provide for remedy when an adverse human rights impact is connected to our activities. We want to use our influence beyond our formal and legal responsibilities to respect human rights, be a force for positive change in the communities we touch and have a positive impact on people's lives. (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 66)

In this extract from the H&M sustainability report, the argument of responsibility is constructed around the dilemma of conducting business in 'countries where human rights breaches may occur'. It is argued that H&M must take responsibility for potential 'adverse human rights impact' in connection to their activities. It is important to note that while the company 'recognises' the responsibility for mitigating any negative impact on human rights in production countries, the cause of such 'breaches' is not addressed or explained here – it is just something that 'may occur' in some countries. This presents H&M as part of the solution, rather than the problem, when it comes to human rights and specific issues such as labour rights and working conditions in the textile industry. The company is characterised as 'a force for positive change' that goes beyond 'formal and legal responsibilities' when it comes to their ethical commitments and sustainability work. Thus, the authenticity of the commitment to be responsible is legitimised through moral evaluation and abstraction, rather than the authority of laws, rules, and regulations.

There are also examples of instrumental rationalisation in these extracts, where sustainability is held up as a prerequisite for the 'future success' or 'future growth' of the fashion companies. Thus, the sustainability efforts are not just legitimised as being ethical, they are also legitimised as being profitable:

Extract 4.5

LINDEX TAKES RESPONSIBILITY FOR HOW THE COMPANY'S
OPERATIONS AFFECT PEOPLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT.

The production of our products shall take place under good working
conditions. Assuming responsibility for how people and the environment are
affected is an important prerequisite if Lindex is to grow, and at the same time
maintain a good level of profitability. (Lindex Sustainability Report 2015, p.
3)

The social and environmental responsibilities of Lindex are again discursively
linked to its financial performance, as they construct 'assuming responsibility'
as part of profitable business practices, which are necessary for future growth.
Thus, the ethical position taken by the fashion companies is not always
juxtaposed financial profit; instead, economic sustainability and the financial
return which shareholders expect is incorporated as a natural part of Lindex's
work towards a 'sustainable future' of fashion. Being responsible also means
looking out for shareholders and other interested parties whose economic
status might be impacted by the company. Through this discursive construction
of the company's identity, profitability comes to signify ethicality at the same
time as ethicality comes to signify profitability.

   Since all three companies also assert that they are concerned with the
experiences and feelings of their customers, taking responsibility is also
invoked in relation to marketing. The focus here is on how the fashion
companies might impact the well-being and self-esteem of consumers,
specifically when it comes to 'diversity' and body ideals:

Extract 4.6

For many years, we have had an advertising policy in place that entails taking
responsibility for the impact of our advertising around the world and choosing
models and images that convey a positive message. This is very important to
us, and we are aware that we, as a major market player, have a responsibility.
We want all of our marketing to show our fashion in an inspiring way, and
include a wide range of models. […] However, there are no objective answers
to what is a healthy look. This needs to be an ongoing discussion in our daily

work, and we also welcome a discussion within our whole industry. (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 73)

The characterisation of H&M as responsible and moral is again legitimised through the authority of tradition ('for many years') together with moral evaluation ('this is very important to us'). The realisation of responsibility also includes the characterisation of the company as 'aware' and inclusive when it comes to issues such as how fashion advertising that promotes a thin, white, and young ideal has negative impact on both the physical and psychological well-being of their customers (specifically, women). Further on in the paragraph, however, it is stated that there is 'no objective answers to what is a healthy look', an argument that draws on theoretical rationality; paradoxically, the 'truth' that there is no truth when it comes to healthy ideals effectively delegitimises any potential critique of the company on this issue.

Responsibility can thus be evoked in relation to textile workers and labour rights, shareholders and economic profit, and consumers and their self-esteem. Being responsible is also emphasised in relation to the companies' own employees – taking responsibility for the work environment within the organisation and in its stores is, for example, constructed as characteristic for KappAhl:

Extract 4.7

It is important for us to take responsibility for good working conditions at KappAhl and we work actively with issues such as gender equality, diversity and the working environment. The work is based on our policies and the overall business strategies. Everyone working at KappAhl is informed of our ethical guidelines and what they mean in order to create approaches to key issues such as corruption and conflicts of interest. (KappAhl 2015/2016, part 1, p. 15)

Here, taking responsibility involves cultivating a certain culture within the organisation and raising awareness of specific issues such as gender equality, diversity, and corruption. Again, this example shows how the *topos of corporate values* is often invoked together with *taking responsibility*; an important part of being a value-driven, moral corporation is to be responsible and 'work actively' to 'create approaches' that are adequate to handle certain issues or problems. This characterisation of the companies as proactive in their

sustainability work, whether it concerns textile workers, shareholders, employees, or consumers, is particularly prominent in the third micro-strategy in the reports: the depiction of H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex as actors with the ability to 'make a difference' and create 'real change' on specific issues.

4.3.3 Making a difference and creating change

In the sustainability reports, the brands are depicted as the ones with the power and ability to actually have an impact on specific issues through their business practices and global presence. This capacity for change is constructed as a result of their core values and willingness to take responsibility, as well as successful business strategies which make them important actors within the industry. The change-making character is articulated via the *topos of global leaders*, achieved by references to how fashion companies 'drive change' in different ways:

> Extract 4.8
>
> Let us make a difference! Lindex at a glance
>
> Our ambition is that Lindex will be recognised as a leading fashion retailer, known as one of the most sustainable, open and trusted companies in the industry. We want to be the company that has gone beyond business as usual and sought to drive change. By being innovative, transparent and acting to create a positive impact, we will create a sustainable difference together with our suppliers, partners and customers. (Lindex Sustainability Report 2015, p. 3)

In this statement, Lindex is ascribed positive qualifying attributes, such as being 'innovative' and going 'beyond business as usual' to create 'positive impact' instead of negative. Similar strategies are found in the H&M report, which speaks of the company as 'leading the way' and 'raising the bar' when it comes to sustainability issues. The H&M CEO argues that the 'size and global presence' of the company makes it possible to ensure that 'the way [they] do business makes places better'. Further, it is stated that the 'holistic approach' to sustainability means that H&M is 'taking a lead' when it comes to fair living wages and a 'circular' business model. Similar strategies can be seen in the way that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are depicted in the reports, specifically by H&M, who even include short interviews with

representatives from 'partner organisations' such as WWF, Oxfam GB, and the Humane Society International to strengthen this argument. The NGO representatives are often ascribed a role as experts, who evaluate the sustainability work that the brands do:

Extract 4.9

"It is exciting to partner with a company that shares our passion for animal protection. Working with H&M to end animal testing for cosmetics, and improve the lives of animals on farms will set a high standard for others to follow. It will show that it not only makes good ethical sense to treat animals with kindness and compassion, but it makes good business sense too." (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 21)

The statement from the CEO of the Humane Society International characterises H&M as an ethical, but still successful, company who leads the way and 'set a high standard' for others. The same positive attitude is found in a similar interview with a representative of WWF International, who says that WWF 'applauds H&M's dedication to sustainability' and that the company can play a leading role in future sustainability initiatives. Thus, the personal authority of NGO partners serves to legitimise the authenticity of H&M's role as a global leader and role model for others in the industry.

4.3.4 Educating and raising awareness

Another important aspect of the corporate self-representation is therefore the way the reports position the companies as educators when it comes to sustainability and ethical business practices. This is often done by invoking the *topos of awareness raising*. All three reports contain a number of references to how the companies educate and inform others, especially suppliers, textile workers, and consumers. The companies create change by sharing their knowledge and consciousness about sustainability issues with others, often through different educational programmes and training.

   The articulations of awareness raising rest on a dual description which highlights both negative and positive aspects when it comes to other groups of social actors with which the companies have a relationship. Textile workers, for example, are mainly characterised as young, female, poor, low-skilled, and uniformed. Lindex argues that the worker's lack of knowledge on certain issues is a 'risk', both for themselves and for the industry in general:

Extract 4.10

Factory workers are often not aware of their employment rights and responsibilities, which is a risk not only for the worker but also for factory owners and the sourcing companies and for countries involved in global trade. (Lindex Sustainability Report 2015, p. 36)

The extract above is an example of how the need for education provided by Lindex, KappAhl, or H&M is constructed as necessary for other actors in the industry. The 'challenges' of the industry are presented as depending on workers who are uninformed ('not aware of their employment rights and responsibilities'), especially in relation to the wage issue or hazardous working conditions in textile factories.

   Similar strategies of predication and argumentation can be seen in the characterisation of suppliers – often referred to as 'partners' – in productions countries; they are also predicated as uninformed, and problems found in factories or on cotton farms are there because of 'lack of knowledge and skills', rather than anything else. H&M argues, for example, that there exists a 'great desire and ambition' in countries such as Myanmar when it comes to 'responsible and sustainable business', although 'there is often a lack of awareness about what that really means'. Therefore, the partnerships with the brands serve to support, help, and educate suppliers so that they get to 'own the knowledge' they need to improve business and workplaces:

Extract 4.11

We choose and reward responsible partners who share our values and are willing to work transparently with us to improve their social and environmental performance. We look for long-term partnerships with our suppliers and engage in strategic partnerships with the most progressive ones. We set high standards for our suppliers and check how well they live up to them. But much more than that, we work together to go beyond minimum standards and to truly integrate sustainability into the management systems of our partners. We provide training, conduct management system analysis, help develop measurements and data systems so our suppliers can identify and tackle their impacts, and we reward good performance systematically with long-term business commitment and growth opportunities, by us defined as better business. (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 27)

H&M describe their suppliers as willing to be 'transparent', 'responsible', and 'progressive' – positive predications which they acquire through their partnership with H&M. Partnerships enable suppliers to fall in line with the company's own values and priorities ('improve their social an environmental performance') and become as innovative and committed as H&M themselves ('go beyond minimum standards'). Similar discursive strategies are used when speaking of unions or other worker's organisations and in the way they are portrayed as 'partners' to the companies. The nomination strategy serves to reinforce the positive corporate self-presentation through constructing this relation as a positive partnership, rather than a confrontational conflict. However, like suppliers, unions can be negatively characterised, depending on context and country:

Extract 4.12

The right to join a trade union and to engage in collective bargaining is a basic right that we uphold. Unfortunately, in many of our production countries the trade unions are weak and the underlying causes are complex and often multifaceted. (Lindex Sustainability Report 2015, p. 26)

As this extract from the Lindex report shows, unions are in some cases described as 'weak' organisations. The reasons for this weakness are 'unfortunately' both 'complex' and 'multifaceted' – a characterisation which is repeated by H&M and KappAhl as well. Because of the unions' weakness, the role of brands such as Lindex is to 'ensure that [the right to unionise] is not violated', although Lindex also point out that 'establishing trade unions remains the workers' own responsibility'. To be able to do so, factory employees 'are informed of their rights' or given opportunities to take part in empowerment workshops.

The micro strategies to construct the fashion industry as global leaders who drive change and educate others can also be seen in the way the companies speak of consumers in their reports. KappAhl, for example, focuses on 'conveying knowledge about how the customer can contribute' when it comes to sustainable fashion; specifically, through making consumers aware of the company's recycling programme and the benefits of better clothing care. Similar realisations of the *topos of awareness raising* are found in the other reports, where 'awareness raising' among consumers is one of the highlighted

ways to make change happen in the industry – both to empower consumers to demand more from fashion brands and to become 'conscious' of their own consumption habits.

The articulations of this argumentation strategy reveal a sometimes contradictory characterisation of the contemporary fashion consumer. A general characterisation of the consumer is that she is female and has high standards when it comes to fashion and 'shopping experiences'. She also thinks that sustainability is important, especially issues such as chemical use, recycling, and human rights in production countries. Being 'conscious' about sustainability issues and about different brands performance in these areas is argued to be something which characterises the contemporary consumer. Thus, the consumers are, in some cases, ascribed a similar activist role as the brands themselves and can be 'partners' when it comes to sustainable fashion.

At the same time as customers are positively qualified as 'conscious' when it comes to sustainability, and as people who 'care for the story around a garment', they are also described as problematic, uninformed, and behaving in an unsustainable way. Consumers do not care for clothes the way they should, they do not use clothes as long as they could, and when they stop using clothes, they do not know how to recycle them:

Extract 4.13

We need to inspire our customers to be more conscious in the way they care for their clothes, for example as regards washing and drying, and make it easy and effortless to recycle any garment that might no longer be wanted. (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 10)

An important aspect of this more negative characterisation is that the fashion companies need to 'raise awareness' and both 'inspire' and 'help' consumers to change their consumption practices – a description which invokes the *topos of awareness raising* and characterises companies as educators who enable consumers to become conscious and aware about how they should change, rather than the other way around.

As this analysis has shown, the presentation of social actors in the sustainability reports serves, to a large extent, to establish and legitimise a positive characterisation of the fashion industry in general and of these three companies in particular. The self-presentation of H&M, Lindex, and KappAhl

as value-driven, responsible, global leaders who educate others serves to position them as a positive force when it comes to environmental, social, and economic sustainability, committed to make the world a better place. They 'push the development forward' due to their own values and intentions, rather than being pushed by consumer demands or by criticism from environmental organisations and worker's associations. Recurring references to being 'proud' of their achievements and ambitions for the future are examples of how these corporate actors position themselves as both role models and leaders for other companies, suppliers, and collaboration partners. They also characterise themselves as activists and mentors, who help to empower others with knowledge in the fight against climate change, unjust labour laws, and unhealthy body ideals. However, the presentation of H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex as leaders and educators when it comes to sustainable fashion, is, somewhat paradoxically, also combined with statements which present the companies as just one among many equal 'partners' with shared responsibilities when it comes to the problematic aspects of the industry.

4.4   Restyling the 'fast fashion' industry

Drawing on the findings in the analysis of corporate self-presentation in the sustainability reports from H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex, three discursive struggles have been identified in the reports: 1) the proposed absence of conflicts between the actors in the industry; 2) the role of consumption in sustainable development; and 3) whether the fashion industry should be regarded as exploiting or empowering women, both in relation to workers in manufacturing countries and in relation to consumers in the global North.

All of these conflicts involve a certain process of 'restyling' the fast fashion industry, where the impact and role of the industry in general, and these brands in particular, is discursively reconfigured in a way that neutralises, or obscures, any criticism. In the following discussion, I will present the basic conflict and the opposing arguments on different sides of the issue. It is important to point out that a 'discursive struggle' is a struggle over meaning, over the right to define the notion of what something 'is' or how specific situations or relationships should be understood. Since the texts analysed are produced by the fashion companies themselves, the 'opposing argument' to their own position is often not made explicit or might just be alluded to by corporate actors.

4.4.1 Industry relationships and the absence of conflicts

The first discursive struggle between conflicting ideas in the reports is actually the absence of conflicts. This might appear a bit contradictory, although it is not as strange as it sounds. The relationships between different actors in the fashion industry are, as shown in the previous discussion, predominantly referred to as 'partnerships', which mitigates any differences of opinion between them. A notable nomination strategy linked to these partnerships is that the issues that they serve to find solutions to are referred to as 'challenges' which the industry faces, rather than problems caused by their own actions or systemic injustices which are a prerequisite for continued profitability:

> Extract 4.14
>
> Our planet is facing scarcity issues on many fronts and too many people still live in poverty. Clean water, climate change, textile waste, wages and over time in supplier factories are some of the key challenges in the textile industry, as well as in many other industries (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 6).

Note that this statement characterises H&M, and the fashion industry in general, as just one actor among many, part of one industry among several, who are faced with 'scarcity issues' and 'challenges' such as textile waste and low wages in supplier factories. The analogy, or comparison, to other industries mitigates and delegitimises criticism of the 'fast fashion' industry as especially problematic or as the cause any of the problems. Further on, the H&M CEO emphasises that dealing with the 'challenges' of a sustainable fashion industry is a 'shared responsibility' between a number of actors – an invocation of the *topos of taking responsibility* that positions the company as one actor among others who have equal responsibilities and interests.

Thus, the overarching conflict here – the discursive struggle – is a conflict about whether there are any conflicts of interest between the different actors in the industry and whether everyone can, and will, benefit from the idea of 'sustainable fashion'. On one side of the argument are (the absent) critical voices who question the idea that everyone would benefit from a 'sustainable' fashion industry, without changing the very foundations of the business model and the relationships between the global North and South. From this position in the overarching discursive struggle, it would be important to highlight the

conflicts of interest and the unequal distribution of power between different actors in the industry.

Such arguments are, however, not explicitly stated by any actor in the sustainability reports, but rather, they are alluded to by different corporate representatives who argue for their company's view on the issue. Instead of conflict, these representatives highlight the mutual benefits and the shared interests between actors. The corporate notion of 'sustainable fashion' is often linked to 'partnerships' between actors in the industry, where all involved parties share a similar understanding and strive towards the same goal, rather than represent diverse perspectives or conflicting interests. Any potential conflict or criticism is obscured by arguments that highlight the responsibilities of different actors and invokes a *topos of shared interests*. In the introduction to the H&M report, for example, the CEO explains that collaboration is the very foundation upon which the company's sustainability work is built and that 'you can only drive real change if you have a collaborative mind-set'. Similar arguments are found in the Lindex report, where the company is characterised as just one out of many actors who are 'joining forces' on issues such as climate change and human rights:

Extract 4.15

Since many of the sustainability challenges we face are not Lindex specific, we are joining forces with our peers. Through collaborating with suppliers, partners, customers, NGOs, other brands and stakeholders we find solutions that step by step are more sustainable for people, for the environment, for the society and for the business. (Lindex Sustainability Report 2015, p. 5)

It is notable how this argumentation strategy serves to mitigate the role of the fashion companies themselves as the cause to any problems and intensifies their role as just one among the many who are affected by environmental or social problems related to the industry ('the sustainability challenges we face are not Lindex specific'). Note how the nomination strategy of referring to problems as 'challenges' recurs in this context. The use of a nomination such as 'peers' also signals that the actors involved in the collaborations and partnerships are equals and possess the same power and opportunity to influence the situation.

One of the areas where the absence of conflicts is particularly emphasised is in the representation of trade unions, in relation to the issue of labour rights and better working conditions in the textile industry. Unions are mainly depicted as 'partners' to the fashion brands, rather than critical opponents. It is argued that there exists a 'shared vision' amongst fashion brands and unions alike; all workers in the industry should earn fair living wages, and the best way to achieve this is through negotiations between the workers and suppliers, rather than regulations that would affect foreign brands and buyers. H&M is the company which pushes this argument furthest and reinforces it throughout the entire report. It is highlighted that the company shares the same view – i.e. problem-definition and solution – as the organisations which represent the workers:

Extract 4.16

Wages are a very complex issue. This is why we seek guidance from wage experts such as global trade unions, the ILO and the Fair Wage Network. They believe our role as a brand and buyer is not to set the level of wages. Rather, wages should be negotiated between the parties on the labour market. We share this view. It would be devastating if foreign companies such as H&M determined wage levels in any countries. (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 3)

In the statement above, unions are referred to as 'experts' from whom the company seek guidance – a nomination that legitimises the claim that it would be 'devastating' if foreign companies would have an impact on wage levels, since this opinion is ascribed the personal authority of workers themselves, rather than H&M.

Lindex also highlights the wage issue in their sustainability report – it is described as 'complex', and the construction of problems and solutions draws on the *topos of shared interests* together with *taking responsibility*. Notable here is the explicit division of responsibilities between themselves and the textile workers:

Extract 4.17

Having the opportunity to join a trade union and engage in collective bargaining is the primary goal, but establishing trade unions remains the

workers' own responsibility. Lindex is responsible for putting pressure on the supplier to ensure that this right is not violated. (Lindex Sustainability Report 2015, p. 26)

Hence, the cause of the 'complexities' of the wage industry is traced back to the workers themselves and their inability to organise, rather than the profit-margins of the buyers in the industry. Such arguments counteract an implicit critique which says that companies such as H&M or Lindex operate in these countries precisely because of their 'complexities' – that it is the cheap labour costs and fast production pace in Bangladesh or Myanmar which attract the companies to do business there, and that to address these 'challenges', one must also address the unequal division of power and responsibility between the actors in the industry.

Instead, H&M positions themselves as a supportive partner of worker's associations – a union-friendly, rather than union-busting, company. This strategy can be interpreted as partly due to the necessary discursive separation between the company and the potential conflicts in the production chain. The example below also illustrates the argument that if there are any conflicts, they are conflicts between the workers and factory owners, not between workers and H&M. In the rare cases where the unions are 'empowered' without the help of European fashion brands, they also seem to behave in a way that is not in line with the vision of the buyers:

Extract 4.18

Unlike many other countries in the region, Cambodia has a history of trade union representation. The vast majority of our supplier factories in the country have trade unions in place. However, negotiations in the sector are often confrontational, resulting in major conflicts. […] Together with the ILO, the Swedish trade union IF Metall and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), we started a unique project in 2014 that will run through 2016. The aim of the project is to increase the number of collective bargaining agreements, create best practice examples for fair and solution oriented negotiations and ultimately contribute to greater stability in the market. To achieve this, we are working jointly to improve negotiations and conflict resolution skills amongst both employers and unions and working with government institutions to help them establish frameworks that support this. (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 55)

It seems that unions are mostly weak, and therefore there is no justice and fair wages – but where they are strong, they are 'confrontational', which leads to conflicts. Being 'confrontational' and going into conflict is not the ideal which H&M promotes. Instead, H&M's goal is to 'contribute to greater stability' in the market through collaborations which will 'improve negotiations and conflict resolution skills' among the actors. The role of H&M is to facilitate productive conversations between the 'parties on the labour market' (which excludes themselves from being one of these parties). This functionalisation of the brand is legitimised by the personal authority of 'partners' such as ILO, IF Metall, and SIDA.

The conflicts – or 'challenges' – which might arise during such negotiations are mitigated by referring to them as 'misunderstandings' or 'confusion', which can be counteracted by 'providing further clarification' on the policies and the law. Thus, *awareness raising* is invoked when lack of information is pointed out as the problem, and better communication ('dialogue') is framed as the solution. Again, then, the company's role as educator is legitimised, as they can teach both unions and suppliers the value of 'positive dialogue'. This form of awareness raising, and the enabling function of the corporate actors, is underscored in quotations from union representatives in the H&M report:

> Extract 4.19
>
> "There are fewer conflicts between the management and workers because the knowledge and understanding of labour law, freedom of association and rights to organise has increased." Jian Li Ling (Head of J&V International Cambodia). (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 55)
>
> Extract 4.20
>
> "We are working in a way that we have never been able to before, with brands that want to make a difference." Jenny Holdcroft, Policy Director, IndustriALL. (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 49)

The quotations in extracts 4.19 and 4.20 both help to legitimise the division of roles between the company and their 'partners', as the representatives claim that without H&M the unions would not have the same opportunities to change their own situation ('we are working in a way that we have never been able to before'). Furthermore, they acknowledge the ethical identity of H&M ('brands

that want to make a difference'), as well as its function as educator and enabler ('the knowledge and understanding of labour law, freedom of association and rights to organise has increased'). The characterisation of unions does, to some extent, depict these organisations as grateful for the support, help, and partnership which the fashion companies offer. It also helps to reinforce the characterisation of H&M as being 'on the same side' as the unions, rather than an opponent in a potential conflict.

4.4.2 Consumption and sustainable development

The struggle over whether there are any conflicts of interest between actors in the fashion industry often overlaps with another discursive struggle which underpins the idea of sustainable fashion in these reports: the role of Western businesses and consumption as either a positive or negative force in developing countries. This discursive struggle is often actualised in discussions on 'sustainable development' in countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, or India. What it boils down to is the question of whether brands such as H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex should be regarded as negative influences in these countries, with business models built on exploitation and greed, or as positive forces who contribute to development, equality, and higher living standards in developing countries.

Similar to the struggle regarding conflict or consensus between actors in the industry, arguments that companies such as H&M or Lindex exploit, or have a negative impact on, production countries are not explicitly put forward in the sustainability reports. Instead, they are often alluded to as an underlying criticism against which different actors argue. The CEO interview in the H&M report, for example, contains two questions that address such concerns: it asks what the CEO thinks about buying clothes from countries such as Bangladesh and Cambodia, and what he thinks about consumption in general. What is interesting in his answers is the way that not only the company itself is portrayed, but also the consumer and the role of (Western) consumption when it comes to economic and social development:

Extract 4.21

Consumption is necessary for jobs generating taxes that pay for schools, hospitals and infrastructure, but also for developing countries to become part of international trade and thereby lift themselves out of poverty. If people

stopped consuming, society would be affected negatively. (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 4)

When the CEO of H&M argues that consumption is 'necessary for jobs and generating taxes', he claims that consumption is essential for the continued maintenance of public services and welfare (health care, job security, education, etc.). In addition to the argument aimed at the local consumer, he also addresses global issues by invoking a *topos of global development*, where the conditional claim is that consumption creates the foundation for further economic and social improvements in 'developing countries'. Consumption is, so to say, what drives societies forward, and the ever-increasing (Western) consumption is therefore legitimised through a form of instrumental rationalisation, where potential problematic aspects are rationalised as a necessary evil, which is overshadowed by other positive outcomes. An underling claim here is that fashion brands do not exploit people in developing countries, as some critics would argue; instead, they empower them by creating jobs and opportunities for future business. The motivation for placing their orders with manufacturers in these countries is not that it is cheap, but rather, that they contribute to economic and social change, which will benefit everyone in the future:

> Extract 4.22
>
> What do you think about buying clothes from countries such as Bangladesh and Cambodia?
>
> Buying products made in developing countries is the most effective way to lift people out of poverty and give them opportunities for a decent life. I would say it is extremely important that developing countries have access to international markets – how else can they make progress? For many countries, the textile industry is the first step on this path. H&M indirectly creates employment for over a million people, not least women, in the countries that manufacture our products. According to the World Bank, the textile industry is an important contributor to poverty reduction. (H&M Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015, p. 3)

There are two discursive strategies worth noting in this extract: First, the question itself suggests some kind of problematic dimension to the act of

'buying clothes from countries such as Bangladesh or Cambodia', although it excludes any reason for why the CEO should have an opinion about this. Thus, it implicitly acknowledges a criticism of exploitative business practices and hazardous working conditions in these countries and a conflict regarding whether consumers should support this by buying clothes made there, although the question does not explicitly give voice to any specific criticism pointed towards the company itself. Thus, it obscures the role of H&M in the suggested conflict, as it totally omits the part that the company plays in the process which brings the clothes to the consumer. The suggested problems are constructed as problems of the production countries, rather than problems connected to H&M or the fashion industry in general.

Second, the CEO again invokes *global development* when he highlights the positive impact of the textile industry in general and the role of H&M in particular in developing countries. 'Access to international markets' is constructed as a prerequisite for 'progress', an argument which implicitly claims that critics who argue that H&M, or other brands, should not do business in these countries, where they know exploitative practices exist, actually deny underprivileged workers their only chance to change their own situation. At the same time, this focus mitigates the other side of the relationship – that the 'international market' also gives H&M access to cheap labour and raw materials in these countries.

Extract 4.22 is also a good example of how *global development* is paired with a *topos of empowerment* within this discursive struggle; the statement that H&M creates employment for over a million people, specifically women, draws on the argument that their presence empowers, rather than exploits, since they provide opportunities for economic security and independency. By referencing the personal authority of the Wold Bank, the CEO legitimises the role of business, and his own company, as a 'contributor to poverty reduction', rather than as an exploitative actor. Private business investments are highlighted as a necessary force to drive society forward and to create opportunities for people to thrive. The CEO later states that the question for H&M is not if they should be present in developing countries, but rather 'how they should be present'. The way that H&M do business should make consumers 'feel proud' of wearing clothes made in Bangladesh and Cambodia, rather than the opposite.

Similarly, Lindex also speaks of *global development* when they argue that they 'contribute to a positive development and sustainable future' in the

countries where they do business and where their production takes place. In a statement from the Sustainability Manager, it is claimed that businesses 'play a vital part in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals' set up by a gathering of World Leaders in 2015. The positive influence of the fashion industry is also argued to extend beyond the immediate environmental and social impact, especially through the charitable projects and organisations which Lindex, as well as H&M and KappAhl, support. The question of consumption in relation to social and economic development is not explicitly addressed in the same way as it is in the case of H&M. Instead, examples from this report show another way that consumption is discussed and discursively restyled:

Extract 4.23

MAKING GOOD CHOICES EASY FOR CUSTOMERS

As a responsible fashion company, we encourage our customers to make conscious decisions and consume responsibly. Today, 42 per cent of our garments are made from sustainable materials, and our Sustainable Choice range is clearly marked with the green hang tag. On the hang tag the customer get information on how the specific item is sustainable, which materials has been used and if there are any certifications linked to the item. At Lindex e-commerce the same information is visible. (Lindex Sustainability Report 2015, p. 53)

By invoking the *topos of changed behaviour*, Lindex acknowledges that there might be problematic aspects of the consumption habits in Sweden and other Western countries – therefore, consumers must 'consume responsibly' and change their shopping habits. This argumentation scheme is present in all three reports, where the fashion companies' role is to 'encourage' this change and to provide information which will help people to 'make conscious decisions' in their stores. In addition to choosing the right alternative when shopping, consumers are also encouraged to take better care of clothes, as well as to contribute to the recycling programmes that all three companies have initiated as part of their sustainability work. Thus, this argumentation strategy helps to construct consumption discursively as something that does not have to be mitigated, but rather managed and pointed towards more 'sustainable choices'.

4.4.3   Female empowerment through fashion

So far, I have discussed the construction of consensus and shared interests between industry actors in the texts analysed and the role of Western consumption (and the fashion industry) when it comes to causing the problems that the brands seek to mitigate with their sustainability work. A third underlying struggle in the sustainability reports revolves around the role of fashion in society at large – what it is and what it does – both as a cultural form and as an industry. Specifically, the texts analysed show traces of discursive struggle over whether fashion should be regarded as either exploiting or empowering women. This conflict involves both the relationship between the brands and their customers, as well as the relationship between brands and workers in the textile industry.

Fashion is argued to be something that should be 'a source of fun and inspiration' for the consumer and also a 'great way to express your personality' or your 'personal style'. Thus, self-expression and individualism is at the centre of the fashion companies' own understanding of what fashion is and what it does. Fashion can be used to communicate who you are and what you think is important by choosing certain brands, labels, or materials. It should be associated with 'feeling beautiful' and be a source for self-confidence. That is, however, not always the case, particularly when it comes to hegemonic ideas about how the female body should look and be shaped – a conflict which is alluded to in all three analysed reports analysed, specifically, in sections focused on 'customer experiences' and marketing. In the KappAhl report, it is actually this complex – and sometimes critical – view on fashion that is the centre of their vision and values:

> Extract 4.24
>
> It's time that fashion makes you feel.
>
> Imagine if we ever realized how beautiful we are. Imagine if we always felt confident in our clothes. And think if the garment always highlighted our best features. For this reason, we do not design for models on a catwalk, but for you. It is about time that fashion gives you strength. And we are going to fight for that (KappAhl 2015/2016, part 1, p. 9).

The rhetorical use of 'imagine' in this statement shows how the brand plays off an implicit understanding that women often feel unattractive and unsure

about themselves, and that this has something to do with fashion and the clothes they wear. By arguing that they 'do not design for models on a catwalk, but for you', KappAhl invokes a *topos of problematic beauty standards*, as they contrast 'models on a catwalk' with the addressed consumer who presumably does not comply with the standards and ideals of the high fashion world. Instead, the company designs for 'the real woman' rather than a presumed inauthentic, fake version of womanhood that is promoted by other fashion brands or designers. This use of analogy thus legitimises the company's authentic concern for the well-being of its consumers, as it implicitly compares KappAhl to other, unnamed brands who might not have the same design philosophy.

Instead of making women feel bad or inadequate, fashion should 'give strength' and 'highlight every woman's best features'– an invocation of a *topos of empowerment* where the transformation from self-conscious to self-confident becomes possible through the actions of the brand and its core values. KappAhl is prepared to 'fight' for the consumer's right to feel good and to 'change the way we look at fashion today'; statements that position the brand as an ally to the consumer in the struggle against objectifying or impossible beauty standards. Therefore, the brand promotes diversity through 'healthy ideals' that are 'inclusive' and 'not limited by size', a strategy aimed to 'elevate [the] customer's self-esteem and well-being' by questioning a presumed focus on thin, white, and young female bodies in the fashion world. This argumentation strategy, aimed at empowering the consumer, draws on a feminist critique of exploitative ideals and lack of diversity in fashion and is particularly emphasised by KappAhl, although it is present in the other reports as well. H&M, for example, also speak of 'diversity' and 'inclusiveness' in relation to marketing and advertising, where they argue that 'there is a need to ensure a diverse and healthy look' in fashion. As discussed earlier, H&M expresses an ambivalent attitude when invoking problematic *beauty standards*, since they also claim that there are no rules about what this actually means.

Customers are not, however, the only ones who can become empowered with the help of fashion – female empowerment is also emphasised in relation to textile workers in the global South. As discussed, the *topos of empowerment* is often invoked in addition to *global development*, when it comes to constructing the textile industry as a way out of poverty. Women are often explicitly pointed to as the beneficiaries of the development opportunities which all three fashion brands offer. Employment in the textile industry is held

out as a 'first step' on the 'development escalator' which will elevate women out of poverty and structural inequality, as well as raise 'environmental consciousness' in general. KappAhl highlights their ambition to empower women in production countries through providing livelihoods and education that will lead to individual freedom and independency. This is, among other activities, done through the company's involvement in an education centre in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where women are offered education and economic support:

Extract 4.25

WE WANT TO CONTRIBUTE TO increased opportunities and positions in society for women in our production countries. We do this, for example, by offering education, which creates a path to self-sufficiency and a more independent life for women and their children. [...] All women are offered work after education and there are former students who now have positions of responsibility. This year 94 women were trained and since the beginning of 2010 almost 500 women have completed the three-month education. We think that all women should get to decide over their own lives. (KappAhl 2015/2016, part 1, p. 31)

Empowerment is here invoked in the way the statement highlights the agency and subjectivity of the women (they can 'decide over their own life'). The statement also points out that they are involved in running the project further ('former students who now have positions of responsibility'). Just as in the H&M report, independence through employment and economic security is linked to the initiative ('all women are offered work').

This argumentation strategy serves to mitigate criticism of the industry and the fact that the self-expression and empowerment of Western women are dependent on the labour of poor women in developing countries. By linking the corporate initiatives to notions such as 'self-sufficiency' and 'independence', the female workers are included in the brand community and its focus on female empowerment. Just as the fashion industry can provide opportunities for women in Sweden to express their independence, femininity, and consciousness through different styles and designs, they can also provide opportunities for emancipation in Bangladesh, India, or Cambodia.

Creating opportunities for personal development and entrepreneurship, for example, through the 'HERfinance project', is another important part of

KappAhl's work to empower female textile workers. Similarly, H&M highlights the work they do to 'promote female leadership' in garment production in Bangladesh, both through basic recruitment and through training programmes for employees. Through the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), the brand works to 'empower young female workers' and to 'build community awareness' on the wage issue. By invoking the *topos of empowerment*, it is possible to emphasise a positive characterisation of both workers and suppliers in the value chain. Textile workers are here considered as important actors in the industry, and their own view is 'undoubtedly central' when it comes to suppliers' sustainability performance. It is these 'empowered' workers who are present in the reports and speak with their own voice. A quotation from a former student at KappAhl's training centre in Dhaka illustrates this:

Extract 4.26

"Now I work in a factory. I'm doing well and can take care of my family in a good way." (KappAhl 2015/2016, part 1, p. 31)

Statements such as the one above, or those from H&M that highlight the need for a 'worker perspective' and use first-hand statements in their report to illustrate the empowerment of workers, can be seen as a realisation of mythopoesis: storytelling where the underprivileged worker is rewarded for engaging in the initiatives and programmes provided by the companies. By doing so, she becomes empowered and can provide for herself and her family. The 'moral tale' of the poor, uneducated, and vulnerable worker who, through her relationship to the fashion industry in general (and these companies in particular), is transformed to a successful, determined, independent individual, serves to legitimise the actions and presence of the fast fashion industry in the global South.

The empowered female workers are also portrayed as committed, creative, and involved in the sustainability vision of the companies. KappAhl quotes a female cotton grower in India, who says that she regards her field as 'sustainable farmland', rather than a 'manufacturing unit'. In the H&M report, another Indian woman tells of how she enjoys 'seeing the creativity and innovation in the clothes' that she makes in the textile factory. She goes on to say that this is why she has worked in the business for so long, an argument which helps to mitigate the impact of poverty and the need to provide for

oneself and one's family, and instead highlights pleasure and personal interest as the driving force for workers in the textile industry.

Through this transformation, the empowered worker becomes an ambassador for the brand identity and its values and proof of the positive impact of the fashion industry. Thus, the business model based on cheap labour in countries such as India or Bangladesh is legitimised through instrumental rationalisation, where the arguments point toward the empowering rather than exploitative relationship between fashion brands and (female) textile workers. References to collaboration with different NGO partners or local organisations also serve to legitimise this positive view of the companies and their actions by referring to the personal authority of, for example, the United Nations or personal accounts from women in the production countries.

4.5   Conclusions

To conclude, this analysis shows that the three sustainability reports mainly focus on the same issues, problems, and solutions in relation to the production and consumption of fashion. Specific terms and concepts may vary, but nonetheless it is the 'triple bottom line' elements of social, environmental, and economic impacts (Milne & Gray, 2013) that underpin the reports to a large extent. This is not surprising, since they all follow the recommendations of the Global Reporting Initiative and are very similar in their approaches. While there is a specific emphasis on certain areas depending on the company, issues such as environmental impact, labour rights and working conditions, and female empowerment and gender equality are dominant in all three reports.

As a communicative practice, the corporate sustainability report can be seen as part of the branding strategies which serve to construct the organisational identity of H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex and to associate them with specific values and practices. Since this is a dynamic process that builds upon the exchange and relationship between producers and consumers (Banet-Weiser, 2012a; Lury, 2011), any critique expressed by external actors must be mitigated, or neutralised, by 'closing' the meaning of notions such as sustainable fashion or the social and economic impact that these companies have (both at home and in manufacturing countries).

The analysis shows how H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex discursively construct themselves as 'moral corporations' (Lury, 2011) and how the neutralisation of criticism is related to, or dependent upon, a discursive

'restyling' of the (fast) fashion industry in general and these companies in particular. It positions the companies as ethical, rather than unethical, actors precisely because of their business model, rather than in spite of it. To counteract any critical claims that major fashion chains are inherently unsustainable because of their business model and need for ever-expanding markets, KappAhl, Lindex and H&M discursively construct their position as global leaders in sustainability in a way that turns their size into a positive, rather than a negative, characteristic.

Ethicality is constructed by linking the companies to certain issues that are emphasised as 'core values', which in turn reinforces the authenticity of these commitments; for H&M, it is the question of fair 'living wages' in the textile industry that is emphasised, while Lindex mainly highlights their environmental initiatives and how these are linked to profitability. In the case of KappAhl, ethicality is mainly constructed around the issue of female empowerment and self-expression through fashion. These companies are examples of the 'caring capitalism' that seeks its legitimacy outside the traditional realm of business in society and sees no contradiction between sustainability and profitability, or any real conflict of interest between different social actors (Hanlon, 2008).

The discursive reinforcement of authentic, long-term concern for democracy, environmentalism, human rights, and female empowerment has an ideological function, as it addresses the implicit critique of the 'fast fashion' industry as promoting a short-term business model focused only on economic profit. Juxtaposing such critiques, the actions and goals of the companies are legitimised through moral evaluation – being 'value driven' companies counteracts the negative characterisation of the fast fashion business model and instead intensifies specific ethical concerns as core values of the three companies.

The reports allude to a critical discourse on the logic and impact of consumer culture and capitalism – a discourse that is counteracted by a corporate discourse on the benefits of sustainable fashion production and consumption. Arguments about the importance of consumption for economic stability and development, both at home and in production countries, serve to 'restyle' Western consumption – specifically, the form of mass consumption that is associated with the 'fast fashion' industry – into a positive, rather than negative, force in society.

Instead of being the cause of many of the problems that the companies address in their reports, consumption is emphasised as the solution to poverty, unequal gender structures, and environmental pollution. In the cases that consumption might be problematic – problems mainly caused by uninformed consumers – there are remedies available in the form of recycling, reusing, and 'closing the material loop' of fashion consumption. Better communication and more information will educate consumers, so that they can put more pressure on themselves, as well as companies, to act and consume sustainably.

The emphasis on 'empowerment' in all three reports is an important aspect of the ethicality and authenticity of H&M, Lindex, and KappAhl. By evoking the neoliberal frame of personal choice and free trade, these brands 'enable and empower' both consumers and textile workers to act and feel in a particular way (Arvidsson, 2006). Consumers are empowered since they are made 'aware' of sustainable, or ethical, consumption practices by the fashion brands and encouraged to become 'consumer activists' who not only make demands on producers, but also take responsibility for their own actions. The focus on education and awareness raising in relation to consumers further legitimises the companies as global leaders – it is the industry who drives change and enables consumers to become aware and to make 'informed choices', rather than the opposite. Consumers are also empowered *through* fashion, since this gives them an opportunity to express their own, unique, individual style and to 'feel good about themselves', with an emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness.

The brand community which emphasises shared values and visions is also extended to include workers and farmers in the global South, as the 'empowered' female workers portrayed in the reports serve to illustrate the positive influence from the fashion industry in general and these specific brands in particular. Sustainable fashion is constructed as a 'win-win' situation for all involved actors, since it is argued to lead to increased profit not just for H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex, but also for suppliers and workers in the textile industry. However, the equal 'partnership' promoted in these reports is characterised by a hierarchical, almost paternal, relationship between the companies and other actors in the industry, where the former are mentors with knowledge and skills which have to be passed on to the latter. It is H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex who educate the suppliers and workers and have the power to reward good behaviour.

The focus on enabling others to 'own' the question also places the responsibility for problems or divergences from sustainability requirements on

them, rather than on the fashion companies themselves. It is emphasised that empowered workers and suppliers share the visions and goals of the companies, and female workers are ascribed the same creativity, commitment, and joy of working in the textile industry as the employees within the corporation. Being employed to produce clothes for H&M or Lindex becomes a source of pride and independence and a first step on the path to self-development. The way that entrepreneurship is combined with small-scale farming on 'sustainable farmland' evokes an image of independent actors outside of the industrialised manufacturing process. As a result, the organisations co-opts some of the 'naturalness' of these workers and farmers – a form of exotification which gives the brands an aura of authenticity and familiarity.

All three companies are described as committed to change on their own accord and beyond standard regulations (although the specific issues where they seek change might differ). This willingness to go further than requirements and regulations positions them as proactive, rather than reactive, and strengthens the authenticity of their ethical identity. Corporate ethicality is legitimised by references to businesses as the ones who *actually* make a difference and eliminate poverty. It is the absent critics who deny people in developing countries opportunities for change and independence when they question the business practices of the industry and its impact in the global South. Thus, the discursive restyling of the industry legitimises consumer capitalism as the best way to create change and to 'lift' people out of poverty, which is in itself a clearly ideological perspective.

The reports also construct the act of buying clothes from brands such as H&M as a form of ethical consumption, since the consumer contributes to the promotion of 'healthy' ideals and female empowerment at home, as well as positive economic and social development in countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Cambodia. This shows how restyling of the fast fashion industry also involves restyling the notion of ethical consumerism and what kind of practices that are associated with it. Rather than abstaining from consumption – the practice of boycotting – consumers are encouraged to look at their consumption as a form of activism that 'creates change' through the practice of 'buycotting', which involves active consumption choices and a positive attitude towards consumer culture's potential to redeem itself.

5 Part II: The newspapers

The traditional news media is still a main source of information for most people when it comes to current issues and political debate – regardless of whether they read the news in printed form or if it is shared on social media (Newman, 2011). This means that news media texts play a central role in the construction of public discourses on problems in social life and of 'authorised voices' in such discourses (Carvalho, 2010). With this as a point of departure for the following chapter, I analyse how ethical consumerism is discursively constructed in journalistic texts, with a focus on the central concepts of ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy. An important part of the analysis is the examination of the intertextuality between the journalistic discourse on ethical fashion and the corporate discourse analysed in the previous chapter.

Part II starts with a discussion on some specific economic and organisational changes in journalism during the last decades and in the media industry in general; specifically, the rise and popularity of lifestyle and business journalism and how these genres are linked to the proliferation of ethical consumerism as an idea. The historical contextualisation is followed by an analysis of 31 articles from five Swedish newspapers – *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, and *Dagens Industri* – published in 2014. These articles represent different genres (opinion pieces, business news, fashion reports, lifestyle stories, interviews, and personal portraits) and different ways of constructing the idea of ethical fashion consumption and production.

5.1 Journalism, lifestyles, and the financialisation of news

Ownership, production, content, advertising, and readership are all areas of the news media where change has occurred recently, both when it comes to platforms (from print to online), distribution (from mass media to personalised media), and content (from 'news' to 'infotainment'). These fundamental changes to the industry are also linked to changes in society, although its impact on audience formation, news consumption, and the agenda-setting function of the news media has been discussed in previous research (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017). While 'hard news' – politics,

the economy, and social issues – still dominates the content in quality morning papers, an increase of 'soft news' – entertainment, lifestyle, and culture – is also evident, especially when it comes to the online editions (Wadbring, 2014). Fashion is one of the topics which can be featured both in hard news – reports on accidents or working conditions in production countries or on the financial success or setbacks of specific companies – and in soft news, such as consumer guides and reports from fashion shows or corporate events. The proliferation of ethical consumption stories in relation to fashion can thus be linked (yet not exclusively reduced) to an increased interest in lifestyle issues, as well as an increased focus on finances, business performance, and the brand identity of powerful corporations.

As part of the 'soft news' approach of much contemporary content, 'lifestyle journalism' seeks to combine classic entertainment and consumption sections such as travel, food, and health with more politically aware and informative perspectives and to link the everyday life of the audience with the societal conflicts and issues which are covered on the 'hard news' pages (Hanusch, 2012). Lifestyle journalism is often characterised by three different, but intertwined, dimensions: a review function which includes judgement of taste and style, a focus on advice and guidance for the reader, and a market-orientation which includes a close relationship with commercial interests (Fürsich, 2012).

These characteristics of lifestyle journalism are evident in the empirical material from *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, and *Svenska Dagbladet*, which includes consumer guides, advice to the reader from 'sustainability experts', discussions on how choices made in everyday life also become politically charged, and how fashion should be revalued as a 'political arena' in society. In such stories, ethical consumption becomes a form of self-improvement through 'the art of living': how to be and how to 'makeover' oneself (Bell & Hollows, 2011). As a prime example of contemporary culture – and a champion of the neoliberal subject position – lifestyle journalism can serve as a fruitful area of research when it comes to understanding the specifics of combining politics and consumption in our time and the discursive strategies used by different actors to shape these discourses in different ways (Fürsich, 2012; Hanusch, 2012).

Business journalism is another sub-field which has been established as a prominent feature of the news media today. Business is now a 'prestigious beat' with lots of impact and a steady flow of big stories, backed up by editors,

advertisers, and readers (Slaatta, Kjær, Grafström, & Erkama, 2007). It is a dominant genre in the material analysed in this chapter – it is particularly prominent in *Dagens Industri* (which is a business newspaper) and also in the datasets from *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *Dagens Nyheter*, and *Svenska Dagbladet*. The increased proportion of economic and business stories are part of a wider social transformation, which has given economic affairs a new importance in our daily lives and can be argued to legitimise the 'financialisation of everything' in neoliberal societies (Harvey, 2005; Kjær & Slaatta, 2007). Kjær (2007) claims that the more 'social' aspects of the economy – such as labour market relations and industrial policy – have been marginalised, while the financial aspects of business are highlighted.

Businesses and their representatives have also become dominant sources and agents in economic news, strengthening the focus on corporate, rather than political, policy. It is even more important, in the context of the study at hand, to note the relationship between business news and corporations' management of media relations and media visibility, as well as how media exposure and interests shape their conceptions of themselves and their role in society (Kjær & Slaatta, 2007; Lischinsky & Sjölander, 2014). Business organisations are increasingly concerned about image and reputation, and business news plays a part in popularising and spreading specific management models and norms (Kjær, Erkama, & Grafström, 2007). The 31 texts analysed in Part II include no less than eight interviews with fashion corporation representatives, predominantly from H&M, where the CEO is featured in four articles, and other company representatives, which are featured in two. Stories on new enterprises and entrepreneurs also occur in the material, as well as sustainability initiatives from H&M or other brands. This is no surprise, since business ethics and corporate social responsibility are notions which can be communicated through media, as well as investigated and critiqued by journalists. As Bacon and Nash (2012) show, for example, many commercial organisations are 'playing the media game' and engage in what Kjær and Slaatta (2007, p. 19) refer to as 'attempts to manage legitimacy, reputation or identity' through an ongoing interaction between the organisation, the media, politicians, and consumers.

5.2 Ethical fashion in Swedish newspapers

The thematic overview of the content of the newspaper articles analysed (Table 6), shows that the main issues associated with ethicality are essentially the same as in the corporate reports from the previous chapter. Environmental risks and impact (specifically, climate change and the use of chemicals in textile production) and exploitation of workers in the textile industry (specifically, working conditions and the fair wages issue) are recurring topics in these discussions. So is the notion of 'sustainable fashion', which here is discussed from the perspective of a new 'trend' in fashion, linked to the idea of a heightened 'consciousness' about certain issues. The trend is framed as part of a general societal shift and manifested both in consumer interest and in corporate initiatives. Much of these discussions revolve around trying to define what sustainable fashion means and guiding and advising readers on better consumption habits. A fourth topic in discussions of ethicality is the 'politicisation' of fashion, which is especially visible in three articles covering the Stockholm Fashion Week and a political trend on the catwalk, addressing issues such as environmentalism, racism, and specifically feminism. Fashion, both as an industry and a cultural sphere, is framed as a world where women can be empowered and successful, rather than exploited and objectified.

Discussions on authenticity actualise the profitability of sustainable fashion as a topic, both in positive terms (new businesses and entrepreneurs) and in negative terms, where the authenticity of initiatives and concern from mainstream brands is questioned based on economic motivations. These discussions on 'authentic' ethicality also revolve around the topic of (Western) consumption, where a general decrease is highlighted as prerequisite for 'real' sustainability. However, corporate sustainability initiatives from mainstream brands such as H&M are also a recurring topic in which authenticity is discussed, as these are framed as proof of the genuine impact of and concern from the brands.

When it comes to legitimacy, much of the discussion revolves around the 'fast' fashion business model and increased growth as a core motivation for different brands. These discussions actualise the question of legitimacy in the way brands are either criticised or celebrated due to their business model.

Table 6 Summary of topics and subtopics discussed in relation to macro questions in the newspapers.

Topics related to ETHICALITY	Topics related to AUTHENTICITY	Topics related to LEGITIMACY
'Sustainable fashion' as a trend Subtopics: *Consumer guides, sustainable consumption habits, new entrepreneurs and brands*	**Profitable sustainability** Subtopics: *New businesses and entrepreneurs, rebranding, economic motivations*	**The fast fashion business model** Subtopics: *Increased growth, fast turn-over*
Environmental risks Subtopics: *Chemical pollution, consumer habits, waste, consumption*	**Decreased consumption** Subtopics: *Quality over quantity, reuse, creativity*	**Critique against beauty ideals** Subtopics: *Sexism, objectification*
Exploitation in production countries Subtopics: *Working conditions, wages*	**Corporate sustainability initiatives** Subtopics: *Recycling, circular economy, 'living' wages, democracy*	**Fashion as political arena** Subtopics: *Political consumption, fashion as communication*
Politicised fashion Subtopic: *Feminism, anti-racism, beauty ideals, empowerment*		

Legitimacy is also discussed in terms of consumption choices and expressions of politics through fashion; to dress in a way that communicates certain values becomes a political act in itself, which in turn strengthens fashion as a legitimate arena for politics. Beauty ideals that are created and reproduced in and through fashion is also a topic in discussions of ethical fashion. Here, however, fashion is not characterised as an empowering arena for women, but rather, it is de-legitimised as oppressive both for people working in fashion and for fashion consumers.

Brands, experts, and the ideal consumer

The in-depth analysis in the following section will focus on the self- and other-presentation of social actors: how they are referred to and ascribed specific qualifying attributes and how different argumentation schemes (*topoi*) are invoked to characterise and functionalise them in specific ways. Looking at the representations of social actors in the material, it is clear that there are three different groups of industry actors that are brought to the fore when it comes to ethical fashion: first, mainstream 'fast fashion' corporations; second, up-and-coming 'conscious entrepreneurs'; and third, the 'high fashion' designers and fashion journalists. The discussions among these actors also actualise different representations of a fourth group of actors: the consumers – specifically, characterisations of an ideal type of 'conscious consumer'.

5.2.1 (Un)ethical mainstream brands

Presentations of the fashion industry in the articles analysed and of mainstream fashion brands such as H&M show some intertextual links to the corporate discourse in the sustainability reports from the previous chapter, where the fashion companies mainly characterised themselves as value-driven, responsible, making a difference, and educating others. Invocations of the *topos of global leaders* are, for example, found here, too – H&M is often referred to, both by themselves and by others, as 'industry leaders' who are 'pioneering' or 'pushing the development' when it comes to ethics and sustainability.

However, the newspapers' construction of specific actors as *global leaders* also 'fills' the argument with a more negative characterisation of the mainstream fashion industry. An inherent contradiction in the nature of the fashion industry in general, referred to as a 'paradox' (DN, 2014-10-25) or

'oxymoron' (AB, 2014-12-25), is a recurring starting point for several of the lifestyle stories in the material, which discuss the politicisation of fashion at the Stockholm Fashion Week or try to define the idea of sustainable fashion.

In an article from *Dagens Nyheter*, which focuses on the 'sustainability trend' in fashion, the journalist starts with describing how a new interest for sustainability can be observed both in mainstream and in *haute couture* fashion. The 'trend' of sustainability is commented by a fashion researcher and blogger, who is prompted to give a prediction for the future of fashion by a question which characterises the fashion industry in a negative way:

> Extract 5.1
>
> Sustainability seems to be the natural trail to follow in the future, but this holds paradoxes: How does sustainability work in a culture where fashion houses have the custom to spit out six collections per year? Is it possible to slow down an industry that is constantly screaming for new stuff?
>
> - The challenge is to find new systems like smaller collections and fewer collections. Stores in the future will probably also learn to invest more in services and reselling. In addition to garment rental, we will probably see more deals on washing, mending, and tips on how to restyle old clothes, says Adrienne Collin. (Dagens Nyheter, 2014-10-25)

In this example, the industry is predicated with an ever-increasing solicitation of new products and continued consumption ('constantly screaming for new stuff') – a characterisation that is framed as problematic and something which has to change or be channelled into new consumption practices. The metaphorical description of fashion houses that 'spit out' several collections each year presents these actors as automatized machines that continue to produce without thinking of the consequences.

The 'fast fashion' business model, often exemplified by H&M, is particularly questioned in line with this characterisation. The critique of H&M comes from environmental and human rights activists and from other actors within the fashion industry itself, such as designers, journalists, and consultants in sustainable fashion. A perceived conflict between 'fast fashion' brands and sustainability functions as a discursive backdrop to the predictions, solutions, and advice from different experts or representatives from smaller 'alternative' brands who comment on ethical fashion consumption. In another article which

focuses on defining and explaining sustainable fashion, this time in *Aftonbladet*, one of the interviewed experts, described as someone who 'has been working on sustainable development for over ten years', is prompted to evaluate the ethicality of H&M specifically:

> Extract 5.2
>
> What do you think of the initiatives from giants like H&M?
>
> - H&M is a leader among its type of business and has pushed the development of sustainable fashion for the entire industry. Meanwhile, they have a problem that is hard to get around. With large volumes and small margins they need to put out huge amounts of clothing to be profitable. This also means a credibility problem. The solution in the future would be to create a circular economy where they recycle 100 percent of the clothing fibres. But it is not possible yet. (Aftonbladet, 2014-12-25)

This is one example of the dual characterisation of H&M as both a moral company (they have 'pushed the development of sustainable fashion for the entire industry'), and as an actor with a 'credibility problem' due to their business model. The constant need for increased profits, i.e. increased consumption, is often highlighted by critics, including other industry actors, as a core problem when it comes to the ethical identity of this particular brand. A recurring feature of the stories that aim to highlight, explain, and promote 'sustainable fashion' are similar comments from actors such as sustainable development experts, fashion journalists, politicians, or brand representatives, who are prompted by the journalist to explain, and overcome, the contradictions of sustainable fashion.

At the core of this negative invocation of the *topos of profitability* lies a perceived conflict between economic gains and ethicality: between 'making a profit' and 'making a difference'. In an opinion piece from a representative of a Cambodian worker's association, the conflict between sustainability and corporate profit is the main frame for the whole article (AB 2014-04-26), and it is in this genre that we find more explicit critiques of actors such as H&M and more negative presentations of the brand. The sustainability programmes of H&M are described as 'empty rhetoric', and the author goes on to claim that 'real change' is yet to be seen, as the company's current efforts has not led to any actual results. The use of 'rhetoric' to characterise the communications

from H&M challenges the credibility and authenticity of the brand, by de-legitimising messages of sustainability as 'just talk, no action' in regards to issues such as labour rights and environmentally-friendly fashion production. The author also suggests that exploitative productions practices, which maximise profit for actors such as H&M, are inherent features of their business model:

Extract 5.3

Every day we experience how workers faint because of insufficient food and lack of sleep; desperate people who want to avoid forced 14-hour shifts in 40 degree heat; women who have been fired because they are pregnant; workers who are beaten, arrested or even being shot because they joined a union. H&M knows all this. One could even say that it is one of the reasons that H&M is here. […] H&M claims that they are the industry leader when it comes to "sustainability". But how can the situation of the textile workers in Cambodia be sustainable? (Aftonbladet, 2014-04-26)

Hence, the extract above is an example of how *profitability* and *global leaders* are articulated in a way that certain actors in the business are characterised as unethical and driven by greed, rather than as successful companies with an authentic ethical identity. In contradiction to the corporate characterisation of workers who become empowered through the textile industry, the workers' association representative characterises the same individuals as vulnerable and exploited by the industry; textile workers are referred to as pregnant women who are 'desperate', suffering from 'insufficient food and lack of sleep', and are 'beaten, arrested or even being shot' because of their attempts to unionise. One of the main arguments in this opinion piece is that these are not unfortunate anomalies – rather, this is 'one of the reasons that H&M is here', i.e. it is a prerequisite for the textile industry and the 'fast fashion' business model. The nominations and predications used to characterise workers stand in stark contrast to the corporate discourse and serve to present H&M as an immoral, rather than moral, company. The rhetorical question at the end of the statement ('but how can the situation of the textile workers in Cambodia be sustainable?') suggests that the material reality of the textile industry is incompatible with the discursive self-presentation of H&M.

Another example of negative characterisation is an opinion piece published in *Expressen*, where the author criticises H&M for cooperating with a fashion

photographer accused of sexual harassment by a number of models. In this piece, the *topos of corporate values* is framed by a feminist perspective on harassment and objectification:

Extract 5.4

But Swedish H&M, who often has plenty of ethical confidence, has not yet put its foot down on the issue. They should do that. Sexual harassment at work is a structural problem. Those who do not speak up, or do something about it, gives their tacit consent. Does H&M really want to send those signals to the young models who they hire and to us who shop there? (Expressen, 2014-04-27)

The predication of H&M as a company with 'plenty of ethical confidence' is here used to de-legitimise, rather than legitimise, their ethical identity. The ethics that H&M claim to represent in relation to issues such as global warming are juxtaposed with a perceived lack of ethics in relation to other issues (they have 'not yet put their foot down' when it comes to sexual harassment). Thus, the strategies of self-presentation as well as argumentation schemes used by the company itself are, in the news discourse, sometimes articulated in ways that question, rather than legitimise, the ethicality of the company and its authentic concern for environmentalism, labour rights, or gender equality. This is especially visible in the genre of opinion journalism and editorial pieces, where such conflicts are highlighted by writers who also position themselves in opposition to the brand.

In the more lifestyle-oriented pieces, however, it is possible to observe how representatives from H&M, and other brands, handle this kind of critique. From their own perspective, it is precisely their leading role that makes it possible to 'really make a difference', and the fast fashion model is presented as positive for the whole industry. This view is exemplified in a quotation from the Sustainable Fashion Advisor at H&M, who is the last expert to have a say in the article from *Aftonbladet*, which tries to pin down what sustainable fashion really means:

Extract 5.5

How does it work when a company that has as a business idea to sell as much as possible, also works with sustainability?

> - Just because we sell and produce so much we need to think smart and be resource efficient. Because of the fact that we put in such large orders and have so many suppliers we are able to create change and really make a difference, and I would say that we are leading the industry on several fronts. We invest a lot of money in developing new materials, and when production of them increases and prices fall, even smaller brands can join in and use them. (Aftonbladet, 2014-12-25)

The size and global impact of the company is here legitimised as a prerequisite of ethicality, since it leads to changes which benefit the whole industry – a form of instrumental rationalisation that speaks to the usefulness of the fast fashion business model. These positive predications in the statement (H&M 'think smart', 'make a difference', and 'are leading the industry') also serve to functionalise H&M as a role model for other corporations and for consumers. Other big fashion companies are also characterised as sustainability leaders in similar ways, by their own representatives as well as by journalists, both in lifestyle stories and in business news. KappAhl is, for example, described as 'the first fashion chain in the world to be environmentally certified' in a story on the re-branding process of the company in *Dagens Nyheter*, which then goes on to list a number of sustainability initiatives from the company (DN, 2014-04-18). As seen in extracts 5.2 and 5.5, the somewhat contradictory characterisations of H&M, or the 'fast fashion' model, can be present in the same article, especially in the lifestyle stories that try to guide the reader by offering advice from different 'experts' within the fashion industry – advice that is different depending on which part of the industry the interviewed actor represents.

5.2.2 Industry experts and ethical mentors

While the presentation of the fashion industry might be negative in some articles, specifically in the genre of opinion journalism, it also involves positive characterisations of industry actors as educators, or mentors, for the reader/consumer. This functionalisation is seen both in descriptions of mainstream brands and when it comes to 'conscious entrepreneurs' and fashion journalists. H&M claims, for example, to teach consumers to become more sustainable, and many of their sustainability efforts are, as the H&M Sustainability Director, puts it, 'about changing behaviour' in regards to their consumers (DI 2014-04-11). Thus, the characterisation of the industry actors

draw on the *topos of awareness raising*; that lack of knowledge creates problems related to the fashion industry, and therefore the industry needs to educate consumers about sustainable fashion consumption.

The mentor role is also self-claimed by new commercial actors, entrepreneurs, fashion designers, and journalists. The creative director of the new brand Uniforms for the Dedicated describes himself (and, by extension the company) as an 'inspirer' who wants consumers to 'feel better' about their shopping by helping them to change habits and behaviours (SvD 201410-25). Several of the fashion designers who are interviewed in different articles also function as mentors who teach readers/consumers how to behave sustainably, both in lifestyle stories on sustainable fashion and in business news covering new brands and sustainable fashion projects:

> Extract 5.6
>
> Swedes buy and throw away clothes as never before. How do you actually make good choices and take care of them so they last for many years? - Invest in a few pieces of good quality, rather than several cheap ones, says fashion designer Camilla Thulin. (Aftonbladet, 2014-11-16).
>
> Extract 5.7
>
> "I felt that I need to think again if I want to have a clean conscience. It's not just a matter of choosing organic, but also to see what is already there. Buying second-hand," says Emma Elwin. (Dagens Industri, 2014-08-28)

As seen in these extracts, quotations from designers and fashion entrepreneurs are often used to guide the reader to a more sustainable lifestyle. The construction of certain practices as more sustainable than others, such as buying second-hand or buying 'quality' fashion – i.e. the construction of ethicality – is legitimised through the personal authority of certain fashion experts who express their views on the issue. Free choice, as well as self-discipline, are highlighted as core components of what it means to be an ethical consumer, as the advice often draws on both the *topos of changed behaviour* ('invest in a few pieces of good quality, rather than several cheap ones') and *awareness raising* ('I felt that I need to think again'). To achieve the same 'clean conscience' as the experts, the consumer needs to become conscious and 'make good choices' when it comes to shopping.

Aside from designers and sustainable fashion experts and entrepreneurs, the personal authority of specific journalists is also used to legitimise certain versions of ethicality in the newspaper discourse. A fashion journalist at *Svenska Dagbladet* – who is the author of three articles covering sustainable fashion and a general interest in communicating ethics through fashion – references her own experiences as a journalist, author, and consumer when she describes and give advice on 'conscious' practices such as recycling and reducing consumption. Hence, her discursive function includes expert, educator, and enlightened role model all at once. In her own articles, she criticises both consumers and politicians for not taking responsibility, while high profiles in the industry are 'a foundation for change' (SvD 2014-02-15). This perspective can be viewed in contrast to other lifestyle stories where the journalist identifies with the reader in a general confusion about 'what sustainability really means' and where this particular journalist is referred to as one of the 'experts' who explains the concept:

> Extract 5.8
>
> What is sustainable fashion?
>
> - In Sweden, we talk about "sustainable fashion", but I prefer to use the term "conscious fashion". It better sums up what it is really about – production, consumption and quality. The very first step to become more aware is to start thinking about how you consume: Where are my clothes made, and do I really use everything I buy? I think it is important that we see our own part in the process, and not just push the responsibility on to brands and fashion houses. (Aftonbladet, 2014-12-25)

As seen in the quote above, the personal and role model authority of the fashion journalist gives legitimacy to the claim that consumers need to 'start thinking' about their own shopping habits and not 'push the responsibility' of sustainability onto the fashion industry. Such invocation of the *topos of taking responsibility* is a recurring feature of the characterisation of fashion consumers in the newspaper discourse on ethical consumerism and will be discussed in more detail below.

5.2.3 Careless and conscious consumers

The characterisation of consumers as 'the problem' when it comes to ethical fashion consumption is often brought forward by authorised voices such as journalists, brand representatives, fashion designers, and other actors linked to the fashion industry in one way or another. The previously mentioned fashion journalist at *Svenska Dagbladet* claims that fashion consumption 'can best be likened to a runaway train' and even though the Swedes are very fashionable and knowledgeable of new trends, they are 'hopelessly uneducated when it comes to fashion's impact on the environment' (SvD 2014-10-25). The negative characterisations of consumers thus involve invocations of both *taking responsibility* and *awareness raising*, as the underlying argument is that consumers need to become aware of, and take responsibility for, the impact of their shopping habits.

It is, however, a specific type of fashion consumer who is presented in this way: the masses who buy new, cheap clothes instead of taking care of the ones they already have. An illustrative example of this negative characterisation comes from a Swedish fashion designer, interviewed in *Aftonbladet* with a focus on her upcoming TV show about sustainable fashion:

> Extract 5.9
>
> - We over-consume and throw away clothes in a completely irresponsible way today. We are chock full and just want the new, new, new. Because the clothes are so cheap and of bad quality, it is no use to mend them. It is a disaster for everyone. […] It is so paralysed today. People cannot even sew on a button. It is tedious and time consuming. At the same time, they spend lots of hours on Facebook, Netflix and TV series. It is actually possible to sew and mend in front of the screen. (Aftonbladet, 2014-11-16)

Note how the statement starts out with aligning the speaker with the 'over-consuming' reader, by using the nomination 'we', but then goes on to talk about 'people' and 'they' who do not behave in the same manner as the speaker. These different nominations create an 'in-group' of those who know how to shop and behave sustainably and an 'out-group' consisting of those who do not. This statement illustrates how bad habits of mass consumption are attributed to the abstract idea of a general population of careless, rather than conscious, consumers who are characterised as lazy ('paralyzed'), unskilled

('cannot even sew on a button'), and prioritising the wrong things ('spends lots of hours on Facebook').

In contrast to commercial actors, the careless consumers are not characterised as actually 'making difference' when it comes to sustainability or other ethical considerations. The previously mentioned fashion journalist at *Svenska Dagbladet* repeatedly argues that while there exists an interest in sustainability and 'conscious consumption' in contemporary fashion culture, it is actually the industry, rather than consumers, who are acting on that interest:

Extract 5.10

- The vast majority of brands and chains now have sustainable initiatives. What is interesting is that we consumers have not really kept up with them. Many want to be conscious, but very few act accordingly. (Aftonbladet, 2014-12-25)

This lack of action and responsibility-taking from consumers is also touched upon in other contexts and by other actors. In an interview with the CEO of H&M – which focuses on 'profitable sustainability' – it is reported that while consumers 'increasingly demand' sustainable fashion choices, they are at the same time 'not prepared to pay more' when the company invests in organic cotton for their clothes (DI 2014-01-15).

However, there also occurs positive invocations of *taking responsibility* in the texts analysed, where consumers are attributed with qualities such as being responsible and knowledgeable, as well as stylish and interested in fashion. From this perspective, it is consumer interest that has 'forced the industry to improve' (SvD 2014-08-27), and one of the industry experts who is interviewed in the *Aftonbladet* story on what sustainable fashion really means characterises consumers as 'the engine of the development' when it comes to sustainability (AB 2014-12-25).

Just as with the careless consumers, it is a specific type of consumer who is functionalised as a role model here: the conscious fashionista who engages in ethical and personalised shopping such as buying 'vintage' and 'organic' clothing from designers or exclusive brands, rather than mass consuming at fast fashion stores. An illustrative example is found in an article from the fashion supplement to *Aftonbladet*, which focuses on a new 'green trend' in fashion. The protagonist here is a former journalist who, based on her

experiences as a mother and consumer, started her own online store to sell organic clothing for children, thus personifying the 'conscious entrepreneurs' of sustainable fashion:

Extract 5.11

It all began with a cocky New Year's promise, promising not to shop impulsively and environmentally-unfriendly for a whole year. She, who always had been interested in fashion, suddenly learned to distinguish between her interests and shopping. Here's how she describes her awakening in the blog:

"From being the girl who bought basically everything she wanted, as long as she could afford, I instead became the girl who longed for things and avoided going by shops to not fall for temptation. Was it boring? Yes. Was it effective? Very much so."

She became a star of vintage shopping and had to make efforts to shop ecologically because the supply is smaller. A brand new shopping happiness appeared – one that lasted long after the gadget or garment had been purchased. (Aftonbladet, 2014-04-30)

Here, the *topoi of taking responsibility* and *changing behaviour* are realised through the presentation of the interviewee and her change in shopping habits. Even though she is referred to as a 'stressed-out parent', she is also someone who takes responsibility for her actions and manages to put a lot of effort and time into practices such as vintage shopping, instead of giving into the 'temptation' of easy bargains at mainstream clothing chains. She is ascribed the discursive function of an enlightened and educated role model consumer, who does not have to 'feel bad' due to 'ignorance'. This goes in line with the way different industry experts also describe the ethical consumer as someone who 'think[s] and feel[s] while shopping', who asks 'if this is something I really need and want?', and who has a need to 'be informed' (AB 2014-12-25).

From this perspective, ethicality is linked to specific practices which disqualify the previously discussed mass of careless consumers from being ethical or 'conscious'. A Swedish designer argues in a similar manner as the protagonist in the *Aftonbladet* story, when she, in a *Dagens Nyheter* report from

Stockholm Fashion Week, is asked to comment on the lack of sustainable thinking when it comes to fashion consumption:

> Extract 5.12
>
> - As Vivienne Westwood says: Do not buy so many clothes. And if you are buying, invest in quality. I myself have shoes that are fifteen years old that I'm still using.
>
> (…)
>
> - I'm so tired of this pursuit of the new and the latest. Restyle an old garment and make it as new instead! (Dagens Nyheter, 2014-08-22)

The reference to well-known fashion designer Vivienne Westwood shows how this particular 'high fashion' construction of ethicality is legitimised by linking it to the personal authority of influential industry actors, as well as the role model authority of the interviewee herself. Ethicality is here configured around self-discipline ('do not buy so many clothes'), financial security ('invest in quality'), and individual expression through creativity ('restyle an old garment'). Hence, the presentation of the ethical fashion consumer in these articles depicts an enlightened individual, interested in fashion, shopping, and style, while at the same time taking responsibility for the environmental and social impacts of her consumption. Fashionable ethicality is linked to character traits such as knowledge, self-control, and discipline, which result in a long-lasting 'new shopping happiness', rather than the short-sighted, passing, and unfulfilling feeling of mass-consumption.

5.3 Restyling ethical fashion

The analysis of self- and other-presentation of different industry actors and the contemporary fashion consumer, actualises some underlying conflicts about what ethical fashion really is and who is responsible both for problems and solutions related to the consumption and production of fashion. A recurring feature in the texts analysed is the articulation of conflicting ideas between different actors, specifically, when it comes to what constitutes ethicality and authenticity. In the following section, I will discuss three of these discursive struggles which have been touched upon earlier in more detail: first, new ideas

about style and politics in ethical fashion; second, the authenticity of fast fashion sustainability; and third, the politicisation of fashion and the relationship between fashion and feminism. All three of these struggles involves a discursive 'restyling' of ethical fashion in different ways and sometimes contradictory ideas about how politics is related to consumption.

5.3.1 Fashionable ethicality and green glamour

One of the dominant discourse topics linked to the macro question of ethicality is that ethics is a trend within the fashion world, that new businesses, programmes, and sustainable collections are evidence of change in the industry, and that the sustainable fashion of today represents a new style of ethical fashion, in comparison to older versions. The interviewed industry representatives often seek to distinguish the new 'trendy' ethical fashion from older versions, which, by extension, also creates a form of distinction for contemporary ethical fashion consumers.

This re-contextualisation of ethicality and the disassociation from 'traditional' ethical consumption is also seen in the journalistic framing of some of the articles analysed. The example below shows how one journalist invokes this *topos of fashionable ethics* by assigning certain attributes to what ethical fashion used to be and then comparing it to a contemporary, trendy form:

> Extract 5.13
>
> It is important to be first with the latest trends. Used clothes smell musty. Organic clothing? You mean the beige, burlap shirts that spaced-out hippies run around in at festivals? No, not really. Those allegations were perhaps true ten years ago. But hardly today. The pendulum has swung, ideals changed and eyes have been opened. Today, everyone talks about the environment, recycling, and the most fashionable word of all – sustainability. (Aftonbladet, 2014-12-25)

The journalist suggests that there exists a stereotypical understanding of what ethical fashion, in this case organic and second-hand, used to mean. By linking the ethical fashion of former years to specific nominations ('hippies') and predications such as 'smelly' and 'beige burlap', it is characterised as unappealing, dull, and contained to specific subcultural identities. It is an almost satirical construction of ethicality that plays off a 'common sense'

understanding of what it means to be an ethical consumer and what kind of cultural context such practices used to be a part of. This negative characterisation serves to legitimise a new, fashionable, and mainstreamed version of ethicality through comparison with the old version.

Another example of how the *topos of fashionable ethics* is articulated through specific predications is found in the preamble to *Aftonbladet*'s interview with the conscious entrepreneur who started her own online store. The framing of the story is that mainstreaming ('available in commercial volumes') actually changes the style and appeal of ethical fashion:

Extract 5.14

Green is not only beautiful, but also popular – at least if we are to believe the fashion industry's latest trend. Organic fashion is no longer confined to small, personal shops with hemp knitted sweaters and bark boots, but is now available in commercial volumes in major clothing chains. (Aftonbladet, 2014-04-30)

The 'old' version of ethicality is again constructed around a stereotypical characterisation which draws on alternative consumption practices ('small, personal shops') and a fondness for natural fibres associated with the environmental movement of the 1970's and 80's ('hemp knitted sweaters and bark boots'). The re-contextualisation of ethicality from 'beige burlap' to the 'green glamour' of contemporary ethical fashion is further reinforced by the interviewed entrepreneur:

Extract 5.15

- It is as if organic clothes only comes in one style, with very natural colours such as green, brown and beige, preferably knits and practical. But I think that organic should be for everyone, whether you want to dress your child in princess dresses or unisex clothing. (Aftonbladet, 2014-04-30)

She describes the organic fashion available on the market up until now as characterised by uniformity and a singular way of dressing ('only comes in one style') where use value comes before style ('preferably knits and practical'). The 'new' ethicality, though, is constructed around individuality and

inclusiveness ('organic should be for everyone') and a certain sense of luxury and glamour ('princess dresses' rather than 'unisex clothing').

These example illustrates how the depiction of 'traditional' ethical consumption is linked to a uniform style of natural colours and materials and to specific identities situated in specific spaces. By contrast, the active voices in these articles call for a new understanding of ethical fashion and the consumers interested in it by linking ethicality to more diverse styles and introducing the idea of 'glamour' to ethical fashion.

The restyling of ethicality is seen both in the journalists' account of the new trend and in the industry representatives' comments. In a report on the launch of a new 'Conscious exclusive' collection from H&M, the journalist describes the clothes as 'sustainable fashion with exclusive qualities, luxury cuts and glitzy details', which is a stark contrast to the presentation of sustainable fashion in the example above. In the same article, the company's Sustainability Director explains that the goal is 'to make fashion sustainable, and sustainability fashionable' (DI 2014-04-11), which implies that this has not been the case in past times. Another example of this restyling process is visible in the extract below, where a fashion researcher and blogger comments on the sustainability trend:

Extract 5.16

Sustainable fashion has formerly been seen as bohemian. You know, a bit beige, boring and baggy. But in connection to the concept of "eco luxury" being coined some years ago, sustainability got an elevated status. Suddenly, it was seen as exclusive and attractive, something that belonged to the conscious lifestyle concept that feels very right today. (Dagens Nyheter, 2014-10-25)

These statements illustrate the discursive restyling of ethicality, as it ascribes attributes such as 'luxury', 'exclusive', and 'attractive' to a contemporary version of ethical fashion consumption and contrasts this to the beige, boring, and baggy 'bohemian' version. By linking ethicality to these qualities, ethical fashion consumption gains value ('an elevated status'), and it also becomes part of a contemporary discourse on personalised politics and individual political responsibility, which is also argued to be in fashion ('the conscious lifestyle concept that feels very right today'). The 'green glamour' becomes

part of an ongoing ethical trend in society in general, not just within the fashion industry. One important aspect of this new ethicality is the discursive restyling of its politics, as well as style, which is articulated through a *topos of de-politicisation*. In addition to being more glamourous, sexy, and uncomplicated, contemporary ethicality is not necessarily 'a political statement', but rather, something that is the outcome of concern for one's own family or health:

Extract 5.17

- Organic fashion should not have to be a political statement, I think it's obvious that young children should grow up without toxic clothes. But people are tired of prophecies of disaster and will not stop consuming, so I'd rather make it easy and not so unsexy to think about the environment. (Aftonbladet, 2014-04-30)

The statement speaks to a general exhaustion when it comes to information on how consumption affects the climate ('tired of prophecies of disaster') and an unwillingness to identify with an 'activist' identity. Mass consumption is depicted almost as a force of nature ('people […] will not stop consuming'), so rather than making unproductive attempts at changing the system, change could be achieved by appealing to the style and fashion sense of consumers. This apolitical aspect of fashionable ethicality is also present in other articles. Ethicality is, for example, considered a 'bonus' rather than a priority for consumers in a quotation from a representative of H&M:

Extract 5.18

So far, most of the customers are interested in that we have nice clothes. Those who buy garments from our "Conscious" collections choose them mainly because they like them stylistically, and sustainability becomes an added value. […]. (Aftonbladet, 2014-12-25)

Even though the H&M representative goes on to argue that it is important for the customers to buy clothes from a 'brand that cares', it is still highlighted that sustainability is an 'added value' and that the 'conscious' consumers are first and foremost interested in style and fashion. The previously mentioned fashion journalist at *Svenska Dagbladet* also argues that making sustainable fashion choices used to be viewed as 'political' and 'left-wing' acts – which she

characterises as a specific Swedish perspective – and that today these attitudes are starting to change (SvD 2014-02-15). Thus, there seems to exist a certain need to downplay ethical fashion consumption as a political practice, at the same time as fashionable ethicality is constructed as part of a general interest in personalised politics. Just as the 'conscious' consumer is juxtaposed with the image of the 'careless' consumer, fashionable ethicality is also legitimised through comparison with a 'critical' consumer who is presented as *too* concerned about the actual politics of products.

Another interesting aspect of the discursive struggle between 'old' and 'new' ethicality is that it also contains traces of a conflict over consumerism. On one hand, ethical fashion is described as becoming 'mainstream', 'popular', 'fast selling', and 'available in commercial volumes' at major clothing chains such as H&M and Lindex. On the other hand, today's green trend is said to be focused on decreased consumption and 'unique' and 'hand-sewn' designs, either found in remote locations or locally produced by up-and-coming actors in the fashion world:

Extract 5.19

It is no longer wear-and-tear and chasing trends that is fashionable. It is no longer hot to brag about the latest fashion, or how you bargained fifteen shirts for the price of a can of soda at one of the budget chains. It is, rather, that unique gown that you dug out of a drawer in a hidden vintage shop in a backstreet in Tokyo, or the new Swedish designer who colour their own fabric with natural colours and sew unique pieces by hand, that you proudly parade to your friends. (Aftonbladet, 2014-12-25)

Statements such as the one above draw on a *topos of anti-consumerism*, where the conditional claim is that because of the negative impact of (Western) consumption, consumers must focus on buying fewer, but better, products. The use of the nomination 'vintage' (rather than 'second-hand') in this statement signals reuse and re-selling driven by an interest in individual style and classic design, rather than by economic necessity. Furthermore, the quotation characterises the ethical shopper as someone who has the opportunity, time, and economic resources to travel over the world for shopping ('a backstreet in Tokyo'). As discussed, other entrepreneurs and experts also talk about using ethical shopping practices such as reusing, mending, or re-designing to 'be

creative in your personal expression' (SvD 2014-01-02) and building a 'personal style' instead of just 'following trends' (AB 2014-12-25). Individuality thus seem to be an important aspect of restyled ethicality, as contemporary fashion consumers can express their unique personality while still being ethical.

5.3.2 Authentic ethics and sustainable profitability

The sustainability initiatives from commercial actors are a dominant topic in discussions on authenticity in the material. Such discussions often involve opposing perspectives on the character and motivation behind mainstream ethical fashion, especially in regards to different forms of consumption and the focus on profit in the fast fashion industry. While brands such as H&M regard consumption as a general good and a prerequisite for social stability and development, high-fashion representatives in the articles see mass consumption as inherently conflicting with sustainability and instead promote a specific kind of consumerism as ethical. The relatively high price of this version of ethicality is legitimised by references to values such as authenticity and transparency and by framing fashion as an 'investment': something to be valued and taken care of, rather than just worn and discarded. Thus, the characterisation of today's ethical fashion involves a conflict between the mainstream 'fast fashion' version and the anti-consumerism, or downscaling, version, which simultaneously is linked to luxury design and haute couture.

A recurring framing of the articles, specifically in the lifestyle genre, is how to overcome an inherent contradiction when it comes to the idea of sustainability in the fashion industry. One of the articles that focuses on the contemporary 'green trend' explicitly addresses the 'oxymoron' of ethical fashion:

> Extract 5.20
>
> Today fashion should be sustainable. But what does that really mean? As one of the interviewees later in this document points out, it is really an oxymoron. Clothing is not sustainable. They are consumables. But it is possible to make fashion more or less sustainable. The production and materials can be more or less environmentally friendly. And the garments can live a shorter or longer time in our closets, depending on quality, design and care. (Aftonbladet, 2014-12-25)

On the one hand, the motivations behind the commitments and insights from global corporate actors are questioned by critical voices in these articles, with a focus on economic incitements, exploitation, and the pursuit of growth. This form of criticism sometimes comes from fashion designers or from 'conscious entrepreneurs' within the fashion industry – a group of actors which includes both new fashion brands and individuals who serve as examples of the enterprising self who 'turn their ideals into business opportunities' (AB 2014-04-30).

A recurring actor is the company Uniforms for the Dedicated, which, in contrast to established mainstream actors such as H&M, is often characterised as an up-and-coming, 'innovative' business, and environmental sustainability is argued to be 'absolutely central' to their brand (AB 2014-12-25). While the proliferation of new sustainable fashion companies is discursively constructed as a testament to the profitability of the new form of ethicality, arguments from these conscious entrepreneurs often position themselves in opposition to 'the industry':

> Extract 5.21
>
> - The biggest difference from a few years ago is that boards and CEOs have woken up and realised that their business models are about to capsize. Very soon we will see sharply rising commodity prices, and then a lack of raw materials. This has meant that those who are smart have begun to focus their attention on recycling to create new raw materials. Now that revenue and profits begin to be affected the industry is waking up, but in the past – when it was just about the climate – it was less interesting. (Aftonbladet, 2014-12-25)

This quotation exemplifies how the authenticity of the conscious entrepreneurs is constructed in relation to mainstream ethical fashion, which is argued to be driven more by greed than by a genuine concern ('now that revenue and profits begin to be affected the industry is waking up'). The creative director of Uniforms for the Dedicated positions the company in opposition to 'the industry' and the 'boards and CEOs', which legitimates the authenticity of his own brand's ethical identity through comparison, or analogy, with mainstream industry actors who are discursively constructed as less ethical based on their pursuit of increased profit.

Similar invocations of the *topos of profitability* are used by other actors in the same article. A sustainability expert argues that while sustainability might be a way to 'strengthen one's brand' for companies, finding new ways of reusing cotton fibre or using alternative materials is also 'a necessity due to rising commodity prices'. Thus, it is the economic bottom line which is the driving force of the trend, rather than compliance with critiques:

Extract 5.22

- Previously, companies were most afraid of getting bad headlines. Today they want to become more sustainable, and they want help to find the business deal in it. (Aftonbladet, 2014-12-25)

The extract above suggests that economic incitements to sustainability ('find the business deal in it') might have replaced the need to cover up exploitative production practices ('afraid of getting bad headlines') when it comes to major actors in the fashion industry. Thus, the authenticity of corporate ethicality is de-legitimised by references to an underlying need for economic security and growth. Other actors, such as fashion designers, argue that the business model of fast fashion is inherently 'unsustainable' since it is built on mass consumption. In an interview with a well-known Brittish designer who has built her brand around her interest in ethics, this conflict is made explicit:

Extract 5.23

- The entire industry is based on creativity and change, but hardly ever changes by itself. Fast fashion chains with a lot of staff, such as H&M, Levi's and Adidas, are occupied with ethical discussions now. They have so many more people to be responsible for. Luxury brands, however, does not have the heavy responsibility for the labour force and they will literally get away with murder. But everything is complicated, well-made clothes in exclusive materials have the great advantage that they last longer, which actually makes them more environmentally sustainable. To buy a dress for 10 dollars that you throw away two weeks later is not environmentally friendly, irrespective of where, what and by whom the garment is made, that's just the way it is. (Aftonbladet, 2014-09-14)

Just as the conscious entrepreneurs, this designer position herself in opposition to the mainstream clothing chains and argues that despite the recent interest in ethics from brands such as H&M, it is 'luxury' or 'quality' fashion that is a more sustainable choice ('to buy a dress for 10 dollars that you throw away two weeks later is not environmentally friendly, irrespective of where, what and by whom the garment is made').

Such realisations of the *topos of anti-consumerism* again show how ethicality is constructed around quality and restraint, rather than quantity and indulgence. When defining sustainable fashion, high fashion actors claim that 'mass-consumption is the big problem' (AB 2014-12-25), and consuming less, but better quality and for higher prices, is held out as the preferred solution to overcome this.

On the other hand, leading corporations such as H&M are also said to be 'at the forefront' (DI 2014-01-15) and 'pushing the issue forward' (DN 2014-09-23) when it comes to ethics and sustainability, specifically, in business news and reports on corporate sustainability projects. The self-representation of the brands, specifically in the eight interviews with CEOs or other corporate representatives, characterises H&M and other brands as the ones with the capacity to 'make a difference' and 'lead the way' for others, which shows intertextuality with the corporate discourse in the sustainability reports. Through their size and influence, big commercial actors present themselves as the ones with the power to 'create real change' (AB 2014-12-25). The claim that their business model should actually be regarded as empowering and positive, rather than exploitative and negative, is a recurring argument in the business news interviews with corporate CEOs:

> Extract 5.24
>
> But your fast fashion business model – how sustainable is it really?
>
> "I think that fast fashion is positive. We offer the latest trends and great renewal, making it possible for everyone to dress according to their different personalities. It is democratic. We have good quality and the garments will last longer," says Karl-Johan Persson. (Dagens Industri, 2014-01-15)

In the example above, the CEO of H&M suggests that fast fashion should be linked to notions such as quality, style, and individual choice, much like the characterisation of trendy ethical fashion discussed earlier. It actually gives

everyone the opportunity to express their unique personality, which is characterised as a form of 'democracy'. This kind of statement is often put forward together with 'closing the loop' through recycling, which is held up as the solution to eventual problems with the fast fashion model. Rather than slowing down consumption – shopping less from more expensive brands, as suggested by many designers and experts – these corporate representatives instead talk about how improved recycling opportunities will enable an ever-growing consumption cycle.

The perspective of the statement is also notable: it talks about democracy and choice for consumers, rather than for the workers of the manufacturing industry. Still, the workers in the production countries are not completely absent the business news. By invoking the *topos of global development*, the beneficial features of the fashion industry as a 'job creator' which brings economic opportunities to production countries is highlighted in another interview, this time with the CEO of KappAhl:

Extract 5.25

I think we do a lot of good and even if it takes time, I believe that we will eventually help these countries to lift themselves, says Åberg, who believe that concepts like sustainability and profitability can be combined. (Dagens Nyheter, 2014-04-18)

The realisation of *global development* in this statement ('we will eventually help these countries to lift themselves') shows how corporate actors manage their brand identity in their relationships with the press, by highlighting the positive outcome of their involvement and investments in production countries.

The statement also exemplifies how development is invoked together with the *topos of profitability* in a positive way. Corporate initiatives in these areas are characterised as leading to increased profits, both for the companies and their subcontractors, in a 'win-win' situation, specifically in business news. Economic profit is constructed as a requirement for ethicality – it is through increased profit for the big actors that ethical fashion production will become the norm, not through decreased consumption with a focus on designer or vintage clothing.

Similarly, the CEO of the brand Indiska claims that critics who argue for boycotting due to the production conditions in the textile industry take 'the easy way out' and that it is Indiska, and other brands, who actually do something to change the situation in manufacturing countries:

Extract 5.26

The easiest way would have been to say that we did not accept the situation and move on to other suppliers. But then there would be no change. We need to break the vicious circle and act concretely. (Dagens Industri, 2014-05-23).

Thus, the 'power to act' is placed with these commercial actors, rather than non-profits or other critics who represent the other point of view in the conflict.

Furthermore, development is not the only motivation highlighted in relation to the recent corporate interest in sustainability. There is also another intertextual link to the previously analysed sustainability reports and the idea of 'moral corporations' who operate based on specific values, as corporate actors often make references to their own personal values and ethics. The CEO of H&M, for example, speaks of his own, personal, commitment to run a business based on *corporate values* rather than economic profit. In an interview in *Expressen*, he states that he is 'not driven by money' and that 'the company's values are in line with my own values'. In the article, he also invokes the *topos of taking responsibility* as he explains how he tries to pass these values on to his son:

Extract 5.27

- Ian and I of course talk about everything, and he poses questions about life and life's injustices. I explain that if we are able to help, we have a responsibility to do that. We do this through both H&M and through our family foundation. (Expressen, 2014-04-06)

The reference to the family foundation in this statement ties the brand H&M close to the owning family and legitimates it as a local, intimate, and personal organisation, rather than a global, multimillion corporation. Moral evaluation legitimation based on references to 'family businesses' and values occurs in other articles as well, through mentions of a personal relation to contractors

and suppliers and a hands-on approach to doing business. The CEO of Indiska talks about how their co-workers regularly travel to the production countries:

Extract 5.28

It is important to be present and to know the suppliers, to talk to them and make demands. Codes of conduct are good, but you need to be on site. […] Perhaps we sometimes think too humanitarian and too much with the heart, but we feel better from it and can do it because we are a family business. (Dagens Industri, 2014-04-23)

When the CEO invokes *corporate values* based on humanitarianism rather than economic profitability, she mitigates the idea of a large corporation only interested in profit and growth and intensifies the personal commitment and engagement of her and all other employees. The humanitarian position is also emphasised by one of the representatives from H&M:

Extract 5.29

Being able to contribute to better working conditions for people is what Helena Helmersson sees as her main driving force.

- Much of our work is in poor countries, and I want the textile workers to be the ones in power. Through my work at H&M, I get the opportunity to influence, she says. […]

- For me the important thing has been to do a good job and make a difference. Therefore, I think this job is so great, that through my position I can influence the decision makers. (Dagens Nyheter, 2014-03-06)

In the extract above, the Sustainability Director at H&M characterises herself and her employer almost in the same manner as a non-profit activist would, identifying with the oppressed rather than the oppressor ('I want the textile workers to be the ones in power'). However, it is working through the corporation, rather than against it, that she can 'make a difference'. Thus, the corporate self-presentation as moral corporations is questioned by some actors in the articles; however, it is also strengthened through the way that corporate representatives use their access to the media to manage legitimacy, reputation, and brand identity.

5.3.3 Politicised fashion and fashionable feminism

Thus far, the analysis of conflicting ideas and arguments has been predominantly focused on the notion of sustainable fashion and critiques linked to issues such as environmental pollution and labour rights. In the last sections of this chapter, I will discuss discursive struggles which relate to the 'politicisation' of fashion, which is another prominent discourse topic in the articles analysed. One of the overarching conflicts here involves the perception of fashion, both as an industry and a cultural phenomenon, as either empty of ethical or political considerations, or as an arena for communicating values, which deserves to be revaluated and regarded as a legitimate political sphere. This also involves discursive struggles over the politics of feminism and its relation to fashion.

Critical actors sometimes describe fashion, both as an industry and a cultural phenomenon, as a rather closed-off sphere, detached from the rest of society. This view is particularly emphasised in the opinion journalism in the material. In an editorial piece from *Aftonbladet*, for example, the author suggests that there is actually no real interest in ethics in the fashion world – a negative realisation of the *topos of corporate values* where she argues that even though issues such as climate change and harmful body ideals are increasingly discussed in other areas, they never seem to break through in the fashion world:

> Extract 5.30
>
> But I am also upset about the excessive luxury consumption conveyed, and its total lack of analysis and impressions of the outside world. The climate threat, increasing inequality and harmful beauty ideals are discussions that never seems to take a foothold in the Teflon-skinned industry. (Aftonbladet, 2014-07-28)

The use of the 'Teflon' metaphor in the quotation above helps to further the argument that the industry is unchangeable and unaffected by criticism from the outside: it is 'conservative' and 'living in a parallel world' (AB 2014-07-28). A last remark in the article is even directed towards the 'symbiotic relationship' between fashion designers and fashion journalists, which questions the ethics of that particular journalistic genre. In another example, a journalist at *Svenska Dagbladet* makes a short commentary on the political undertone of Stockholm Fashion Week (and the reporting of it as such). She

suggests that the industry's contemporary interest in feminism and environmentalism is a sign of the constant need for new content and a new focus, rather than an authentic concern:

Extract 5.31

It is not automatically a proof of a political awakening in the fashion world, rather, a clear sign that the craving for content is high, and that the political scene of the fashion world is rather hollow. (Svenska Dagbladet, 2014-08-31)

While fashion might be an excellent way to express political ideas, she argues, the political significance of fashion is rather limited in a Swedish context, since hegemonic ideas about clothing and style are quite liberal in relation to other parts of the world. Thus, the politicisation of fashion is de-legitimised through comparison to other countries where such ideas would have been more controversial. This commentary evokes the same image of the fashion industry as superficial ('rather hollow') and detached from reality, as in the editorial in *Aftonbladet*. A difference, however, is that while the journalist in *Svenska* Dagbladet asks the question if it really is the role of fashion to be political, the editorial writer in *Aftonbladet* argues for the idea that politics is something that should be considered:

Extract 5.32

You cannot constantly isolate yourself from the outside world and swear yourself free from moral responsibility. Above all it is terribly unfashionable in 2014. (Aftonbladet, 2014-07-28)

Hence, being aware of politics and ethical considerations are put forward as characteristic of the contemporary moment (being uninterested in politics is 'terribly unfashionable in 2014'), drawing on the idea of an increased politicisation of everyday life and of individual consumption choices.

The politicisation of the private sphere is also highlighted on the other side of this discursive struggle, where fashion is explicitly characterised as infused with politics or by ethical considerations and 'consciousness' about certain issues. A Fashion Studies researcher comments on the politicisation of fashion as part of everyday life in an article from *Dagens Nyheter*:

- Yes, like almost all other social issues, from aesthetic expressions to how we organise our lives, fashion has become more politicised. Overall, there is a strong contemporary tendency to focus on the political perspective over others. (Dagens Nyheter, 2014-08-22)

This statement is as an example of how a *topos of revaluation* is invoked in these discussions. Fashion is here constructed as a social arena with political significance, rather than separate from both society and politics – the politicisation of everyday life affects fashion just as any other cultural or economic domain.

Several other actors in the articles also position themselves, and fashion in general, in opposition to arguments about fashion as superficial, shallow, and detached from the 'real' world. That fashion has political significance and works as a tool to communicate values is highlighted by the designers, politicians, and other experts interviewed in relation to the Stockholm Fashion Week. One designer explicitly states that 'fashion is part of our society' (DN 2014-08-22) and that fashion is an excellent forum for taking a stand, since 'fashion effects everyone' (AB 2014-09-18). Another claims that fashion 'does not only reflect our time, it also has an impact on it' (DN 2014-08-22).

The political potential of fashion is also highlighted in reference to Fashion Week's inauguration speech. By including quotations from or references to politicians who participated in the events, the journalistic re-telling of the ceremony links politicised fashion to institutionalised politics:

Extract 5.34

It started with the Gender Equality Minister Maria Arnholm (FP) who opened the week with a speech in which she said that "clothes communicates values and values change the world" and "dress like the person you want to be in the world you want to see." (Aftonbladet, 2014-09-18)

An important aspect of the *revaluation of fashion* argument is to position the critics as the ones who are indifferent to the politics of fashion and only view what can be found 'on the surface' of the fashion word. The previously mentioned fashion journalist in *Svenska Dagbladet* argues for a re-evaluation

of fashion as a political arena with actual impact, when she emphasises the increased opportunities to express politics through fashion consumption:

Extract 5.35

The opinion that fashion has no meaning and detached from reality is unfortunately a claim that anyone who deals with clothes is forced to argue against too often, and even if the effect of these purchases may be dismissed as inadequate these garments actually offer something more than just surface. (Svenska Dagbladet, 2014-08-23)

Thus, the politicisation of fashion is constructed as a testimony to the incorrectness of the type of opinions exemplified in the commentary in the same paper (SvD, 2014-08-31) or in the *Aftonbladet* editorial (AB 2014-07-28) and to the shallowness of those who make such assumptions. An important aspect here is the focus on fashion as empowering for creative women, and that it is underlying sexist assumptions about fashion and feminine culture which form the basis for such criticism. Taking fashion seriously, as discussed above, is described as characteristic of contemporary feminism, which is one of the subtopics discussed in relation to the politicisation of fashion.

The discursive struggle over fashion and feminism in these newspapers is interesting, since it brings three different strands of feminist critique to the fore. What feminism means, and how it relates to fashion, is something that is the subject of diverse opinions. First, there is the specific criticism of objectification and sexualisation of women within fashion (much in line with the more general criticism of the industry discussed above). Second, there exists an internal critique of 'traditional' norms and ideals in fashion, and third, an internal feminist critique directed back at the first external one, claiming it to be too narrow in its views on power and emancipation. This struggle over the meaning of feminism also has interdiscursive links to the discussions of female empowerment in the corporate sustainability reports, and the characterisation of fashion as either 'objectifying' or 'empowering' women.

The external critique of fashion evokes an image of the industry as inherently oppressive, as fashion produces, and reproduces, ideals and norms for how women should look, dress, and act. The editorial writer in *Aftonbladet* invokes the *topos of problematic beauty standards* when she writes that looking at nice clothes and beautiful photos on fashion blogs 'is a pleasure

associated with a certain degree of shame and anxiety' which comes from a feeling of inadequacy (AB 2014-07-28). In another opinion piece, the same journalist describes fashion as a 'ruthless industry' when it comes to sexual harassment and argues that the problems facing young models are an example of a structural problem of objectification and sexualisation, which permeates all of society (Expressen 2014-04-27).

This critique of normative ideals coming from outside of the industry is mirrored in some of the statements from designers who are interviewed in relation to the politicisation of fashion. The representation of feminism in these articles often involves the right to 'be who you want to be' and to move away from stereotypes regarding 'feminine' or 'masculine' clothing. To express one's individuality, rather than socially constructed ideas about how to dress for a specific gender, is attributed as an important part of the fashionable feminism shown at Fashion Week.

Descriptions of how designs based on instructions for beauty routines are used to highlight 'the complicated clash between the socially acceptable female body and the real flesh body' (AB 2014-09-18), and clothes sewn with bubbly applications added 'where it according to the norm should not bulge and bubble out' (DN 201408-22), highlight the internal critique of beauty standards within the fashion world. Such articulations of the *topos of problematic beauty standards* are an important part of the fashionable feminism that wants to break with conventional norms of beauty and style.

Arguments on this side of the discursive conflict are not just reactions to the ideals and constraints in the traditional fashion world, however, but also to the feminist critique of those ideals. The construction of fashionable feminism is based on a double-sided conflict between feminism and fashion, exemplified by a designer who talks about what the major problems are, for her as a feminist, within the industry:

Extract 5.36

- That it [the fashion world] still pays tribute to a young beauty ideal and that women are objectified, what is put on her is just decoration. And that fashion is reduced to something that is not high-brow culture simply because it is seen as a female sphere. Meanwhile, there are feminists who look down on fashion because it is all about appearance. (Aftonbladet, 2014-09-18)

The designer self-identifies as a feminist and points towards an ongoing conflict between her own values and the world in which she works. At the same time, however, she also addresses a conflict between different perspectives within feminist theory and activism. The reference to 'feminists who look down on fashion' shows an awareness of the critique from feminists concerned with questions of objectification, sexualisation, and exploitation related to the fashion industry. It also shows a disassociation from such critiques, which are framed as being too one-sided as fashion also serves as an arena for female expression, empowerment, and enterprise. Thus, the discussions on fashionable feminism actualise the *topos of empowerment* in a way that sees the negative view of fashion as unbalanced and outdated. Critique of rigid beauty norms, unattainable ideals, and lack of diversity is countered by arguments about fashion as a specific feminine culture and form of expression:

Extract 5.37

- It is of course also an aspect. Its approach to perfection is a big burden for many girls. But that is just one side of it all, it also creates a lot of clothes that we ordinary women can wear and it is an industry where there are many female designers and creators, says Maria Arnholm. (Aftonbladet, 2014-09-18)

The main argument in this statement is that fashion is important for feminist practice, since it provides opportunities for enterprising women and speaks to 'ordinary women' as well as models. The emphasis on the empowering potential of female enterprise and innovation can be understood as a way to de-legitimise the criticism articulated when speaking of *problematic beauty standards* ('its approach to perfection'). By invoking *empowerment*, feminism is re-contextualised within fashion, and the elevation of fashion as a political arena and expression becomes a way to evaluate women in general and female creativity in particular.

Just as in the discussions of sustainable fashion, the articles covering the politicisation of fashion often express a desire to redefine the popular understanding of feminism and feminist politics – for example, the question of 'whether or not it is okay to wear high heels if you are a feminist' (AB 2014-09-18). Aesthetically, fashionable feminism on the catwalk is characterised as

loud, aggressive, and militant, combined with sexually explicit femininity and 'stereotypically girly' attributes such as the colour pink:

> Extract 5.38
>
> The feel of the collection was: we will dress as cute glamour princesses or sexy sluts if we feel like it and we do not care what others think, because we do it for our own sake. A woman should not have to dress like a man to take part of power. (Aftonbladet, 2014-09-18)

Valuating traditional feminine identities and feminine clothing, through the refusal to 'dress like a man' to gain power, invokes the *topos of empowerment* in a way that safeguards the femininity and attractiveness of fashionable feminism. Another recurring feature is the use of the personal authority of role models from popular culture as a way to legitimate this 'new' feminism: high profile international artist such as Rhianna, Beyoncé, and Britney Spears are mentioned as inspirational, together with Swedish acts such as Silvana Imam and Seinabo Sey. These references, together with the use of metaphors such as 'manifest' and 'feminist army' (AB 2014-09-18) and descriptions of models with 'sharp silhouettes' who are 'marching to rap music' (DN 2014-08-22), create an image of a loud, outspoken, and confrontational movement, which still embraces femininity and glamour through its strong ties to popular culture.

5.4   Conclusions

To conclude, the newspaper discourse on ethical consumerism shows traces of what Olausson (2009) refers to as 'framing contests' between different actors and perspectives, and these discursive struggles often revolve around this study's central concepts of ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy. In comparison to the corporate reports in Part I, the different 'sides' of the conflicts are more explicit, since the newspaper discourse gives room to more diverse voices and arguments, and to actors both inside and outside of the fashion industry.

The emphasis on conflicting understandings of what ethicality consists of, or how authentic the concerns for different issues are, can be explained by the logics of news media as a communicative practice. The inclusion of opposing views is important since it both creates a certain dynamic in the texts and fulfils

the journalistic ideal of 'balance' in news reporting. The framing of a story, and focus on certain issues or actors, can also be partly explained by the way that journalism (especially daily newspapers) rely on the occurrence of events, which are deemed more or less newsworthy. Had an event such as the Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2013, happened during the timeframe of data-collection for this study, the reporting on actors such as H&M might have looked different. Had 2014 not been an election-year in Sweden, the 'politicisation' of fashion might not have been so emphasised at the Stockholm Fashion Week, and in the reports from this event.

Different perspectives (and actors) are also more or less emphasised depending on the genre. In the more lifestyle-oriented articles, there is a diversity of voices from the industry (and some from outside of it, such as academics or politicians) who function as experts and 'guide' the reader both when it comes to defining 'sustainable fashion' and which form of consumption that should be considered ethical. Prompted by the journalist's questions (which sometimes pitch one against another), they give their specific views on ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy. The most explicit critique, however, is found in opinion pieces, which is also a genre that allows the author to actually take a stand without necessarily including counter-arguments from brand representatives. In business news, specifically interviews with corporate CEOs, some of the concerns expressed in the opinion or lifestyle material are countered by characterisations and arguments which to a large extent are mirrored in the corporations' own communications.

Ethicality is thus addressed by journalists and industry actors alike, although it is the latter who mainly function as experts and role models who guide and advise the reader and give judgements on style and taste. As 'authorised voices' (Carvalho, 2010), industry actors dominate the newspaper material and strive to re-contextualise and discursively 'restyle' the notion of ethicality and what kind of practices constitute ethical consumption. What is interesting here, however, is that there seems to exist an internal conflict between different industry actors – a discursive struggle over both ethicality and authenticity. A 'fast fashion' perspective on ethical consumerism, emphasised by corporate CEOs and other brand representatives, shows intertextuality between these articles and the corporate self-presentation and formulations of ethicality in sustainability reports. This is particularly prominent in business news and reports on corporate initiatives, such as the launch of new collections or brands or interviews with CEOs. Focus on

technological invention, free trade, and individual lifestyle choices actualises a 'neoliberal environmentalism' (Koteyko, 2012), which constructs businesses as key actors in the fight against global warming and poverty. This ideologically informed perspective also constructs the fast fashion business model, and the form of mass-consumption on which it is built, as a positive phenomenon which drives economic and social development.

The corporate construction of fast fashion as a form of ethical fashion is, however, met with criticism, and the legitimacy of initiatives from brands such as H&M is questioned by references to a contradiction between ethicality and increased growth. Such arguments are put forward not only by environmental NGOs and representatives from worker's organisations, but also by fashion designers, journalists, and new entrepreneurs in the industry. In a conflict over authenticity, these industry actors draw lines of distinction between themselves and the mainstream, or mass consumption, version of ethicality. From the 'high fashion' perspective, ethicality is constituted by quality over quantity and a focus on both designer and second-hand ('vintage') shopping, self-discipline, and individual taste, rather than mass consumption and indulgence, which keep the economic wheels turning.

An important aspect of this high fashion perspective is the class-based characterisation of the conscious consumer, which addresses a well-off, and well informed, middle class with the means and the time to invest in different identity-building consumption practices. References to exclusive or obscure brands, handcrafted unique pieces, and personal style are realisations of the neoliberal 'entrepreneurial self' who engages in self-branding and promotional strategies which, in turn, feed into social distinction (Davis, 2013; Hearn, 2012; Heath, 2005). These aspects are also somewhat typical to the genre of lifestyle journalism, which often contains a classed 'makeover' element of self-improvement and personal development, which is made possible through the adoption of consumption practices that are authorised (and legitimised) by 'teaching-by-doing' experts in the area (Bell & Hollows, 2011).

The high fashion version of ethicality is also legitimised through comparison with somewhat stereotypical characterisations of two other consumer types, who serve as a discursive backdrop to the positive traits of the ethical fashionista. The first type is a general (working class) mass of 'careless consumers', whose never-ending need for new and cheap clothes, or lack of knowledge about fashion and clothing care, is constructed as the driving force behind problems linked to consumption. The second is the 'critical consumer'

associated with earlier understandings of ethical consumption, whose tendency to prioritise use-value and the politics of products over style and individual choice is constructed as unappealing and boring.

The material also includes a parallel restyling process when it comes to the relationship between fashion and society and the understanding of fashion as an arena for feminist politics. This discursive restyling draws on the 'personalisation of politics' (Bennett, 1998, 2012) where politics, both in terms of communication and participation, has expanded into new areas of society. Fashion is 'restyled' into a social sphere with political potential, and feminism is 'restyled' into empowerment and a critique of the versions of womanhood made available both by mainstream fashion and by 'traditional' feminism. Fashionable feminism can be understood as a reaction to the ideologically informed characterisation of feminists as suppressed and unfeminine, uninterested in fashion, beauty, or other female-coded consumer products. By contrast, it embraces sexually explicit expressions, celebrates femininity, and empowers women by revaluating stereotypically feminine, or 'girly', colours and fashion styles.

Consequently, even though there are different views on what constitutes authentic and legitimate ethics, all industry actors still have a similar need to ideologically remake ethicality in different ways. It seems that to gain popularity, and to fit into the narrative of the fashion industry as well as journalism, ethical consumerism must be discursively 'restyled' and constructed as something other than what it used to be. A recurring feature is the strive to 'sex up sustainability' (Banet-Weiser, 2012a) through a restyling process where 'hemp and bark' is replaced by 'green glamour' – a tendency that is mirrored in the articles that focus on 'sexy' feminism and politicised fashion. Regardless of the perspective, individuality and personal style are emphasised as important aspects of ethicality, and the 'new' version is positioned in opposition to the alleged beige or brown conformity of the 'traditional' ethical consumer or feminist. I have previously argued that ethical consumerism as an ideological construct draws on a de-politicising discourse, which naturalises market solutions and consumer culture as the only perceivable organising logic for society (Berglez & Olausson, 2013); the analysis in this chapter shows how this post-politicisation of the public sphere is made manifest. Although there are disagreements on certain aspects of both ethicality and authenticity, the importance of consumer choice and corporate power to act is left rather unchallenged.

6 Part III: The public

The third, and last, empirical part of this study focuses on discourses on ethical consumerism among 'ordinary people', i.e. the public, or potential consumers of ethical fashion. I am interested in how people perceive the discursive struggles which have been mapped so far and how they make sense of the idea that specific consumption practices or brands are more 'ethical' than others. The empirical material for this part of the study is collected from user comments on the social media platform Facebook, where three 'trigger events' related to the overarching issues of environmentalism, labour rights, feminism, and cultural diversity are discussed in relation to fashion consumption and the fashion industry (for a detailed presentation of these events, see the methodological chapter).

Part III examines the interdiscursivity and intertextuality of texts in the 'moments' of production, representation, and consumption in the circuit of discourse. It turns the attention towards the public and how the audience makes sense of the mediated messages from journalists and fashion companies. The discussions on ethical fashion in the comments, and on how different companies or consumer practices could be understood as more or less 'ethical' involve different perspectives on what the hegemonic ideas in today's society really are and in what way these ideas are tied to specific political ideologies.

It must be pointed out, however, that the 'ordinariness' of these user comments does not mean that they should be seen as representative of the Swedish population or the general public opinion. What I mean with the term 'ordinary' in this context is simply that – compared to the texts analysed in Parts I and II – the opinions and discursive strategies in these texts come from individuals, rather than professionals such as corporate communication managers, industry representatives, or journalists.

6.1 User comments as an object of study

The focus on user comments in social media requires some discussion of what type of texts these comments represent and who the users might be. The Web 2.0 development of social media and 'user generated content' is said to lead to a more 'participatory' culture, where so called 'produsers' actively engage in

– and produce – content, rather than passively consume it (see for example Jenkins, 2006, 2013). While not entirely novel, the cultural and technological shift towards more participatory media does mean that the public has, at least theoretically, increased opportunities to engage in conversation with journalists and their texts (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015). Similar development can be seen in the relationship between consumers and brands. The rise of 'lifestyle politics' and activist groups that often use social media networks to mobilise and organise people provide new platforms for consumer power (Bennett, 2012). Through comments and online reactions, readers and consumers can express their opinions, challenge the perspective on a story, or give both positive and negative feedback to brands and other organisations.

As van Dijck (2009) argues, however, this might be an oversimplification when it comes to user agency and practices on platforms such as Facebook. While these new media environments give users 'better access' to networked media and allow them to actively 'talk back' to traditional media organisations, or to commercial actors, it is far from everyone who does so. There are different levels of participation, ranging from 'creators' to 'spectators', or passive viewers, among the large group of social media users. Research shows that in the Swedish context, it is only a small percent of readers who actually engage in online discussions on politics or news. These users often are young, male, and frequent online news readers. Generally speaking, then, online news comments should be seen as 'the opinions of a well-educated minority' rather than a cross-section of the public (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015).

Reader comments have previously been part of both quality papers' and evening tabloids' own websites (where they used to be particularly common), and they have been studied by a number of scholars (for example Almgren & Olsson, 2016; Bergström & Wadbring, 2012, 2015; Hagren Idevall, 2016; Karlsson, Bergström, Clerwall, & Fast, 2015). With the expansion of comment sections and opportunities for interaction, moderating became a tiresome activity for journalists and media organisations (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015). A breaking point came in 2011, when comment sections on many Swedish news sites became particularly filled with abuse, racism, and unwanted content (Hagren Idevall, 2016, p. 102). Although many newspapers tried to enforce tougher rules for commenting, such as pre-moderation before publishing, the problem still persisted. Consequently, many Swedish newspapers – both local and national, quality and tabloids – have removed the comment sections from their own sites. Recently though, *Dagens Nyheter* have

launched a test initiative where readers have the opportunity to comment on articles published on their opinion pages.[12]

At the same time, the increased popularity of social network sites and applications has given users other ways to interact with news content as well as corporations. The 'outsourcing' of comments to platforms such as Facebook is not just a Swedish phenomenon, rather, it is a global trend among newspapers and media organisations. Some argue that this has increased the quality of comments. Hille and Bakker (2014) refer to international news editors who speak of the 'self-policing nature' of Facebook, where all users can read your comment and the loss of anonymity makes users more hesitant to post abusive or offensive content. As the authors point out, though, these are rather anecdotal remarks. In their own study, they found that the quality of comments was actually higher on the news sites, compared to the Facebook pages of the same papers. Users were also more inclined to post on the news sites than on the accompanying Facebook page, which could indicate that the visibility of comments in your social network might make users reluctant to post there altogether.

6.2   Reactions and resistance in social media

A thematic analysis of the Facebook comments (Table 7) shows the main discourse topics discussed in relation to the three macro questions of ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy. That some of the main topics in discussions on ethicality are linked to issues of environmentalism, labour rights, and gendered social norms is not very surprising, since the selection of 'trigger events' was based on the occurrence of these issues in the previous material. Problematic aspects of consumption is a recurring subtopic here, specifically when it comes to the environmental issue. The topic is, however, also present in discussions of the labour rights issue, where consumption habits in Sweden (the demand for cheap fashion) are characterised as the cause of exploitative practices in the fashion industry.

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[12] Dagens Nyheter (2017) 'Nu kan du kommentera artiklarna på DN Debatt' available at http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/nu-kan-du-kommentera-artiklarna-pa-dn-debatt (accessed 2017-09-22)

Table 7 Summary of discourse topics and subtopics discussed in relation to macro questions in Facebook comments.

Topics related to ETHICALITY	Topics related to AUTHENTICITY	Topics related to LEGITIMACY
Climate change and fashion consumption Subtopics: *Plastic bags, decreased consumption*	**Profit and corporate greed** Subtopics: *Economic motives, 'green washing' and politicised marketing strategies*	**Positive influence of the fashion industry** Subtopics: *Sustainability initiatives, economic development and job-creation*
Working conditions and wages in production countries Subtopics: *Industry relations, price levels, consumer demand*	**Responsibility and accountability** Subtopics: *Corporate responsibility and ethics of specific actors, consumer responsibility and changed behaviour*	**Branded politics and corporate engagement** Subtopics: *Corporate responsibilities*
Social norms related to gender or ethnicity Subtopics: *Diversity, body ideals and children's clothes*	**Impact of corporate initiatives** Subtopics: *Focus, effectiveness, consistency*	**Norm criticism and feminism as hegemonic ideology** Subtopics: *'Political correctness' and identity politics, Swedish society*
Consumer power and politically motivated consumption Subtopics: *Boycott and buycott*	**Ethical consumption as social distinction** Subtopics: *Privilege, conformity, class, self-promotion*	

While it is often the consumers who are seen as problematic in relation to consumer actions, there are also comments that actualise consumer power as a topic of discourse. Such comments discuss the different ways that consumers can influence brands and corporations to make change happen in the fashion industry, for example, through boycotting. While the discussions on boycotting speaks of abstaining from consumption, there are also those who speak of the opposite: choosing to buy products from a specific brand/corporation precisely because of political motivation (so called 'buycotting').

Authenticity is discussed through the topic of profit and corporate greed, where economic motivations and politicised marketing are used to call into question the authenticity of the corporate initiatives. The responsibility and accountability of different actors is also a topic here, where authenticity is framed by assigning responsibility for either cause or solution (or both) to consumers or producers. The impact of corporate initiatives is also discussed, and its effectiveness, consistency, or focus is used to either question or strengthen authenticity. 'Authentic' ethical consumer identities is another recurring topic in the comments; these discussions revolve around consumption as social distinction and the class-based characteristics of ethical consumers, where the political motivations of others are framed as conformity and self-promotion.

When it comes to legitimacy, the influence of the fashion industry in production countries is one of the main discourse topics, and different corporate initiatives to decrease problems in the production chain, as well as the role of the fashion industry in the global economy, are highlighted. Legitimacy is also discussed in relation to branded politics in general: whether or not brands should engage in politics at all, and what the 'responsibilities' of a corporation really entail. Users also discuss legitimacy in relation to feminism and the notion of norm criticism, which are framed as hegemonic, rather than critical, ideological influences. Such discussions are characterised by the frequent presence of anti-feminist statements, as well as anti-Islamic attitudes. Contemporary Swedish society is an important subtopic here, as well as national identity and 'political correctness' among the Swedish people.

6.3 Contesting or co-creating branded politics

The following section will focus on how users make sense of the corporate self-presentation as 'moral corporations', which has been examined in

previous parts of the thesis, and which discursive struggles that branded politics actualise when it comes to ethicality and authenticity. Representations of the industry and certain brands as more or less ethical, articulated both through strategies of nomination and predication and through specific argumentation schemes (*topoi*), show how the discourse topics actualise conflicting views on authenticity, accountability, and consistency of the corporate initiatives and their ethical identities. It is primarily the fashion companies linked to the 'trigger events' – i.e. H&M, Lindex, KappAhl, and Åhléns – that are present in these discussions when it comes to industry actors. The users who partake in the discussions in the comment sections both contribute to the co-creation of the ethical brand identity and challenge the idea of 'moral corporations' from different ideological viewpoints.

6.3.1 Greedy capitalists and progressive leaders

Much of the discussions about the three trigger events and ethicality of the fashion industry revolves around a conflict of authenticity: should these events be understood as genuine efforts to 'make a difference' by the commercial actors, or do they serve some other purpose? As the analysis in the following sections shows, two main micro strategies are used within this conflict. One side claims that the companies are involved in/promote certain issues because they can make a profit from it, either directly through sales or indirectly through marketing that appeals to an affluent consumer group. The other side claims that the companies are involved because they want to make a difference and that the initiatives or campaigns are based on genuine concern for the issues.

Previous chapters have shown how fashion companies strive to characterise themselves and their actions as driven by certain values and ethics, rather than by economic profit. The public discourse in the Facebook comments, however, shows clear characterisations of commercial actors as only interested in profit, realised through specific predication strategies. Critical comments about the One Bag Habit initiative explicitly characterise the companies as 'greedy', 'stingy', or 'cheap'. There are a lot of emotional statements among these comments and predications such as 'disrespectful', 'ridiculous', 'stupid', 'bullshit', or 'a scam' are used to describe the initiative, which in turn can be seen as characterisations of the fashion brands themselves.

Similar negative characterisations are also seen in comments related to the labour rights issue. According to some, H&M is 'a second degree trash

business', as well as 'greedy capitalists' who do not care about workers. This does not, however, necessarily mean that the users think that the suggestion of raising prices so that textile workers could get paid more is a good idea. Rather, the greedy nature of the brand is a reason for why this would be a misdirected action:

Extract 6.1

Some greedy capitalist would take 4 and 95 of those 5 crowns right away so that was a bad idea

As in the example above, negative characterisations of fashion companies as organisations, specifically H&M, also include the individual owners themselves who are predicated as 'greedy billionaires'. Such characterisations specifically draw on an anti-capitalist discourse where the quest for profit and growth is incompatible with authentic ethicality.

In these discussions, users invoke the *topos of profitability* in ways that de-legitimise the authenticity of the 'moral corporation' identity of the fashion brands. Users that are critical towards the One Bag Habit initiative, for example, tend to highlight the revenue that H&M, Lindex, and KappAhl gain from the new charge for plastic bags. The argument that it is economic profit, rather than genuine concern, that motivates the different initiatives is a form of instrumental rationalisation which counteracts the moral evaluation of the brands themselves; it intensifies the economic dimension of the initiatives and mitigates the altruistic or ethical dimension. From this point of view, the initiative is 'a smart way for the companies to be able to earn an extra hack with the environment as an excuse'. The authenticity of the initiative, and the moral identity of the brands involved, is thus questioned through references to profit as a main motivation:

Extract 6.2

Such bullshit. Call me a cynic, but I do not think for a moment that it's about doing something good for the environment. It's making money it's about. Consider the revenue on all the bags they used to give away. If we are to sort out the environment, it must be a global change of gigantic dimensions. The fact that we here in Sweden start paying for plastic bags (and lower consumption moderately) is a drop in the ocean.

The example above shows how this type of argumentation builds on a certain level of suspicion ('I do not think for a moment that it's about doing something good for the environment'). The metaphorical description in the last sentence ('a drop in the ocean') suggests that the actual impact of the initiative is rather insignificant, which challenges the presentation of it as a genuine environmental effort that 'makes a difference'. These critical comments also highlight the fact that the cost for plastic bags used to be included in the price of clothes (together with other overhead costs), and that this has not changed:

> Extract 6.3
>
> If it's a genuine initiative, it's great, maybe some customers choose not to take a new bag and reuse an old instead, or take a tote. However, you repeat several times that the "surplus" will go to sustainability causes. Which I interpret as that the revenue from the sale will first cover the cost of the bags and then any surplus will go to sustainable initiatives. What this ultimately gives you is reduced costs for bags because you do not have any revenue on them today. The whole initiative therefore feels pretty pale!

Hence, the authenticity of the initiative is questioned by the claim that the companies only highlight certain aspects of it ('you repeat several times') and that the main outcome is more profit for the companies involved ('what this ultimately gives you is reduced costs').

Another micro strategy which focuses on the economic dimension of the different events is to discuss them in terms of *promotion* and marketing. The conditional claim in the comments that invokes this argumentation scheme can be summarised as follows: the different actors highlight certain issues, or act in a specific way, because it makes them look good, and this leads to increased sales. Therefore, the branded politics should be understood as part of marketing strategies, rather than expressions of authentic concern for the issues. One user, for example, suggests that the One Bag Habit initiative is a way for the companies involved to 'get cred' from consumers, while simultaneously earning extra money. Similar claims recur in relation to the other issues, where the economic value of linking the brands to certain ideas is highlighted in several comments. From this position, the norm-critical commercials from H&M and Åhléns are, for example, explicitly constructed as promotional efforts without any actual impact:

Extract 6.4

So typical for bigger brands / department stores to jump on "trends" that can generate a small cheering on social media for a few days but lots of money in the cash register. Would be nice to see someone make a real difference, do your "goodwill campaigns" and donate the profits it gives to a women's organisation or something like that. Take a step further and make your advertising ideas into something concrete for the ones you want to empower in the commercials. Moderately amused by these lame attempts by everyone mentioned in the article. Yawn to the whole damn thing!

What is interesting here is that the same basic argument is used both by those who are critical towards the political message of the campaigns and those who endorse it. One user describes the Åhléns campaign as 'virtue signalling 101', a pejorative characterisation often used by the so-called 'alt-right' in political discussions. The use of this notion presents the campaign as an empty, or superficial, expression of political values which will enhance the company's standing with a certain social group. In the same manner, another user describes the campaign as 'smart marketing' that appeals to an affluent group of middle-class consumers. A third critical user wants to 'question the sincerity' of the campaign, which is described as 'an opportunistic latching on to a norm breaking trend that is fashionable right now'.

These examples share the implicit or explicit questioning of the very idea about gender norms and social structures that the campaign is said to challenge. A *topos of double standards* is invoked by these users, through the use of qualifying descriptions of the companies as 'inconsistent' or 'opportunistic'. It is specifically Åhléns that is characterised as 'hypocritical' in this manner:

Extract 6.5

Did you not have a burqa chick on the last cover? Hypocrites!

The nomination 'burqa chick' (which refers to an image of a veiled woman on the cover of an earlier edition of the Åhléns membership magazine) in this statement is important, as it alludes to anti-Islamic attitudes in discussions on migration and integration, where the veil (often referred to as 'burqa') worn my Muslim women has become one of the more visible symbolic issues in many European countries today. Other users who are negative towards Åhléns

and their campaign refer to this magazine cover in their comments and use it as a comparison to de-legitimise Åhléns' anti-normative position. The veil is characterised as 'a symbol of oppression' by these users, rather than a symbol of diversity and freedom from social norms. Others present the company as 'stupid' and the campaign as 'nonsense', since there are 'more important problems' to care about than the gender norms of fashion in Sweden.

However, there are also users with the opposite perspective, who see the commercials as exploitative appropriations of a political idea, though they do so without questioning the idea in itself. The difference in the way these comments 'fill' the *topoi of promotion* as well as *double standards* with meaning is exemplified below:

Extract 6.6

Klädmaktsordning almost sounds like a real feminist concept, namely *könsmaktsordning*. Some advertising agency has come up with a clever linguistic flip in order to hawk more clothes. Not to change anything. But shop till' you drop and let the children take care of the consequences.

In this comment, the term 'klädmaktsordningen', coined by the Åhléns campaign to describe the way fashion is gendered in today's society, is compared to 'a real feminist concept', an analogy which de-legitimises the feminism that Åhléns stands for as inauthentic or illusive. The comment is also an example of how users that draw on *promotion* often combine this with negative invocations of *profitability* as the 'clever linguistic flip' from 'some advertising agency' is linked to the motivational explanation 'in order to hawk more clothes'. Users who are critical of the way H&M and Åhléns use feminism and multiculturalism in their advertising also invoke the *topos of double standards* when they speak of how the message in the campaign clashes with the reality in the stores:

Extract 6.7

I wonder where HM thinks that plus size women should buy their clothes, as they don't sell them anymore in their stores ☐ Real hypocrisy ☺

These users claim that 'this is just a campaign to get likes' and that H&M is 'not really interested in any fat customers'. From this point of view, it is

specifically H&M that is negatively predicated as a company that 'represents child labour and slavery' rather than progressive thoughts, and the brand is explicitly characterised as 'hypocritical' for promoting norm criticism at the same time that their plus size range is being discontinued. Similar invocations of *double standards* can be seen in comments that speak of the fashion companies in relation to environmentalism and labour rights:

> Extract 6.8
>
> They are using child labour and paying slave wages abroad and claim to protect the environment? Hypocrisy. This is just an extra profit margin.

> Extract 6.9
>
> It is just an illusion that H&M or any other clothing chain would care about low-wage workers. All they say they do for those who have to live on pittance is just lip service. Greedy hypocrites!

Together with the examples discussed above, these comments show how the *topoi of profitability*, *promotion*, and *double standards* are used to question both the authenticity and ethicality of the three trigger events and the brands behind them. The characterisation of fashion brands as hypocritical often goes hand in hand with describing them as greedy, since the motivations behind the different events are seen as economic, rather than ethical. Thus, in the 'backdraft' of social media, the authenticity of the branded politics is de-legitimised both through moral evaluation and through rationalisation, by users who essentially agree with the politics that the brands promote and those who disagree with or challenge them.

On the other side of the authenticity conflict, we find comments that defend the different actors behind the trigger events and the authenticity of their ethical efforts. A tendency to view these brands in a positive light is, for example, noteworthy in relation to environmentalism, or to feminism and cultural diversity. Users who are positive towards the One Bag Habit initiative and the new charge for plastic bags invoke the *topos of global leaders* when they talk about the fashion companies, by refereeing to them as 'fashion giants'. H&M in particular is presented as a 'big actor' with 'great influence', specifically, when it comes to the wage issue. In such comments, H&M is implicitly characterised as 'good guys', through references to them as 'not the bad guys'

and 'not the big crooks' in the industry. Positive descriptions of the fashion brands also include realisations of the *topos of global development*, as H&M, for example, is argued to be 'job creators' who drive economic development in countries such as Bangladesh. Users describe them as 'hard working' when it comes to the wage issue:

Extract 6.10

It's not H&M who owns the factories and hence not H&M who decides the wages. H&M, however, has a great influence and has initiated many actions through, inter alia, Bangladeshi government for so-called fair living wage. H&M makes the most of all major fashion companies in terms of wages and working conditions in developing countries.

When discussing 'living wages' and better working conditions in the fashion industry, users point out that it is not H&M, or any other brand, who owns the supplier factories in Asia. Therefore they cannot, and should not, control the wages. As seen in extracts 6.10 and 6.11, the critique of H&M is de-legitimised through the use of analogy, as a common claim is that H&M is actually better than other brands when it comes to labour rights. The tweet about raised prices to raise wages, and the stories about it in the news, are seen as a way to 'demonise' the company:

Extract 6.11

Interesting that HM always has to be named and shamed as the bad guys on these issues, when they are one of the companies that work hard to induce factory owners to pay fair living wages to their workers. HM does not own the factories but cooperates with the factories that comply with HM requirements regarding both the environment and how workers are treated. Other big companies more or less ignores this (Zara for example).

The users who take this position in the conflict over authenticity show how corporate invocations of both the *topoi of taking responsibility* and *shared interests* are adapted in these discussions, as they highlight different corporate initiatives and collaborations in production countries.

Similar positive characterisations are seen in comments related to feminism and cultural diversity. When speaking of the two commercials from H&M and

Åhléns, users describe them as 'magically good', 'wonderful', 'exciting', and 'super cool'. *Taking responsibility* occurs in such characterisations as well, where the advertising campaigns are constructed as a way to take responsibility for an issue which is 'really relevant', and their actions are described as 'a big step forward' or 'a step in the right direction':

Extract 6.12

Everything could always have been better, right? But it's a big step forward! I think the campaign – and especially the actual changes in the stores – is amazing. No, the predominantly male coded people may not be dressed in typical skirts, but a slightly less edgy campaign can reach more people. And using concepts like power order is still pretty progressive for a big clothing chain I think. Go Åhléns!

These users express gratitude and positive feelings about the initiative or campaigns, and thank the companies for 'taking a stand' and 'highlighting important issues'. Thus, this point of view draws on qualifying attributes and topoi which reflect the corporate self-presentation as 'moral corporations' who are driven by values, take responsibility, and make a difference on specific issues. The companies are characterised as responsible role models who are at the forefront ('pretty progressive') when it comes to ethicality in fashion and in society in general.

The initial rhetorical question in extract 6.12 can be seen as a realisation of a *topos of good intentions*, as it alludes to the argument that what the companies are doing might not be perfect, but it is better than nothing ('a big step forward'). The 'superficial' use of political terminology and imagery is argued to be a more effective form of awareness raising than a more 'authentic' version ('a slightly less edgy campaign can reach more people'). Such claims are often used as counter-arguments to the type of comments found on the other side of the authenticity conflict, and the conditional behind them could be expressed as follows: corporate actions might not be perfect or solve all problems at once, but at least they make people think about the issues, and therefore, they should be regarded as positive.

The view that the different commercial initiatives should be understood as expressions of authentic concern for the issues is also seen in relation to the environmental question and the One Bag Habit initiative. The initiative is

described as 'really good', 'fantastic', and 'excellent', and when users respond to the kind of criticism that is exemplified in extracts 6.2 and 6.3, the economic gains from the new price on plastic bags is legitimated both by moral evaluation and instrumental rationalisation:

> Extract 6.13
>
> The profits from the bags do not go to the chains, it goes to initiatives that drives sustainable development. Thus to research. This is a great initiative! ✋ If you do not want to buy bags in the store, you are welcome to bring some from home!

The two first sentences in the example above show how the idea of a common good ('sustainable development' and 'research') is used to construct *profitability* in a way that counteracts arguments about marketing and economic motivations in this context. Profitability is here 'filled' with a meaning that highlights the altruism of the fashion companies, rather than greediness. A similar comment highlights that 'the point is to decrease the use of plastic bags', and thus the motivation behind the initiative is constructed as environmental concern, rather than profit-making. Such explanations help to legitimate the ethical authenticity of the initiative and de-legitimise any potential economic motives.

These discursive struggles over the meaning of the different events, and the claims from commercial actors, show how authenticity is negotiated within the public discourse on ethical consumerism. It is important to point out, however, that most often it is not a question of either/or, but rather, a question of different (changing) positions on a continuum. Sometimes, similar arguments are presented by users who have essentially opposing perspectives or understandings of the events, while they still question or criticise the corporate actions from a similar point of view.

6.3.2 Doing too little, or the wrong thing

The contestation or co-creation of branded politics as 'authentic' politics also relates to struggles over the consistency of the brands' commitment to different issues, or the focus of specific initiatives. One argumentation strategy that recurs here is the claim that the ethics that brands like H&M or Lindex speak of are not applied throughout the organisation and its business practices. Such

comments are often posted to counter the kind of positive claims and characterisations discussed earlier, or to question the description that the fashion companies themselves present of the events.

A main argument is that the companies are only ethical to a certain degree, and therefore, they should not be perceived as better than others. When discussing the One Bag Habit initiative, for example, users call for a total ban on plastic bags, rather than the new charge for them:

Extract 6.14

Why do you not hold the line #Lindex, #KappAhl and #HM? Skip plastic bags completely as to really show your point of view. It would really change it. This will be some kind of half-measure ....

The description of the initiative as 'some kind of half-measure' de-legitimises both the impact of the companies' efforts and the status of them as ethical actors in the fashion industry. Other similar comments ask why the companies in question do not offer environmentally friendly bags for free, instead of charging for plastic bags. Such questions show how the use of the *topos of consistency* overlap with struggle over authenticity, as the economic motivations for the initiative are highlighted in this context as well.

Similar claims are found in discussions on branded feminism and cultural diversity, where some discussants argue that the norm-critical commercials are not as 'norm breaking' as they could be. These users are not necessarily critical of the idea behind the campaigns, although they claim that the implementation of it is lacking. One user, for example, comments on the campaign from Åhléns:

Extract 6.15

Good initiative, but in the name of honesty, I do not think that what is shown is particularly norm breaking

Another user with the same point of view says that Åhléns 'seems completely lost' when it comes to showing fashion that really challenges social norms and that there 'really is so much more' that the company could do on the issue. Similar arguments are by another user who claims that the campaign 'totally

misses the target and the point' and that it 'had been much more exciting' if it had focused on transgender persons and fashion.

Aside from not being ethical enough in different ways, there are also comments that claim that the companies are focusing on the wrong aspects of specific issues. Some argue that the companies involved in the One Bag Habit initiative 'can't see the forest for the trees' when they target the consumption of plastic bags, rather than synthetic materials used in their clothes or the plastic packaging they are sold in. Others speak of the environmental impact of the actual production of clothes, in relation to the use of plastic bags in the stores:

> Extract 6.16
>
> Hahahahah H&M will charge for plastic bags to save our earth ?! Ridiculous, maybe they should think of the amounts of poison the earth and workers in other countries have to endure from the dyeing of the clothes & pesticides for the cotton plants. Is it the first of April? 😁

The extract above illustrates how satire and irony are often used to challenge and de-legitimise the ethicality of the fashion brands. The comment explicitly calls the One Bag Habit initiative 'ridiculous' and laughable, since the campaign focuses on an issue which is constructed as minor in comparison to other environmental effects of the textile industry. The rhetorical question in the last sentence ('Is it the first of April?') refers to the tradition of celebrating 'April Fools' Day' on this date and serves to implicitly characterise the initiative as a hoax or a prank played on the consumers. Hence, this form of argumentation often involves arguments about the level of commitment to different issues and characterisations of fashion companies as not ethical enough.

6.3.3 'Conscious' consumers or 'moral' corporations

Another discursive struggle in these online discussions is the conflict over accountability: who is responsible for (i.e. the cause of) the problems that are actualised by the three trigger events? And who is responsible for doing something about these problems? This particular conflict is mostly visible in relation to the environmental and labour rights issues and revolves around whether consumers or producers should be held responsible for the

environmental impact of fashion consumption or for wage levels and exploitation of workers in the textile industry.

On one side, there are users who highlight the individual responsibility of consumers to 'start thinking about our actions' and to become 'conscious' about one's shopping habits, thus invoking the *topoi of taking responsibility* and *changed behaviour* in a manner similar to both journalists and the fashion brands in previous chapters. These users often construct consumers as responsible for both cause and solution, by highlighting particular destructive consumption practices that lead to environmental problems and exploitative labour practices, and then argue for changed consumer habits as a remedy. *Taking responsibility* is realised in different ways, for example, in comments where users draw on consumer responsibility by encouraging other consumers to change their habits:

Extract 6.17

I do not understand why there are so strong reactions to this. Should we really ignore changing things that make it better for the environment because some people do not know how they should shop spontaneously then? People should just learn to bring a tote bag in their bag. After a while, it will be natural. If you forget, you just pay 2kr then!

Two things are notable when it comes to the realisations of responsibility and changed consumption habits in the example above: first, people's concerns over the new charge for plastic bags are de-legitimised, or dismissed, as a form of overreaction ('I do not understand why there are so strong reactions') due to selfish convenience ('people do not know how they should shop spontaneously then'). Second, changed behaviour is naturalised to be a logical consequence of responsibility, as the changes needed are presented as minor and something that will 'be natural' as soon as people get used to it. Similar legitimation strategies are seen in relation to the labour rights issue, where actions such as boycotting H&M due to their business model are presented as 'pretty simple'. There are also users who invoke similar arguments to highlight more systemic, or fundamental, changes in habits and mentality among consumers:

Extract 6.18

> Avoid buying cheap shit at H&M, buy quality and wear your jacket, shoes, clothes in say 5-10 years instead of buying new each year. Take care of what you buy, mend if needed. There are plenty of skilled craftsmen like shoemakers, tailors who cannot survive in their occupation because the majority in Sweden buy shit that's not worth taking care of. The number of purchases and consumption must be reduced.

The example above illustrates the intertextuality between this user perspective on ethicality and the high fashion perspective identified in the newspaper material which focused on decreased consumption and increased awareness. Consumers are encouraged to take responsibility by changing their shopping habits ('buy quality'), as well as to take care of the clothes they buy ('mend if needed'). Consumer responsibility is also discursively linked to habits that exclude 'fast fashion' companies ('avoid buying cheap shit at H&M'), and instead promotes small businesses and 'skilled craftsmen' who supposedly produce higher quality goods. The last sentence in the example shows how this particular user invokes the *topos of anti-consumerism* as an irrefutable fact. Thus, arguments about individual consumer responsibility are legitimised not only by different realisations of moral evaluation, but also by theoretical rationality, which establishes 'how things are'.

In line with a neoliberal focus on freedom and choice, these comments construct the consumer activist as an autonomous individual with a free will. One user, for example, argues that the good thing about the One Bag Habit initiative is that 'you get to make an active choice' regarding plastic bags. Another highlights that 'everyone has their own choice', implicitly stating that ethical consumption is equally possible for everyone and that it is up to the individual to take responsibility and make better choices. To make good choices, however, one must also be informed. Therefore, arguments about consumer responsibility are also discursively linked to arguments about need for consciousness, or *awareness-raising*, among consumers. Again, this position mirrors the industry claim that consumers in general are unaware, or unconcerned, about the impact their consumption have on others and on the environment. It is argued that the One Bag Habit initiative, for example, forces people to 'think twice' about their own responsibilities and that it 'makes people conscious' about the impact of their consumption habits:

Extract 6.19

Only positive about this. We need to start thinking about our actions in dealing with simple things like plastic bags. What are we fussing about ??

Extract 6.20

[…] Think of our children, grandchildren, etc. They should also be able to live on the planet. Show some positive spirit!

Such arguments are evoked when speaking of lazy or irresponsible consumers who need to stop being 'selfish' or 'ignorant' and instead take responsibility and think about how their actions will impact others. Similar notions about awareness raising and becoming conscious recur in relation to labour rights. There is, for example, one commenter who argues that, 'speaking of H&M and low wages', all consumers should read a particular book about the textile industry so as to become more aware about wage issues and working conditions.

On the other side of the accountability conflict linked to ethicality are those that claim that it is not the individual consumer who should be held responsible. Instead, these users argue, it is the fashion companies who are responsible both for problems and solutions related to environmental impact or wage levels in the industry. When discussing the One Bag Habit initiative, one user claims that 'it's always the little person who is supposed to take care of everything, while the companies don't give a shit'. Another explicitly frames the environmental initiative as an active attempt to shift responsibility from the fashion companies to the consumers:

Extract 6.21

Perhaps the stores should reduce plastic packaging in stores over all then they actually take responsibility. Instead, they sell the bags so they earn more and the consumer get to take "responsibility" instead of the clothing chains ..

Similarly, a comment on the suggestion that prices should be raised in H&M stores so that textile workers could get paid a living wage (which places the responsibility for the solution with the consumers) calls this a 'ridiculous' idea and argues that H&M 'should stop blaming the consumers'. Instead, the

company should 'make a real difference' by taking responsibility for their own actions. Other comments that discuss the labour rights and fair wages invoke the *topos of taking responsibility* in a similar manner:

Extract 6.22

This is pure nonsense. The problem is not us customers but the big clothing chains and intermediaries that agree on the price that will be requested from the small manufacturers in China, India and Pakistan who do not have economic opportunities and the knowledge to explore the world market. Do not accept it. It is fraud and a poor excuse.

As illustrated by the example above, the main argument here can be summed up as follows: it is the actions of commercial actors on the global market that create the problems in the textile industry, and therefore, it is these actors who are responsible for finding solutions. The suggestion that consumers should take responsibility is de-legitimised as a dishonest diversion ('fraud and poor excuse'), rather than a real solution. Among these comments, there is also a large group that essentially supports the idea of fair wages, although they argue that it is the owners or shareholders who should pay for the wage raise, not the consumers:

Extract 6.23

Or, we do not raise prices, but instead talk about H&M making so much profit that their bosses are among the richest men in the world? Why should the consumer pay for the seamstresses' salary, instead of the greedy billionaires sitting in between?

Comments similar to the example above claim that 'the bosses' should get 'a little less pay' and the money should instead be redirected to the workers. To pay living wages, it would be enough 'if the clothing chains gave up their huge profit margins' or if 'the CEO and shareholders stopped putting billions in their own pockets'. These users point to an alternative solution to the wage problem in the textile industry and specifically highlight the owners, or shareholders, of fashion companies as responsible ('or, we do not raise prices, but instead talk about H&M making so much profit'). As the examples above shows, arguments about the commercial actors' responsibilities in relation to the wage

issue actualise an ideological dimension of the conflict, where capitalist market practices/logics are constructed as the cause of systemic exploitation.

Furthermore, just as when the responsibility is placed with consumers, the need for *changed behaviour* is another recurring argument used on this side of the accountability conflict. From this point of view, however, it is the fashion companies who should change their practices:

Extract 6.24

Raising prices means more profit margin for HM and no better wages for workers in Asia. HM should put pressure on its suppliers so that they pay the right salary and that it is a good working environment for the workers. So that suppliers must be certified to be able to produce for HM. In this way, suppliers are forced to comply with the requirements for obtaining these million dollar deals from HM. But it means much higher costs. With the annual volume HM has SEK 5 means "only" billions in increased costs.

In the example above, it is H&M that should take responsibility by changing the way they do business ('HM should put pressure on its suppliers'), which in turn would change the behaviour of other actors in the textile industry ('suppliers are forced to comply with the requirements'). The suggested price increase is argued to be ineffective when it comes to solving the problems; it would lead to economic profit for H&M rather than better living standards for workers ('raising prices means more profit margin for HM and no better wages for workers in Asia'). Thus, rationalisation is used to de-legitimise the suggested version of ethicality and, instead, promote an alternative version.

This way of 'filling' the *topos of changed behaviour* is also actualised in relation to the environmental issue. Some users explicitly point out that the problem with plastic consumption in clothing stores might not be caused by consumers, but rather, by the stores themselves:

Extract 6.25

I'm a bit sceptical of "changing the behaviour of customers". I have never ever asked for a plastic bag in any clothing store. Never been asked about it either. Often where I'm asked, I always say no if I have a bag already. Otherwise, I don't mind paying. So it's probably the staff at H&M, Lindex, etc. who have to change behaviour.

The claim that shop assistants routinely put purchases in plastic bags, without even asking the consumer, constructs such habits as the main cause of the problem. Changed routines in stores are presented as the solution ('it's probably the staff at H&M, Lindex, etc. who have to change behaviour'). Similar comments also claim that 'the biggest difference is that the cashier asks if you want a bag or not', or suggest that it would have been interesting to see if usage dropped by itself if the stores changed their routines, rather than the price for the plastic bags. Thus, these examples evoke the same need for changed behaviour as the users who argue for consumer responsibility, although they argue that it is the fashion companies who need to change, rather than the consumers.

6.3.4 Anti-consumerism or caring capitalism

Discussions on accountability also actualise another discursive struggle linked to the construction of ethicality: the conflict over consumption and its function in society. On one side of the consumerism conflict, we find users who invoke a *topos of consumer power* and argue for boycotting of specific fashion brands as a way to change exploitative practices in the industry. These comments are specifically recurring in relation to the labour rights issue, and they argue that H&M (as a representative of the fast fashion industry) is an inherently unethical company. Thus, to be an ethical consumer, one should avoid supporting their business altogether. Users state that they are already boycotting, or will start to do so, due to the issue of wages and working conditions in the industry:

> Extract 6.26
>
> Living wage should be a human right. I will not put my foot in H&M until they pay reasonable wages to those who do the job!

Others argue for a general decrease of consumption as a necessary step towards an environmentally sustainable future, not just boycotting due to working conditions of wages in production countries. Such realisations of *anti-consumerism* are expressed in relation to all three overarching issues and focus on mass-consumption as a main cause of problems related to pollution and climate change. The ethicality of the 'norm-critical' messages from H&M and

Åhléns, for example, is de-legitimised since they still support ever-growing consumption, which is argued to have negative environmental consequences:

Extract 6.27

[…] they support an overturning of norms and social conventions for the purpose of selling more clothes and thus contribute to the expansion of the consumer society when we should rather economise the earth's resources and choose more 2nd hand and barter trade.

Statements such as 'we don't need these cheap clothes' and statements that the companies should think about their own impact on the environment and strive to decrease fashion consumption recur among this category of comments. Other users, however, focus on systemic inequalities and global social injustice and argue for more trade regulation, rather than targeting specific actors in the industry or specific consumer habits:

Extract 6.28

We should not criticize H&M (who, by the way, is being outdated by online retailers?) but rather the system that creates the injustices. It is not because individual consumers boycott some chains, but through political policy that we can bring about change. Do not protest H&M, protest trade agreements such as CETA and TTIP. Not because we are against globalisation or trade – but because we want trade agreements that strengthen workers' rights, which strengthen work on environmental issues, and that are based on human and not corporate freedom.

While they have a similar negative view of the fashion industry as the previous examples, these users still suggest that other actions might be more ethical (and effective) than boycotting specific brands or corporations or placing the responsibility for change with consumers. One user suggests that the situation in the textile industry 'perhaps is something for politicians to look at', rather than being regulated through consumer choices or corporate social responsibility.

There are also other, sometimes contradictory, views on the role of consumption in contemporary society, and what kind of consumer actions should be considered 'ethical', in the comments. In relation to the

environmental issue, users point out that fashion consumption does not necessarily have to be a bad thing, since the revenue from sales of plastic bags goes to other sustainability initiatives:

Extract 6.29

"Companies will donate the surplus from the sale of bags to sustainable development. For example, H&M donates money to the Wateraid organisation." So now, first, there is less plastic in circulation, and then you contribute to the development (Y) Now you take a plastic bag with good conscience.

In the example above, the whole experience of fashion shopping becomes an ethical act in itself, since the consumer 'contributes to the development' and to monetary donations to different environmental organisations. Thus, these users reinforce the discursive restyling of ethicality seen in corporate communications, where the 'power to act' is constructed around the practice of consumption.

When discussing labour rights and 'living wages', a rather small, but loud, group of users denies the whole idea that there is a problem with the wages or working conditions in the textile industry and also argue that companies such as H&M have no obligation to care if there was. The tweet about price changes, and the stories about it, is framed as 'communist propaganda' that wants to 'brain wash' people. H&M should not care about the wages or the critique, since this is not their problem. One of the most prominent arguments, however, is found in comments that highlight the role of companies such as H&M when it comes to economic and social *global development*. As seen in Parts I and II, the economic investments of the textile industry in countries such as Bangladesh are used to construct H&M, and the fast fashion industry, as a positive rather than problematic actor. Companies that produce consumer goods or services in one way or another are argued to be an important, and powerful, force in society:

Extract 6.30

Get real, what the hell would happen without #hm #ikea #Spotify #norrsken #nordea #volvo #abb #longlist All are big companies that actually contribute to the fact that many in the world have anything at all, and [to] tool industries

every day. If all of them would work together. Then there would be real chaos.
Bye bye politics, I'm just saying

This user explicitly places 'the power to act' with global corporations, rather than with political participation ('bye bye politics, I'm just saying') when it comes to creation of social and economic security ('big companies that actually contribute to the fact that many in the world have anything at all'). Others also argue that 'a small wage is better than no wage at all' when it comes to the well-being of textile workers. This includes comments that highlight a possible outcome of raised wages; that companies such as H&M would move their production to other places than Bangladesh:

Extract 6.31

An old example is that former textile factories got closed down. A large proportion of the population in Sweden and other countries cannot spend much money on clothes. Don't forget, they create jobs in these countries. The alternative for these women is much worse.

This user draws on the same understandings of consumer capitalism as a prerequisite for development ('they create jobs') as seen in the corporate discourse on ethicality and consumption. The comment also alludes to the same notion of female empowerment, as it specifically highlights women as beneficiaries of this corporate power. Thus, the ethical act as a consumer is not to boycott companies such as H&M, but rather, to support them, and through increased consumption contribute to jobs and economic security for people in other parts of the world. Boycotting, another user claims, is more a way for consumers to feel good about themselves than to exercise any actual ethical conviction or create change. As one comment rhetorically states: how much would the workers earn if there were no factories? Thus, these comments promote an alternative understanding of ethical consumerism, much in line with the corporate restyling of the fast fashion industry. From this point of view, business actors such as H&M represent a form of 'caring capitalism' that takes responsibility for problematic aspects of the industry, at the same time as they are a prerequisite for a prosperous and sustainable future.

6.4 Restyling consciousness

While the discursive struggles over authenticity and ethicality that I have discussed so far mainly involve corporate initiatives and the ethical identity of certain fashion brands, similar conflicts are also found in characterisations of other social actors and in discussions of certain political issues. The public discourse in the comments shows two opposing positions when it comes to consumers and ethicality, where one reinforces the negative characterisation of the 'careless' consumer type, identified in the analysis of journalistic texts as well as corporate communication, and the other questions the ethics of the 'conscious' consumers and instead constructs an 'alternative' form of consciousness.

These discussions are in turn related to a conflict over the hegemonic ideology and politics in contemporary Swedish society, specifically, in relation to issues such as gender equality, immigration, and the notion of 'norm criticism'. The users on the Facebook pages actualise these struggles through strategies of nomination and predication, which serve to characterise both themselves and others in specific ways, and through the invocation of certain *topoi*, or arguments that legitimise or de-legitimise certain views on ethicality and authenticity.

6.4.1 Contesting the 'conscious' consumer

When discussing the One Bag Habit initiative, users who are negative towards the environmental efforts of the fashion industry are referred to with nominations such as 'whiners', 'slackers', and even 'idiots'. Qualifying attributes include negative predications such as being 'cheap', 'stupid', 'ignorant', and 'ill-considered'. Further, this group of consumers are also characterised as 'lazy' in different ways and motivated by self-centred convenience:

> Extract 6.32
>
> It is pure laziness that makes people whine over the charge for plastic bags. It's "practical" to just take a bag when you're shopping. I always have a tote bag with me when I shop. Should I shop a lot, I take my trolley or both if I really buy a lot.

Comments like the one above sometimes claim that those who want to be 'comfortable' should pay for it or 'start to think about others not just themselves'. Careless consumers are described as people who complain about environmental issues, at the same time as they are 'not prepared to do something about it'. These consumers are functionalised as 'the problem' in relation to the environmental issue, since they are not willing to change their destructive consumption habits.

Characterisations of consumers as lazy and ignorant of the impact of their consumption habits is also evoked in relation to labour rights and wages in the textile industry. Comments that are critical of H&M, or the fashion industry in general, construct similar images of the general mass of consumers: 'the majority in Sweden buys shit that is not worth taking care of' and invoke the *topos of double standards* when speaking of consumer habits and reactions:

Extract 6.33

It would be better if Nordea calculated how many crowns each westerner would have to refrain from to eliminate poverty. Though they do not need to do that, we already know - less than 1% of our wages. How much do you donate? Or do you just share videos on Facebook and blame HM and Nordea, despite the fact that you shop there?

As seen in the examples above, the 'conscious' consumers' self-representation is rather the opposite. The users often speak of their own consumption habits in positive terms, such as how s/he brings her/his own bags when shopping. Claims that 'people should stop buying clothes on an impulse and start planning their shopping' or that people will become 'more conscious' because of having to 'think twice' about their consumption, draw on the topoi of *awareness raising* and *taking responsibility* in a similar manner as in the self-presentation of designers, sustainability experts, and fashion journalists in the newspaper discourse. Such discursive strategies implicitly characterise these users as more responsible, active, and enlightened than others and, like the industry actors, they function as role models in comparison to the 'careless' consumers they talk about.

The idea of 'conscious consumers' who take responsibility and are more aware than others is, however, also met with some scepticism. Questioning 'authorised voices' from brands and journalists, as well as other users, is a

dominant feature of the public discourse on ethicality, specifically when it comes to the imagined consumers of clothes promoted in the two norm-critical advertising campaigns, or the users that criticise H&M and call for a boycott of the company. It is often the users with opposing views who present these actors as 'others' with specific group affiliations, political views, or qualifying attributes.

On one hand, these consumers are characterised as a bit naïve or unaware of the fashion companies underlying motivations. They are 'easily fooled' and 'ignorant' about how things 'actually work':

Extract 6.34

Do not understand how people can be surprised by this? When you buy a shirt for ~ 170: - it is not very likely that it is hand-sewn in Italy.

Comments such as this one also speak of the *double standards* of consumers, in a similar manner as this argumentation scheme is invoked in relation to fashion brands. The critique of H&M is seen as just a spur-of-the-moment outrage without any real connection to people's actual shopping habits. When they are 'done raging', these consumers will continue to 'buy shit made by even cheaper labour' – an invocation of double standards that serve to de-legitimise the authenticity of their concern. Hence, such consumers are also, like the fashion companies, characterised as 'hypocritical', since they focus their criticism on certain brands or the fast fashion industry in particular.

The negative descriptions of 'conscious' consumers also actualise a *topos of privilege*, where the underlying argumentation scheme rests on claims that these people are judgemental and detached from reality, and therefore, they should not be considered more ethical than others:

Extract 6.35

I have worked in China and visited suppliers to the company I was working for. Can say that the numbers in these movies rarely match reality, it's easy to just believe a lot of things when you sit comfortably in your couch with a glass of wine in your hand and scroll through your Facebook feed. […] I do not think people from a country who bothers their bosses about a few minutes overtime to be paid can or have the right to decide how people who do not even have other opportunities to survive should live their lives.

As seen above, the consumers that criticise H&M are characterised as spoiled ('bothering their bosses about a few minutes overtime'), uninformed ('it's easy to just believe a lot of things'), and unaware of their own privilege. The user legitimises this image by references to his own expert authority and knowledge ('I have worked in China and visited suppliers'), together with the theoretical rationality of telling others 'how it really works' in the textile industry.

Similar characteristics and legitimations can be found in descriptions of the imagined consumers targeted by the norm-critical commercials from H&M and Åhléns. Users point out that the prices of the clothes in the Åhléns campaign excludes a large part of the population from buying them. Shirts that 'challenge gender power' are thus 'something that only the privileged in society can enjoy', rather than an actual step towards equality. Regardless of whether these users are positive or negative towards the politics from which H&M and Åhléns draw, such arguments de-legitimise the ethicality of consumers by reference to the class dimensions of the version of ethicality they endorse. Conscious consumers are characterised as 'pretentious' and referred to as 'the gender conscious middle class' who go through life without 'real' problems:

> Extract 6.36
>
> Heavy questions to deal with for people who do not have to worry about having food on the table or dress their children. Just hope that the clothes do not contain gluten or lactose...

There are also recurring geographical references in these invocations of *privilege*; one comment describes the imagined consumers as 'norm critical gender retards from the Stockholm city centre', while another specifically locates them as living on Södermalm, one of the central islands in Stockholm, whose residents are used as representations of a left-wing, or liberal, part of the population. Description of Swedes in general as unaware of their own privilege and too interested in 'nonsense' also occur in this context. One comment states that 'there is nothing in Sweden that stops people from dressing the way they want', which implicitly characterises the imagined consumers as people who make up problems where there are none. Thus, this group of politically motivated consumers are depicted as both privileged and spoiled, in

the same manner as the consumers calling for a boycott of H&M in relation to the labour rights issue.

6.4.2 Norm(ative) critique and hegemonic ideology

The discursive restyling of 'consciousness' that I have discussed above is also used to characterise ideological opponents in the discussions, rather than just a type of consumer. While specific political ideologies might be actualised in relation to the fair wages question (such as referring to H&M as 'capitalists' or de-legitimising the suggestion of higher prices as 'communist propaganda'), it is particularly visible among the users who comment on the advertising campaigns from H&M and Åhléns and who discuss issues of feminism and cultural diversity. Comments on this form of branded politics often actualise different ideas about social norms in relation to fashion consumption and what the 'normative', or hegemonic, ideas really are in contemporary Swedish society.

On one side of the conflict, we find those who argue for a norm-critical perspective and that fashion companies should be involved in discussions on feminism, cultural diversity, and social power structures. Users who agree with the underlying (or explicit) message in the H&M and Åhléns campaigns claim that consumer choices are restricted by social norms about gender and fashion and that these norms are, in turn, related to more overarching social power hierarchies:

> Extract 6.37
>
> So true! Expose it! Same thing with hair length on children. Short-haired girls are tough but long-haired boys should "cut their hair". Big thanks to Zlatan and other lovely role models. We get diversity if we deal with power structures and unnecessary norms !!

Similar comments argue that men and women should have 'the same access to all colours' and that the negative reactions to the campaigns 'only shows how askew everything is about looks and ideals today'. Thus, the negative reactions from other users are used to legitimise the need for the type of norm-critical message that the brands promote. Users who take this position construct feminism, cultural diversity, and challenges to normative understandings of beauty and gender as something positive. That fashion brands involve

themselves in the debate, and speak of social norms and power structures, is also perceived as a good thing. The politics of H&M and Åhléns are a motivation for participating in the brand community, as the norm-critical commercials make these users more inclined to shop from the fashion brands behind them:

Extract 6.38

Lovely Åhléns really like your clothes I will definitely shop more from you ☺

This can be seen as an example of how the idea of 'buycotting' is discursively linked to ethicality in these comments, as consumption of certain brands, or from certain retail stores, is constructed as an act that supports a specific political idea. While there are users who criticise the branded form of feminism promoted in the commercials, most users who argue for the importance of a norm-critical perspective do not question the connection between politics and fashion consumption.

Users who criticise the campaigns and the norm-critical perspective are referred to as 'liberals', which in the Swedish context, means right-wing, rather than progressive. These right-wing 'others' are depicted as reactionaries and traditionalists who want things to be as they were 'in the good old days', who oppose new ways of thinking, and who write 'depressingly stuffy' comments. Others attribute them with negative qualities such as being 'pretentious' and 'begrudging'. Furthermore, they are 'not enlightened' and need to think more on their own:

Extract 6.39

Lovely !! Imagine how nice if everyone just dressed in what they liked and everyone was happy that others felt good. New thoughts takes more energy than doing as usual, like everyone else. Time for some brain gymnastics!

As shown above, a *topos of conformity* is actualised in characterisations of this 'anti-feminist' group of users, as the norm-critical users speak of the ideological 'other' as someone who just does or thinks 'like everyone else'. The characterisation of anti-feminist discussants also predicates them with a form of emotional irrationalism, since they are 'panicking' over, or are

'provoked' and 'offended' by, the commercials. Furthermore, one very satirical comment paints a picture of the right-wing anti-feminists as a group of upper/middle-class men ('business boss') who do not recognise their own privilege and have a know-it-all attitude:

Extract 6.40

Yuk! Letting people wear what they want! Where are we heading with this disgusting populism and 70's Cretinism. It is absolutely ridiculous that anyone could wear anything. What Sweden needs is someone like Donald Trump, who can put his foot down and really tell you how things should be done. Get out of here! I for one have never even thought of wearing something that has not been approved by someone else. And what is this idea of using clothes for power? When I, or any business boss for that matter, goes to work in a black suit, it has nothing to do with power. I'm a man. Then you dress that way. End of discussion. I know how everything works, indeed.

Thus, characterisations of ideological 'others' on the right wing of the political scale present these individuals as reactionary men who are close-minded, incapable of understanding new perspectives or thoughts, and who embrace an authoritarian and essentialist view on gendered power hierarchies. These men also represent an elite group in society, who hold both cultural and economic power.

Interestingly though, similar strategies of self- and other-presentation are employed by users who are negative towards the campaigns or towards the very idea of 'norm criticism'. Users who take this position argue that the version of norm criticism expressed in the commercials is actually normative in Sweden today and that to be truly ethical, H&M and Åhléns should challenge these ideas, rather than embrace them. Users who take this position might explicitly argue that politics and consumption should not be mixed:

Extract 6.41

Really creepy when both business chains and museums are trying to throw ideology and "correct thinking" in our face when we consume. Let a department store be a department store, nothing else.

These users strive to separate ethicality from consumption altogether; the expansion of political engagement and 'consumer action' into cultural or commercial spheres is argued to be destructive, rather than positive. Retail stores should focus on service and quality, without 'making politics' of their clothes.

Most importantly, however, these users also challenge the idea that the commercials from H&M or Åhléns are 'norm critical' at all, since they are seen as representations of a contemporary 'political trend' that tries to 'enforce everything that isn't normal' on the Swedish people. Users describe Åhléns as being 'kidnapped by gender ideology' and 'joining the Marxist bandwagon'; both predications depict the company as acting in line with hegemonic ideas rather than as independent free-thinkers. This trend is in turn said to be promoted by social groups with a specific political ideology:

Extract 6.42

To make the abnormal normal and the normal abnormal is the wet dream of the cultural Marxists.

As exemplified above, the argument that norm criticism is actually a normative, rather than critical, idea, often attributes the advocates of these ideas with a leftist political view ('cultural Marxists') and links it to 'abnormal' practices. A main argument here is that it is a 'cultural elite' consisting of feminists, anti-racists, or LGBTQ people who promote the idea of norm criticism, and, contrary to these groups' own self-image, they are the ones with political power today.

Drawing on a *topos of political correctness*, these users imply that the ideas of a small group of radicals have become the hegemonic way of thinking and that any form of opposing opinions is silenced in the public debate. One comment presents the Åhléns campaign as promoting a 'Marxist Utopia' where 'everyone has correct opinions'. Another comment claims that the campaign is an attempt to 'control the people's mind' in the same manner of the book *1984* by George Orwell. The commercial advertising from a fashion company is hence compared to 'propaganda' from a fascist state, which seeks to create 'consent among the population'. In another comment, it is implied that, in fact, it might be those who do not want to break any social norms who are marginalised today:

So sick of this obsession that norms "should be broken"! Everyone may be as
they like, even those who want to be within the norm. Damn bitching!

Another category of comments question which norms the campaigns are
critical of and which they might help to reinforce. One user poses a rhetorical
question about 'who is to decide what is norm free or not?', thus implying that
the 'norm critical' actors are pushing opinions about what constitutes 'good'
and 'bad' social norms in the same way as the ones they criticise. It is implied
that it is just a certain kind of cultural diversity or female empowerment which
is promoted by the fashion companies, and users apply satire, sarcasm, or irony
to argue for this view. One asks when H&M is going to include 'Marxist
workers' in their diversity campaigns, another when Åhléns are going to front
their campaigns with a Muslim man 'in make-up and women's clothes'. The
last example implies that this would not be done, since that kind of portrayal
of a Muslim man would go against the supposed compromising attitudes of the
'cultural elite' when it comes to social norms of immigrants, and especially
Muslims.

From this point of view, the whole idea that social norms would be
problematic is de-legitimised through naturalisation combined with
instrumental rationalisation, where users point to the uses and perceived
positive effects of social norms. They argue that norms 'create peace' in
society, which is a good thing:

Extract 6.44

Norms are a lubricant and a kit in an increasingly loosely unified and
increasingly poor functioning society. Do not break this down. In addition,
how exciting is it when men and women pretend to be the same.

Hence, the norm criticism promoted by Åhléns and H&M is seen as a threat
against community and society ('an increasingly loosely unified and
increasingly poor functioning society'). In addition, it creates dull and uniform
culture without clear divisions which are argued to be stimulating ('how
exciting is it when men and women pretend to be the same').

The last example also draws on a portrayal of Sweden as a society in
decline, threatened by ideas that seek to divide and emasculate the nation. The

two campaigns are seen as part of a 'pathological gender battue', a 'sickness' in contemporary Swedish society promoted by 'disgusting feminists'. In comparison to how the national identity is constructed in discussions on environmentalism, where Sweden might be characterised as 'far behind' on the issue, these discussants rather see the country as going 'too far' when it comes to feminism and cultural diversity. These users' characterisation of a Swedish national identity builds on a sense of humiliation and loss of masculinity. Åhléns is, for example, accused of 'ridiculing their own people' with their advertising. This sense of indignity is also combined with an impending disaster and the dismantling of society, brought on by 'gender craziness'. Thus, users draw on a *topos of social decline* when they speak of how 'postmodern nonsense' and 'populism' affect Sweden and the population. One states that 'the sick society in this country is about to dismantle itself', another that 'Sweden has capsized' due to these 'sick disgusting' ideas. This view is legitimised with the help of analogy, or comparison, with other countries, as well as moral evaluation ('anything else is just absurd'):

Extract 6.45

South and Eastern Europe laughs at us, there are only 2 sexes, anything else is just absurd. You might as well create clothes for people who think they are dinosaurs or ostriches.

Others, with a similar view, quote an opinion piece from Göteborgs-Posten, where the main argument actualises the *topos of conformity*, as it claims that 'in Sweden we like diversity as long as everyone likes it in the same way' and that 'consensus' is prioritised above 'free thinking'. One user argues that 'those who actually violate any "klädmaktsordning"' are the ones who dress as they like without having to be guided by some advertising campaign'. Thus, the characterisation of contemporary Swedish society is also closely tied to, and overlaps with, the characterisation of ideological 'others' who are positive towards the ideas promoted by the two fashion companies.

Looking at strategies of self- and other-presentation, there are some recurring descriptions and characterisations which are highlighted by users who are critical towards the messages in the campaigns. Consumers who are positive towards the politics in the commercials and who argue for the norm-critical perspective are referred to with nominations such as 'Taliban

feminists', 'cultural Marxists', and 'the cultural elite' by those who criticise the campaigns. These ideological 'others' are characterised as part of an elite group in society, with a specific political agenda. The use of 'Taliban' as a qualifying prefix is noteworthy, as it connects to other descriptions of this group as religious fanatics and the commercials as examples of 'the hateful feminist religion'. An illustrative example is found in one of the longer comments, which explicitly speaks of the character of those who appreciate the message in the commercials:

Extract 6.46

It's so damn fascinating. And tragic. Some people spend their days discovering and understanding the world down to the smallest element. Others are content to engage in any volatile viewpoint without substance. The sectarian leftists who claims a high moral is completely uninterested in justice, utilitarianism and all other ethical perspectives. It's all about marketing yourself. Highlighting fake problems and attributing groups of people with evil to appear as a better person themselves. I am so tired of hearing people with psychopathic tendencies cast accusations around and attack entire groups. What most annoys me is probably your arrogance. I really want to understand the world, including the moral landscape we think we are seeing. I have devoted a lot of time to break down different perspectives. And then there are a bunch of ignorant idiots that claim a higher knowledge (and goodness, of course). Though you have not done a damn thing to understand anything (accept for social coding of opinions, then). You bore me. Conjure up some interesting damn thoughts on your own instead of echoing what the herd you would want to belong to bleats.

The ideological opponents ('sectarian leftist') to whom this comment refers are attributed with hate, aggression, and fanaticism, bordering on mental illness ('people with psychopathic tendencies cast accusations around and attack entire groups'). The last sentence is another example of how *conformity* is actualised by these users, as the metaphorical language characterises such persons as 'herd animals' without individuality. They are 'ignorant idiots' who cannot think for themselves; instead, they just follow social codes to make themselves appear better than others. From this perspective, the presentation of these 'others' is legitimised through both instrumental rationalisation ('it's all about marketing yourself'), expert authority, and theoretical rationalisation,

which is realised through claims of superior knowledge and insight ('I really want to understand the world' or 'I have devoted a lot of time to break down different perspectives').

The depiction of ideological opponents presents the author as an enlightened individual, in contrast to people who think that they are 'conscious' but really just follow what authorities say. Another user refers to fellow critics as 'dissidents' and 'innovators', whose ideas people should listen to and contemplate, instead of just 'backing the like-minded'. Thus, the presentation of the 'others' as emotional, following trends, and not having any opinions of their own, is contrasted with self-presentation strategies that draw on rationalism, individualism, and anti-authoritarianism, which serves to legitimise the opinions of the authors. These users 'restyle' the notion of consciousness in a way that fits into a right-wing, anti-feminist, and anti-Islamic discourse. The authenticity of this form of ethicality is legitimised by negative invocations of the authority of conformity, which serve to present these users as individuals as independent free-thinkers who have seen through the 'politically correct' 'myths' and 'hate propaganda' reflected in the campaigns from H&M and Åhléns.

Hence, in their descriptions of each other, both groups of users use similar strategies of self- and other-presentation which characterise the ideological 'other' as narrow-minded, emotional, ignorant, and unable to think for themselves, while the 'self' is open-minded, rational, enlightened, and capable of forming individual opinions. The self is also, unlike the 'other', presented as speaking from a subordinate position and in opposition to a group that is presented as powerful (the female 'cultural elite' or the male 'business bosses'). There are also, however, differences in the descriptions. For example, when feminists are described as 'others', they are linked to feelings of sickness and disgust, while in the opposite situation, more satirical, or humorous, language is used.

6.5   Conclusions

To conclude, the analysis in this chapter suggests that both journalistic and corporate discourses on ethical consumerism are reinforced, but also contested and negotiated, in these online discussions. The discourse topics related to ethicality and authenticity cover much of the same issues as seen in the previous parts of the study, and the distinction between 'conscious' and

'careless' consumers is actualised in these discussions as well. The characterisation of brands such as H&M or Lindex as 'moral corporations' also recurs here, as they are positioned as role models for both consumers and other actors in the industry.

There are also users who express opposing opinions, specifically, when it comes to the authenticity of the companies' efforts and their motivation for engaging in certain issues. Here, we can see how much of the implied critique that the companies strive to mitigate in their own communication is made manifest. The strategies of self- and other-presentation among discussants show how opposing sides of conflicts often strive to position themselves in an oppositional role, arguing against a perceived powerful elite and the hegemony of this elite's ideas. These comments also realise counter-discourses to the characterisation of conscious consumers as role models for others, as they include a form of 'alternative consciousness' which proposes other ways of being an ethical consumer and other understandings of the motivation for ethical consumption practices.

This speaks to the performativity and co-creational nature of political brand cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2012a) and the way that the discursive construction of ethical consumerism is dependent upon the relationship between producers, consumers, and the media. The analysis in this chapter shows how online discussions on the three trigger events create the kind of 'backdraft' that Simon (2011) speaks of. Topics such as the sustainability of increasing economic growth or unequal social relations in capitalist societies are joined by discussions on feminism, gender roles, cultural diversity, and immigration, as well as national identity and the state of contemporary Swedish society. While these discussion in some ways mirror the discursive struggles found in the two previous parts of this thesis, they also show how social media, as a communicative practice, gives voice to different actors and positions and makes conflicts explicit. The notions of 'sustainable' or 'political' fashion taps into ongoing struggles over dominance and hegemony (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009), as they manifest different ideological positions and diverse perspectives on what the hegemonic ideas really are.

One of the main conflicts in the material is the conflict of authenticity – to what degree the corporate involvement in these issues should be regarded as genuine or as superficial. This, in turn, is linked to discussions of responsibility and consistency, as they all intertwined with one another. The findings show how the audience draw on different issues when they discuss the ethicality of

different brands – however, it is predominantly the 'living wages' issue that is recalled to question the sincerity of initiatives in other areas. It is clear that for many users involved in these discussions, the corporate initiatives or engagement in certain questions are not interpreted as genuine concern, but rather, as a way to increase profit – either through direct revenue (from the sale of plastic bags or clothes) or through increased 'brand equity' due to their association to certain issues. This questioning of corporate motivations is present in relation to all three overarching issues and among discussant who hold both negative and positive attitudes towards the issue as such. As Banet-Weiser (2012a) points out, it seems that in the public discourse on the relationship between consumption and politics, 'authenticity' is lost when profit is gained.

Another interesting finding is the discussions on the kinds of practices that actually 'makes a difference': what responsibilities a corporation really has and to whom. It is notable how different users propose opposing ideas of what 'ethical' consumption actually is. For some discussants, buying clothes from H&M is a practice which signifies ethicality, since it is argued that it contributes to economic, and thus social, development in production countries. This is a position that mirrors the corporate discourses on the issue in many ways, as it highlights the companies' role as 'job creators' and that it is investments, free trade, and market logics that actually make a difference in people's lives. Most interesting, however, are the comments that suggest that it does not matter if companies such as H&M have a positive impact or not – their only responsibility is towards shareholders and the economic profitability of the business. This can be seen as a counter-discourse to the companies themselves, who – as shown in the previous part of the thesis – often emphasise their own commitment to issues beyond the bottom line. Both in relation to the fair wages question, and to feminism and diversity, the comments analysed manifest a certain ambivalence regarding whether commercial actors should engage in politics at all – or whether they should stay clear of any kind of statement or affiliation.

Much of the discussions on cultural diversity and feminism, in and through fashion, draw on other contemporary discourses of immigration and identity politics and show the controversy with which these issues are surrounded. These discussions involve an attempt to 'restyle' the idea of norm criticism into a normative way of thinking and instead propose an 'alternative consciousness' that sees through this perceived ideological hegemony. From

this perspective, the branded politics of H&M and Åhléns becomes just another example of the agenda of the 'cultural elite' and a way for an affluent middle class to position themselves as socially aware. Interestingly, however, similar discursive strategies are seen on the other side of the conflict, where users characterise their opponents as part of an economic elite who are stuck in a conservative way of thinking. It seems that regardless of the perspective on the issues, neoliberal ideals of individualism and freedom (from 'following trends' or from being part of a specific social group) are important aspects of the self-branding practices of the discussants involved.

7   Main conclusions and key findings

The general focus for this thesis has been how different understandings of the relationship between consumption and politics are made manifest in mediated discourses related to the Swedish fashion industry. The specific aim has been to examine the discursive construction of *ethical consumerism* as a solution to global environmental problems and socio-economic inequalities. I have done so by analysing texts from three communicative practices – corporate communications, news media, and social media – all of which actualise discussions on politics in relation to fashion consumption and production in different ways.

In this chapter, I summarise the results from the three parts of empirical analysis and expand the discussion of some key findings. These findings add to the much-needed empirical examination of the discursive elements that construct individual consumption choices and corporate social responsibility as the best solutions to some of the most important political issues of today. They illustrate both the limitations and the possibilities of discursive ethical consumerism, as different perspectives on *ethicality*, *authenticity*, and *legitimacy* are reinforced, negotiated, and contested in the texts analysed. To a certain degree, however, these findings also problematize the view that ethical consumerism is a fundamentally de-politicising idea and part of a 'post-politicisation' of the public sphere. The chapter ends with some thoughts about the implications of the main conclusions and about possible future research in this area.

7.1   Summary

A presumed decline or expansion of political engagement have been at the centre of much scholarly interest and debate in recent decades. Some argue that falling membership numbers in political organisations, decreased interest in institutional politics, and increased distrust in traditional news media points toward a general weakening, or failure, of the political system in many Western countries. Others claim that rising numbers when it comes to voluntary work, strong interest in lifestyle and identity politics, and 'individualised collective action' organised through temporary networks and online platforms show that

political engagement is actually stronger than ever – it is just happening in other places, or in in relation to other issues, than in traditional parliamentary politics. In many ways, these conflicting versions of citizenship and participation are based on different conceptualisations of 'participation', as well as 'politics' (Hooghe, 2014; Van Deth, 2014).

This thesis focuses on a form of political participation that has been specifically highlighted as illustrative of a new 'personalisation' of politics, where people increasingly code their political engagement and concerns through lifestyle choices and consumption practices or in relation to political 'brand cultures' which are dependent on interaction between producers and consumers (Banet-Weiser, 2012a; Bennett, 2006, 2012). Ethical consumerism is a notion that emphasises both individual consumer choices and responsible corporate activities as fundamental to social change and that constructs both the 'consumer activist' and the 'moral corporation' as political subjects.

My point of departure in this thesis has been that ethical consumerism is neither a reaction against, nor a remedy for, the global social inequalities or environmental problems of today, which to a large extent are produced by the system of consumer capitalism (J. Lewis, 2013). Rather, it is an essential part of today's consumer culture and can be understood as an ideological construct of late capitalism, where a neoliberal shift in culture, economy, and policy has naturalised market-based solutions as the only perceivable organising logic for society and politics (Harvey, 2005; Lury, 2011).

The increased influence of corporate power in new areas of society and politics thus merits some critical examination, specifically, how the idea of ethical consumerism is promoted or contested by social actors who 'load' consumption with political content and importance. As messages about political responsibilities often are communicated through different forms of mediated discourse, the proliferation of ethical consumerism also becomes a question for critical communication scholars.

Based on an interest in how texts hold a specific ideological power to present events, practices, or ideas in a particular way, this thesis adopts the perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA). I analyse the empirical material with the help of tools from the discourse-historical approach (DHA) within this research tradition. Key analytical categories are *discourse topics*, which summarise the content of texts and identify the 'limits' of different discourses, and the *discursive strategies* used by different social actors, which

include self- and other-presentation, argumentation, and legitimation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; van Leeuwen, 2007).

The analysis in Part I focused on how three Swedish fashion companies – H&M, KappAhl, and Lindex – discursively construct their brand identity as 'moral corporations' (Lury, 2011) in their annual Sustainability Reports. Ethicality is constructed by linking the brands to certain issues and 'core values', which are emphasised as the driving force for the companies as organisations and for their employees and owners. Values such as democracy, human rights, diversity, and inclusiveness are constructed as inherent to the company culture and the base from which they operate: a characterisation which helps to reinforce the authenticity of their ethical identity and the concern for particular issues.

The main issues in the sustainability reports include environmentalism, labour rights, and female empowerment, where the latter is linked both to textile workers and to fashion consumers. References to how they take responsibility in these areas, specifically, through corporate initiatives and awareness-raising campaigns, characterise the brands as proactive rather than reactive and as important actors in a global context. Thus, they construct themselves as authentic political subjects with the 'power to act', due to both their genuine concern and their size and global presence.

The discursive construction of the moral corporation, which is driven by authentic values and 'makes a difference' in certain areas, also serves to legitimise these brands as empowering rather than exploiting when it comes to both workers and consumers. Both these groups of social actors are integrated into the brand community and are, in different ways, invited to co-create the branded politics which the corporations promote.

'Moral tales' of empowered women in the global South, who gain education, freedom, and economic security through their relationship with the fashion industry, serve to legitimise the actions of the 'fast fashion' business model in general and these brands in particular. The ethicality of the brands is also legitimised through the construction of them, and the fashion industry in general, as important for economic growth, poverty reduction, and for consensus and dialogue – rather than conflict – between parties about the labour market in production countries.

Consumers are empowered both as 'partners' in the fight against poverty and climate change and as the object of concern for the brands when it comes to issues of beauty ideals and diversity in the fashion world. The focus on how

fashion brands can help women to 'feel good' about themselves serves to legitimise them as positive, rather than negative, actors in their home country, too.

In Part II, the analysis focused on journalistic texts and how ethical consumerism was constructed in a selection of articles from five Swedish daily newspapers. The journalistic discourse on ethical fashion shows traces of discursive struggles, or 'framing contests' (Olausson, 2009), which involve both conflicts regarding what 'sustainable fashion' entails and conflicts regarding fashion as an arena for (feminist) politics. Ethicality is here constructed with references to a contemporary 'trend' in fashion, which includes both the sustainability concept and the influence of identity politics, specifically, feminism. Representatives from influential fashion brands (specifically H&M) are constructed as 'authorised voices' (Carvalho, 2010) who define ethicality in terms of recycling practices, better clothing care, and technical innovation. The legitimation of the fast fashion industry as driving change and empowering others through education and awareness raising, which is a dominant feature in the corporate discourse on ethical consumerism, is invoked here as well. The corporate representatives strive to construct fast fashion as a form of ethical fashion by linking it to these positive traits.

However, other authorised voices from the industry, such as up-and-coming entrepreneurs, designers, and fashion journalists, de-legitimise the 'fast fashion' ethicality by highlighting the economic motives behind corporate initiatives and the quest for ever-increasing growth. Instead, they contrast indulgence and mass consumption with a 'high fashion' form of ethicality, where quality over quantity, self-discipline, exclusive taste, and individuality are emphasised. The 'fashionable' ethicality is also separated from an almost stereotypical construction of 'traditional' ethical consumerism and the kind of identities, practices, and aesthetics to which this is linked. The discursive construction of the 'conscious consumer' addresses a well-off and well informed middle class, interested in a new form of 'green glamour' rather than 'hemp and bark' ethicality.

Other critical voices come from editorial writers and NGO representatives in opinion pieces, who de-legitimise the authenticity of fast fashion ethicality by either invoking the same contradiction between profitability and ethicality as some high fashion actors or by questioning the consistency of the values for which the brands claim they stand. The latter is also invoked in relation to the issue of feminism and the construction of fashion as either exploiting or

empowering women. Here, the discursive struggles involve different perspectives on the fashion industry's place in society and on its relationship to feminism.

In Part III, I turned my attention towards the public discourse on ethical consumerism, in the form of user comments collected from the Facebook pages of Swedish fashion brands or media organisations. A total of 1,843 comments were analysed, with a focus on the political 'backdraft' made possible by social media (Simon, 2011) and on how the audience make sense of the mediated messages from journalists and fashion companies. The analysis identified a number of discursive struggles over ethicality and authenticity in these comments, where the construction of 'moral corporations' as well as 'conscious consumers' is questioned and delegitimised from diverse ideological perspectives.

The conflict over whether fashion brands are 'making a difference' or 'making a profit' with their branded politics is, for example, actualised in these texts too, which shows the intertextuality between social media and the discussions in the newspaper discourse. Authenticity is also questioned by reference to consistency and accountability, specifically, the conflict between consumer responsibilities and corporate responsibilities. This involves the construction of either consumers or corporations as both the cause and solution to social and environmental problems linked to the fashion industry.

Intertextuality between the sustainability reports and the corporate discourse on ethical consumerism is seen here as well, for example, in the construction of the fashion industry as 'job creators' who provide employment and economic security for textile workers and thus drive global development forward. Corporations are also constructed as the ones with the 'power to act' in contrast to institutionalised politics, or in contrast to critical users who call for a boycott. Ethicality is therefore linked to supporting, rather than criticising, brands such as H&M.

Similarly, other users invoke the same conflict between 'careless' mass consumption and 'conscious' consumption practices based on quality, self-control, and enlightenment as the 'high fashion' version of ethicality proposed by industry actors in the newspaper discourse. However, this ideal consumer, and this version of ethicality, is also de-legitimised by a group of users who see this as a left-wing, class-based, elite viewpoint that only serves to present both brands and consumers in a positive light. Instead, they construct an 'alternative' consciousness that characterises ideas such as corporate

responsibility, ethical consumption, and norm-critical fashion as part of a hegemonic political discourse, which serves to destabilise, emasculate, and destroy Swedish society.

7.2 Key findings

The three empirical parts of this thesis address how the notion of ethical consumerism is constructed within different communicative practices and by different social actors. As a whole, the results point to three key findings when it comes to the discursive construction of ethical consumerism: first, the 'restyling' of the aesthetics of ethical fashion and the consumer identities and practices associated with ethicality; second, the positive 'restyling' of the fast fashion industry and of consumer capitalism; and third, the 'restyling' of feminism and the notion of norm criticism.

   While actors might express opposing opinions and perspectives on particular issues, a general need to redefine ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy can be observed in all three parts of the study. These discursive processes are in turn realised through the re-contextualisation and de-contextualisation of specific ideas, actors, or practices so that they are positioned as more or less ethical from specific ideological perspectives. Consequently, these three key processes in the construction of contemporary ethical consumerism will be further discussed in the following sections, with reference to both their promises and their limits when it comes to the relationship between consumption and politics.

7.2.1 Restyling fashionable ethicality

Different invocations of 'good' or 'bad' fashion taste and consumption practices are an important aspect of the first restyling process in the material: the stylistic reconfiguration of ethical fashion from 'hemp and bark' to 'green glamour'. The texts analysed show traces of an ongoing process of redefining representations of ethicality, both in terms of the actual designs and materials of clothes, and in terms of the consumers wearing them. The endeavour to 'sex up' different issues and make them more 'fashionable' has been argued to be characteristic for contemporary ethical consumerism and branded politics (Banet-Weiser, 2012a); the analysis in this thesis shows how this is made manifest in discussions of several topics, but especially in regards to the new 'trend' of sustainable fashion.

In a way, the focus on defining a 'new' version of ethicality is not that surprising considering the context. Even though ideas of 'classic' designs that will 'always be in style' might play a part in fashion discourse, the very notion of change plays an important part in its logic, both as a motor in the manufacturing industry (to launch something as the 'new trend' is a way to motivate new purchases) and as a feature of fashion as a cultural industry linked to processes of self-identification. Drawing on Bauman's (2000, 2007b) theories on the contemporary moment as a 'liquid society', Niinimäki (2010) claims that change is an unavoidable aspect of fashion, especially in a time characterised by fluidity and uncertainty. Consumers are guided by an 'ongoing need to renew his/her appearance and clothing according to a mobile self' (p. 155) based on constant self-critique and insecurity.

The idea of fluid identities is not just influential in fashion, it has also been important in discussions on the 'postmodern' state of Western societies in recent decades, although the fluidity and change of postmodern identities are not necessarily associated with insecurity or uncertainty. Fluid and reflexive identities are instead increasingly linked to neoliberal notions such as freedom of choice and individualism and the possibility for individuals to rebuild and reshape the self in accordance to personal interests or desires. Therefore, it is not surprising that 'unique designs' and 'finding your own style' are highlighted as core aspects of 'fashionable' ethicality and that individuality rather than conformity is constructed as an important attribute of the contemporary conscious consumer.

As both Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2001) point out, processes of individualisation have had a strong impact on the organisation of society in recent decades – processes that run parallel with neoliberalisation. Thus, the tendency to de-contextualise ethical fashion from specific collective, or conformative, identities such as 'hippies' and instead re-contextualise it within a discourse of multiple styles and individual choice, can be understood as a manifestation of this contemporary fascination with constantly reinventing oneself outside of fixed identities or definitions. It also has ideological significance, since one of the core ideas that underpin neoliberal views of the world is that everyone has the same opportunity to exercise this 'right to choose' who they want to be, or become, regardless of the structural circumstances or personal factors that might restrict or restrain people within a certain social identity or class.

De-contextualisation is also seen in the way that the new interest in ethics is actively constructed as 'apolitical' by influential actors – both by corporations who mitigate the conflict between increased consumption and ethicality, and by other industry representatives who deny the idea of ethical fashion as a 'political statement' or as linked to certain positions on the left-right political spectrum. Concern for issues such as the environmental impact of one's consumption is instead derived back to concern for the health of family members or oneself or as an 'add on' for consumers who still care more about the style than the politics of clothes. This naturalised understanding of ethical consumerism thus reinforces its de-politicisation, as the disagreements about responsibilities for particular actors to 'solve' certain problems still work within the post-political framework of consensus when it comes to the core question of causes (Berglez & Olausson, 2013).

But how fluid is this 'new' ethical identity, really? Fashion enables identity-building practices on different levels: both to express individuality and differentiate oneself from others and to mark affiliation to specific social groups and classes. Clothes serve as 'semiotic markers' which, through non-verbal communication, signify belonging or detachment both to larger collective identities and the fragmented and multi-faceted meaning within such groups (Schofield & Schmidt, 2005). Rafferty (2011) points out that what is considered 'fashionable' or 'stylish' depends both on time and on different culture-specific interpretations, and that, drawing on Bourdieu (1984), fashion can be regarded as 'a practice born out of competitive social relations' (p. 242). As specific fashions and styles come to be associated with certain collectives and identities, they are either adopted or rejected by other groups depending on processes of identification and association. Therefore, I would argue that the refusal to identify with political or collective understandings and identities has ideological significance when it comes to ethical fashion, as it is conceptualised both by corporations and journalists.

What is interesting, then, is to contemplate what kinds of identities and associations the new version of ethicality reflects, especially in regards to fashion as conditioned by class-based taste and social distinction. The restyling of ethical fashion makes it interesting to recall the argument put forward by Harvey (2005): that the process of neoliberalisation is a project to restore class power, although with a different version of the ruling class – a society lead by corporate CEOs and business professionals, rather than aristocrats. If we understand ethical consumerism as a 'natural way' of engaging in social issues

in neoliberal societies (Carrier, 2010) and neoliberalisation as a project to restore class politics, then what do those class characteristics look like? What are the practices, virtues, attributes, and traits that signify high status?

As pointed out in the empirical chapters, the ideal conscious consumer is predominantly constructed from the perspective of an affluent, knowledgeable, creative, and highly skilled middle-class individual, who is contrasted to a faceless mass of uneducated and irresponsible careless consumers. It is the reckless working class who cannot control their desire for cheap and easily discarded fashion that is the problem of consumerism, and this can be solved by the acquisition of borrowed cultural capital from upper middle-class style advisors.

High-brow culture, such as designer clothes, classic brands, and 'vintage' shopping, becomes a form of class distinction to dissociate oneself from low-brow mass consumption, bad taste, and second-hand shopping out of necessity rather than fashion interest. As Rafferty (2011) also point out, the class fractions with privilege struggle to remain at the top, by continuously drawing new lines of distinction between them and the lower class; in this thesis, that struggle is made manifest by designers and entrepreneurs who position themselves in opposition to the 'fast fashion' version of ethical fashion.

Again, the class distinctions of restyled ethicality do not come as a surprise; the class-based segmentation of ethical consumerism has been mapped out in previous research, showing that these consumers generally possess both high levels of economic and cultural capital (Baek, 2010; Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Carfagna et al., 2014; Ferrer-Fons & Fraile, 2013; Stolle et al., 2005).

Ferrer-Fons and Fraile (2013), for example, argue that the class affiliation of ethical consumers actually contradicts postmodern theories of social stratification, individualisation, and the 'decline of class politics', where 'the political' is increasingly configured around identity or lifestyle issues. Instead, ethically motivated consumption can be explained as a function of class distinction; these consumption practices are more common and available for citizens with high a level of socioeconomic resources than for those with a low level. Thus, it is only 'natural' that the ethicality proposed by the 'high fashion' experts in the texts analysed is configured around ideas and practices that are more easily attained by someone with high levels of cultural or economic capital (preferably both).

The most interesting part, however, of the answer to the question of what kind of traits that signify high status and 'authentic' ethicality, is found in the analysis of the public discourse in social media. Even users who criticise the fashion companies, and the idea of an enlightened and responsible 'conscious consumer' precisely based on similar analysis as the one above, use strategies of self- and other-presentation which highlight the same neoliberal ideals of individualism, rationality, and enlightenment as the actors they argue against. These users characterise their own stance as based on their own individual thoughts and analysis and therefore as more 'real' than what they perceive to be the socially accepted and 'approved' version of ethicality. It is still the free-thinking individual who is configured as the 'authentic' political subject – regardless of whether the users criticise the brands for 'appropriating' politics, or spreading 'propaganda' from (or for) the cultural elite, they still position themselves in opposition to collective identities and as an autonomous individual rather than as someone who seeks confirmation and acceptance from others.

7.2.2 Restyling the 'moral corporation'

The restyling of ethicality also means that from a corporate perspective, the idea of what ethical consumerism really means needs to be changed, not just when it comes to aesthetics and consumer identities, but also when it comes to how the public views the fashion industry and the commercial actors' identities as 'moral corporations' (Lury, 2011). Re-contextualisation and de-contextualisation of certain ideas or practices, which serves to discursively 'restyle' the (fast) fashion industry in general, and some brands in particular, into an authentic and legitimate ethical actor, is a second key finding in the texts analysed.

Although the fashion industry might have been partially spared the intense scrutiny of ethics and production processes to which other industries have been subjected for a longer time (such as, for example, the food or oil industries), it still has an 'image problem' when it comes to ethics. The use of 'sweatshops' in textile production has been on the agenda since the 1990s, and brands such as Nike and H&M have been forced to manage the criticism from both labour and consumer organisations on these issues. The environmental impact of the industry has also gotten increased attention during recent decades, both in terms of water management, the use of chemicals, and transportation and emissions, specifically in developing countries, and in terms of encouragement

of 'over-consumption' of clothes in the developed world. The fast fashion business model, which is based on fast turn-over and an optimised supply-chain that makes it possible to manufacture clothes quickly and inexpensively, has been especially criticised in this context. Brands such as H&M (and their customers) are often held out as representative of a problematic, and unethical, form of fashion production and consumption. In addition to these aspects, the fashion industry also has to manage criticism when it comes to objectification of women, encouragement of unhealthy or unattainable beauty ideals, and the role that fashion plays for upholding sexism and patriarchal power in society by cultivating a culture (and business model) that links the self-esteem and 'worth' of women to their appearance.

Discursive restyling of ethicality is therefore seen in relation to all three of these central issues and in all empirical parts of this thesis. When speaking of environmentalism, both in their own reports and when representatives act as 'authorised voices' in the press, the fashion brands draw on ecological modernisation theory by focusing on 'closing the loop' of textile production, through recycling, more effective procedures, and technical innovation. An important dimension of this perspective is that it is precisely large commercial actors such as H&M or Lindex who are central to the success of these initiatives, as their position in the market makes it possible for them to 'lead the way' for others. The re-contextualisation of notions such as 'democracy', 'human rights', and 'diversity' into the corporate discourse is also significant for the restyling of the moral corporation, since this constructs the brands as ethical not just *even though* they are successful actors with global presence – it is rather *because of* their size and profitability in combination with their values that they can 'make a difference'.

Thus, 'fast' fashion becomes 'ethical' fashion, since it creates the necessary conditions for finding a solution to the environmental impact of the industry, without really changing the institutions, relations, and logics which guide both production and consumption. Similar constructions of problems and solutions are seen in relation to other industries in today's environmental discourse; recall, for example, recent discussions on the environmental impact of flying as a mode of travel and how increased tourism made possible by low-fare airlines and charter companies is one of the main contributors to global climate change, which threatens to destroy, or even obliterate, some of the very destinations to which people travel. While critics and environmental interest groups argue for the need to limit emissions from airplanes by regulating the

industry and its prices, the industry itself (together with some political actors) claim that the only way forward is to encourage more travel by air, since the economic boost this creates makes it possible for them to invest in more environmentally friendly fuel and to finance research to find better solutions for the future. Thus, from this ideologically informed perspective, the nature of a specific business model is constructed as the remedy for problems created by the same mode of production: a perspective which mitigates any conflict between the logics of consumer capitalism and a 'sustainable' global development.

Similar forms of re-contextualisation are therefore seen in relation to the labour rights issue, where the restyling of ethicality is used to de-legitimise the idea that the fashion industry upholds a system of inequality, exploitation, and alienation of the labour force in the global South. This is done by re-contextualising the notion of empowerment into the corporate discourse and emphasising individualism, entrepreneurship, education, and emancipation as fundamental aspects of what corporations in general, and these brands in particular, give workers in the textile industry.

Just as with the environmental question, the fast fashion business model is here constructed as a prerequisite for development and for improved living standards in production countries. The metaphorical description of the industry as an 'escalator' that elevates people out of poverty, and the characterisation of corporations as mentors who can empower workers by making them 'aware' of their own rights (and responsibilities), restyles fast fashion from an exploitative business model into a positive force which creates opportunities and self-fulfilment for people, especially in developing countries. In addition, the focus on shared interests and collaboration between equally powerful 'partners' in the supply chain de-contextualises the relationship between brands and other actors in terms of conflicting interests, motivations, and benefits.

The ideological invocations of empowerment thus serve to construct the branded politics that the fashion companies promote as 'democratic', both for workers and consumers. When the CEOs of H&M or KappAhl, or users in the comment threads on Facebook, claim that their critics are the ones who 'take the easy way out' when they call for boycotts, they also construct these ideological opponents as the ones who keep people in poverty and deny others the opportunities that are taken for granted in their own life. Instead, it is market solutions and the presence of commercial actors that provide 'real'

equality and freedom from dependence and poverty for people in developing countries, and it is through supporting rather than criticising the industry that people can live out their identities as ethical consumers.

In line with what both Arvidsson (2006) and Banet-Weiser (2012a) argue, the branded politics of the fast fashion companies enables and empowers anyone in Sweden (or other Western countries) to be a 'consumer activist', since it gives people opportunities to become 'conscious' without having to change their consumption habits. The CEO of H&M also characterises his company as democratic since it gives everyone the opportunity to express their personality through fashion – something which, implicitly, would otherwise only be possible for a societal elite with economic means and access to the latest fashion trends.

This corporate construction of ethical consumerism involves a discursive 'restyling' of not just the moral company, but of consumer capitalism as such, in the way that market-logics are emphasised as the only way to increase human well-being and neoliberal policies which support global free trade rather than regulation are constructed as prerequisites for social and economic development. The 'power to act' is configured around consumption in a way that constructs increased consumption as the solution to, rather than the cause of, social and economic injustices and unequal power relations between the global North and South.

7.2.3 Restyling feminism and norm(ative) criticism

Fashion's potential to enable and empower is also an important part of fashionable feminist politics, as it is defined and 'restyled' in these texts. From the corporate perspective, it is pointed out that it is predominantly women who work in the textile industry, and therefore the empowerment of workers means empowerment of women. The investments and business relations in productions countries are discursively constructed as a form of applied corporate feminism, focused on education, emancipation, and independence for women. Female empowerment is also invoked in relation to the consumers – both by enabling them to become 'consumer activists', as discussed above, and by enabling women to 'feel good' about themselves and to resist feelings of inadequacy caused by unattainable and 'unnatural' beauty ideals.

All the brands that are present in the texts are aware of the critique against the fashion industry when it comes to reproducing sexist representations of the female body and promoting standards which cause anxiety and self-

consciousness among women. This critique is countered by highlighting how fashion can help consumers/women to 'express their personality' and feel empowered by the clothes they are wearing.

The construction of the brands as an ally who 'fight' on the same side as the consumer against objectifying or impossible beauty ideals can be understood as a discursive restyling of feminism, where the fashion industry provides the tools necessary to solve problems that it simultaneously is accused of creating. The notion of 'diversity' is important here, as it both encompasses a multitude of body shapes and a multitude of skin colours. The construction of the fashion industry as a feminist ally draws on interdiscursive links to intersectional identity politics of both gender and ethnicity, and 'inclusiveness' is constructed as the remedy to the idea of an industry that is only interested in thin, white, and young women.

The common idea that underpins the corporate re-contextualisation of female empowerment, both in relation to workers and consumers, is that consumer culture and capitalism can provide paths to emancipation and equality for all women. It is economic, social, and personal development through trade and entrepreneurship that is constructed as 'empowering' for women in the global South, and it is expressions of individuality, strength, and self-confidence through fashion and beauty that are constructed as 'empowering' for women in the global North.

What the corporate re-contextualisation of empowerment does, from an ideological perspective, is to dissolve the contradiction between the emancipated, liberated, Western woman who expresses her unique personality through fashion, and the fact that this fashion is made by underprivileged women in developing countries. Thus, the political potential of ethical consumerism is contained within, and limited by, the logics of the market, since 'empowerment' is configured around the consumer choices, commodities, and individual entrepreneurship provided by the fashion industry.

The focus on female empowerment is also strong in the more explicit discussions on the relationship between fashion and feminism, specifically, in the newspaper discourse on 'politicised' fashion, as well as in the user comments on Facebook. The analysis shows a strong tendency to re-contextualise the notion of feminist politics into the world of fashion, although in such a way that at the same time de-contextualises certain forms of political analysis.

Instead of characterising fashion as the object for feminist critique, it is constructed as a tool and arena for feminist politics. Feminism is invoked both *in* and *through* fashion, as fashion is constructed as an important arena for female leadership and creativity, as well as a form of performative communication where feminism can be articulated through the actual designs and clothes. Through this re-contextualisation of feminism, fashion is 'restyled' into a cultural and commercial arena with political significance, which also gives it legitimacy.

In addition, fashionable feminism is constructed as a critique of the versions of womanhood made available by both mainstream fashion and by 'traditional' feminism. By invoking the idea that female interests, culture, and creativity should be revalued and legitimised as a feminist practice, the critique of how fashion makes money off of feelings of inadequacy and anxiety among women is de-legitimised as an expression of sexism in itself. Just as with the notion of sustainable fashion, feminist fashion is also aesthetically 'restyled' with the help of references to 'dressing like a slut' or not having to 'dress like a man' to be empowered. Thus, it is a specific form of hyper-sexualised and feminised political engagement that is constructed as authentic and legitimate – a feminism that celebrates, rather than criticises, consumer culture, and that can be expressed in and through the consumption of specific brands, styles, or identities.

This re-contextualisation of feminism is characteristic of both the recent 'personalisation' of politics (Bennett, 2012) and of the 'postfeminist' discourse which has been prolific in the popular culture of recent decades. In a struggle over feminism itself, the notion of postfeminism can be linked both to a post-structuralist view of gender and power – which focuses on pluralism, deconstruction, and difference – and to an ideological 'undoing' of feminism, while still being engaged in a well-informed, and well-intended, response to feminism (Garrison, 2000; McRobbie, 2004).

Drawing on the 'third wave' of feminism that rose to recognition during the 1990s, characterised by its (in comparison to its predecessors) joyful embracement of popular consumer culture as a place of empowerment rather than misogyny, commercialised articulations of postfeminism are often configured around the notion of 'girl power', where any kind of female culture or expression is seen as an empowering practice (Banet-Weiser, 2004; Riordan, 2001). As it happens, this view integrates well with the neoliberal focus on individual empowerment, brand culture, and opportunities to act

politically through commodity activism, which in turn is contrasted with an almost stereotypical 'boring' or 'unsexy' version of feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2012b; Groeneveld, 2009).

The ambition to revaluate 'girl culture' can be positive in the way it celebrates female creativity, media production, and self-organisation; however, the juxtaposition between 'fashionable' feminists and 'feminists who look down on fashion' is also a form of de-contextualisation which uses a stereotypical, and ideologically charged, image of feminism to legitimise the 'new' version as more authentic and effective. An underpinning assumption of popular feminism today is that the characterisation of fashion as a key arena for the manifestation and reproduction of the patriarchal system is in itself oppressive, since it 'victimises' women and devalue feminine culture.

The 'restyling' of feminism, and what it means to be a feminist, can thus be seen as a parallel process to the previously discussed construction of ideological opponents in relation to labour rights, where critical actors are constructed as the ones who deny underprivileged people the rights to and opportunities for development and keep them in a state of dependency and 'victimhood'. It removes the critique of capitalist logics which reproduce exploitation and objectification of women from feminism, and thus makes it fit into a neoliberal discourse of empowerment and personal freedom expressed through a playful use of commodities and consumer identities.

The 'postfeminist' restyling of feminism can be seen as characteristic of a more general 'post-political' state of contemporary society (Berglez & Olausson, 2013). The emphasis on free choice, 'being who you want to be', and empowerment through, rather than conflict with, consumer culture plays into a consensual discourse which mitigates any conflict between 'being a feminist' and 'wearing high heels', i.e. conflicts between feminist activism and expressions of traditional femininity and interests which previously were seen as exploitative or as objectifying of women.

Interestingly, though, the public discourse in the Facebook comments analysed includes yet another restyling process when it comes to feminism, which is built on explicit invocations of conflict rather than consensus: the restyling of feminist politics and 'norm criticism' from critical to hegemonic ideas. This ideological struggle is one of the most striking features of how 'the public' reacts to the branded politics that fashion companies promote. While the labour issue shows traces of ideological conflict between users positioned on more or less opposite sides of the left-right political spectrum, it is the issue

of feminism and cultural diversity that seems to attract most attention from people who oppose the politics that H&M and Åhléns draw on in their advertisement campaigns. Much of the argumentation and questioning of the ethicality of both brands and other users shows aggressive, even hateful, attitudes towards feminists and feminist politics, as well as towards Muslims and the immigration policies in Sweden. The idea of norm criticism is also constructed as something that includes both 'made up' problems, which only concern a privileged group of people, and as a real threat to the very foundations of social structure and order which concerns everyone.

Another aspect of this restyling of feminism and norm criticism is the way that users construct such ideas as an attribute of the elite and of the powerful people in society. This links the restyling of norm criticism to the discursive restyling of ethical fashion and the kind of consumers who are interested in 'fashionable' politics. Most importantly, however, the re-contextualisation of feminism and norm criticism into a hegemonic discourse shows how ethical consumerism has the potential to open up for highly politicised discussions, which have clear interdiscursive links to some of the most polarising issues in political debate today. Thus, the de-politicised nature of ethical consumerism should perhaps be nuanced, as it seems to be dependent both on how corporations and other commercial actors construct certain ideas and practices, and on how these ideas and practices are 'decoded' by the audience. While some issue might be deemed 'safe' enough to be included into the political brand culture of certain corporations or industries, they might not be as 'safe' in all contexts or for all consumers.

7.3   The promises and the limits of ethical consumerism

Based on the findings discussed above, it is possible to draw some more general conclusions when it comes to the discursive construction of ethical consumerism as a solution to the global environmental problems and socio-economic inequalities of today. It seems that much of the corporate as well as the journalistic accounts shows traces of the de-politicising processes which I highlighted in the theoretical discussion on neoliberalism, consumer culture, and individualised modes of political participation in the beginning of this thesis.

While there are actors who draw attention to the conflict between, for example, the ideas of 'ethical' fast fashion, or the industry as a representative

for feminist politics, and the underlying logics of the capitalist system which (re)produce the problems that ethical consumerism is said to counteract, the analysis also identified the 'post-political building blocks' which construct a discourse of consensus rather than conflict (Berglez & Olausson, 2013). Industry representatives function as 'authorised voices' when it comes to defining the ethicality, authenticity, and legitimacy of certain ideas and practices, and even though they might have conflicting ideas about which consumption practices are more or less ethical, they still see the system of consumer capitalism as something that should be managed in different ways, rather than changed at its foundation.

The core issue with this perspective, however, is that politics involves regulation and restriction based on conflict – antagonistic interest in society cannot always be encompassed in the 'win-win' ideal of ethical consumerism. When the industry (regardless of whether it is fast fashion brands or high fashion designers) claims that there is no contradiction between 'looking good' and 'doing good', they implicitly say that change can be created without fundamental challenges to the desires and promises of consumer culture. Yet, at the same time as the practice of consumption becomes de-politicised, the idea of the 'moral corporation' as a political subject with the 'power to act' is emphasised in these texts, and it is through co-creation of political brand cultures that individuals in turn can be empowered as 'consumer activists'. Thus, there is no need to critically scrutinise or revaluate the very logics of contemporary capitalism and the processes that uphold this system as the only perceivable way to organise society.

There are, however, also findings which nuance this conclusion. Online discussions on ethical consumerism create a political 'backdraft' (Simon, 2011) and make conflicts explicit by giving voice to diverse actors and ideological positions. Participants in these discussions propose opposing ideas of what ethical consumption actually is and what responsibilities both consumers and corporations really have. The controversies and ideological struggles that are realised in these discussions point towards one of the most important conclusions in this thesis: while journalistic and corporate discourses might be de-politicising in the way they focus on individual responsibility and consumer choices – or consensus and collaboration rather than conflicts of interest – these ideas become highly political when they are discussed by the audience.

Thus, the 'promise' of discursive ethical consumerism might lie in how discussions around branded politics and corporate initiatives on certain issues show the 'fault lines' of political discourse today. For example, while there are critical comments about the environmental initiatives from the fashion brands, these users do not debate the structural cause of climate change – rather, it is different versions of the solution that are the focus of debate. In comparison, the discussions linked to feminism and norm criticism include comments where the very problem that these notions revolve around is contested and de-legitimised. To understand how the idea of ethical consumerism – the emphasis on the market as an arena for political participation for both individuals and commercial actors – actually limits or expands the political sphere, we therefore need to examine both the production and consumption of these ideas.

Another thought worth contemplating for the future is the function of the 'post-political' discourse when it comes to political organisation, participation, and self-identification. Just as branded politics might create a backdraft for commercial actors who need to manage the politics of which they claim to be 'aware', findings in this thesis suggests that the critique of class-based consumer identities promoted by ethical consumerism, as well as the critique of commodified feminism, might create a political backdraft of 'counter-ideological' interpretations of the very same critical analysis.

If we understand the 'ethical turn' of late capitalism as a way to handle a crisis of capitalism brought on by, for example, the economic crisis of 2008 and an increased awareness of the environmental impact of ever-increasing growth, we can also see how this crisis management creates opportunities for actors that represent a right-wing protectionist 'counter-discourse' against the neoliberal focus on globalisation, free trade, and diversity. The analysis in Part III shows how some features of neoliberal society end up in the line of fire from more conservative, nationalist, and reactionary actors who draw on perceived class-distinctions and social identities of ethical consumers, not only to de-legitimise the companies behind the branded politics, but also to de-legitimise the politics themselves.

Furthermore, we could recall the argument from Banet-Weiser (2012a) that the critical examination of branded politics and the construction of consumer activism does not necessarily mean a categorical dismissal of these ideas and practices as fundamentally 'apolitical' due to their commercialised nature. Based on this, we should not succumb to the temptation of glorifying the 'lost treasure' of authentic politics, free from the restraints of commercialism. Just

as consumer activism has a long tradition in different forms, corporate power has been part of political discourse and policy for a long time – the difference now, perhaps, is that it is made explicit in a way that was not as obvious in the political landscape of earlier decades.

Another thing to remember is that we all live within the capitalist system of competitive social relationships. Therefore, one could argue that the idea (and manifestation) of 'post-politics' is necessary for the formulation of critical 'authentic' politics. If we expand on the remark by Berglez and Olausson (2013) that the de-politicisation of public discourse can be understood in the same manner as the de-politicisation of subcultural phenomena such as the punk movement, we could also say that it is exactly this commercialised appropriation which makes it possible to be a 'true' punk or activist. Just like there would be no 'subculture' without a 'mainstream' against which to position oneself, there would be no 'authentic' politics without the 'fake', 'commercialised', or 'post-political' version.

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9   Appendices: Summaries of topoi

Macro strategy of construction of the 'moral company'	
Micro strategies of	Topoi
Constructing brand identity, legitimising ethical authenticity	Topos of corporate values (corporations care about certain ethics because they are driven by moral value rather than economic value)
	Topos of taking responsibility (if actors are to be considered ethical, they should take responsibility for the environmental and social impact of their practices)
	Topos of global leaders (corporations should be regarded as ethical because they are global leaders who drive change and work proactively rather than reactively)
	Topos of awareness raising (other actors behave unethical because they lack knowledge and therefore they need to be educated)
	Topos of profitability (corporations care about ethics because it is profitable)

Macro strategy of restyling the fast fashion business model	
Micro strategies of	Topoi
Delegitimising critique, changing the idea of 'fast fashion', construction of profitable sustainability	Topos of shared interests (actors in the fashion industry should collaborate because they have shared interests and similar visions)
	Topos of global development (consumption leads to social and economic development in the global South, because it is consumer capitalism that drives innovation, employment, and economic progress)
	Topos of empowerment (the fashion industry empowers, rather than exploits, women and textile workers because they provide opportunities for economic independence, education, individual expression, and personal development)

	Topos of profitability (corporations care about ethics because it is profitable)
	Topos of changed behaviour (if consumers learn to manage their consumption and change habits, then consumption does not have to be mitigated to be ethical)
	Topos of problematic beauty standards (there are problematic aspects of the fashion world because some actors promote unattainable ideals)

Macro strategy of constructing the (un)ethical fashion industry	
Micro strategies of	Topoi
De-/legitimising fast fashion brands as ethical actors, functionalisation of industry actors as educators, constructing positive and negative consumer types	Topos of global leaders (corporations should be regarded as ethical because they are global leaders who drive change and work proactively rather than reactively)
	Topos of closing the loop (if the fashion industry can develop new recycling techniques and effectively reuse used textiles, then it can become sustainable)
	Topos of profitability (corporations care about ethics because it is profitable)
	Topos of corporate values (corporations care about certain ethics because they are driven by moral value rather than economic value)
	Topos of awareness raising (other actors behave unethical because they lack knowledge and therefore they need to be educated)
	Topos of changed behaviour (if consumers learn to manage their consumption and change habits, then consumption does not have to be mitigated to be ethical)
	Topos of taking responsibility (if actors are to be considered ethical, they should take responsibility for the environmental and social impact of their practices)

Macro strategy of restyling ethical fashion	
Micro strategies of	Topoi
Legitimising 'high' fashion ethicality, 'sexing up sustainability' Legitimising technical innovation and effective recycling as solutions Revaluing fashion as apolitical arena and expression	Topos of fashionable sustainability (contemporary ethical consumption differs from older versions, because it is individual, colourful, fashionable, and apolitical) Topos of de-politicisation (ethical consumption does not have to be a 'political statement', because it is not connected to a certain ideology or view on consumption) Topos of anti-consumerism (fashion consumers must focus on buying fewer, but better, products, because of the negative impact of Western consumption) Topos of profitability (corporations care about ethics because it is profitable) Topos of closing the loop (if the fashion industry can develop new recycling techniques and effectively reuse used textiles, then it can become sustainable) Topos of global development (consumption leads to social and economic development in the global South, because it is consumer capitalism that drives innovation, employment, and economic progress) Topos of corporate values (corporations care about certain political issues because they are driven by moral value rather than economic value) Topos of revaluation of fashion (fashion should be taken seriously because it has a political and cultural significance) Topos of problematic beauty standards (there are problematic aspects of the fashion world because some actors promote unattainable ideals) Topos of empowerment (the fashion industry empowers, rather than exploits, women and textile workers because they provide opportunities for economic independence, education, individual expression, and personal development)

Macro strategy of co-creating of contesting branded politics	
Micro strategies of	Topoi
De-/legitimising fast fashion brands as ethical actors	Topos of profitability (corporations care about ethics because it is profitable)
	Topos of promotion (fashion brands highlight certain issues, or act in a specific way, because it makes them look good, and this leads to increased sales)
	Topos of double standards (fashion brands or consumers should not be considered as more ethical than others, because they say one thing and do another)
	Topos of global leaders (corporations should be regarded as ethical because they are global leaders who drive change and work proactively rather than reactively)
	Topos of taking responsibility (if actors are to be considered ethical, they should take responsibility for the environmental and social impact of their practices)
	Topos of good intentions (branded politics should be regarded as positive because it makes people think about important issues)
	Topos of global development (consumption leads to social and economic development in the global South, because it is consumer capitalism that drives innovation, employment, and economic progress)
	Topos of consistency (the corporate ethics are not effective, because they focus on the wrong thing or issue)
	Topos of anti-consumerism (fashion consumers must focus on buying fewer, but better, products, because of the negative impact of Western consumption)
	Topos of awareness raising (other actors behave unethical because they lack knowledge and therefore they need to be educated)
	Topos of consumer power (consumers have the power to influence the actions of corporations, because they can choose to either contribute to profits or abstain from consumption)

Macro strategy of restyling consciousness	
Micro strategies of	Topoi
De-/legitimising 'conscious consumers' as ethical actors De-/legitimising norm criticism and ideological 'others'	Topos of double standards (fashion brands or consumers should not be considered as more ethical than others, because they say one thing and do another) Topos of taking responsibility (if actors are to be considered ethical, they should take responsibility for the environmental and social impact of their practices) Topos of privilege ('conscious' consumers do not understand how things actually work because they are privileged and do not have 'real' problems) Topos of conformity (people conform to the opinions of authorities because they do not think for themselves or act as independent subjects) Topos of political correctness (people argue for certain opinions because they are sanctioned by a political 'elite') Topos of social decline (Sweden is in a state of decline because the nation has been influenced by political ideas that dismantle society)

10 Swedish summary

Denna avhandling fokuserar på medierade diskurser kring *etisk konsumtion* –
ett samlingsnamn för en rad olika fenomen där politik och konsumtion kopplas
samman på olika sätt. Den här formen av engagemang kan sägas exemplifiera
en samtida 'personalisering' av det politiska (Bennett, 2006; 2012), en
skiftning som innebär att människor i allt högre grad uttrycker sina politiska
åsikter genom olika livsstilsval och konsumtionsvanor. Det kan till exempel ta
sig uttryck genom *bojkott* (att inte köpa vissa produkter på grund av exempelvis
produktionsvillkor eller miljöpåverkan), eller genom *buycott* (att välja
specifika produkter eller märken på grund av deras politiska kvaliteter eller
konnotationer).

 Samarbeten mellan kommersiella och ideella organisationer, eller företag
som inkluderar politiska frågor i sitt varumärkesarbete, kan också räknas in i
etisk konsumtion som idé. Det är ett begrepp som betonar vikten av både den
enskilda konsumentens val och av företagsansvar, och som ser dessa aktörers
handlingar som grundläggande för att hantera frågor som till exempel
klimatförändringar, eller ekonomisk och social ojämlikhet. Den här förståelsen
av vad politik är och hur man kan engagera sig i olika frågor utgör i sin tur en
viktig byggsten i de politiska 'varumärkeskulturer' som präglar samhället idag,
vilket innebär att människor kan kanalisera sitt politiska intresse, eller sitt
politiska engagemang, genom olika former av varumärkesgemenskaper
(Banet-Weiser, 2012a).

10.1 Syfte och frågeställningar

Denna avhandling fokuserar på den diskursiva dimensionen av etisk
konsumtion – mer specifikt hur dessa idéer formuleras och förhandlas i
förhållande till klädkonsumtionen och modebranschen i Sverige. Med
utgångspunkt i kritisk diskursanalys som både teori och metod – särskilt
förhållandet mellan språk och makt – studerar jag hur etisk konsumtion
diskursivt konstrueras som lösningen på sociala ojämlikheter eller globala
miljöproblem i olika kommunikativa praktiker och textgenrer. Analysen
fokuserar på hur vissa sociala identiteter och praktiker framställs som mer eller
mindre etiska, autentiska och legitima i relation till olika politiska frågor, samt

hur diskurser kring etisk konsumtion förstärker eller utmanar ett samtida fokus på marknadslösningar, individualism och valfrihet. De konkreta forskningsfrågor som jag har sökt svar på fokuserar på tre centrala begrepp:

1. Hur definieras 'etiskhet' – det vill säga vilka bilder och idéer representerar att "vara etisk" – och hur kopplas det till specifika praktiker eller aktörer?

2. Hur konstrueras autentiska etiska identiteter och hur representeras olika sociala aktörer eller konsumentgrupper?

3. Hur legitimeras eller de-legitimeras olika konsumtionspraktiker eller företagsinitiativ i relation till specifika sakfrågor?

10.2 Teoretisk ram

Avhandlingens teoretiska ramverk bygger på kritisk diskursteori samt kritisk konsumtions- och kommunikationsforskning. Det diskursteoretiska angreppssättet bidrar med sitt fokus på ideologi, språk och makt, det vill säga hur texter (i vid mening) alltid konstruerar en viss förståelse av händelser, aktörer och idéer, vilket innebär att den som producerar text också har ett visst inflytande över hur dessa uppfattas (Fairclough, 1995; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). Analysen fokuserar därför på vilka uttalanden eller frågor som är möjliga i ett visst sammanhang, vad som lyfts fram som problem, orsaker, eller lösningar, samt hur den ekonomiska, politiska och ideologiska kontext inom vilken specifika texter produceras påverkar deras utformning.

Vidare ses etisk konsumtion som en integrerad del i dagens konsumtionskultur (snarare än en reaktion mot den) och undersöks som en ideologisk konstruktion i det senkapitalistiska samhället, där ett nyliberalt skifte i kultur, ekonomi och politik har naturaliserat tanken på marknadsbaserade lösningar som den enda möjliga organisationslogiken för samhälle och politik (Harvey, 2005; Lury, 2011). Ett ökat fokus på "medvetna" val, individualiserat ansvarstagande och marknadsanpassade problemformuleringar ger också företag större makt och inflytande som politiska aktörer, i och med att "lösningen" på olika problem eller missförhållanden förflyttas från politiska beslut till marknadslogik och valfrihet (för företag så väl som konsumenter).

Samtidigt erbjuder 'moraliska företag' (Lury, 2011) sina konsumenter en möjlighet att leva ut en etisk identitet genom engagemang i olika politiska varumärkeskulturer (Banet-Weiser, 2012a), utan att för den skull ifrågasätta de strukturer som ligger till grund för många av de problem som man säger sig motverka. Detta innebär att etisk konsumtion även spelar roll för en samtida 'avpolitisering' av den offentliga sfären där konsensus snarare än konflikt betonas (Berglez & Olausson, 2013). Dessa utgångspunkter placerar avhandlingen inom en tradition av kritiska studier av varumärkespolitik och nyliberalt inflytande över ekonomiska, politiska och sociala frågor.

10.3 Metod och material

Samtidigt som jag utgår från ett teoretiskt ramverk som lyfter fram avpolitiserande aspekter av etisk konsumtion och politiska varumärkeskulturer, syftar tillvägagångssättet i avhandlingen till att undersöka hur diskursiva dimensioner av dessa fenomen kan innebära både möjligheter och begränsningar när det gäller politiskt engagemang i det senkapitalistiska samhället. Det innebär att jag inte bara analyserat vad företag kommunicerar kring dessa frågor, utan även vad som händer med dessa företagsdiskurser när de re-kontextualiseras i nyhetsmedier eller sociala medier.

De metodverktyg som används i denna avhandling hämtas till stor del från det diskurshistoriska tillvägagångssättet inom den kritiska diskursanalysen. Analysen har gjorts i två steg; först en inledande tematisk analys av diskursämnen – en form av sammanfattande "rubriker" för innehållet i texterna – sedan en mer djupgående analys av de diskursiva strategier som används av olika sociala aktörer i texterna. De analyskategorier som är centrala för steg två inkluderar (re)presentation av sig själv och andra, samt argumentations- och legitimeringsstrategier (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; van Leeuwen, 2007).

Studien tar sin utgångspunkt i företagskommunikation, där jag analyserar hur tre svenska modeföretag – H&M, KappAhl och Lindex – konstruerar sin varumärkesidentitet och idén om sig själva som moraliska företag i sina årliga hållbarhetsrapporter från 2015-2016. Jag går sedan vidare till nyhetsmedier och analyserar 31 artiklar från fem svenska dagstidningar som tar upp förhållandet mellan mode och politik på olika sätt, för att på sätt att fånga en journalistisk diskurs kring dessa frågor. Samtliga artiklar publicerades under 2014. Slutligen undersöker jag publikens reaktioner i sociala medier, i form av 1 843 kommentarer från Facebook, där användare diskuterar konsumtion och

politik i förhållande till specifika sakfrågor och händelser i modevärlden under 2016-2017. De analyserade kommentarerna har postats som svar på inlägg eller artiklar som fokuserar på de tre frågor som jag identifierat som centrala: miljö och klimatförändringar, arbetsrätt och produktionsförhållanden, samt feminism och kulturell mångfald.

10.4 Slutsatser

Som helhet pekar avhandlingens resultat mot tre övergripande tendenser, eller diskursiva omvandlingsprocesser, när det gäller konstruktionen av etisk konsumtion. Den första tendensen handlar om hur etiska uttryck, identiteter och praktiker diskursivt omvandlas för att passa in i en mer glamourös och individualiserad version av 'etiskhet'. Resultaten visar en pågående process för att omdefiniera representationer av etiskt mode, både när det gäller kläders design och material och när det gäller konsumenterna som bär dem, vilket innefattar en estetisk omvandling från "hampa och bark" till "grön glamour". Denna tendens att göra olika samhällsfrågor "sexigare" eller mer "moderiktiga" kan sägas vara karaktäristisk för etisk konsumtion och politiska varumärkeskulturer under de senaste åren. Analysen i den här avhandlingen visar hur denna avpolitiserande tendens manifesteras i relation till flera av de frågor som diskuteras, framför allt inom livsstilsjournalistik som behandlar en ny "trend" av hållbart mode.

Olika idéer om "bra" eller "dåliga" konsumtionsvanor och klassbaserade smakdistinktioner är en viktig aspekt av denna omvandlingsprocess. Både journalister och olika representanter från modebranschen konstruerar den medvetna konsumenten som del av en välbärgad och välinformerad medelklass, vars konsumtionsvanor kontrasteras mot den oaktsamma masskonsumtion som andra står för, eller mot den allt för politiskt motiverade konsumtion som förknippas med tidigare versioner av 'etiskhet'. "Unika plagg" och att "hitta sin egen stil" presenteras som karakteristiskt för "fashionabel" etisk konsumtion, och individualitet snarare än konformitet lyfts fram som ett viktigt attribut hos den samtida medvetna konsumenten.

En intressant aspekt av denna process är att även kritiska individer, som i sociala medier ifrågasätter modeföretagen och idén om en upplyst och ansvarsfull "medveten konsument", lyfter fram liknande idealföreställningar om individualism, rationalitet och upplysning som de personer, eller föreställningar, de argumenterar mot. Dessa aktörer karakteriserar sin egen

inställning som baserad på egna tankar och analyser och därmed mer "autentisk" än vad de uppfattar som en socialt accepterad och "godkänd" versionen av 'etiskhet'. Oavsett om användarna kritiserar företagen för att de "approprierar" specifika politiska frågor, eller för att de sprider "propaganda" från (eller för) en kulturell elit, så är det den fritänkande individen som motsätter sig olika former av kollektivism som lyfts fram som autentiskt politiskt subjekt.

Den andra tendensen handlar om hur den så kallade "fast fashion" modellen i textilindustrin (och i förlängningen marknadsliberalismen i allmänhet) omvandlas till en form av etisk produktion och konsumtion. Denna diskursiva omvandlingsprocess manifesteras i alla tre delar av analysen, men kanske starkast i den del som fokuserar på modeföretagens egen kommunikation. Här visas hur värderingar som demokrati, mänskliga rättigheter och mångfald lyfts fram som en inneboende essens i modeföretagens organisationskultur, vilken utgör grunden för deras verksamhet. Beskrivningar av hur företagen "tar ansvar" inom områden som miljö, arbetsrätt och kvinnlig frigörelse (både för kvinnliga textilarbetare och för modekonsumenter) genom olika initiativ och medvetenhetshöjande kampanjer karakteriserar dem som proaktiva snarare än reaktiva och gör dem till viktiga aktörer i ett globalt sammanhang.

När man talar om miljöfrågan, både i sina egna rapporter och som auktoriserade röster i pressen, lyfter företagsrepresentanter fram vikten av en "cirkulär ekonomi" inom textilproduktion, som kan åstadkommas genom återvinning, effektivare produktion och teknisk innovation. En viktig aspekt av denna argumentation är att det är just stora kommersiella aktörer som H&M eller Lindex som karakteriseras som centrala för sådana initiativ, eftersom deras position på marknaden gör det möjligt för dem att "leda utvecklingen" för andra. Liknande former av diskursiv omvandling ses också i förhållande till arbetsrättsfrågan, där positiva egenskaper hos "snabbt" mode används för att de-legitimera argument från aktörer som menar att textilindustrin drar nytta av ojämlika globala maktförhållanden och exploaterar arbetare i produktionsländer som Kambodja, Indien, eller Bangladesh.

Företagens version av 'etiskhet' legitimeras istället genom konstruktionen av dem, och modebranschen i allmänhet, som viktiga för ekonomisk tillväxt, fattigdomsbekämpning och dialog – snarare än konflikt – mellan parter på arbetsmarknaden i produktionsländer. Precis som med miljöfrågan ses textilindustrin som en förutsättning för utveckling och för förbättrad levnadsstandard i produktionsländer, snarare än ett hinder. När

företagsrepresentanter, eller individer i kommentarstrådarna på Facebook, hävdar att kritiker som uppmanar till bojkott bara letar efter enkla lösningar, karakteriserar de också dessa ideologiska motståndare som de som håller kvar människor i fattigdom och som förnekar andra de möjligheter som tas för givet i den egna tillvaron. I stället är det marknadslösningar och kommersiella aktörers närvaro som ger "autentisk" jämlikhet, oberoende och en väg ut ur fattigdom för människor i utvecklingsländer.

Konsumenterna, i sin tur, konstrueras både som "partners" i kampen mot fattigdom och klimatförändringar och som föremål för oro och omsorg när det gäller skönhetsideal och mångfald i modevärlden. Fokus på hur modeindustrin och specifika företag kan hjälpa kvinnor att både "känna sig bra i sig själva" och leva ut sina politiska övertygelser som 'konsumtionsaktivister' legitimerar dem som positiva, snarare än negativa, aktörer även på hemmaplan. Således konstruerar företagen sig som autentiska politiska aktörer med möjlighet att "göra skillnad" just på grund av sin globala närvaro och affärsmodell, snarare än trots sin storlek och sitt inneboende krav på lönsamhet. "Snabbt" mode blir därför "etiskt" mode eftersom det skapar nödvändiga förutsättningar för att finna en lösning på både klimatrelaterade och socio-ekonomiska problem, utan att för den skull förändra institutionerna, relationerna eller logiken som styr både produktion och konsumtion.

Den tredje övergripande tendensen i resultaten handlar om en omvandling av vad feminism och normkritik innebär, både i diskussioner mellan aktörer inom modebranschen och i de diskussioner som uppstår i sociala medier när företag anammar dessa idéer i sin marknadsföring. Den gemensamma idén som underbygger företagens re-kontextualisering av kvinnlig frigörelse, både för arbetare och för konsumenter, är att konsumtionskultur och marknadsliberalism leder till frigörelse och jämlikhet för alla kvinnor. Det är ekonomisk, social och personlig utveckling genom fri handel och entreprenörskap som konstrueras som "frigörande" för kvinnliga textilarbetare, och det är individualitet, styrka och självförtroende uttryckt genom mode och skönhet som konstrueras som "frigörande" för kvinnliga konsumenter.

Idén om kvinnlig frigörelse återkommer även i diskussioner om förhållandet mellan mode och feminism i dagstidningar och i användarkommentarer på Facebook. Den "fashionabla" feminism som lyfts fram i tidningarna presenteras som en kritik av de versioner av kvinnlighet som erbjuds både av den "traditionella" modebranschen och av "traditionell"

feminism. Genom att argumentera för att kvinnligt kodad kultur och kreativitet bör uppvärderas och legitimeras som feministisk praktik, kritiseras analysen att mode profiterar på kvinnors känsla av otillräcklighet och ångest, vilket istället de-legitimeras som ett uttryck för sexism i sig självt. Precis som med begreppet hållbart mode blir feministiskt mode också estetiskt omvandlat till en specifik form av hyper-sexualiserat och feminint kodat uttryck, vilket konstrueras som autentiskt och legitimt – en feminism som omfamnar, snarare än kritiserar, konsumtionskultur och som kan uttryckas genom specifika produkter, stilar, eller identiteter.

En annan omvandlingsprocess i relation till denna tredje tendens kan ses i diskussionerna mellan individer på Facebook, där vissa argumenterar för att både feminism och normkritik är hegemoniska, snarare än kritiska, idéer i dagens svenska samhälle. Den här ideologiska kampen mellan personer med motsatta politiska åsikter är ett av de mer framträdande dragen i hur allmänheten reagerar på 'politiseringen' av mode. Medan frågan om produktionsförhållanden och arbetsvillkor i textilindustrin visar spår av ideologisk konflikt mellan åsikter som går att placera in på den politiska höger-vänster-skalan, är det frågor som feminism, normkritik och kulturell mångfald som tycks locka mest uppmärksamhet från människor som motsätter sig den politik som H&M och Åhléns införlivat i sina reklamkampanjer. Stor del av dessa användare uppvisar aggressiva, till och med hatiska, attityder mot feminister och normkritisk politik, liksom mot muslimer och invandringspolitiken i Sverige. Den här re-kontextualiseringen av feminism och normkritik visar hur diskursiv etisk konsumtion har tydliga kopplingar till några av de mest polariserande frågorna i den politiska debatten idag.

Således pekar resultaten mot att olika aktörer kan uttrycka motsatta åsikter och tolkningar när det gäller specifika frågor, samtidigt som det finns ett genomgående gemensamt behov av att omdefiniera etiskhet, autenticitet och legitimitet i alla tre delar av studien. Dessa diskursiva processer realiseras i sin tur genom re-kontextualisering och de-kontextualisering av vissa idéer, aktörer eller praktiker så att de konstrueras som mer eller mindre etiska från specifika ideologiska perspektiv. De här tre nyckelprocesserna i samtida föreställningar kring etisk konsumtion kan sägas innebära både möjligheter och begränsningar när det gäller hur vi kan förstå förhållandet mellan konsumtion och politik. Även om diskurser kring etisk konsumtion som lyfts fram av journalister och företag är politiskt begränsande i det att de fokuserar på individuellt ansvar och konsumentval, eller på konsensus och samarbete snarare än intressekonflikter,

blir dessa idéer verkligt politiska när de diskuteras av publiken. Samtidigt som vissa frågor kan anses vara "ofarliga" nog att ingå i den politiska varumärkeskulturen för vissa företag eller branscher, kanske de inte är lika "ofarliga" i alla sammanhang och för alla konsumenter. Således kan den politiska möjligheten hos etisk konsumtion ligga i hur diskussioner kring varumärkespolitik och företagsinitiativ visar var de "politiska gränslinjerna" dras i den offentliga debatten.

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