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Meanings of Clothing Consumption for Identity Construction

*Comparing Fast Fashion and Slow Fashion
Consumers for Sustainability Purposes*



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Abstract: Drawing from literature on identity construction, consumption meanings, consumer culture and fashion consumption, the aim of this study is to compare the conception of clothing consumption of fast fashion and slow fashion consumers, and to develop a broader understanding regarding how consumer culture and symbolic meanings influence identity construction. In times of growing consumption and large negative environmental impacts of the fashion industry, the objective is to provide important implications for how the clothing industry could promote slow fashion behavior rather than fast fashion by creating more sustainable identity meanings for consumers to seek out. Using a phenomenographic research approach with ten phenomenological in-depth interviews, an understanding is developed regarding the variations in meanings of lived experiences of clothing, as well as how the respondents conceive and interpret their consumption from a greater perspective. The findings show four groups of consumer conceptions, where fast fashion consumers belong to either *The Impulsive Consumer* or *The Social Consumer*, while slow fashion consumers belong to either *The Circular Consumer* or *The Critical Consumer*. These subgroups illustrate how fast fashion and slow fashion consumers differ in their clothing consumption and how they perceive meanings of value expression, novelty, creativity, status, self-confidence, uniqueness, aesthetic ideals among other aspects, as well as social adaptation or resistance to norms of consumer culture, when constructing their self-identity. Conclusively, the similarities between the conceptions arguably constitute possibilities to change future consumption patterns to move towards slow fashion. This article adds to the body of knowledge on fashion-interested female consumers and the identity meanings fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers attach to clothing they consume.

Keywords: consumer culture theory, CCT, symbolic meanings, identity construction, sustainable consumption, fast fashion, slow fashion, clothing

INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to building an understanding of how fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers differ in their conception of identity meanings connected to clothing consumption. As the world income and population continuously increase, so does the consumption level (Eurostat, 2020; UNESCO-UNEP, 2002). Since consumption is synonymous with utilizing resources, it is evident that the changed consumer behavior has negative environmental implications in terms of exploiting resources, but also in terms of pollution and global warming (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). As consumption levels have risen, expenditures on clothing and footwear have also increased as share of total household expenditures (Eurostat, 2019). At the same time, it has been shown that the fashion industry is one of the environmentally ‘dirtiest’ industries, contributing to approximately 10 percent of all global carbon emissions (Di Benedetto, 2017). A report conducted by the European Parliamentary Research Service in 2019 states that carbon emissions, water consumption and waste associated with the fashion industry are expected to have risen by 50 percent in 2030, in a business-as-usual scenario (Šajin, 2019). As consumers are becoming increasingly informed about the environmental impacts of consumption, they tend to feel a greater social responsibility towards how their consumption affects the world (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007). Although, much literature illustrates that there is

still an attitude-behavior gap which delimits sustainable fashion consumption (Lundblad & Davies, 2016) since only 27 percent tend to consider sustainability when selecting what products to purchase (Accenture, 2014).

The combination of the large environmental impact originating from the clothing industry, together with practices of overconsumption, contribute to the fashion industry being guilty of negative and unsustainable consequences for our planet (Cavender & Lee, 2018). The dramatic increase in clothing consumption and excessive disposal of clothing items has been shown to coincide with the increase of highly competitive fast fashion actors on the global market (Cavender & Lee, 2018; Crane, 2016). Compared to other industries, the fashion industry is lagging behind in adopting sustainable stewardship, which to a great extent depends not only on consumers demanding trendy clothing but also due to them caring more about low prices than their environmental impacts (Di Benedetto, 2017). Due to the negative social and environmental consequences associated with the fashion industry as a whole, there is a pressing need to investigate different forms of more sustainable fashion consumption (McNeill & Venter, 2019). However, sustainable consumption and the general development of fashion consumption could be seen as two contradictory phenomena, since the first is associated with longevity while the latter is characterized by increasingly short

product life cycles, and overconsumption as a means to construct identity (Lundblad & Davies, 2016; McNeill & Venter, 2019).

Consumer capitalism, as well as corporate brands, thrives on consumers believing that material objects and their inherent imagery could bridge the gap between who they seemingly are, and who they wish to be (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). It has been shown that fashion consumers commonly consume fashion as a means to construct identity, which also has been related to problems of overconsumption with individuals seeking a desired ideal self-image (McNeill & Venter, 2019; Dermody et al., 2018). By consuming objects solely to portray a desired self-identity, consumers' relationships with their belongings are weakened (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Consumption of fashion items as signifiers has become a tool for consumers to express their social status and, as a consequence, consumers attempt to raise their status by continuously raising their consumption level (Wang Chengbing, 2011).

A growing trend within the fashion industry is the phenomenon of fast fashion, which is characterized by frequent purchases of clothing, greater quantities for lower prices, less focus on quality, and with an emphasis on regular new collections (Mintel, 2007; Skov, 2002). In order to change this unsustainable development of consumer behavior in the fashion industry, sustainable slow fashion could be encouraged (Šajn, 2019). Sustainable fashion can be defined as 'slow fashion', which involves a greater focus on quality instead of quantity, less frequent purchases, and consumption of brands concerned with ethical aspects, transparency and holistic dimensions of sustainability (Muthu, 2019; Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013; Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013; Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2010). In addition, slow fashion consumption could also involve practices of 'collaborative consumption' which McNeill and Venter (2019) describe as a process of utilizing assets more efficiently to benefit all. This could involve activities such as renting, purchasing second hand, swapping, or sharing schemes (McNeill & Venter, 2019).

Previous studies have investigated fast fashion and slow fashion consumption from several different angles. Zarley Watson and Yan (2013) conducted an exploratory study comparing the two different groups of either slow fashion or fast fashion consumers regarding their decision-making processes. They found that each consumer group is acting differently based on differences in type of clothes, personality, motivations, attitudes and values. McNeill and Venter (2019) investigated motivations and obstacles for young over-consuming female consumers to move towards

collaborative fashion consumption practices in their identity construction, such as purchasing second hand, renting or swapping clothes. They found that standing out from social norms, and taking advantage of social implications could drive this change in practices. Moreover, other significant drivers were found to be the desire of belonging to a social community, as well as experiencing emotional and hedonic values (McNeill & Venter, 2019).

Thompson and Haytko (1997) studied how fashion consumers utilize meanings of fashion consumption to interpret their conceptions and experiences of fashion. They found that consumers appropriate fashion discourses to create personalized narratives of fashion, to possibly show resistance towards fashion norms in consumer culture. Further, it has been shown that it is common for consumers to use brands and clothing as symbols for expressing social status, as well as uniqueness (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Wang Chengbing, 2011). According to Thompson & Haytko (1997), clothes could act as symbols for both opposing or following historically shaped gender norms within fashion. However, the research area of gender norms deserves a deeper analysis and could be studied separately in a different study. Continuing on symbolic meanings attached to consuming clothes, Niinimäki et al. (2010) have found that perceived symbolism associated with items was related to, for instance, reaching aesthetic ideals, novelty-seeking, or to fit social and cultural norms. However, according to Niinimäki et al. (2010), ethical meanings in clothing consumption contexts are to some consumers more important than other aspects, and highly influences consumption of sustainably produced clothing.

Previous studies have emphasized a large interest in research of consumer behavior of fashion consumers, their stance in regards of sustainable consumption, and how identity meanings are associated with clothing consumption. However, due to the lack of research studying how these aspects differ between fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers, there is a need of analyzing these consumer categories in comparison to one another. This paper aims to compare the conceptions of clothing consumption meanings of these two consumer categories in relation to their identity construction, and to develop a greater understanding of how consumer culture and symbolic meanings affect their clothing consumption to be more or less sustainable. This study intends to provide important implications for how corporations could promote slow fashion rather than fast fashion by creating more sustainable identity meanings for consumers to seek out, as a means to contribute to a more sustainable consumer culture. This article is delimited to examine

solely Swedish female consumers identified based on predetermined criteria for being either a fast fashion consumer or a slow fashion consumer.

Drawing on previous research within the fields of identity construction, consumption meanings, consumer culture and fashion consumption, the purpose of this paper is to create a deeper understanding of the following research question: “*How do fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers differ in their conception of identity meanings connected to clothing consumption?*”.

In order to answer the research question, this article is structured as follows. In the first section, the theoretical framework is presented as a foundation for the intended study regarding identity meanings of fashion consumption. Thereafter, the phenomenographic methodology based on in-depth interviews is explained, followed by a findings and analysis section where the empirical results are stated and analyzed. Lastly, a conclusion is presented along with suggestions for future research as well as managerial implications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Consumer Culture and Symbolic Meanings of Consumption

Consumer culture theory (hereinafter: CCT) conceptualizes consumer culture as the social arrangement through which meaningful ways of life are dependent on material, as well as symbolic resources, mediated through markets (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It can further be explained as a system interconnected by commercial objects, texts, and images used by groups to create identities, practices and meanings, and can be viewed as a way for consumers to collectively make sense of experiences, environments and the lives of group members (Kozinets, 2001). What is central in CCT is the “*consumption of market-made commodities and desire-inducing marketing symbols*” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 869), and the upholding of this cultural market system is dependent on the free choice of consumers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumption, in its turn, can be defined as “*the search for, choice, acquisition, possession, and disposal of goods and services*” (Hogg & Michell, 1996, p. 629). Culture can be seen as a phenomenon constituting the world by giving it meaning (McCracken, 1986) and material consumer products can be seen as a palette from which consumers themselves compose their identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Gabriel and Lang (2006) claim that consumerism has different meanings depending on specific contexts, but that one ideological meaning is that of consumption

having come to replace religion, politics and work as mechanisms that communicate social status. As stated by Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), the world consists of symbolic meanings that are ascribed to different objects and situations and could be understood differently among consumers. Therefore, meanings are not unidirectional or deterministic (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Historically, economists have to a large degree neglected that non-utilitarian forces affect consumption when illustrating market behavior (Hogg & Michell, 1996). However, consumers do not solely consume due to the utility of products but also due to their cultural and symbolic meanings (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Creusen & Schoormans, 2005). Many authors have argued that consumption has an addictive quality, and that consumer culture has created a constant dissatisfaction among consumers (Gabriel & Lang, 2006).

Arnould and Thompson (2005) claim that consumer culture is not determining what actions to be performed by consumers. Instead, they argue that consumer culture, along with the market ideology it represents, could frame the feelings, thoughts, and actions seeming conceivable (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). As a consequence, consumers are more likely to adapt to certain patterns of behavior and interpretations of reality (McCracken, 1986). In consumer culture, consumption becomes a way of living and also a tool for expressing personality and individuality (Wang Chengbing, 2011). CCT further studies how consumers use symbolic meanings encoded in marketing advertisements, products, and brands as a tool not only to communicate their social and individual circumstances, but also their lifestyle and self-identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). According to Belk (1988), consumers exist both as individuals and as collective groups. Therefore, consumers could both interpret symbolic meanings by themselves in the creation of their own self-identity, and share collective meanings in a social environment (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Most importantly, it is argued that consumers assess different products and brands through the evaluation of their ascribed symbolic meanings (Rompay et al., 2009).

According to Zwick et al. (2008), consumers are being governed by marketing actors to believe that they are acting in a world of freedom and free choices. As stated by Foucault (1978), the concept of governmentality means that individuals are controlled or governed to make certain decisions within a framework of rationality. At the same time, theories within the field of consumer culture have found a connection between ‘consumer identity projects’ and how the structure of the marketplace has an ability to influence consumer behavior, where they argue that the marketplace creates

ready identities for consumers to simply purchase and inhabit (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Advertisers and marketers can in this context be seen as cultural mediators, shaping wants, needs and lifestyles of consumers, working to change consumer behavior to meet their own implemented marketing strategies (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006).

Identity Construction through Consumption

Gabriel and Lang (2006) argue that contemporary consumers have many faces, among which one discourse is that of consumers being identity-seekers. Dermody et al. (2018) argue that there is a connection between consumption and identity based on consumption being an integral component in the building and enhancement of individuals' self-identity. Thompson (1995) defines the self as a 'symbolic project' which consumers establish by creating a self-identity narrative through the consumption of symbolic items. Self-identity constitutes an interplay between personal and social self-identity that in combination portrays who a person has been, currently is, and will become (Oyserman & James, 2008). As stated by McNeill and Venter (2019), many consumers over consume as a means to pursue their ideal identity, and this is especially common in time periods such as the youth when consumers are extra conscious of their identity development.

In a consumer culture context, products as well as brands can be seen as cultural artifacts carrying meaning, which are consumed to provide certain representation (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). This is also stated by Solomon (1983), who claim that symbolic meanings attached to products are used by consumers as a part of their identity creation as well as how they define relationships with other people. According to CCT, 'consumer identity projects' entail consumers using marketer-generated resources and materials to create an image of self and a narrative of identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). To express their individuality, consumers choose to consume items that they believe can function as representations of who they are and as communicators of their personality, social status, wealth as well as personal values (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). According to early theories by Simmel (1971), 'imitation' constitutes a central feature in consumption, meaning that consumption is used to imitate leading social groups to communicate a certain self-image and thereby a differentiation from the masses (referred to in Gabriel & Lang, 2006). However, Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) argue that the self-identity of a consumer is not shaped by fixed meanings attached to products, instead the consumer is a free creator who

ascribe one's own identity meanings to objects. They further mean that meanings are socially constructed and shared among individuals, and a certain object could therefore also be ascribed or associated with a particular identity or lifestyle.

In connection with consumption being an essential part of associating values and meanings to the personal as well as social worlds of consumers, advertising has been identified as one of the large sources transferring symbolic meaning (McCracken, 1986). Some literature even suggests that consumers 'are what they own' since their belongings represent an extension of the self and by consuming objects, consumers could convince themselves of having a certain identity (Belk, 1988). Kleine et al. (1995) argue that possessions along with their symbolic meanings can be used to portray individuality or as a reflection of connections to specific others. Belk (1988) further argue that symbolic consumption could function as an aid in categorizing oneself in relation to society. As stated by Stets and Burke (2000), the self-identity of consumers is developed in parallel with their social identity, since social interactions are what validates the identity-creation.

Gabriel and Lang (2006) argue that most Western consumers today do not develop any profound relationships with the products they consume, but rather opportunistically use them as a means to infer an image of oneself. However, they further state that the question remains whether all consumers deal with this issue of identity in the same way, since some consumers arguably use resistance towards consumption as a means to communicate identity. Further, Moisander and Valtonen (2006) state that many contemporary psychologically oriented scholars seem to assume this view of seeing brands and products as tools in identity construction. However, they argue that this stream of research, focusing on individual consumption and stating that consumption could function as a practice that closes the gap between the self and the ideal-self, possibly downplays the social complexity and cultural dynamics of consumption and consumer behavior.

Identity Meanings of Clothing Consumption

As stated by Bai et al. (2014), manufacturers in the fashion industry are becoming increasingly aware of fashion items needing to satisfy needs other than just functional ones, and that fashion and clothing possess symbolic meanings. As stated in much literature, fashion consumption is connected to social identity and self-concept (McNeill & Venter, 2019). Consumers use fashion to create meaning for their self-identity and

define who they are (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Niinimäki et al. (2010) state that the meaning of appearance and clothing consumption can be understood from a perspective of social contexts. Accordingly, fashion is “*a dynamic social process that creates cultural meanings and interaction*” (Niinimäki et al., 2010 p. 153).

Since consumers use fashion to communicate identity to society, it is important to study identity construction as a foundation for understanding how consumers behave and their motivations (McNeill & Venter, 2019). Fashion can in one sense represent cultural artifacts which consumers use to express symbolic meanings both for oneself and people around them (Belk, 1988), since fashion allows consumers to express and confirm their identity in a social context (McNeill & Venter, 2019). However, according to Thompson and Haytko (1997), consumers ascribe different meanings to products based on their subjective interpretations of, for example, advertising as well as social norms of society. Thereby, meanings associated with fashion are both used by consumers in their identity construction, but are also created and reworked by consumers themselves (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). The clothing items of an individual must fit the inner self-image to express a visual identity that is linked to what the person stands for (Niinimäki et al., 2010). To change a person's identity, for example moving towards a more ethical lifestyle, the practices and routines must be changed to transform the inner image of who the person is to suit the new perceived self-image (Niinimäki et al., 2010).

As found in previous studies, there are multiple meanings connected to identity and consumption of clothing, for example meanings associated with aesthetic values, social groups, emotional values, novelty, social status, ethics and uniqueness (Niinimäki et al., 2010; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Raunio, 1995; Wang Chengbing, 2011). In terms of aesthetic meanings of fashion consumption, the type of clothing items selected by consumers could depend on what consumers perceive as being in line with their aesthetic ideal (Niinimäki et al., 2010). For example, designers of fashion items and marketers can incorporate meanings, such as beauty, into the design and promotion of products which consumers in their turn can utilize in their identity construction when consuming objects (Bai et al., 2014; Craik, 1994). In addition, it is also possible for consumers to take advantage of cultural meanings attached to clothing to reach an ideal image that oneself desires in their life projects (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). The symbolic meaning of consumption is often greater than just the aesthetic appearance of an item, but Niinimäki et al. (2010) argue that both the aesthetic

aspect and quality is important for consumers when purchasing clothing.

Further, consumers also could consume clothing items to adapt to the social environment. The creation of a self-identity when consuming fashion is an ongoing process that changes depending on other consumers' opinions and acceptance (Uotila, 1995). Therefore, when defining who the consumer is through consumption of fashion, it is also made in relation to the social context of others (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). The symbolic meaning of fashion makes it possible for consumers to differentiate themselves and become part of social groups (Niinimäki et al., 2010). When evaluating a product in relation to the social environment, the emotion of insecurity could affect the consumer with the concern of not being accepted by other consumers (Niinimäki et al., 2010). Emotional values affect consumers' perceived meaning of consuming clothing since it influences feelings, and could affect emotions of energy and happiness when consuming an item (Raunio, 1995). For instance, Niinimäki et al. (2010) exemplify that individuals consume products to reach meaningfulness and if a consumer cannot fulfill a desire, there is a risk of experiencing emotional dissatisfaction. Thereby, consumer choices are not always rational and are not necessarily connected to consumer values in everyday purchasing situations (Niinimäki et al., 2010).

Another meaning of consumption is that of consumers striving to renew themselves by seeking novelty through purchasing new things and following fashion trends (Niinimäki et al., 2010). As society is constantly changing, consumers feel a need to replace their clothing items with new ones in order to be socially confirmed by the surrounding environment (Niinimäki et al., 2010). Consumers must therefore continuously examine how their identity could be modified in order to follow the cultural and social rules (Roach & Eicher, 1973). Further, consumers could utilize the symbolic meaning of fashion as a status marker (Wang Chengbing, 2011), indicating a certain level of income or lifestyle (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). As stated by Ulver and Ostberg (2014), ‘status consumption’ is based on a desire of keeping or improving a social status position through consumption. Thereby, consumers could reach a certain status position, determined by the surrounding social environment or context, by consuming certain objects. Further, the social status positions desired by consumers could be seen as the ever-changing result of constantly changing ideals in consumer society (Ulver & Ostberg, 2014). By consuming particular brands or products that consumers link to a certain social status or lifestyle, their identities could be configured in line with the perceived meaning (Wang Chengbing, 2011).

Consumers also perceive ethics to be an important meaning associated with consumption. As stated by Niinimäki et al. (2010), ethical values and commitment in a clothing consumption context are significantly influencing consumers to purchase eco-clothes. Consumers with a strong ethical commitment view ethics as a more important value in clothing consumption than other aspects such as aesthetic values (Niinimäki et al., 2010).

A different meaning of clothing consumption, discussed by Thompson and Haytko (1997), is the desired feeling of being unique and standing out from the crowd by distinguish oneself as the creator of one's identity project related to fashion. They further argue that consumers could create a sense of being unique by resisting meanings embodied in ready styles or looks of various clothing brands, and instead create an own personal style or new combinations of clothing and brands. Consequently, it generates a feeling of being, for instance, more creative and knowledgeable about fashion. However, Thompson & Haytko (1997) state that being unique is not always based on an objective 'uniqueness' that is perceived similarly by everyone, but can rather be classified as a feeling of differentiating oneself from social norms or a generalized group of other individuals. In addition, they claim that consumers seek this feeling based on a fear of being seen as an individual who is dependent on other people's confirmation, and strives towards a uniqueness as a way of disproving this. As a consequence, the consumer categorizes oneself as a leader instead of being an individual who is following others. This illustrates the paradoxical meaning of uniqueness, since consumers could experience the meaning of being unique by contrasting oneself from one social group, while still conforming to another group perceived as 'more unique' (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Further, Thompson and Haytko (1997) argue that uniqueness could also be achieved by deviating from norms regarding sociocultural gender categorizations of clothing being either feminine or masculine. Therefore, fashion could be used as symbolic expressions to communicate a rejection towards fashion ideals born from historical perceptions of gender norms.

Perspectives of Fashion and Clothing

From a sociological perspective, Ahmadi and Landahl (2012) discuss two different interpretations of how fashion consumption is shaping identity, and argue that consumer culture can be seen to grant consumers the freedom of choice while this also could be an illusion. The first interpretation emphasizes a responsibility of consumers to make their own lifestyle choices, while the second interpretation rather views consumption as

influenced by manipulative skills of business actors. According to Murray (2002), it is also possible to view clothes from a political perspective, since different clothing items and brands carry various cultural meanings which individuals could chose to embody or avoid. Ahmadi and Landahl (2012) further states that in the modern society of today, consumers are encouraged to take responsibility for their own identity creation without any rules guiding them, which possibly could lead to identity issues.

Further, Petersson McIntyre (2019) discuss how individuals understand fashion and clothing meanings from an ethological perspective. From this point of view, fashion could be seen as a desire of seeking change, both in terms of changing one's personality or ability to perform. In addition, fashion also involves feelings of pleasure in terms of happiness about material objects and positive feelings related to the consumption experience. On the contrary, fashion could also be related to anxiety, due to the pressure of complying with ideals and norms of the fashion industry and society (Petersson McIntyre, 2019). Historical researchers, such as Veblen (1899) and Simmel (1904), oppose the idea of fashion as based on functional and rational needs (referred to in Gianneschi, 2007). Instead, fashion could be used as decorative symbols for status and nonfunctional consumption.

From a socio-cultural perspective, Markkula and Moisaner (2012) argue that fashion consumption habits are shaped throughout the childhood of the average fashion consumer by factors such as marketing and advertising which has created a demand for changing trends, consequently pressuring the fashion business strategies to revolve around change. Consequently, ethical fashion consumers remain a minority (Crane, 2016). Fredriksson (2016) offers another perspective on clothing consumption, arguing that the growing interest in environmental, ethical and social issues has made consumers prone to fulfill oneself through more sustainable and creative consumption using items from the secondary market. From this angle, fashion consumption could be seen as a creative process which is based on a personal ability to reuse or remake items in creative ways, thereby stepping away from being a controlled and passive consumer and instead seeking uniqueness (Fredriksson, 2016). This perspective allows the consumer to become the creator of the consumer's own life and to create a self-expression through clothing. However, opposing newly produced goods and being knowledgeable enough to find and select items from the secondary market requires the consumer to possess greater levels of creativity and competence (Fredriksson, 2016).

Fast Fashion and Slow Fashion Consumption

During the last decade, the business model of fast fashion has contributed to large changes in the fashion industry (McNeill & Moore, 2015). According to Mintel (2007), fast fashion is associated with low-cost production, regular new clothing styles and materials purchased from international overseas suppliers. Companies offering fast fashion are working with short and fast cycles of production, meaning that they apply smaller clothing collections of a greater variety as well as efficient and rapid prototyping, transportation and delivery (Skov, 2002). The range of fast fashion stores are regularly replaced with new items to attract consumers to return (Tokatli & Kizilgun, 2009). As costs associated with labor and production are kept low, Joy et al. (2012) state that fast fashion companies can offer lower prices and larger volumes. Joy et al. (2012) also mean that fast fashion chains manufacture fashion of their own brands that are of the latest trends and mirrors a feeling that consumers must purchase the items immediately, and not wait for lower prices during later sales. As styles and trends change quickly, it contributes to consumers continually being encouraged to purchase new low-priced clothing to create a certain image of oneself (Joy et al., 2012). Tokatli and Kizilgun (2008) argue that the movement towards fast fashion has stepped away from originality and exclusivity, to instead focus on a planned impulse consumption and an availability of fashion for the mass market. Fast fashion could be seen as a means to reach instant gratification, where constant new styles enables fast fashion consumers to satisfy their endless search for new expressive ways to communicate their evolving perceptions of who they are at a low cost (Crane, 2016).

According to Muthu (2019), sustainable fashion could be described by multiple definitions, in which the concept of slow fashion is especially concerned with ethical consumption. Haugestad (2002, p. 4) define sustainable fashion from an end-consumer perspective as consumption where *“all world citizens can use the same amount of basic natural and environmental resources per capita as you do without undermining the basis for future generations to maintain or improve their quality of life”*. As stated by Ozdamar Ertekin et al. (2015), another concept of sustainable fashion is slow fashion which involves the transit of clothing being categorized as either green, sustainable, ethical or ecological. The process of slow fashion is based on a holistic approach of sustainable production, planning of design, and education for consumers (Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2010). Slow fashion involves the usage of more sustainable material, technology that facilitates a reduction of environmental damage and pollution, and

an awareness of how a product is transferred through its supply chain (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). Cavender and Lee (2018) state that the slow fashion movement involves a greater consciousness for the negative impact of fast fashion.

Slow fashion could be seen as a counter movement to the unsustainable practices that comprises the fast fashion industry (Cavender & Lee, 2018). According to Zarley Watson and Yan (2013), slow fashion companies apply a different business model compared to fast fashion brands, since slow fashion is focusing on quality instead of time or quantity. They further argue that consumers of slow fashion keep their clothing items for a longer time, and make purchases that are complementary to their wardrobe or style. Also, consumers of slow fashion are interested in transparency of businesses which becomes a vital part of slow fashion consumption (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). According to Cervellon and Wernerfelt (2012), consumers with a green consumption pattern are motivated and supported to maintain their behavior due to surrounding social networks of groups with similar sustainable values.

According to McNeill and Venter (2019), an alternative and sustainable form of fashion consumption is that of collaborative consumption. They studied what motivates consumers to undertake collaborative and sustainable shopping practices, such as renting clothing or shopping second-hand, and found that ethical and social implications of sustainable shopping activities are unlikely motivators for sustainable shopping behavior. Instead, engagement with collaborative shopping of fashion is rather connected to consumers seeking an opportunity for expressing their individual identity (McNeill & Venter, 2019). Consumer possessions represent a reflection of identity (Belk, 1988), thereby creating a juxtaposition between consumers feeling the need to possess fashion items to construct identity while also feeling an urge to adapt to collaborative and more sustainable consumption models, distancing oneself from the ownership of products (McNeill & Venter, 2019).

According to Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera (2012), alternative consumption models based on sharing or swapping activities prevent dependency on new production and acquisition of products. Sharing could both save resources, while also promoting collectivity rather than individuality (Belk, 2010). Further, a perceived meaning of consuming second hand offered by Gregson et al. (2002) is to consume either by 'choice' or 'necessity', where choice represent consumption based on it being a pleasure or treat and a way of differentiating oneself, while necessity

emphasizes consumption as a need carried out as a methodological procedure. It has been shown that the financial aspect is not the main driver of second hand shopping practices (Roos, 2019). Instead, what seems to contribute to this consumer behavior is rather the search for the 'unique' and the 'cool', at the same time as it has become trendy to purchase 'retro' and 'vintage' items (Hansson & Brembeck, 2015; Roos, 2019). As stated by Brooks (2013), the growth in clothing consumption originating from fast fashion in the Global North has created an abundance of fashion garments, but only 12 percent of all discarded clothing in the seven greatest consumption areas of the world is assumed to actually end up being resold at second hand markets (Ellen MacArthur Foundations & Circular Fibres Initiative, 2017). In 2015, statistics showed that 73 percent of post-used and disposed clothing on a global level was incinerated or landfilled (Ellen MacArthur Foundations & Circular Fibres Initiative, 2017).

Comparing fast fashion consumers to slow fashion consumers, Zarley Watson and Yan (2013) discuss the perception of 'personal utility', which they define as an emotion of happiness or satisfaction experienced by oneself. They argue that fast fashion consumers tend to reach a personal feeling of utility by consuming a larger quantity for a lower amount of money, whilst slow fashion consumers maximize their level of utility by consuming fashion of high quality, that suits them well, and could be seen as an investment. In addition, different groups of consumers achieve different hedonic values when consuming fashion (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013). Consumers of fast fashion achieve hedonism through social encounters, the atmosphere of a store, purchasing larger quantities and looking for good bargains. In comparison, slow fashion consumers experience hedonic values mainly through the products themselves and by recognizing fashion as art and couture. However, Zarley Watson and Yan (2013) claim that both consumer groups build their self-image through consumption of fashion in similar ways. Fast fashion consumers tend to consume clothing items to add the object to their image of who they are, and slow fashion consumers add items to their personal style. A big difference rather lies in the expectations when consuming an item, since fast fashion consumers do not expect their clothing to last, whilst slow fashion consumers believe in their clothing to survive for a longer period of time (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study applied a phenomenographic research approach with phenomenological in-depth interviews, which is a useful method when attempting to understand

the meanings of lived experiences and to describe how groups of individuals perceive and interpret aspects of their world as meaningful (Marton, 1981; Sandberg, 2000). Since the objective of the study is to describe how two different consumer categories differ in their conception of identity meanings connected to clothing consumption, this method of focusing on variations in meaning structures of consumer experiences was judged as suitable.

Although this article has a phenomenographic research approach, it also has its point of departure in consumer culture theory, and aims to study "*the imbricated layers of cultural meaning that structure consumer actions in a given social context*" (Thompson & Troester, 2002, p. 550). When applying a cultural orientation in studies of consumer behavior, it is assumed that the world is culturally constituted, and thereby also the market, since consumption is shaped in accordance with the cultural world (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Since qualitative methods are deemed helpful in attempting to understand a reality created by social and cultural meanings (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015), it was judged as the most suitable research method. In addition, since the aim of this paper is to study symbolism, meanings, consumer identities and other abstract non-measurable phenomenon, a quantitative method was ruled out. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), qualitative business research is a useful method when wanting to produce new knowledge regarding how a phenomenon in question functions, why and how it possibly could be changed, which is well aligned with the research objective of this study.

Sampling

The applied method for selecting respondents was purposive sampling, which is a non-probability method (Bell et al., 2019). According to Goulding (2005), purposive sampling is suitable for phenomenological interviews, since the researchers select respondents based on their individual and personal experiences being of interest for the purpose of the study. Since this article aims at comparing two different categories - fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers - a clear distinction between the two groups was necessary to enable identification of two representative categories of respondents. Respondents were strategically chosen by using criterion sampling which means that the respondents had to meet predefined criteria to become part of each category (Bell et al., 2019). The criteria for each consumer category was defined based on previous studies and statistical data. According to a study conducted by The Swedish Consumer Agency (2018), women tend to consume clothing to a greater extent than men, and they are also better equipped to make

sustainable consumption choices. Since female clothing revenues account for the largest share of the overall revenues of the European clothing industry (Statista, 2019), these consumers arguably are an important target group to better understand with the intention of promoting sustainable consumption. Therefore, women were chosen as target group for this study. In a report mapping the household consumption of 2018 in Sweden, it could be seen that what characterizes Swedish second hand consumers is that they mainly are younger women with an interest in consumption that is above average (Roos, 2019). According to statistics of clothing consumption in United Kingdom, consumers in the age of 30 to 49 spend most money on purchasing new clothes (Statista, 2018). As stated by Crane (2016), fast fashion consumers generally are younger than 35 years old. Consequently, the chosen respondents were all between the age of 23 and 35, and had an interest in fashion.

For this study, ten Swedish respondents were interviewed, which is a suitable number for phenomenological interviews (Dukes, 1984), among which five were fast fashion consumers and five were slow fashion consumers. The respondents are found in Table 1, where they are ordered in accordance with their consumer category and name. Due to ethical considerations and in respect of the confidentiality of the respondents, pseudonyms were used for each respondent in accordance with Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008).

As stated by Zarley Watson and Yan (2013), consumers cannot exclusively be considered either slow or fast fashion consumers, since it is possible that consumer behaviors align with both consumer categories. However, this article has established a perspective where each consumer belongs to one of the two categories, as a simplification to investigate differences in consumer behavior. The categorization was based on both differences in behavioral patterns between the categories, but also on chosen fast fashion or slow fashion brands from which they usually consume

clothing. However, the consumers' general and dominant clothing consumption behavior had to meet the set criteria of its consumer category. For instance, consumers considered as fast fashion consumers who sometimes purchased more exclusive and sustainable brands of better quality are still considered fast fashion consumers, although these few sporadic purchases arguably could imply a more sustainable behavior.

Definition and Criteria of Fast Fashion Consumers

In accordance with Joy et al. (2012), fast fashion consumers can be defined as those continually purchasing low-priced fashion items as a means to adapt to rapidly changing trends. To identify the category of fast fashion consumers, a number of popular fast fashion retailers and e-commerce sites were used to support the selection. As stated by Zarley Watson and Yan (2013), examples of global fast fashion retailers are *Zara* and *H&M*. Other examples of well-known fast fashion brands in Sweden based on the researchers' general knowledge are *Gina Tricot*, *KappAhl*, *BikBok*, *Mango*, *Lindex*, *NA-KD.com* and *Nelly.com*. According to Solér (2017), recent studies show that the average Swedish consumer purchases around 50 new clothing items per year. This means that the monthly consumption is approximately four new items. Therefore, the criteria for identifying fast fashion consumers has been set to finding individuals purchasing approximately four or more items per month, since this is equal to or above the average consumption level. In conclusion, the fast fashion category was included individuals fulfilling three different criteria: (1) they consume clothing from the mentioned brands regularly, and (2) they purchase approximately four or more clothing items on average per month. Besides, (3) they have an interest in fashion trends. The fast fashion consumers were identified through referrals of friends who recommended individuals that would fit the determined sampling criteria. Thereafter, potential respondents were contacted and asked to judge themselves whether they fit the criteria or not.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents. *All names are replaced with pseudonyms.

Name *	Age	Occupation	Consumer Category	Interview Time
Emily	24	Marketing Student/Customer Service	Fast Fashion	58 min.
Jasmine	33	Manager Online Grocery Store		48 min.
Jennifer	34	Private Banking Advisor		41 min.
Laura	27	Accounting Specialist		32 min.
Stella	25	Audit Associate		32 min.
Angelica	35	Priest	Slow Fashion	42 min.
Annie	30	CSR Project Manager		58 min.
Fiona	23	Graphic Design Student		50 min.
Linda	27	Textile Engineering Student/Customer Service		62 min.
Maria	29	Sustainability Manager		47 min.

Definition and Criteria of Slow Fashion

Consumers

Research about slow fashion consumption describe slow fashion consumers as usually focusing on quality over quantity, seasonless fashion instead of trends, a long-term perspective, and consumption of sustainable brands (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013; Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). According to McNeill and Moore (2015) sustainable fashion consumption is associated with second hand purchases. In addition, McNeill and Venter (2019) argue that collaborative consumption or renting of clothing items are forms of sustainable consumption. Therefore, the slow fashion category was defined to include consumers of slow fashion brands, or clothing rented or purchased at second hand stores. The brands mentioned as slow fashion brands in the criteria below were selected based on general knowledge of the researchers, and information offered by a slow fashion store in Gothenburg (Thrive - Conscious Fashion, 2020). Conclusively, the selected respondents for the slow fashion category were required to fulfil three criteria: (1) they purchase second hand items of better quality, are renting clothing, or consume new clothing items from sustainable brands, such as *Nudie Jeans*, *Filippa K*, *People Tree*, *Armedangels*, *Dedicated*, *Houdini* or *Mayla Stockholm*, and not fast fashion brands, (2) they have an interest in sustainable fashion and sustainability and (3) they were required to consume less than four clothing items on average every month, since this is below the average number of new clothing items Swedish consumers purchase every month (Solér, 2017). The respondents were found through both personal contacts of the researchers and through social media. An important aspect when selecting the respondents through social media channels was that none of the individuals should have a commercial gain from their promotion of slow fashion, and they were solely interviewed in their capacity as consumers. After contacting the respondents, they had to confirm that they fulfilled the criteria.

During the interviews, two of the respondents of slow fashion were found to be on the verge of exceeding the limit of clothing items per month. However, the third condition was applied mainly to newly produced clothes, since collaborative consumption does not directly contribute to any new production (McNeill & Venter, 2019). Therefore, it was determined that if additional second hand clothing items were consumed, the total number should not exceed the limit of four clothing items per month significantly. Consequently, the two mentioned respondents were still included in the sample.

Data Collection

This paper applied phenomenological in-depth interviews with consumers from the two distinct categories; fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers. As this study focus on investigating meanings, which involves personal understandings, beliefs and values associated with clothing consumption, a hermeneutic phenomenology has been applied for the data collection since it allows the researcher to take into account how sociohistorical situatedness affects psychological processes of consumers (Bhar, 2019). This method gives access to the narratives of lived experiences of consumers since it places the consumer in a sociohistorical context, highlighting how cultural background affects what different personalized meanings are developed (Bhar, 2019). In-depth interviews were applied since it is a common method in scholarly research to produce empirical in-depth data, and also suitable for phenomenological data collection (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Thompson et al., 1989). According to Bhattacharjee (2019), phenomenological interviews are based on a process of studying a phenomenon without inferring biased assumptions or personal understandings of the researchers. This interview method aims at understanding individuals' perception and judgment of a phenomenon based on how they perceive the social reality, symbolic meanings and personal experiences (Bhattacharjee, 2019). As individuals perceive their actions and the social reality as meaningful in various ways, the researcher must try to understand their perception from the individual's point of view (Bell et al., 2019). In accordance with Thompson et al. (1989), the interviews were therefore mostly steered by the respondents to make it possible to clearly distinguish their perception of a topic which is typical for phenomenological interviews, without any disruption of the researchers. Conclusively, the goal of the interviews was to develop a deeper understanding of the respondents' subjective perceptions of the clothing consumption phenomenon and what identity meanings they associate with it.

Prior to the interviews, a brief description was made regarding the purpose of the study to ensure that the respondents were aware of the reason for their voluntary participation (Bell et al., 2019). In addition, the respondents were requested to consider what clothing items they had purchased during the last year, as well as their favorite clothing items. In accordance with Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), the interviews then began with confirming that the respondents approved of the interviews being recorded. The interviews were held in Swedish since this was the mother tongue of all the respondents.

As recommended by Thompson and Haytko (1997), the major part of the phenomenological interviews focused on understanding the respondents in three different ways; (1) what the individuals have experienced in regards of the studied phenomenon, (2) what situations or contexts have influenced the lived experiences of the studied phenomenon, and lastly, (3) how this has affected the individual. In accordance with Thompson et al. (1989), the opening question of the interviews was of particular importance since the purpose of phenomenological interviews is to gain a first-person description of experiences connected to the research phenomena. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of the identity meanings connected with fashion consumption, the respondents were asked the following question: “*Can you in a detailed manner describe your personal clothing consumption habits?*”. Moreover, the interviews were semi-structured, which means that they were based on a prepared interview framework of topics and questions seen in Appendix 1, but with an informal and more conversational structure (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). A semi-structured interview form is useful since it allows the flexibility of being able to ask follow-up questions during the interviews, but still guiding the discussion in a certain pre-decided direction (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In alignment with Thompson et al. (1989), most follow-up questions were ‘how’ and ‘what’ questions which intended to encourage interviewees to further reflect on their own values and feelings, to consequently gain further descriptions of experiences. All questions asked were neutral and open-ended, meaning that no pre-assumptions were made and more detailed answers were to be expected (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Lastly, in alignment with Thompson and Haytko (1997), the interviews ended with the researchers obtaining some basic background information about the participants to form an overall perception and understanding of each respondent.

Data Analysis

A full transcription was made of each interview, and this textual data constituted the basis for analysis. In line with Sandberg (1994), the analysis was following an intentional method consisting of a process alternating between understanding both *what* consumption of clothing means for each respondent (its meaning), and *how* the respondents perceived their clothing consumption from a greater perspective (their conception). The researchers carefully read through the transcribed text for each interview multiple times to develop a deep understanding of the content, as well as a general grasp of each respondent’s conception of clothing consumption (Sandberg, 2000). Then, based on the process by Sandberg (1994), different meanings were identified for each interview text by constantly

asking “*what does clothing consumption mean to this respondent?*”. Thereafter, the researchers once again identified a greater conception behind each respondent and their view of the world by analyzing how each individual perceived clothing consumption based on the identified meanings (Solér, 1997).

Along this iterative process and by simultaneously analyzing both (1) what consumption of clothing means to each respondent, and (2) how they perceive and experience clothing consumption, the respondents were sorted into different subgroups based on similarities in conceptions, as well as meanings. However, the fast fashion respondents and slow fashion respondents were not mixed, since they were already categorized into these two groups based on the predetermined sampling criteria, but also due to the purpose of the article being to compare differences between fast fashion and slow fashion consumers. In line with Sandberg (2000), once each identified conception remained stable although cross-checking for alternative interpretation of how each respondent conceive clothing consumption, four conceptions were confirmed. Continuing, the analysis followed with an iterative process of matching and discussing the collected data in relation to previous theories to develop an understanding of the data, to challenge previous ideas and interpretations of the studied phenomena (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), and also to discover new findings.

Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), four criteria should be fulfilled to reach trustworthiness in qualitative research. First, the study should meet the criterion of dependability, which means that the research is informative, logical and the origin of the findings are verifiable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since the objective of this study was to analyze the conceptions of consumers in a cultural context, the empirical findings were clearly presented to disentangle the identity meanings of fashion consumption in an informative and structured way. Further, due to the iterative process of data analysis, the found links steering the results were deemed logical. Second, the criterion of transferability concern the ability to find links between the research and previous studies within the field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since this article could be seen as an extension of previous research within the subject, and since findings were analyzed in relation to previous studies, this criterion arguably has been fulfilled.

Continuing, the third criterion of credibility verifies the researchers’ familiarity of the topic of the study, the logic of the links between the empirical findings and the

presented result and the probability of future research to make similar findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Critique regarding the phenomenographic research method using phenomenological interviews involves how respondents possess different abilities to articulate and explain in words their lived experiences, which possibly could prevent the building of credible narratives and conceptions of an experienced phenomenon (Solér, 1997). However, by carefully guiding the respondents through the interviews without asking leading questions and by encouraging detailed descriptions of experiences, this issue was avoided. Further, due to the extensive literature review conducted and the fact that the researchers were deeply informed in the area of consumer behavior in fashion and sustainability contexts, the credibility of the researchers and their familiarity of the topic is judged as very high. Lastly, the fourth criterion of conformability is met if other individuals easily could understand interpretations of the findings in a similar way as the researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This last criterion arguably was fulfilled since quotes are clearly presented throughout the analysis which highlights how interpretations have been made. However, although the researchers have attempted to maintain an objective standpoint, it is possible that subjective understandings have affected the result due to previous experiences and knowledge regarding the subject.

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Based on the ten phenomenological interviews, two different conceptions of clothing consumption are identified for each category of fast fashion and slow fashion consumers, which are presented in Table 2. Whether the respondents belong to a fast fashion or slow fashion conception is already determined prior to the analysis. The conceptions are ordered based on the first perspective arguably being most different in terms of level of contemplation and reflection regarding sustainability compared to the fourth, with the critical

consumer being most thoughtful when consuming clothes.

The fast fashion consumers are found to belong to a subgroup having either a conception of *The Impulsive Consumer* or *The Social Consumer*, while the slow fashion consumers are identified as belonging to a subgroup having a conception of either *The Circular Consumer* or *The Critical Consumer*. All four conceptions and their respective meanings are based on the empirical findings, but their names and signification are partly inspired by previous research. The conception of the social consumer is inspired by Niinimäki et al. (2010) as well as Thompson and Haytko (1997) who discuss how consumption is affected by the social environment and ideals. The conception of the impulsive consumer is inspired by Zarley Watson and Yan (2013) disentangling what it means to be a stereotypical fast fashion consumer. The two conceptions of the slow fashion category are inspired by Solér (2017) who discuss perspectives of sustainable consumption based on either distrust, critical consideration, or circular consumption patterns. The meanings mentioned as Novelty, Social Adaptation, Status, Aesthetic Ideals, Social Community, Creativity, Uniqueness and Necessity are named with inspiration from previous studies discussing various similar meanings of consuming fashion (Niinimäki et al., 2010; Wang Chengbing, 2011; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Cervellon & Wernerfelt, 2012; Gregson et al., 2002), while the remaining meanings are named based on new findings of this study.

Below, a brief presentation of each conception is presented, based on the notion that each conception could be illustrated as a fictional character. Thereafter, the different conceptions and their respective meanings of fashion consumption are presented in more detail, along with an analysis of the findings.

Table 2. Overview of consumer category, conceptions and meanings of clothing consumption.

Consumer Category	Conception	Meanings of Clothing Consumption
Fast Fashion	<i>The Impulsive Consumer</i>	Novelty Personal Expression and Self-Confidence
	<i>The Social Consumer</i>	Social Adaptation Status Aesthetic Ideal Experience and Reward
Slow Fashion	<i>The Circular Consumer</i>	Social Community Creativity Uniqueness
	<i>The Critical Consumer</i>	Value Expression Responsibility Necessity Social Relationship

Presentation of Conceptions

Table 3 contains a short illustrative summary of each conception and highlights the most apparent consumption meanings associated with each perspective. The fictional characters presented in the table are built up by findings from all respondents belonging to each conception to clearly illustrate their different behaviors and attitudes towards clothing consumption, which will be more deeply analyzed in the next section of this article.

Fast Fashion Conceptions of Clothing Consumption

The Impulsive Consumer

The first conception of the fast fashion category is the perspective of being an impulsive consumer. This conception is based on findings related to the respondents Laura and Jennifer who both consume clothes spontaneously and impulsively, based on a sudden intention and new upcoming trends. Both respondents consume most of their clothes from typical fast fashion brands, such as H&M, Gina Tricot, Nelly, Zara, KappAhl and Lindex. Laura explains that she consumes clothes without any predetermined goal and often ‘run into something’ that she finds attractive, and spontaneously purchases. Similarly, Jennifer states that she tends to visit some clothing stores during her lunch

break and spontaneously purchase something. Consequently, their consumption is based on greater quantities of clothes for a lower price from fast fashion brands (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013). Neither Laura nor Jennifer seems to be concerned with purchasing more expensive brands, but are rather interested in consuming clothing items that are comfortable, flattering and makes them feel confident as well as good-looking. Therefore, the respondents step away from originality and exclusivity to rather choose items available to the mass market (Tokatli & Kizilgun, 2008).

Novelty

A perceived meaning for the impulsive consumer when consuming clothes is a desire of seeking novelty - to consume something new (Niinimäki et al., 2010). According to Laura, she becomes very happy when consuming clothes, since she enjoys purchasing something new because it feels like it constitutes a new happening in her everyday life. Her consumption is therefore based on a willingness to renew herself, to reach a feeling of change (Niinimäki et al., 2010). Sometimes Laura recognizes an item on a model, social media or in an advertisement, and impulsively purchases a similar one. However, she argues that these spontaneous purchases result in both good or bad consumption, since the clothing does not always look the same on her. This behavior often has led to her

Table 3. Overview of the conceptions based on fictional characters.

Consumer Category	Conception	Illustrative Summary of Each Conception
Fast Fashion	<i>The Impulsive Consumer</i>	<i>The Impulsive Consumer</i> search for instant gratification through the consumption of clothes, and enjoy purchasing new clothes for the feeling of solely wearing something new. New clothing items are regularly purchased with little consideration, since shopping is an interest and sudden feelings of desire steer her consumption habits. She rarely develops any deeper relationships with her clothes since they are easily replaceable but she still needs clothing to express personality, experience positive emotions and to gain confidence.
	<i>The Social Consumer</i>	<i>The Social Consumer</i> is a consumer of more feminine clothing, largely influenced by social contexts, societal norms and the social confirmation of others. She is more concerned with fitting in than standing out, and actively seeks after status as well as aesthetic ideals highly influenced by social media, influencers, marketing and advertising. The social consumer literarily ‘dress for success’ since she is concerned with creating a certain image of herself and chooses her clothing mainly with the goal of becoming part of a social group.
Slow Fashion	<i>The Circular Consumer</i>	<i>The Circular Consumer</i> has a consumption pattern where she both purchases and sells clothing on the secondary market, and only owns clothes she currently uses. Her consumption is based on a desire for novelty, but using a sustainable approach aligning with her inner personal values. Consuming clothing second hand is an exciting hobby and experience, due to the unpredictability, lower prices as well as the associated social community. Therefore, she feels inspired and confident to be more creative but also eager to seek uniqueness and oppose societal norms and ideals.
	<i>The Critical Consumer</i>	<i>The Critical Consumer</i> is knowledgeable and well-informed about sustainability issues related to clothing consumption, making her personal values highly affect her purchases. To her, clothing consumption is associated with anxiety, deeper consideration and careful choices with clothes fulfilling functional long-term needs. Her consumption expresses her sustainable and ethical values since she carefully selects either sustainable clothing brands, shop sustainable items in second hand stores, or resist to purchase any clothing at all.

purchasing clothing that have ended up in a pile along with her other unused clothing items. Laura admits that she is influenced by fashion trends and that she probably would need to replace her old skirts from previous seasons with two or three new ones if skirt trends are to change the coming season. As a result, Laura seeks novelty to feel adapted to social norms of fashion as well as being accepted by the social environment (Niinimäki et al., 2010), since marketing affects Laura to seek new clothes based on new trends arriving and constantly changing (Markkula & Moisander, 2012).

Laura consumes a lot of clothes during spring and summer due to the possibility of purchasing a greater number of items for less money compared to more durable and expensive winter items. If clothing is cheap, she finds it easier to purchase more. Lower prices therefore reinforce her desire to consume new clothes (Joy et al., 2012). In addition, Laura argues that her clothes are quite easily replaceable. Therefore, she does not believe she has any strong relationships with her clothes.

Researcher: *“What does this dress mean to you?”*

Laura: *“It sounds terrible, but if it broke, it would more be like ‘yes, I could try to find something new’. It is very easy to replace. I rarely have any strong relationships or connections to my clothes.”*

As illustrated, Laura’s expectations are low for her clothes to last for a longer period, which is common for fast fashion consumers (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013). As a consequence, these lower expectations on clothing items arguably also leads to a weaker relationship with or connection to her clothes, as is common among western consumers (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Laura’s clothes are rather opportunistically used for fulfilling a symbolic meaning of novelty and social confirmation (Niinimäki et al., 2010), instead of being thought of as meaningful and long lasting items.

Further, Jennifer describes a couple consumption experiences highlighting that her purchases usually are unplanned, and sometimes she has not even decided if she liked the item or not until she arrives at home. She explains that she once visited a store to return a clothing item, but accidentally saw another item lying on the cashier desk that she impulsively ended up purchasing. Jennifer also describes how she recently visited a store to search for an item that she needed, which is not that common for her. Jennifer rather consume new clothes because it is fun, instead of the consumption fulfilling actual needs.

Researcher: *“If you are going on a shopping trip, do you plan in advance what you will look for, or is it more for the experience itself?”*

Jennifer: *“It is rather the latter, more for fun. The other day when I wanted a... I was really in need of a jacket, or a sweater. Like, something that you could wear when you are going to a workout or after a workout, during the warm-up and such. Then I was searching specifically for that. And then it was like ‘this is something I never do’. I usually buy things rather because I want something new.”*

Jennifer’s consumption behavior is often based on an impulsive feeling of desire or an eagerness for something new, as well as a search for positive feelings through consumption experiences (Niinimäki et al., 2010; Tokatli & Kizilgun, 2008; Petersson McIntyre, 2019). As illustrated by both Laura and Jennifer, their consumption is based on fulfilling needs of positive emotional values rather than a functional demand (Raunio, 1995; Bai et al., 2014). Moreover, both Laura and Jennifer claim that they feel dissatisfied with some purchases that they made spontaneously before a specific happening. For instance, both Laura and Jennifer explain that they have purchased clothing before a night out or before a specific event because they wanted something new, but ended up solely using the item once, or never. One could argue that the respondents’ impulsive consumption based on a desire for instant gratification (Crane, 2016) is perceived as a quick solution, which often results in feelings of guilt and regret.

Personal Expression and Self-Confidence

Further, the impulsive consumer also perceives consumption of clothes as a tool used for personal expression and to reach a greater self-confidence. Both Laura and Jennifer enjoy purchasing clothes that are special in terms of design and colors, and appreciate looking different than everyone else. However, both Laura and Jennifer purchase their clothes at fast fashion stores that offer a great number of similar items available to the mass market. Therefore, the respondents possibly believe that they are wearing unique clothes compared to others which they have selected themselves, but they are still governed by trends and styles offered by actors of the fast fashion market (Zwick et al., 2008).

Jennifer meets customers in her job, and therefore believes that it is important to look well-dressed. However, she does not believe she looks like a typical ‘bank person’, since her style is more ‘liberal’ with colorful dresses with a lot of patterns. Jennifer describes that her favorite outfit, a black dress and black and white leggings, makes her feel a bit tough or cool. If she does not believe that her clothes look good on her, she feels

very uncomfortable and limited. Similarly, Laura states that she feels most comfortable when wearing her favorite outfit, since it makes her feel positive about herself. As a result, she feels more confident wearing specific clothes, while uncomfortable clothes offer her the opposite feelings.

Researcher: *“Could you give an example of a situation where you have been wearing your favorite outfit and felt more confident, like you said?”*

Laura: *“I could think about that a lot before a meeting or a moment when I am going to present something where people see me. To feel comfortable, so I can be relaxed and feel more okay with people looking at me. Then, it is fun to be seen by others. If you are uncomfortable you just want to hide, and I like to make myself heard when I feel comfortable with it.”*

It could be seen that various clothes generate different feelings for both Laura and Jennifer, since they both feel either more confident or happy about some items than others. Consequently, cultural meanings of various items affect the respondents' behavior and contribute to emotional meanings of change in ability to perform based on their clothing (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; McCracken, 1986; Niinimäki et al., 2010; Petersson McIntyre, 2019), since the respondents feel more confident in specific clothing items. Therefore, one could argue that the respondents perceive their clothing being closely related to their emotions. Further, both Jennifer and Laura seemingly have somewhat unrealistic expectations on their clothes and the emotional effect they are expected to provide, meaning that their symbolic association to what becomes possible when wearing an item is not fully rational (Niinimäki et al., 2010).

Further, Laura likes to wear clothes with natural and earthy colors since she wants people to perceive her as a calm person with strong confidence. In addition, Jennifer argues that she wants to convey an impression of herself being a combination of both 'professional' and 'easy-going'. Therefore, she is mostly wearing colorful dresses. When Jennifer is wearing an item that she likes, she also experiences a feeling of well-being.

Jennifer: *“I want to give the impression of being... Now I think a lot about my job. But I want to give the impression of being serious and professional, but at the same time being personal and fun. I mean, I don't want to be a boring banking contact. People should like me. Perhaps that is equal to my personality, that I am happy, social and fun. That I express that with my clothes as well.”*

Symbolic meanings attached to the respondents' clothes could make them feel like they are communicating a

certain self-identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), since they argue that their clothes act as a personal expression of who they are. In addition, cultural meanings attached to their clothing therefore become a symbolic expression of the personality of each respondent (Wang Chengbing, 2011; Petersson McIntyre, 2019). Both Laura and Jennifer's clothes are carrying various subjective cultural meanings shaped by their personal perceptions (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). For instance, Jennifer perceives colorful dresses as symbols granting her confidence as a professional, whilst Laura experiences a similar meaning for clothing with less color.

The Social Consumer

Consumers of the second conception of the fast fashion category perceive the meaning of clothing consumption mainly as a tool for adapting to social norms or a social context (Niinimäki et al., 2010), but also as a means to express individuality in relation to a group (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). This conception of clothing consumption is shared by Emily, Stella and Jasmine, whom all argue that they both knowingly and unconsciously adapt their clothing to their surroundings. For example, Stella justifies her many purchases of clothes with the need of complying with the dress code at her job at one of the 'Big Four' accounting organizations, whilst Emily wants to dress accordingly to social norms at her school. All three respondents use the symbolic meanings of their clothing to communicate associations with groups of other people (Kleine et al., 1995). These respondents also express a desire for constantly updating their wardrobe and they are somewhat dependent on consuming new clothing to avoid feelings of dissatisfaction (Gabriel & Lang, 2006).

Social Adaptation

An important meaning for the social consumers is consumption of clothes for social adaptation, as a means to fit in with a crowd or a social context (Niinimäki et al., 2010). While Emily and Stella are influenced to dress a certain way due to their jobs or education, Jasmine's clothing style is instead mainly influenced by the social friendship circle she is part of, as well as her own perception of what it means to belong to a fashion interested group. Jasmine appreciates purchasing clothing that communicates her high interest in fashion, which shows that she is eager to consume objects that adds to the image of who she is or wish to be (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013; Oyserman & James, 2008). In Jasmine's friendship circle, they all dress similarly and they often compliment or comment each other's clothing. In a similar sense, both Stella and Emily argue that they dress in a similar style as other young women at their work and school, and they appreciate receiving

compliments from other people about new clothing items.

Stella: *“I’m also inspired by my colleagues and people I meet through work. We’re many women in the same age at my employer, around 25 to 30 years old, us who are new at work, and among us it’s very common that we ask each other ‘where did you buy that item?’, or like that. Because you think it fits well, or looks nice. So, it often happens that you perhaps have some clothing item that someone else has as well.”*

To all three respondents, compliments function as a social confirmation, which according to Niinimäki et al. (2010) becomes a driving force to constantly purchase new clothing items which could lead to greater acceptance of social groups. Stella is considerate about dressing according to clothing norms and the dress code at her work and claims that she always has to consider what is appropriate to wear when meeting CEOs, financial managers and other clients. The willingness of Stella to adapt to her surroundings as a means to show ambition has consequently become an argument that, according to her, justifies the behavior of constantly purchasing new clothes at fast fashion stores. To reach the ideal identity of who Stella wants to be at her job, it seemingly requires her to somewhat over consume clothes beyond fulfilling actual needs. By consuming a certain type of clothing, she wishes to become part of the culture and social environment of her work place through items that she perceives as symbolic of who she is; professional and serious. Thereby, Stella arguably consumes clothing with the intention of ‘being what she owns’ (Belk, 1988).

In a different sense, Emily claims that she dresses more properly for school because she experiences a pressure to comply with an informal dress code and the social norm of what a regular business student should look like. For example, she explains that she would like to wear a particular item but refuses to, because then she would feel dressed down compared to other students.

Researcher: *“Would you say that you ever feel any pressure in regards of how you dress?”*

Emily: *“Yes, a little, at school. I know I have a jacket at home that is especially nice now when the weather is bad, my boyfriend’s old jacket. I would really like to wear it whenever it’s snowing, but I feel like I can’t because then I would feel like I don’t fit in. I feel like many people attending this school are very properly dressed and it is a good school... and everyone are so ambitious and pretty, and therefore I guess I want to dress up as well.”*

This illustrates that clothing can be consumed for different meanings than functional ones (Bai et al.,

2014), since Emily chooses clothes to comply with social norms instead of being warm. It also shows how Emily assesses products in relation to her social environment, and that insecurity about not being accepted by other students affects her consumption choices (Niinimäki et al., 2010; Uotila, 1995). Thereby, it proves that clothing and its symbolism can be used to create a desired self-identity (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). It could be concluded that the social consumer imitates other individuals by actively adapting their clothing to their surrounding social environment (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; McNeill & Venter, 2019; Oyserman & James, 2008). The respondents of the social consumer conception thereby are immensely steered by their concern about not being accepted by others (Niinimäki et al., 2010), especially those groups they truly want to belong with, such as their job, school or circle of friends. However, norms regarding styles of these social groups are subjectively interpreted by the respondents and their meanings are also somewhat reworked based on personal understandings (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Therefore, these social groups could also be seen as a source of inspiration, and possibly not simply a subject for imitation.

Status

Emily, Stella and Jasmine all perceive their clothing as a means to express social status (Wang Chengbing, 2011; Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Emily feels that whenever she is wearing clothes that could be described as ‘office clothes’, she is being taken more seriously by providing an impression of being a devoted and serious business student or banking employee. For example, Emily argues that since her business school has a rather high status, she experiences some pressure to dress up at school. Similarly, Stella experiences a feeling of being seen as important both at work and outside when being dressed in ‘business clothes’. She believes that her professional clothing style symbolizes professionalism and status.

Stella: *“If a guy is wearing a suit or not, you get a different perception of him. It is somewhat like that at work, we meet a lot of people... And you want to make a serious impression, and I feel that I do that through my clothes. Also, if you get off work and are outside of work in your office clothes, then you look a little more important, perhaps.”*

Accordingly, Stella perceives clothes to express symbolic meanings of social status as part of one’s identity creation (Wang Chengbing, 2011), since she believes her consumption indicates a certain lifestyle that fits the social environment (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Ulver & Ostberg, 2014). By consuming certain clothes, the respondents manage to maintain their status

positions in their surrounding social context (Ulver & Ostberg, 2014), more specifically, their work or school. Further, both Emily and Jasmine are interested in purchasing clothes from specific well-known and more expensive clothing brands. Jasmine claims that much clothes in her wardrobe comes from fast fashion chains but that she also uses clothes from, for example, Anine Bing. In a similar sense, Emily explains that she feels more 'luxurious' when wearing more expensive clothing items from brand such as Rodebjer, IRO and Whyred, compared to when she is wearing less expensive clothes from H&M. This underlying desire to purchase certain high-status products highlight how the respondents actively seek after symbolism associated with certain brands (Wang Chengbing, 2011; Rompay et al., 2009) and use consumption to improve their social status position (Ulver & Ostberg, 2014). Both Jasmine and Emily use the symbolic meanings of more expensive clothing to differentiate themselves from consumers only purchasing cheaper brands, while at the same time showing that they belong to a certain social group or social status position (Niinimäki et al., 2010; Ulver & Ostberg, 2014) with a higher fashion interest in more exclusive brands. Another finding associated with status-seeking, is that Emily believes it is important to communicate having a financial ability to use different clothes every day.

Emily: *"I can sometimes feel like you need to have different clothes every day, to signal that you have other clothes. Sometimes it happens that I wear the same things all the time, mostly because it's comfortable. But sometimes you have that mindset, that you want to show that you have more clothes."*

Seemingly, status also could be expressed through the quantity of clothes rather than through meanings attached to certain brands, due to it communicating a certain financial ability (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). As discussed by Ulver and Ostberg (2014), social status positions change in relation to changes in consumer society. Hence, the social consumer is affected by a strive towards improving the social status through consumption of new clothing associated with a certain social group, which contributes to an increased consumption level.

Aesthetic Ideal

Stella, Emily and Jasmine all perceive the meaning of clothing consumption as related to reaching aesthetic ideals and a certain appearance, instead of consuming clothing to reach meanings of functional and rational values (Gianneschi, 2007). For example, Stella enjoys purchasing beautiful and trendy clothes, and states that she stays updated on the supply of both Mango and Zara, to match her clothes with current trends. Jasmine

illustrates a similar attitude by claiming that appearance is a vital factor when consuming clothes, but also that good fit generates positive feelings about herself.

Researcher: *"Could you describe your favorite outfit and a situation in which you prefer to wear it?"*

Jasmine: *"I believe it is a black dress that is... I don't know, but it suits me very well and I have a belt at my waist. When I'm wearing it I always feel good-looking and well-dressed. The little black dress works for everything... I always feel pretty, and that's why I often choose to wear that dress."*

By consuming clothes to feel good-looking, new clothing support the respondents in achieving an aesthetic ideal (Niinimäki et al., 2010). Thereby, their clothing consumption is not solely based on utility, since the respondents also are seeking symbolism of aesthetic values of products (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Further, Emily tends to purchase clothes designed by influencers she follows on Instagram, but argues that there is no deeper reflection behind the purchases other than the clothing items being good looking. However, after some consideration she admits that she sometimes recognizes clothing items on other people and purchases similar clothes due to a willingness to look like them. Emily states that although some clothing items she has purchased have been aesthetically attractive, they have not always appeared comfortable which has led to her not using them. For example, she purchased a sheer t-shirt that had been appearing on several Instagram profiles, but immediately after the purchase she realized she felt uncomfortable wearing it.

Emily: *"I think it looks so good on other when they wear sheer t-shirts and you see some top beneath. But whenever I wear it, I always feel a little exposed, kind of. I don't think it looks good on me. But you really wish it would look good. I have seen that type of clothing item a lot on Instagram and people wearing it, and it looks really good on them. So, I guess you just want to look similar, but I don't feel comfortable. However, it seemingly suits others."*

The symbolic meaning attached to the desired clothes of Emily could be associated with a pressure of suiting norms of beauty ideals and fashion trends (Pettersson McIntyre, 2019). For example, Emily uses cultural meanings attached to clothing designed by famous influencers she admires and wish to imitate, as a means to reach an ideal image of herself (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). However, comfortability also plays a significant part in the usage and meaningfulness of clothing. Accordingly, the respondents tend to avoid using items that makes them feel uncomfortable or does not contribute to their intended self-image, such as items

purchased with the single purpose of looking similar to others. Instead, they rather use clothes that makes them feel more confident or obviously aesthetically attractive. Consequently, consumption is perceived as more meaningful when the items better express one's perceived identity or match personal opinions in terms of attractive appearance (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Emily further argues that purchasing new clothes is an interest, and that it evokes positive feelings.

Researcher: *“Would you say then that it is an interest of yours, consuming clothes?”*

Emily: *“Yes absolutely. I think it is fun, you get to feel pretty. Especially now when the weather is bad, then you want to brighten the day and feel more beautiful. You obviously feel rather dull now, and therefore I think it helps a lot to purchase new clothes.”*

It could be discussed that in moments when Emily is feeling low, clothing consumption is an activity that could cheer her up, and thereby functions as a means to reach instant gratification (Crane, 2016). Arguably, consumer culture along with constantly changing fashion trends has created a desire for the respondents to continuously seek novelty through aesthetic ideals. Further, both Jasmine and Emily like to express a femininity with their clothes, by wearing typical ‘girly’ or ‘feminine’ clothing. For instance, Jasmine states that she wants to wear clothes that shows her female body shape, while Emily feels that she must mix some pieces with more feminine items to create a more female expression with her clothes. As marketers, fashion brands and designers of clothing incorporate meanings of what a ‘female identity’ looks like into their clothing items, it could be seen that these identity meanings are confirmed and utilized by the respondents to express a sense of femininity through their clothes (Bai et al., 2014; Craik, 1994; Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

Based on the respondents' willingness to look pretty, feminine and similar to social media icons, one could discuss how marketing and fashion trends steer the respondents to make certain consumption decisions, without themselves being fully aware of it (Foucault, 1978; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). As the marketplace of fast fashion brands offers ‘ready identities’ that the consumers could identify themselves with (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), it possibly makes the respondents less willing to take risks when consuming by deviating too much from these images. While the mentioned ideals arguably function as rules guiding the behavior of the social consumer group, the lack of ideals possibly would leave this consumer group feeling stressed about what clothing items to choose, which possibly could lead to identity issues (Ahmadi & Landahl, 2012). Most likely, their desire for clothes

seen in media, in marketing, in well-known fast fashion stores, on influencers and on people in their surroundings provides some reassurance that clothing choices will be socially accepted.

Slow Fashion Conceptions of Clothing Consumption

The Circular Consumer

Consumers of the first conception of the slow fashion category find consumption of clothes as a means of being circular consumers. This perspective is shared among the slow fashion consumers Maria, Angelica and Linda, since they consume most of their clothes at second hand and vintage stores, while also selling clothes on the secondary market to finance new purchases. Consequently, the respondents' aim is to create sustainable wardrobes in terms of the usage of their clothes and not own clothes that they do not use. The respondents' perspectives show how their clothing consumption is a circular consumption process that could be considered as ‘collaborative consumption’, involving second hand consumption (McNeill & Venter, 2019).

Experience and Reward

Both Angelica, Maria, and Linda describe their consumption of clothes at second hand stores as an experience and a reward, due to the great variety in supply and the feeling of being rewarded when finding a special item, like a treat (Gregson et al., 2002). The consumption process could therefore be seen as an experience, and a habit that is regularly performed. For instance, Linda describes a situation where she was looking for the ‘perfect white shirt’, and spent years on searching. One day when she found a shirt that had the correct size, design, color, material and sewing, she experienced strong positive emotions. As a consequence, Linda argues that this shirt is very meaningful to her, both due to the positive associations linked to the ‘hunt’, but also due to the risk of being forced to spend equally long time again to search for a new one.

Researcher: *“How did it feel when you found that shirt that you had been looking for during such a long time?”*

Linda: *“I became very, very happy. I mean, it is very special feeling with second hand and such, because there could be situations where you search for an item for a very long time and when you find it, it is like a joyful feeling in your body and you want to take photos and show everyone. ‘Look I have found what I have been looking for during such a long period.’”*

Consequently, perceived positive emotional values affect the symbolic meanings ascribed to an item

(Raunio, 1995), since Linda finds her shirt more meaningful due to the effortful and exciting experience. Moreover, Maria describe her passionate feelings for consuming second hand compared to newly produced products as rewarding, since it is more like a lottery without knowing the outcome in advance. She could visit second hand stores several times without finding anything, and then she suddenly finds something which she describes as a 'reward'. Sometimes, if she is lucky, she could arrive home with a number of cheap second hand items. Positive perceptions of second hand shopping is also confirmed by Angelica who explains a situation when she was searching for a specific pair of jeans. At first, she tried them on at a regular store, and then set notifications for similar items on an online second hand store. When she finally found a similar pair of jeans, Angelica felt like a winner of a lottery both for economic and environmental reasons, in terms of saving both resources and money. As illustrated by Linda's shirt and Angelica's jeans, the meaning of consumption as an experience and reward is more based on the items themselves, rather than the store atmosphere or social encounters, which according to Zarley Watson and Yan (2013) is more common for fast fashion consumers. Further, both Angelica and Maria rather consume somewhat greater quantities of cheaper second hand items before solely investing in a few high-quality pieces. Still, they combine these two types of second hand purchases.

Researcher: *"How many items do you usually purchase per month?"*

Maria: *"I have had a really nice flow the latest month in terms of shopping second hand clothing and I have purchased some super cheap skirts for like 30 SEK. But this month I haven't purchased anything..."*

This illustrates how Maria's behavior is somewhat similar to the fast fashion consumers, since they also search for cheaper bargains (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013). As the respondents appreciate constantly updating and replacing items in their wardrobe, the meaning of seeking novelty (Niinimäki et al., 2010) also becomes significant for their clothing consumption. However, even if these similarities exist, their actual behavior and attitudes towards clothing consumption differ. For example, the quest for novelty is taking place through second hand consumption and not newly produced goods. The respondents have a great interest in sustainability, and have found second hand consumption to constitute a rewarding outlet of creativity showing their interest in sustainable consumption. Therefore, their behavior of consuming second hand becomes a counter movement towards the consumption of newly produced items offered by fast fashion brands (Cavender & Lee, 2018). As an example,

Angelica states that she likes the idea of utilizing resources that already exist, instead of contributing to the production of new ones and commonly considers the resale value of an item in case she would regret a purchase. Angelica argues that she historically was a shopaholic who consumed a lot of newly produced clothes, but her interest in fast fashion was prevented by her inner sustainable values and opinions. When her lifestyle shifted into a more circular consumption pattern with an interest in second hand shopping, her passion and positive emotions about her clothing consumption significantly increased. As her personal values about sustainability changed and her commitment grew stronger, her consumption followed the same pattern, which made her consumption behavior suit her transformed self-image and inner values (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Niinimäki et al., 2010). However, these transformed values evidently did not contribute to a fully changed mindset. The reason is that she still seeks change and finds pleasure in consumption of material objects (Pettersson McIntyre, 2019). Arguably, sales on the second hand market still upholds the sales on the first-hand market, which highlights the possible problematics of second hand consumption.

Social Community

A second meaning experienced by the circular consumer is the meaning of being part of a community with similar interests or values in sustainable clothing consumption (Cervellon & Wernerfelt, 2012). Angelica, Linda, and Maria use Instagram as a social online community to find inspiration and ideas about clothing style and maintain their interest for second hand shopping. Linda is sometimes participating in challenges on Instagram with the aim of using clothes that she already owns by, for example, following different themes every day. The challenges make her feel more creative and brave to try outfits that she had not worn otherwise. In addition, Linda usually shares her second hand purchases by sending photos to her second hand passionate friends, since she believes that they better understand the challenge of finding vintage clothes. In addition, Angelica expresses her perceived meaningfulness of the community of sustainable consumers she is part of, by receiving inspiration, motivation and a feeling of belonging to a group.

Researcher: *"You have explained that it requires more knowledge to create an outfit when you purchase second hand clothes. How do you know what to wear?"*

Angelica: *"Friends and other people, stylists. You have your role models or icons that you follow or get inspiration from. Then, I believe that this movement of people who wants to think differently about consumption, you motivate each other, encourage. To know how to create a more sustainable wardrobe. To*

use different items in several ways. So I would not say that I am the one who came up with it, instead it is more like imitating within the community. But I would say that it feels more creative and less regulated. Perhaps more personal.”

This behavior and attitude clearly shows how the symbolic meanings attached to material objects are linked to relationships with other individuals (Kleine et al., 1995), since the second hand consumption is a shared interest among the respondents. It also illustrates how these connections are encouraging their circular and sustainable consumption, since they use their communities to both sell and purchase clothes, as well as to collect inspiration regarding usefulness of already owned clothes. Besides, social interactions with others reinforce the perceived self-identity (Stets & Burke, 2000) of the respondents, since individuals in the communities inspire each other to consume clothes in a more sustainable, creative and different manner.

Outside of their communities, both Maria and Linda describe themselves as perceived by their friends or other people as ‘someone who is interested and has good knowledge in fashion’, and that their fashion interest constitutes an important part of their respective identities and the image they want to portray of themselves. Linda wants people to know which group she belongs to based on her educational background as a textile student, while she at the same time clearly wants to differentiate herself from her job colleagues that are less interested in fashion.

Researcher: *“Do you think that you would have different clothes if you did not study to become a textile engineer?”*

Linda: *“I mean, perhaps if I never started to study here. But I have had a study break for almost two years and I was working instead, and I was working at an office. And I still dressed like I used to. Even if the job was at a customer service, and did not deal with fashion, more IT and support and such. And the other people working there were just wearing jeans and a hoodie, and they didn’t care at all about fashion, clothes or trends. They don’t know anything about that. I haven’t adapted myself to them, I have continued to dress like I usually do. Perhaps I have tried even more weird things, even if, in my opinion, these people with boring clothes have surrounded me.”*

Both Maria and Linda actively create their self-identities in relation to other individuals (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), since they describe themselves as more interested and into fashion compared to others. As a consequence, the respondents experience themselves as belonging to a certain social group by wearing different items than the mass (Niinimäki et al., 2010; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). The respondents thereby use clothing

as a means to express symbolic meanings for both themselves and other people (Belk, 1988; McNeill & Venter, 2019; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), since they use their clothing to communicate their belonging to a sustainable community while at the same time differentiating themselves from other groups with more commercial consumption practices.

Creativity

It is evident that all respondents categorized as circular consumers perceive their consumption of clothes as a chance of be playful and creative with their clothing and style. They all share a perception of their consumption of second hand clothes as being a creative process or art creation (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013; Fredriksson, 2016). Being a circular consumer allows the respondents to be more open to purchase experimental items from second hand stores. As stated by Linda, she likes to experiment with different patterns and colors of her clothes, and argues that fashion is a way of keeping her creativity alive. By taking part in a creative process of matching her clothes every day, she is humbled by the fact that the result could differ, but she is always the creator that decides what to wear. Similarly, by playing with different items and colors, Angelica argues that fashion becomes a creative process and a way to reach a feeling of happiness. Since Angelica is working as a priest and often is in contact with deeper and existential questions, fashion becomes a way to escape everyday life as an activity of creation that brings wellbeing. As a consequence, positive feelings associated with consuming fashion strengthen the perceived meaning of the respondents’ clothes (Niinimäki et al., 2010).

Maria also likes purchasing items that could be considered both beautiful and ugly. She likes the feeling of wearing pieces that makes people ask themselves ‘what is she wearing?’, and to amaze them through her clothes. According to Maria she does not find it interesting to wear a regular pair of jeans. She is not attracted to items that are 100 percent beautiful, since she believes that clothing can offer her something more than solely its appearance.

Maria: *“I mean, it is weird, but I find it tempting with beautiful-ugly items for which you do not know if it is nice or just weird. And this dress was just like that. It could both be a hit or a miss when trying it on. But it fitted me and it was a hit. Because it’s an eye-catcher in some way.”*

The consumption of items that Maria does not necessarily perceive to be aesthetically attractive could be seen as a contradiction to what Niinimäki et al. (2010) describe as a perceived meaning of consuming clothes due to an aesthetic ideal. Although, since the

items are consumed due to its more 'ugly' or 'weird' design, the consumption is still based on its appearance, as a meaning of consuming fashion. However, as stated in previous research, consumption from this perspective is rather based on the symbolic meaning attached to a visual expression (Niinimäki et al., 2010), to reach a feeling of creativity (Fredriksson, 2016). The reason is that Maria is striving to consume these items to create a reaction or eye-opener among surrounding people, and to oppose social norms and ideals (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

Angelica clarifies that consumption of second hand clothing requires a greater effort of creative work for her as a consumer, since she does not permit the regular clothing chains to dictate her outfits. It offers a feeling of having more power as a consumer, compared to consuming clothes at a fast fashion store where the creative job of matching items is already made. Hence, Angelica states that fashion also becomes a political issue (Murray, 2002), and that it is her right to be herself and to express who she is by either avoiding or embodying clothing associated with various cultural meanings. The freedom of being the creator of one's own clothing style, mentioned by both Linda and Angelica, could be seen as a counter movement to the phenomenon of governmentality by the fashion industry (Zwick et al., 2008). Both respondents oppose and are skeptical towards the constructed market of freedom of which newly produced fashion products are a part, as well as being a passive consumer adapting to 'ready identities' created by advertisers and fashion brands (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006; Fredriksson, 2016; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Instead, they are striving towards experiencing more authentic consumer power and creativity by being the creators of their own lives (Fredriksson, 2016).

Uniqueness

Among the circular consumers, clothes seemingly constitute a means to break away from norms of being an idealized female fashion consumer. Instead, the respondents seek a meaning of being unique (Fredriksson, 2016; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Maria discuss her idea of breaking norms of solely wearing clothing for female consumers due to its appearance and beauty ideals, and how she instead has begun to purchase male fashion of greater quality and more timelessness. Likewise, she does not prefer clothes with slim figure or clothes that are 'too feminine'.

Researcher: "You mention that you usually purchase clothes from the men's department. Could you explain that more in detail?"

Maria: "It is usually clothes with a better quality, I believe. Then, it is more timeless and there are much

more woven items. /.../ I think that we have been taught our whole life that we should be pretty and that our appearance means so much. But they have put more soul into every item. Instead of that we should have perhaps ten items, they should have one. Therefore, I generally like these items better."

This illustrates how Maria opposes socio-cultural gender norms of fashion (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), to not solely wear what is considered 'female clothing' and instead evaluate an item based on quality and personal preferences. In addition, her opposition towards the 'too feminine' clothing also illustrates how she has a willingness to reach uniqueness through clothes symbolizing masculinity rather than femininity (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

Both Maria and Linda do not appreciate looking like everyone else, but rather strive to reach a feeling of being unique and different. Linda explains how she is motivated to dress uniquely when she is surrounded by people that avoid standing out from the crowd. This is a feeling that Linda did not experience during her high school studies since that was a period which was characterized by the willingness to fit in and look like everyone else. Arguably, this was a period during which she was more prone to consume a lot of clothing as a means to pursue a self-identity and that suited the social environment, due to her youth (McNeill & Venter, 2019). Today, the uniqueness and perception of being 'too much' gives her positive feelings and confidence. Continuing, Angelica claims that she also likes the feeling of being different, and to make people pay attention to her. As a priest, she appreciates breaking norms and opposing preconceptions about her clothing, and to express values different from the ones she believes people usually associate with someone working in a church.

Angelica: "I believe I use to look at other people and ask myself 'what does she or he want to say with that?'. But I also think that people with my occupation are affected as well. I work in a church and there could be a lot of prejudices about what a priest should look like. And I think I like the idea of breaking that norm. It feels important to me to communicate that the church is modern, trendy, and relevant. And for me, fashion is a way to communicate that."

As illustrated, the respondents use fashion as a countermovement opposing the common strive towards viewing clothes as entailing meanings of social identification and acceptance of other people, as well as cultural and social rules (Uotila, 1995; Roach & Eicher, 1973). Instead, the respondents use their clothes to express a meaning of being unique and different from the mass (McNeill & Venter, 2019; Thompson &

Haytko, 1997; Roos, 2019). Their clothing items becomes cultural and symbolic artifacts when creating their self-images (Belk, 1988) of being unique individuals with an independent and personal style.

Angelica also discuss how she believes that many women consider themselves as incapable of wearing colorful or special clothes. However, she argues that her courage to wear these clothes expresses female dignity, that she is worthy of wearing color and that she could wear all kinds of clothes. She means that clothes could strengthen a feeling of self-esteem and also could grant her the political power of choosing herself what meanings she wishes to be associated with, as a leader instead of a follower (Murray, 2002; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). She portrays an image of herself as being a 'colorful parrot' that makes people around her feel curious and perhaps somewhat provoked by her clothes. Accordingly, she does not believe in the idea of being limited by norms to fit in, and not being able to feel free to express who she is. Angelica use her clothes to oppose fashion ideals and 'ready styles' (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), to instead reach a perception of being unique. By wearing certain items, her clothes also become part of the narrative of who she is as an individual (Thompson, 1995). Conclusively, the circular consumer view consumption of clothing as a way of challenging fashion norms, and express symbolic values connected to different opinions and personal values (Niinimäki et al., 2010) of what type of clothes and colors they prefer, and their courage and confidence to be different.

The Critical Consumer

Consumers of the second conception of the slow fashion category perceive clothing consumption as an act that requires careful consideration of sustainable aspects, a perspective that is immensely influenced by obtained knowledge and information regarding global sustainability issues in totality. This perspective on clothing consumption is shared by the two slow fashion consumers Fiona and Annie, and implies that the meaning of clothing consumption entails a long-term perspective on clothing as investments (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013), but most importantly a responsibility of being critical towards the contemporary consumption society. They both dress in more neutral and classical clothing items compared to the circular consumers, and their ethical values have an immense impact on their clothing consumption behavior. Since both Fiona and Annie have adapted their entire lives as well as their consumption to their personal standpoints, their consumption constitutes both a way of living, but also a way of expressing their individualities (Wang Chengbing, 2011). Consequently, their strong ethical commitments and values clearly express their

willingness to purchase sustainably produced clothing (Niinimäki et al., 2010).

Value Expression

Clothing consumption, from Fiona and Annie's point of view, is to a large extent controlled by meanings of expressing personal values and standpoints in regards of sustainability in the fashion industry. They are deeply devoted to only purchasing clothes from either sustainable brands or second hand stores, and neither one of them is interested in purchasing a large amount of clothes. As a consequence, both respondents are knowingly resistant towards the powers of fast fashion marketers as cultural mediators shaping wants and needs of consumers (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). This is mainly due to their large interest in sustainable consumption, their wide knowledge regarding industry issues, as well as their unwillingness to support unsustainable businesses. However, Fiona does not want to support the wool production industry, but still allows herself to purchase wool as long as she believes the item will become an essential component in her wardrobe and not jeopardize her self-image of having a sustainable lifestyle.

Fiona: *"I have a few things I stand for. I don't buy any pure polyester. I am also a vegan, and before, I never used to buy any wool or leather clothes and such. Wool really is a good material in some ways, but I still do not support that industry, how we take advantage of animals and such things. I have a pair of Filippa K suit pants that I bought perhaps a year ago, newly produced. They contain wool, however, they are Filippa K, which I consider have a fair production, and they are very open with how they operate and from where every material originates and so on. It has been worth it because I use them so much, and I think they are timeless."*

This attitude strongly highlights how consumption could function as a representation of who someone is (Gabriel & Lang, 2006), since Fiona shows concern of being misjudged by others for consuming wool. Also, it seems as her decision to commit to a vegan food lifestyle possibly has spilled over into her clothing consumption, since she strives towards a vegan clothing consumption. Overall, she clearly communicates her sustainable values through both clothing consumption processes but also through the sustainable brands she chooses to wear. In addition, Fiona's sustainable clothes constitutes symbols communicating that she is a sustainable consumer (Solomon, 1983), since the symbolic meanings attached to her clothes, in terms of sustainable brands, quality and style, constitute important parts of her identity construction.

Fiona has collected a large amount of knowledge regarding sustainable brands and slow fashion production on Instagram, which has come to shape her values and requirements on brands she chooses to support. She asks herself why people always seem to want to purchase more, and has developed a resistance towards the temptation of falling for desires of newly produced things. Thereby, Fiona actively refuses to seek novelty by constantly purchasing new clothing. Instead, she has made it almost a 'life project' to create a sustainable wardrobe, and careful consideration lies behind every purchase since she does not permit herself to make impulse purchase decisions. Similarly, Annie associates purchasing new clothes with negative feelings since she is aware of the negative effects overconsumption has on the planet, both in terms of wasting resources in over production and disposal of clothing, but also in terms of socially unsustainable working conditions throughout the value chains of many fashion companies. According to Annie, this attitude has its foundation in her working as a Fairtrade ambassador approximately ten years ago.

Annie: *"I have a lot of, I think, anxiety in relation to new clothes. That there is often guilt in purchasing. I have had a skiing jacket for eleven-twelve years now and it's beginning to become quite worn out. So yesterday I bought a new one, and then I came home and was like 'perhaps the old one would have lasted a little while longer', and my husband was like 'Annie, now you have a new jacket'. I think that is because I'm so knowledgeable in the issue. But I have also always had a strong feeling for fairness issues, and the fact that the issue of clothing consumption is global has left a mark in me since long back."*

The resistance towards novelty by the respondents could be seen as a contradiction to Niinimäki et al. (2010) claiming that many consumers are consuming clothes to seek novelty and change for social acceptance by a society in change. Compared to the impulsive consumers of fast fashion, whom experience these negative feelings after some purchases, Annie and Fiona avoid these emotions since they carefully consider what they purchase. Therefore, a more sustainable behavior requires more thoughtfulness before consuming clothes. One could discuss how both Fiona and Annie are immune towards the governmentality of fashion actors, which otherwise would imply that they are steered towards making certain decisions (Foucault, 1978). Instead, they are eager to avoid the influence of the fast fashion industry, as part of their commitment to a more sustainable lifestyle. By resisting meanings embodied in ready styles created by fast fashion brands, both Fiona and Annie create their own personal style at the same time as they are communicating that they are knowledgeable

in regards of the clothing industry (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

Responsibility

A second meaning associated with purchasing clothing for the critical consumer is seeing clothing consumption as an act of responsibility that contributes to a more sustainable planet. This perception is closely intertwined with the personal values of Fiona and Annie, since they primarily purchase second hand clothing, and choose to purchase newly produced clothing from carefully selected sustainable brands. For them, brands function as cultural artifacts carrying meanings that they believe will provide them with a specific self-image (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), since both respondents want to be associated with brands that are aligned with their commitment to sustainable consumption. This further implies that the critical consumer is somewhat concerned with establishing a uniqueness by differentiating oneself from the mass (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) of 'non-critical consumers', but it also shows an attempt to reach a certain social status position in the social context of other like-minded sustainability passionate consumers (Ulver & Ostberg, 2014). However, what differentiates the critical consumer from the social consumer of fast fashion in the quest for social status is that the critical consumer raises their status by consuming as little as possible and thereby communicating a knowledgeability regarding the sustainability issue, while the social consumer consumes to create an idealized self-image based on quantity rather than quality of garments.

Both Annie and Fiona justify their purchases of newly produced clothing with it being difficult to find pants and similar at second hand stores due to the obvious limitations in the second hand supply. They are both willing to spend a larger amount of money on sustainably produced clothing they know will last for a longer period, and they actively try to stay away from the temptation of purchasing fast fashion as well as unnecessary clothing items. Annie once bought an item which she considered to be outrageously expensive, but she convinced herself that she would use it until she is 50 years old, and that reasoning signifies her attitude towards clothing as long-term investments. Neither one of Fiona or Annie are searching for instant gratification through clothing consumption, but are instead deeply concerned about making personal decisions about clothing, instead of being governed or steered by fashion trends and ideals which is a common stress among fashion consumers (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Petersson McIntyre, 2019). They both see a greater value and utility in purchasing fewer highly priced

clothing items of greater quality as investments (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013).

Further, Fiona is deeply devoted to treating all clothing items with respect and caring for them to prolong their durability. For example, she avoids wearing her more fragile clothes at home because she does not want her clothes to become worn out or destroyed. She also describes how she perceives an item that break or disappear as a waste of resources.

Fiona: *“If a clothing item would disappear or break and it was impossible to repair, which you always can do, then it would be very unfortunate because I feel that either the money or the entire production and all resources are gone in some way. That would feel more like something has been wasted. That is more how I feel about clothing items.”*

As illustrated, Fiona and Annie differ from the circular consumers since they seemingly assess the sustainability of clothing from a wider holistic perspective, where aspects such as production, working conditions, resources used and durability of clothing items are considered. In contradiction to findings in previous studies, stating that social and environmental implications of sustainable consumption are unlikely motivators (McNeill & Venter, 2019), both Fiona and Annie proves the opposite. They both have committed to a holistic approach towards sustainable consumption (Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2010), where they consider all aspects of the fashion industry to determine whether clothing items and brands are sustainable or not, in their opinion. Further, both respondents are concerned with transparency of the brands they choose to support (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013), and they agree with it being an essential part of the slow fashion movement.

Necessity

A third meaning is consuming as a means to meet practical and basic needs, as a necessity (Gregson et al., 2002). This could be seen as a direct consequence of clothing to communicate personal values, since the sustainable mindset of Fiona and Annie prohibits them from solely consuming clothes for meanings of pleasure or aesthetic values. Fiona is concerned with only purchasing a few carefully selected clothing items that are comfortable, neutral and easy to match with the rest of the wardrobe. If she decides to purchase something trendy, she purchases it in a second hand store since she does not wish to contribute to the production of new and trendy clothing. Further, Fiona has in a structured manner and based on intense planning achieved a ‘basic’ or ‘capsule’ wardrobe where most of her clothes match each other. According to herself, this behavior aligns well with her personality. Fiona has invested

much time and effort into building a wardrobe where all clothing items serves a purpose.

Fiona: *“I lived in Stockholm last spring and when I moved I cleaned out my closet to really try and find a structure in the wardrobe and not keep things I didn’t use. Then I gave everything to friends and family, and some to second hand. But all things I have left are things I truly use. Due to the clean out, I have been like ‘okay, i want to try and create a basic wardrobe’. Which I now think that I have managed to. I even wrote a list of things I needed, like a white t-shirt, a black t-shirt. Of course I have items I use less, but I do use all of them.”*

Fiona’s consumption opposes the perception that clothing to an increasing extent are expected to possess solely symbolic meanings (Bai et al., 2014), since her consumption rather is satisfying functional needs. At the same time, both Fiona and Annie arguably use clothing as cultural artifacts that symbolizes their individual sustainable identities (McNeill & Venter, 2019). By contrasting their consumption behavior with less sustainable behaviors of others, an intended self-identity is created by communicating a perception of clothes as needs instead of amusement or status symbols. Further, Annie view clothing from a functional long-term perspective, for instance, she bought a breastfeeding bra for her wedding, even though her baby was not due until a few months later, since she knew she would need one and decided to purchase one bra instead of two. She describes a winter jacket she has held onto for many years due to its functionality, although it is far from trendy. She has an attitude where new clothing items should represent solutions to problems.

Annie: *“I think I have become much less sensitive to fashion trends. I think it is more important that I experience something as being ‘me’, than it being trendy. I don’t think people would describe me as trendy. For example, I have had an issue when breastfeeding since I haven’t been able to wear regular jackets. Then I complained to my mom and she was like ‘I have a thick winter jacket’, one of those real down jackets. And I was like ‘so perfect, I can even fit the baby inside the jacket, and it’s so warm, I really love it’. But my husband thinks it’s horrible. He is like ‘I pay, can we please just go and buy a new jacket for you?’. And I’m like ‘this jacket is perfect, it fulfills all my needs’.”*

Both Fiona and Annie’s strong ethical commitments make them perceive ethics as a more important value than other aspects which consequently leads them to purchase clothing in a more sustainable manner (Niinimäki et al., 2010). Instead of being governed by new trends, both respondents are rather steered by their

strong commitment to making sustainable decisions and purchasing clothing items that will last for a long time (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013) due to timelessness, usefulness and comfortability. Annie states that as she has grown older she has become more secure in her own style and has been distancing herself from the pressure of following trends and fear of missing them, which she feels has been associated with anxiety and stress due to insecurity of not being accepted by others. Now, she instead chooses more classical clothes since she perceives that style as being both more 'safe', but also more comfortable in terms of having learned what clothes that suits her. Since Annie has chosen to distance herself from the pressure to follow fashion trends, she has also overcome these earlier negative emotions. It could also be stated that both Annie and Fiona use resistance towards consumption as a symbol expressing identity (Gabriel & Lang, 2006), by communicating their sustainable concern and solely purchasing items to fulfill functional needs.

Social Relationship

Both Fiona and Annie attach meanings of social relationships to their clothing consumption, but in slightly different ways. Fiona is concerned with keeping up with expectations of fellow knowledgeable consumers with whom she has developed social relationships online. Through social relationships with both companies and other individuals, she has gained a greater knowledge regarding sustainability as a macro issue. Due to her fear of losing reliability and trust of established social relationships, she carefully considers her purchases and mentions how a 'mistake' possibly could hurt her self-image as a sustainable consumer. This is particularly evident since Fiona expresses some concern about being judged as an 'unsustainable consumer' for simply making one unsustainable consumption choice.

Researcher: *"Could you imagine purchasing fast fashion clothing today?"*

Fiona: *"I bought a cap from Weekday. They had some eco-cotton collection a year ago or something, and that is like... or they are obviously owned by H&M. Yes, so now I did. But I try not to blame myself when doing things that aren't as good. You just have to try not to... That is also something common on Instagram, that people can be so very judgmental."*

This shows that Fiona is somewhat concerned with consuming clothes that could lead her to not being accepted by other people, showing that also this type of consumer group is concerned with social acceptance (Niinimäki et al., 2010). Fiona argues that she finds these relationships to be immensely inspirational and encouraging in creating more sustainable consumption

habits. One could argue that the pressure to consume sustainably either allows or prevents the respondents to take part in this network, thereby confirming that possessions and their symbolic meaning play part in reflecting connection to others (Kleine et al., 1995; Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

Annie attaches a slightly different meaning to clothing consumption in terms of social relationships, where she appreciates associating clothing with her friends, family and other loved ones since it contributes to a feeling of being part of social relationships. For example, Annie experiences that borrowing clothes and sharing clothes among friends grants clothing items a greater value and results in stronger social connections.

Annie: *"What characterizes this year is truly borrowed clothes. I have borrowed clothes from many different friends and have had a large borrowed wardrobe. /.../ I bought some pregnancy clothes on Blocket. And now I have these clothes in a bag and, I have three-four friends who are pregnant this year, and it is so nice to have this bag and be able to say, 'I have clothes, borrow from me'. And that feeling is somewhat, like sparkling eyes on those who I have borrowed clothes from. It is a part of the mutual experience of being pregnant. Knowing what it is like not fitting into your regular pants. It becomes a social bond in that way. You are very considerate of that, to be able to pass on and enable others to use them."*

Annie's collaborative clothing consumption of sharing and its symbolic meaning thereby enables her to be part of a social group (Niinimäki et al., 2010) of other like-minded individuals with a similar interest in similar consumption habits. In addition, her consumption habits are rather based on collective meaning of sharing, instead of solely fulfilling an individual desire (Belk, 2010). Further, Annie's parents have raised her to choose quality before quantity in terms of consuming clothes. Her family has always held onto special clothing items for many years, for example a Fjällräven bomber jacket, showing during her upbringing that old items can be valuable and should be responsibly nurtured. This shows how Annie's fashion consumption habits are shaped throughout her childhood (Markkula & Moisander, 2012), since her parents had a similar consumption behavior.

Annie attach meanings of memories and stories connected to social relationships to her clothing items, which she argues provides them with a greater value. For example, a cardigan she often wears has been passed down from her grandmother to her mother, and then from her mother to her. In that sense, the aesthetics of clothing and brand symbolism seems less important in comparison to her own perception of what this

specific clothing item symbolizes. As a consequence, her clothes offer her meaning related to a perceived symbolism (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Creusen & Schoormans, 2005) which in this example is linked to memories, rather than purely a functional need. Her clothes also become a link in her relationships with other people (Solomon, 1983), since her cardigan is an item that has been passed down through generations in her family.

Discussion of the Identity Conceptions

In this section, the differences and similarities between the conceptions of fast fashion and slow fashion consumers are discussed in order to develop a deeper understanding of their identity construction and perceived consumption meanings in relation to one another. The conceptions are discussed in relation to four themes; *Social Relations*, *Novelty*, *Sustainability*, as well as *Norms*, *Status and Ideals*.

Social Relations

The analysis above show that clothing consumption of both fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers are affected by social relations. This confirms previous research stating that consumers share meanings as social groups, and identify as well as confirm their self-images in relation to the social environment (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Belk, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000). While the social consumer is affected by a willingness to imitate others and adapt to social contexts, such as work or school environments, the circular consumer is motivated to follow a more circular consumption pattern and maintain a fashion interest due to social communities. In addition, the critical consumer is affected through social means since social relationships with family and friends are strengthened by exchanging both clothes and knowledge about sustainable consumption.

For all conceptions, social meanings are related to being part of a social group (Niinimäki et al., 2010) as well as fitting social norms or rules (Roach & Eicher, 1973; Uotila, 1995), although these meanings are found to be different in terms of influence of sustainable consciousness. For instance, both the impulsive consumer and the social consumer are striving towards adapting to and imitating social surroundings, for example by complying with fashion ideals (Niinimäki et al., 2010; Gabriel & Lang, 2006) created by fast fashion brands and market actors. The social consumer is further more eager to adapt to these social rules in fear of being excluded from the group, and is constantly searching for confirmation of fitting in through compliments. On the contrary, the community of circular consumers tend to motivate each other to be

more sustainable (Cervellon & Wernerfelt, 2012), as well as more unique in their clothing style by breaking norms about ideals and gender stereotypes (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), and are less dependent on the approval of others. As a result, both fast fashion and slow fashion consumers affect consumption behavior through social groups. As social norms in each community differ in terms of sustainable awareness and regard, it results in a more or less sustainable consumption behavior. Consequently, an increase of sustainable fashion ideals and norms in society would possibly lead to a changed social environment for both fast fashion groups, likely leading to increased shares of sustainable clothing consumption.

Novelty

The search for novelty through clothing consumption (Niinimäki et al., 2010) takes different shapes for fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers. The critical consumer resists the pressure from marketers and consumer culture to seek novelty based on new trends and fashion ideals. This consumer avoids purchasing clothes mainly based on emotions, amusement or novelty, which seemingly is more common for the other three conceptions. For example, both the social consumer and the impulsive consumer is somewhat steered by a quest to renew oneself due to the pressure of fitting in with a society that is constantly changing based on fashion trends, media and other affecting factors encouraging consumption (Niinimäki et al., 2010; Roach & Eicher, 1973).

However, both the impulsive consumer of fast fashion and the circular consumer of slow fashion seek novelty and regularly update their wardrobe due to lower prices, which according to Joy et al. (2012) is a common tool to encourage fast fashion consumption. This chase after 'the new' has different origins and purposes for the two conceptions. The impulsive consumer places little consideration and reflection into questioning purchases of new clothes, and is steered by emotions where new clothing could represent a new positive mood (Raunio, 1995). The circular consumer instead seeks novelty through second hand clothes as an outlet of creativity or art creation (Fredriksson, 2016; Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013), and as a means to differentiate their clothing style from other consumers (Niinimäki et al., 2010; Thompson & Haytko, 1997), with a more commercial clothing style. Both the impulsive consumer and the circular consumer purchase new clothes regularly, with the difference being the consideration of sustainability. The impulsive consumer contributes to the upholding of an unsustainable production pace and constant flows of new and trendy clothing, while the circular consumer rather is eager to creatively make use of resources which already exists (Fredriksson, 2016).

However, one could claim that the second hand market, and its associated circularity and inflow of newly produced clothing, upholds an unsustainable fashion production. Although it is argued that clothing on the secondary market is more sustainable than newly produced clothing (McNeill & Venter, 2019), an increase in second hand consumption arguably does not represent a long-term solution to the large fashion industry issues. The fact that only 12 percent of post-used clothing are resold second hand highlights the problematics associated with the current fashion business models, since most disposed clothing becomes waste (Ellen MacArthur Foundations & Circular Fibres Initiative, 2017). Therefore, clothing must be produced to have longer life-cycles by having better quality, to enable clothing to be resold or reused to a greater extent. Arguably, the second hand market still fulfills a desire of new and trendy clothing, while also creating an illusion that unnecessary consumption is accepted as long as unwanted items are left for resale. For that reason, sharing activities focusing on collectivity rather than individuality (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Belk, 2010) represents a more long-term solution that would lower the negative effects associated with novelty, while still enabling a similar consumption meaning. For instance, renting or sharing clothes within social groups are examples of sharing activities focusing on collectivity.

Sustainability

Although both the circular consumer and the critical consumer have sustainable and ethical values in common when consuming clothes, their sustainable values are communicated in different ways. The circular consumer is more concerned with being seen as a sustainable consumer, while the critical consumer is less concerned with how the social environment perceive them. The first conception use clothing to add symbolic meanings to their identity as well as to communicate associations to a certain social community (Kleine et al., 1995), while the second conception rather use resistance towards consumption to communicate their identity (Gabriel & Lang, 2006), which also differentiates the critical consumer from all three other conceptions. The critical consumer is less concerned with communicating a certain visual appearance, confirming that symbolic meanings of consumption are more important than aesthetic appearance (Niinimäki et al., 2010), but is rather interested in avoiding feelings of guilt and anxiety in association with clothing consumption. These negative feelings are commonly experienced by the impulsive consumer of fast fashion, often feeling regretful after making unnecessary consumption choices. Thereby, the critical consumer implies that what possibly could prevent negative feelings of guilt and anxiety is a

greater consideration prior to purchases instead of impulsive decisions based on a desire for instant gratification, which constitutes the foundation of the fast fashion clothing industry (Crane, 2016). A change in behavior requires a greater knowledge of sustainability issues related to clothing consumption, as a means to affect the personal values of fast fashion consumers to include sustainability concerns.

Norms, Status and Ideals

Both two slow fashion conceptions use clothing to express a self-image based on sustainable and ethical values. Together, they show a resistance towards norms, ideals and a passivity as a fashion consumer, through meanings of uniqueness, creativity or lower consumption levels (Fredriksson, 2016; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Fast fashion consumers instead tend to utilize cultural meanings of clothing to create an idealized image of themselves, or communicate as well as maintain a certain social status position in relation to a social setting (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Ulver & Ostberg, 2014). Consequently, the social consumer could become for example 'professional', 'trendy' or 'fun', and hope that their surroundings will interpret them as intended. The critical consumer seemingly also use consumption to associate oneself with a certain social status, but rather as a tool to gain respect and admiration in a social context of other like-minded sustainability passionate consumers, by consuming as sustainably and as little as possible.

The difference in terms of consuming clothes to reach an identity for fast fashion consumers or slow fashion consumers is somewhat based on different levels of confidence and self-awareness of who one is outside of the framework of ideals created by the fashion industry, media and other actors. The actions of fast fashion consumers are further framed or governed by consumer culture and marketing (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Foucault, 1978), and their personal values or stance in regards of sustainability issues is not communicated through their clothing consumption. When choosing an alternative consumption pattern, rather than following new trends of fast fashion brands, consumers are encouraged to more carefully consider what they actually like and what items that suits them, without the same influence of others. However, even if the self-image of slow fashion consumers differs from the conceptions of fast fashion, material objects still contribute to the establishing of self-identity for both consumer categories (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013). This shows how a dependence on symbolic meanings integrated into clothing is still necessary in building a desired self-identity (Gabriel & Lang, 2006), no matter which category or conception a consumer belongs to.

For example, even if a consumer wishes to portray oneself as either unique or trendy, some clothing evidently is required. Consequently, this behavior upholds a constant production and consumption of clothing, even though the clothing consumed differs in terms of quantity, brand, life-span (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013; Rompay et al., 2009) as well as symbolic meanings.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article is to add knowledge to previous research on fashion-interested female consumers and their cultural identity meanings (e.g. Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Niinimäki et al., 2010; Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013; McNeill & Venter, 2019) by studying how fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers attach identity meanings to the clothing they consume. This study is conducted with the purpose of answering the research question: “*How do fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers differ in their conception of identity meanings connected to clothing consumption?*”, in order to contribute with implications for how a more sustainable fashion consumption can be encouraged. Based on ten phenomenological in-depth interviews, two subgroups with different conceptions are identified within both the fast fashion and the slow fashion category. The results imply that the identity meanings differ between the fast fashion and slow fashion categories depending on which one of the four conceptions the consumers belong to in regards of their clothing consumption.

Fast fashion consumers are found to possess a conception of either *The Impulsive Consumer* or *The Social Consumer*. The impulsive consumer search for novelty in a quest for positive feelings by consuming clothes based on new trends, social relations, fashion ideals, and low prices (Tokatli & Kizilgun, 2008; Petersson McIntyre, 2019; Crane, 2016; Joy et al., 2012; Markkula & Moisaner, 2012; Niinimäki et al., 2010), combined with a desire for expressing personality, gaining self-confidence and striving towards an idealized self-image (Petersson McIntyre, 2019; McNeill & Venter, 2019). Moreover, the social consumer perceives clothing as a means for social adaptation to a certain group or context (Belk, 1988; Kleine et al., 1995), where clothing consumption is associated with cultural meanings of social status or reaching an aesthetic ideal image (Wang Chengbing, 2011; Ulver & Ostberg, 2014; Niinimäki et al., 2010; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Hence, clothes are opportunistically used to associate oneself with aspired symbolic values, and practical aspects of clothing are overlooked (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

Slow fashion consumers are found to possess a conception of either *The Circular Consumer* or *The Critical Consumer*. The circular consumer perceives clothing consumption as an experience or reward, by seeking change and finding pleasure in material objects and financial benefits (Petersson McIntyre, 2019; Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013). Through collaborative consumption (McNeill & Venter, 2019), this consumer seeks association with sustainable communities to strengthen their self-image as more sustainable compared to others as well as maintain their interest (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Niinimäki et al., 2010; Kleine et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Belk, 1988; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Cervellon & Wernerfelt, 2012). Clothing is associated with creativity and constitutes an expression of uniqueness to oppose social norms and ideals (Zarley Watson & Yan, 2013; Fredriksson, 2016; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Lastly, the clothing consumption of the critical consumer is guided by greater knowledge and a willingness to express sustainable values, or a resistance towards consumption altogether (Wang Chengbing, 2011; Niinimäki et al., 2010; Solomon, 1983; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Consumption is rather seen as a holistic sustainable responsibility as a consumer (Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2010), and clothing is not only mainly perceived as a necessity based on fulfilling practical needs, but also as a chance to strengthen social bonds through collaborative activities (Solomon, 1983).

Fast fashion consumers and slow fashion consumers show both differences and similarities in how they perceive identity meanings when consuming clothing. The main difference is the consideration for sustainability integrated into their identity seeking, and how this affects their consumption behavior. Both consumer categories perceive clothing consumption meanings as related to social relations as well as novelty, but they express these meanings in diverse ways. Besides, they differ in terms of their level of self-confidence or willingness to oppose social norms and ideals, and what social status positions they seek after. These insights could be applied to consumption and identity construction more generally in contexts outside of the fashion industry, highlighting the interconnection between these different mentioned meanings, when studying what possibly prevents or encourages sustainable consumption. To move towards more sustainable consumption, it is important to recognize how consumers utilize social associations to encourage and inspire each other to consume sustainably. In these social communities, sustainable ideals, norms and status positions are aspired in identity seeking as a result of a greater knowledge about sustainability and a sense of responsibility, but also as a result of criticism of current

rules or norms associated with the contemporary consumption society. Seemingly, this encourages consumers to maintain and develop their sustainable consumption. However, it is possible that the selected respondents are particularly social beings involved in larger social contexts which affects the study, and that the results also would differ if the respondents had a lower interest in clothing. Arguably, a large fashion interest could still constitute a stepping stone towards being willing to learn more about sustainable clothing consumption. Since the driving force for constant new consumption is connected to complying with new trends and external expectations created by consumer culture, finding a solution to the constant search for novelty would represent one key to a more sustainable consumer behavior, possibly minimizing the current overconsumption. For instance, swapping activities or sharing schemes of consumer goods could lead to a transition from constant new purchases, and instead contribute to a more sustainable behavior, stronger social bonds through collective activities and a less individualistic perspective of consumption.

The similarities between the conceptions and their perceived meanings constitutes possibilities to change future consumption patterns to become more sustainable. The reason is that somewhat similar identity meanings could be attained, although consumption behaviors are changed. Metaphorically, one could view the order in which the different conceptions are presented as a staircase where the critical consumer is most concerned with sustainable clothing consumption. The identity construction of the fast fashion conceptions is arguably more concerned with creating an idealized self-image rather than being based on personal values. Thereby, the circular consumer conception offers fast fashion consumers a first step towards a more sustainable consumption behavior, and the critical consumer a further development as ethical values grow stronger and sustainable knowledge increase. An increase in level of confidence and self-awareness, as well as courage to oppose societal norms and ideals, represents possible stepping stones to oppose the governmentality of consumer culture. However, although second hand consumption is preferred before purchasing fast fashion, it still upholds the sales of clothing on the first-hand market and thereby should not be considered a long-term solution to unsustainable clothing consumption. If instead perceiving the critical consumer as the ideal consumer in terms of sustainable behavior, it highlights the importance of contemplation, rationality and functionality when consuming clothing. However, since it is quite unlikely that all consumers would adapt this strategy, the most important is to distance oneself from novelty and instead develop

deeper relationships with clothing based on a more long-term perspective.

Conclusively, to cater for more sustainable consumption, the authors of this study advocate a wider collective perspective on clothing and fashion, rather than a self-centered identity seeking of status or social confirmation through symbolic meanings attached to unsustainable fashion ideals and norms. As seen in this study, consumption related to construction of a symbolic self-identity could be problematic for sustainability reasons, for both fast and slow fashion consumers. An uncoupling between consumption and idealized identity seeking, connected to novelty and the pressure of complying with ever changing fashion trends shaped by media and the fast fashion industry, could arguably result in a more sustainable consumption. Identity seeking in itself is not necessarily an issue, but what is problematic is when identity construction is dependent on constantly purchasing new clothing.

Future Research

While this article studies the identity meanings associated with clothing consumption, suggestions of future research include investigating identity construction through consumption of other consumer goods, focusing on comparing consumers with varying knowledge or awareness of sustainability. This could provide an extension of previous research of identity construction through clothing consumption, since clothing is not the only object providing consumers with symbolic identity meanings (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Another suggestion for future research includes studying identity meanings for slow fashion and fast fashion consumers from a corporate perspective, to further investigate how companies and marketers contribute to the creation of ready consumer identities in the fashion industry, which many seek out due to them representing a simple solution (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). By creating a greater knowledge regarding how, for example, fast fashion companies incorporate symbolic meanings into their products or marketing, insights about the creation of consumer culture and aesthetic ideals could be gathered. Lastly, future research possibly could elaborate on how gender norms affect perceived meanings of clothing consumption (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Since this article found that fast fashion and slow fashion consumers differ in their conception of gender norms in the clothing consumption context, future research could further study how gender norms affect clothing consumption differently for the two consumer categories, seeking either 'feminine' or 'masculine' clothing to either comply with or oppose social norms.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this article provide implications for both fast fashion and slow fashion companies wanting to maintain their business model and further learn about their target market, or needing to adapt to changing consumer behaviors. However, the main contribution and purpose of this study involves how fast fashion companies and marketers can develop more sustainable identity meanings for consumers to seek out in their identity construction process through clothing consumption, as well as how slow fashion companies could attract fast fashion consumers. Hopefully, these managerial implications can provide important guidelines regarding how fast fashion consumers can be steered towards beginning to purchase more sustainable clothing, thereby leading to an important change towards a more sustainable consumer culture along with more sustainable fashion consumption.

- If fast fashion consumers would strive to reach meanings of aesthetic ideals, status or social confirmation by using sustainably produced brands and clothing instead of fast fashion, it would arguably result in a positive transition without completely changing the perceived meaning of clothing or minimizing the interest in fashion. Therefore, companies could choose to collaborate with fashion influencers portraying images or marketing in line with more sustainable values, thereby affecting ideals to become more sustainable. Influencers with a consideration for sustainability could act as leaders in social communities online, guiding fast fashion consumers towards social groups with a greater consideration for sustainability.
- Since fast fashion consumers of the social consumer conception appreciate the possibility of purchasing 'ready identities' to avoid experiencing identity issues and anxiety of creating their own style, sustainable ready identities could be a solution which second hand retailers or sustainable clothing brands could offer to attract fast fashion consumers. Sustainable 'ready identities' also could be used by fast fashion actors wanting to move more towards promoting sustainable consumption.
- Since an increased awareness regarding sustainability lead to more critical consumers, marketers need to increase consumer knowledge through their communication by incorporating information about consequences of overconsumption, etc. This could be useful not only for fast fashion consumers, but also circular

consumers, to move towards lower consumption levels as well as long-term investments in higher quality clothing. However, knowing that the attitude-behavior gap prevents sustainable behavior although consumers possess knowledge regarding these issues, information could be combined with actively making sustainable options more attractive to consumers in comparison to less sustainable options.

- Retailers of both fast fashion and slow fashion need to consider the entire process when analyzing how consumers construct identity through clothing consumption. To prolong the lifespan of clothing, they should encourage consumers to not only nurture their clothing, but also put them to resale or exchange. A further suggestion includes swapping or sharing of clothes to fulfill the desire of novelty using already existing resources. This could lead to sustainable benefits as well as social bonds and stronger relationships with clothing. For example, clothing brands could arrange physical events or create online communities with these purposes. Lastly, marketers could incorporate meanings of novelty into advertising to promote these mentioned approaches.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Guide

Clothing Consumption

- Can you in a detailed manner describe your personal clothing consumption habits?
- Can you in a detailed manner describe three clothing purchases that you made during the latest year?
 - What led you to conduct the purchase? How did it happen?
 - How did the purchase make you feel?
 - How do you feel wearing the clothing item?
 - What does the clothing item mean to you?

Meanings of Favorite Outfit

- Can you describe your favorite outfit and during what circumstances/situations you enjoy wearing it?
 - How do you feel when wearing this outfit?
 - Can you give an example of a recent situation in which you wore this outfit?
 - What does the clothing items in this outfit mean/signify to you?
 - Can you describe how your favorite outfit relates to your overall clothing style?
 - Can you further explain how you would describe your personal clothing style?
 - How would you estimate that your clothing style will change in the future?

Meanings of Clothing Consumption

- Can you describe what meaning clothing and fashion has to you personally?
 - Can you give an example of situations in which your clothing is of particular importance to you?
 - How have your interest in clothing and fashion come about?
 - What inspires your interest in clothing consumption?

Identity Meanings and External Effects

- What aspects do you value as important when consuming clothing?
- How would you describe that your clothing is related (or not related) to who you are and your identity?
- How would you describe that your clothing style is either aligned with or differs from the styles of individuals in your surroundings?
- How do you experience that others interpret you when you wear your clothes?
- How do the opinions of others affect how you dress?
- How would you estimate that your clothing style and clothing consumption would differ if you had different social relations or a different occupation?