Labelling Sustainability

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- Can Fast Fashion Become Sustainable with the Use of Environmental and Ethical Labels?
Preface

We want to thank our respondents for answering our questions and providing us with interesting thoughts and opinions. We would also like to thank our thesis advisor, Professor Olof Holm at the Swedish School of Textiles, for his comments and guidance during the process.

You made this thesis possible, thank you!

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Abstract: The concept of sustainability has become apparent in the fast fashion business. In recent years many companies have started to label the more sustainable garments in order to make it easier for the consumer to make conscious decisions while shopping. However, this raises many questions due to unclear use of sustainability terms and the contradiction between environmental and ethical aspects in regards to the fashion industry.

The purpose of the thesis is to raise a discussion concerning the use of sustainability labels within fast fashion. In order to reach the purpose, the following questions were developed: “What do different sustainability labels mean according to the fast fashion business?”, “What knowledge do the customers have about different sustainability labels?” and “Do the labels have an impact in the buying decision making process?”

We have done an explorative study to investigate a phenomenon and highlight a potential problem in this field of studies. Since the aim of the empirical research is to gain insight of the consumers' attitudes and knowledge, the study is to a large extent qualitative. We conducted a survey in which purposive sampling was used as we wanted the respondents to fulfil certain criteria. In addition to the survey, we also conducted research on a number of fast fashion companies to get an idea of what information the customers would be naturally exposed to.

The results from the study show that sustainability labels within fast fashion have not experienced their intended success among their largest consumer group. It has not yet reached desired effects on the consumption behaviour, the interest for sustainability nor the knowledge among the young female respondents. One can therefore discuss the utility of using labels within fast fashion.

Key words: Fast fashion, Sustainability, Eco-labels, Consumer behaviour, CSM, Consumption
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APPENDIX
1. INTRODUCTION

The chapter acts as a background of our chosen field of research. This is followed by the problem discussion that developed into our research questions, as well as the purpose of the study.

1.1 Background – The rise of fast fashion

The origin of modern-day fashion consumption can be traced back to several historic and cultural changes in society. The industrial revolution caused great change since mass production provided customers with a wide range of choice and products at lower prices, this made the pleasures of consumption available to ordinary people (Kawamura, 2005). In other words, “…fashion, which had been the epitome of luxury, was democratized and consumption behaviour began to change” (Kawamura, 2005, p. 92). The industrialized society also caused changes in the economic structures: societies became less dependent on autarky and people started to move into city areas. Urbanization created new opportunities for commerce and in the beginning of the 20th century new types of trading firms and retail outlets started to emerge in the bigger cities (Östberg & Kaijser, 2010). Consumption became part of the daily life, instead of just trade events on specific dates, and stores and shop windows encouraged people to plan and dream about future purchases (Östberg & Kaijser, 2010). Retailers and marketers started to take advantage of the commercial dynamics of fashion and the society began to value fashion and new things more than the old ones (Kawamura, 2005).

Until the late 80’s fashion retailers usually had two main collections per year, spring/summer and autumn/winter, but in the 90’s things changed drastically and the era of “super cheap and super fast” began (Pasquinelli, 2012). The fast-moving nature of fashion, combined with the ability to outsource and produce cheap clothes has created a twist in the modern fashion business (Welters & Lillethun, 2007, p. 351). Fashion companies are increasingly using time as a way of enhancing their competitiveness and the fashion consumer of today expects and thrives on constant change which means that new products have to be available in the stores on a regular basis (Bruce & Daly, 2006). The objective for fast fashion companies is to get clothing into the stores within the shortest possible time frame, this is often combined with limited ranges and rapid stock turnaround (Bruce & Daly, 2006). There seem to be an especially high demand for cheap fast fashion among younger women since they tend to be more concerned with trends and influenced by the fashion press and media
In Sweden people buy more clothes than ever before, between the year 1999 and 2009 sales increased with 53% and especially women in the age 20-49 spend the most money on clothes (Ungerth, 2011, p. 7). The way Swedes consume textiles is not sustainable: according to the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency the consumption of textiles is estimated to be 15 kg per capita and year, and at the same time around 3 kg of clothes are donated to charity whereas 8 kg are incinerated annually (Palm, 2011). One out of five consumers throw away fashion items because they are simply tired of them, and young women between the ages of 16 and 19 seem to be more inclined of doing so. (KfS, 2011, p. 9). The accessibility of fashion today makes the customers closer to the trends as they emerge which puts pressure on the companies: trends and retail are becoming caught in a “revolving door of fashion” that is turning faster than ever before (Chapman, 2007, p. 352). The dramatic price deflations are causing a desire for fashionable items at “disposable prices”, which adds even more pressure on both suppliers and retailers to tolerate lower ethical standards to achieve competitive prices (Bray, 2009).

1.2 Problem Discussion – What about sustainability?

In the fashion industry there has been a rising awareness of ethical and sustainable issues among stakeholders and the fashion brands are trying to respond to this in various ways (Bray, 2009). According to Sahlin-Andersson (2006), CSR is commonly thought of as a regulatory framework driven by protest movements, corporate scandals and environmental catastrophes. In other words, the dominant view is that CSR is a company’s way of reacting to rising stakeholder demands (Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). Most of the actors on today’s fashion market have established well structured CSR-principles and Codes of Conduct. Within this ‘responsibility revolution’ corporations in the fashion industry seem to be competing with each other to prove that they care the most, and the companies that lead the revolution are often the big retailers who fill the globe’s wardrobe (Siegle, 2011, p. 241). At the same time, there has also been an increased popularity in product-oriented environmental policies in Europe and elsewhere (Thøgersen, 2002). The relative importance of resource use and pollution associated with private consumption has grown and many attempts are made to motivate consumers to choose less environmentally harmful products (Thøgersen, 2002). An increasingly popular tool is to label the least harmful products so that the consumers can distinguish them from others (Thøgersen, 2002). Green products are becoming increasingly available in the marketplace, which means that companies’ ecological practices are also becoming more apparent in marketing strategies (Gam, 2011).
In the lifecycle of apparel, everything from the manufacture of the fibre to the disposal of unwanted garments contribute to environmental degradation, therefore encouragement of eco-conscious apparel consumption is required (Hiller Connell, 2010). However, it is not only the composition, but also the volume of consumption in the industrialized countries that is seen as unsustainable (Thøgersen, 2002). The best garment from an environmental point of view is the one that never gets produced (Ungerth, 2011). Many question if it is possible to combine fast fashion with sustainability since the business model behind the companies contradicts it, but most fast fashion giants, such as H&M, now offer their customers lines of clothes made in more sustainable ways (Siegle, 2012). “We are almost drowning in an ocean of do-good fashion design products and fashion design textiles or clothing labelled as sustainable because they are either organic, or fair, or ethical or vegan, or green or ecological.” states professor Simonetta Carbonaro & Dr Christian Votava in an article for the Nordic Textile Journal in 2009 (p. 41). It seems as if sustainable fashion has become democratized and easily available to everyone, or is that too good to be true?

The anticipated “green revolution” in marketing during the last decades has not yet radically changed products and markets (Peattie & Crane, 2005). According to Hiller Connell (2010), research indicates limited engagement among consumers in eco-conscious apparel consumption and empirical evidence supports that knowledge is frequently a prerequisite to engaging in a more sustainable behaviour. Eco-labelling is done with the hope of increasing the consumers’ knowledge about environmental risks associated with the consumption of the product (Thøgersen, 2002). However, the confusion in the Western markets and civil society about “the sustainability thing” seem to increase since all of the above mentioned terms are generally put together as one and “sustainability” has become the catch phrase of our time (Carbonaro & Votava, 2009). Simply attaching a word to your actions is not enough for a company today, one has to understand the meaning of the word and be able to prove it to the customers as well (Friedman, 2010). The word “eco” for instance, might mean something entirely different to the customer than what the fashion brand intends (Friedman, 2010). One might wonder why the fashion industry has not set up a distinct vocabulary from the beginning. According to Friedman (2010) a reason might be that most efforts in combining the luxury of fashion with environmentalism have been done more defensive than offensive: “...an industry predicated not on need but desire is one that is often associated with indulgence and excess. To add a moral dimension is to invite charges of hypocrisy.”. According to Carbonaro and Votava (2009) more people tend to associate sustainability not just with something durable and good for the environment but also with some kind of denial.
Previous research within the subject has often been aimed at finding ways to overcome gaps between customers and sustainable products and increase the consumption of the better alternatives. However, others have also expressed concern that labelling products with sustainable concepts may legitimize continued consumerism, causing an increased volume of consumption that may restrict the possible environmental gain caused by a shift to less harmful products (Thøgersen, 2002).

“A friend justifies her purchase of not one, not two, but three cute, chic, t-shirts in a single fell swoop by pointing to their organic cotton labels and declaring that it’s ok because, “they’re sustainable.” But when it comes to fashion, what does sustainable even mean? Is it sustainability of materials?” (Pierre-Louis, 2012).

The more one tries to figure out the concept of sustainability, the more confusing it seem to become: one example is that most people assume that natural fabrics is always better, but some synthetics are actually “cleaner” to create than organic ones (Friedman, 2010). Cotton is a natural fabric, but the production of it consumes a large amount of pesticides, fertilizers and water (Siegle, 2011) (Intelligent Life, 2010). Even organic cotton does not guarantee that toxic chemicals were not used in dyeing and finishing, in addition the plants are less productive and farmers might have to expand their plants in order to grown enough cotton (Intelligent Life, 2010).

It is obvious that sustainability within the fashion industry is a multifaceted discussion, especially when it comes to fast fashion brands. The size of the clothing market, in combination with the many ethical issues that are connected to the fashion industry, causes a need for further research to explore the role that ethical considerations play in consumers’ decision-making processes (Bray, 2009). It is also of interest to investigate whether consumer responses to the marketing of CSR has reached a general acceptance or if it is met with general scepticism due to the increasing number of companies using cause related marketing campaigns (van de Ven, 2008). By investigating the meaning of different concepts and labels from a company and a consumer perspective the future of eco-labels in fast fashion can be discussed.
1.3 Problem Definition

After conducting research in the area, we realized that there was an interesting dilemma concerning the use of sustainability labels. From that, we developed our main research question in order to fulfil our purpose.

The question is *How do young female consumers comprehend sustainability concepts used in fast fashion and what implications does this have for the companies?*

To be able to answer that question, we constructed the following sub-questions:

- What do different sustainability labels mean according to the fast fashion business?
- What knowledge do the customers have about different sustainability labels?
- Do the labels have an impact on the buying decision making process?

1.4 Purpose

The purpose of the thesis is to raise a discussion concerning the use of sustainability labels within fast fashion, consumers’ perceptions of it and what implications this has for sustainability in the fast fashion business as a whole.

1.5 Delimitations

The research is aimed at investigating the use of eco-labels within fast fashion, therefore we will not look further into the attitudes towards sustainable fashion as a whole. We have chosen young female consumers as our respondents since previous research has often stated this group as the biggest consumers of fast fashion. We are aware that this angle limits our results, however it is a group of interest since they are the future consumers of fashion. The research object are consumers on the Swedish market, this is mainly a choice done because of the limited amount of time to collect results, but also because this area of research is fairly explored in this nation.
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the following chapter theories about corporate social marketing, the consumer decision making process and ethical consumption are presented. These theories constitute the theoretical framework of the study and the chapter therefore concludes with a summary of the main points of the theories.

2.1 Corporate Social Marketing

When companies invest in corporate social responsibility (CSR) they expect created value, not only for stakeholders, but for the company itself and one way to do this is through the marketing of CSR. Branding has become increasingly important in today’s emotion economy, in which purchasing decisions are no longer solely based on product characteristics but more on emotional experience and symbolic qualities. As with all types of communication, branding can be manipulative and this raises a question from an ethical perspective whether branding of CSR is morally acceptable. One might even take it one step further, and ask if marketing of CSR contradicts intrinsic moral motivations since it is stressing the business case of the idea. (van de Ven, 2008)

The philosophy behind marketing is built around the relationship between the customer and the company and if companies want their customers to follow their path towards sustainability this relation cannot be characterized by cynicism and distrust. During the 90’s a revolution in green marketing evolved, but the awareness among consumers and market share of green products still has not increased in a similar proportion. Some companies’ have become cautious about marketing sustainability because they fear being accused of green washing. Many firms in history took for granted that green would sell well and therefore adjusted their promotional campaigns according to these circumstances. The so-called green selling approach focus more on sales activity than product development and the company often continues to produce the same products but add green themes to the marketing on them. Unproven green claims on unchanged products lead to consumer suspicion and green is often seen as a fruitless marketing strategy, no matter how high the environmental standards are on a product. (Peattie & Crane, 2005)

It is also common that the companies that have publicised a green approach have been those that are targets for criticism. This causes a reactive response, focused on reputation and risk management, aimed at persuading a sceptical public. In this case, green marketing has little
opportunity in affecting products, production or policies since it is isolated to the PR function of the company. The so-called green spinners also fail when it comes to engaging, debating and listening to stakeholders since they tend to look inwards when trying to forward the position of the company. Green spinning will inevitably fail because contemporary consumers are unlikely to be convinced simply by public relations and marketing from commercial companies. To avoid this, a company should embrace all aspects of their business, including the product, means of production, consumption and disposal to avoid cynicism and accusations about hypocrisy. (Peattie & Crane, 2005)

2.1.2 Organized Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy in a traditional sense means that one act contrary to what has been said or decided. This is most often considered to be a problem, however, in some situations hypocrisy can serve as a solution for companies and organizations.

In a world where values, ideas and people are in constant conflict with one another, hypocrisy can be a response and a way for organizations to deal with these issues. Companies have to answer to a number of demands regarding profitability, ethical issues etc. and it is difficult to live up to both ideology and practice at the same time. Organizations are systems that need to act, therefore tensions need to be handled immediately in order to carry on with activities. The assumption of traditional decision theory states that action is the main point of interest, but this does not seem to fit to modern organizations where the talk and decisions in practice is considered of high interest by the audiences. Modern companies must be able to communicate with their stakeholders and explain current strategies and decisions, this means that talk and decisions can be counted as value output produced by organizations. Hypocrisy also challenges the traditional decision theory in another way; talk and decision should increase the likelihood of a corresponding action, but in this model the causality is reverse. If decisions are made about something, according to the hypocrisy model, the contradictory action is more likely to happen. (Brunsson, 2003)

2.1.3 An Ethical Framework for Marketing

In order to create an ethical framework for CSR marketing Van de Ven (2008) uses a virtue ethics approach, which explains why the motivation and identity behind CSR initiatives are important for customers. Consumers tend to personalize their relationships with corporate brands, and to judge the personality of the corporations as if it were a moral person. An action might be considered “the
right thing to do”, but if it is not performed from the right motives it does not deserve customers’ ethical appraisal and the company is not considered virtuous. From a marketing perspective it is of importance to assess the ethical dimension of a company’s corporate identity, since a successful CSR strategy is built upon the condition that it holds no misalignment with the identity. As an example, van de Ven mentions the extent to which an oil company can be perceived to be green since their main activity is a non-sustainable exploitation of a natural resource. (van de Ven, 2008)

A company should formulate an ideal identity that reflects how they want to deal with social and environmental aspects of its business. Thereafter, the reflection should lead to a choice of one or more of the following CSR strategies: reputation management, building a virtuous corporate brand and ethical product differentiation. The choice of reputation management as a strategy focuses mainly on the basic requirements of establishing a responsible business, and it is done in order to obtain and maintain a license to operate from society. This approach suits a company that has begun to address the needs of key stakeholders and that are also responsive to criticisms from a wide external environment of the company. A company in this stage can be considered a responsible company, but since it does not yet excel in regards to CSR initiatives it is not a virtuous company. (van de Ven, 2008)

According to van de Ven (2008), only a virtuous company should consider adopting the next strategy of building a virtuous corporate brand and make an explicit promise to stakeholders about CSR endeavours. If the company does not live up to the corporate brand image a promise/performance
gap will occur. This is especially common for companies that refer to social or environmental responsibilities and therefore it is essential to have a strong commitment to the strategy. In order to build a virtuous corporate brand the company has to decide how to communicate the CSR activities. The choice of using marketing communication instruments such as advertising, packaging and promotion adds a strong commercial dimension that easily can arouse sceptisism from the public, therefore corporate communication is sometimes less risky. (van de Ven, 2008)

In the last stage the company can distinguish its products from competitors’ with an ethical product differentiation strategy. The company differentiates a certain product on the basis of an environmental or social product quality, this often results in a premium price and hopefully brand preference. This strategy can, in comparison to the others, be developed relatively independent of the corporate branding strategy. However, van de Ven (2008, p. 349) highlights that: “Ethical and ecological claims which serve to differentiate the product, and to legitimize a premium price, tend to arouse public scrutiny to the highest degree”. Therefore, it is essential that ethical and ecological claims which are communicated via advertisements, packaging etc. are paired with virtues of sincerity, accuracy, modesty and compassion. (van de Ven, 2008)

2.2 Fashion Consumption and Decision making

Traditionally, the decision-making process for a good is a logical and rational procedure that begins with a need that the customer wants to fulfil. This is followed by a search for information to find the alternatives best suited to fill the particular need, the alternatives are then evaluated and a product choice can be made. (Solomon & Rabolt, 2009)

As most fashion purchases are made based on wants rather than needs, the decision making process differs from that of other goods. The process begins when the consumer sees a fashion product and awareness is raised. The awareness turns into interest and the consumer evaluates the product and its features and thereafter makes a purchase decision.

Figure 2 Stages in Fashion and Traditional Decision Making. Salomon & Rabolt (2009) p. 382
The decision-making process does not apply to all purchase decisions, but the consumer evaluates the effort required to make a particular choice, and chooses the strategy best suited for each purchase. (Solomon & Rabolt, 2009)

![A Continuum of Buying Decision Behavior](Salomon & Rabolt (2009) p. 383)

2.2.1 Impulse Purchasing

Impulse purchases refers to all items bought without any planning in advance and is defined by the speed of the buying decision (Hausman, 2000). It occurs when a consumer experiences a sudden and often powerful and persistent urge to immediately buy something (Rook, 1987). Impulse purchases can be classified into four different types:

1. Planned impulse buying;
2. Reminded impulse buying;
3. Fashion oriented impulse buying; and
4. Pure impulse buying. (Han et al, 1991)

Apparel impulse buying differs from reasonable buying behaviour based on emotional preference or object evaluation. According to Ko (1993), emotional factors such as positive feelings might lead to fashion-oriented impulse purchases. Fashion is often a product category of high involvement and emotional preferences, this creates a situation likely to motivate the consumers to make these kinds of purchases (Park, Kim, & Forney, 2006). The motivation behind fashion-oriented impulse purchases is new versions of fashion styles and brand image salience (Goldsmith & Emmert, 1991) and the purchase intentions can be influenced by the in-store emotion, which can also influence spending, perceptions of quality, satisfaction and value (Babin & Babin, 2001). A high involvement in a purchase may not necessarily mean the decision is made with a rational approach, in areas such as fashion,
music and art one usually uses the *experiential perspective* as the totality of the product or service, rather than one single factor is the basis for determination (Solomon & Rabolt, 2009).

### 2.2.2 Eco-fashion Purchasing

The decision making regarding eco-fashion purchasing is complex. According to Jeffery Bray (2009), many researchers have tried to model the ethical decision-making process in general and in Figure 3 he shows a synthesis of the main stages for these theories.

![Figure 4 The ethical decision making process. Bray (2009) p 3](image)

However, this approach focuses on ethical elements in any kind of decision-making process and does therefore not incorporate settings in which ethicality might be secondary to other attributes. The assumption that a perceived ethical issue is significant enough to lead the consumer into further processing, as the model shows, may in other words not be appropriate in regards to clothing purchases. Instead, Bray argues that it is important to understand each factor that might influence the consumer in the purchasing decision-making. As an example, one aspect that makes it difficult to evaluate the process in the more traditional way is the diversity of motives for purchasing fashion items. (Bray, 2009)

Peattie suggests a similar way of understanding green consumption, instead of classifying consumers according to how green they are, it might be more helpful to separate the consumption process into different stages and look to the actual purchase itself. After doing that, one is able to investigate the environmental orientation of consumers at different points in the process. Figure 4 shows three hypothetical paths over a simplified consumption process where the environmental orientation differs through the stages. (Peattie, 2001)
The actual purchase is often the main focus in marketing and it is likely that many consumers make green purchases based on eco-labels without the intention of changing their lifestyles, their view on consumption or the use and disposal of products (Peattie, 2001). According to Bray (2009), a consistent finding within previous research in the fashion field is that ethical and environmental factors most often are secondary to other attributes and that consumers seem unwilling to sacrifice personal benefits in order to buy more ethical products.

Bray’s (2009) research suggests that the ethical aspects are most likely to influence the consumer in three specific stages in the consumption process (see Figure 5). The Ethical Red Line occurs early in the selection process, it is when consumers can decide to boycott brands or products because they are dissonant to their individual beliefs. None of the respondents in his research identified ethically relevant factors when discussing attributes recently considered while selecting clothes, however this
does not necessarily mean that they are not important in the evaluation of alternatives. When choosing between products with the same main attributes the customer was initially looking for, it is likely that she will choose the more sustainable option in the end and this stage is referred to as *Ethical Clouding*. The last stage is the *Post Purchase Reflection*, in which the customer reflects over the purchased item. The probability of positive feelings while using the product seem to be higher for the more ethical products, whilst some respondents described feelings of guilt for the products produced in a less ethical manner. (Bray, 2009)

![Figure 6 Ethical influence in the consumption process. Bray (2009) p.8](image)

### 2.2.3 Consumer Needs

What we buy and how we look have an effect on how we are perceived by others, but also how we perceive ourselves and what we stand for. Maslow’s psychological forces therefore affect our consumer behaviour. When all basic human needs are fulfilled, the need for love and belongingness will emerge (Maslow, 1987). In terms of brand feelings, two feelings are particularly applicable to corporate social marketing (CSM), the first of them being *social approval*. Social approval is when the brand results in the consumer having favourable feelings about reactions from others – believing that their appearance will be looked at positively by their peers (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). Everyone have a need or desire for self-respect or self-esteem, and for the *esteem* of others (Maslow, 1987). What products and brands we buy may affect how others perceive us (Martesen & Grønholdt, 2004) and can, therefore, in some cases become a personal statement. (Aaker, 1996)

When all other needs are fulfilled, we start to strive towards *self-fulfilment*, to actualize what we potentially are (Maslow, 1987). According to Hoeffler & Keller (2002) purchasing a specific brand or
product can make the consumers feel better about themselves, which creates self-respect. They feel a sense of pride, accomplishment or fulfilment. To emphasize these feelings, corporate social marketing can be used as a tool to make people feel like they are doing a good thing, which makes them feel good about themselves.

2.3 Barriers towards eco-fashion consumption

Kim Y. Hiller Connell (2010) has made a study with the purpose of expanding the knowledge base for eco-conscious apparel consumption and question the limited participation in it from a consumer perspective. The results indicated a number of barriers, both internal and external, that stand in the way of engaging in the acquisition on a consistent basis.

2.3.1 Internal barriers

Knowledge is an important factor that acts as a constraint against engagement in eco-conscious acquisition. The majority of the respondents in her study had limited awareness of the relation between environmental issues and the production and consumption of fashion items. It was too many unclear what the effects on the environment were, and few had detailed knowledge about the effects of different fibres. A common thought was that natural fibres are always better for the environment than manufactured fibres, and misunderstandings like this one serves as a barrier. Apart from organically grown cotton and hemp few knew of other environmentally preferable alternatives. Neither did the respondents know where to find clothes made out of these materials to purchase. In addition to knowledge, attitudes about eco-fashion are an important barrier. Fit and comfort was considered to be lacking in comparison to more mainstream apparel, and eco-clothing was not seen as fashionable and stylish enough. (Hiller Connell, 2010).

2.3.2 External barriers

The most apparent external barrier was the availability of environmentally preferable apparel, both when it comes to sources for acquiring them and the ability to find clothes with desired attributes. Styles are limited and some product categories, such as business wear, were considered extra difficult to find. Economic resources were considered as an external barrier, since much eco-fashion has a price premium. The way second hand stores and other alternatives merchandise the products
was also seen as a hindrance, because visiting a regular store was a considered a more enjoyable experience. (Hiller Connell, 2010)

2.3.3 The separation barriers

Even when consumers have knowledge about the environmental effects of the production and consumption of fashion, another aspect may serve as a barrier. In the book *Fatal Consumption – Rethinking Sustainable Development* Woollard (2000, p. 8) presents a fundamental dilemma for the Western society: “How do we drastically reduce the consumption of a society that is based on consumption, while moving toward a sustainable social system?” He continues to give a description of different elements concerning the dilemma of overconsumption and one important aspect is the separation between human action and their ecological and social consequences that occur within a number of dimensions and manners. Three of them can be considered highly relevant to the consumption of fashion:

**Temporally** – Environmental effects are commonly delayed, making them uncertain in present time.

**Intellectually** - People, both individually and collectively, practice denial by preventing conscious understanding of the connecting between actions and consequences.

**Geographically** – Global trade and movements of goods all over the world has caused an effective separation between both consumption and waste from their origin and final disposal points. (Woollard, 2000, pp. 8-9)

In general, the Western society sees the environment as a backdrop to human affairs. According to Rees, this human-centered cultural bias, where economic growth and human wants take the precedence, makes it easier to externalize the environmental issues. When people try to improve matters it often means a technical fix, such as building a hatchery when fishery is in trouble, which enables the society to move forward in a similar way as before. (Rees, 2000)
2.4 Theoretical Summary

The behavioural theories provide an understanding for the consumers’ behaviour, while the theories on CSR and CSM can explain the consumers’ attitudes and thoughts about the sustainability marketing from the investigated companies.

By investing in CSR and marketing these activities, the companies expect to create value for stakeholders and improve the brand image. However, marketing these types of activities might also lead to consumer suspicion and criticism if the promises exceed their actions. The companies of today have to answer to a number of demands regarding profitability, ethical issues etc. and living up to both ideology and practice can be difficult. A company should however try to formulate an ideal identity reflecting how they want to work with environmental and social aspects of its business and chose CSR strategies compatible with that.

The consumer decision making process for acquiring fashion items differs from the traditional process for purchasing goods. It often involves impulse purchases or experiential perspectives. When adding an ethical factor to the equation, the decision making process differs even more. It is however suggested that the ethical decision-making process is not applicable for ethical apparel purchasing as there are several other factors influencing the consumers’ decision-making process. As a way of understanding green consumption, one can separate the different stages of the consumption to investigate the environmental orientation of the consumers.

The largest barrier to ethical consumption is a lack of knowledge amongst consumers, both regarding the relation between environmental issues and the production and consumption of fashion items, but also where to acquire these products. Even when the consumers possess this knowledge there are barriers to ethical consumption, mainly the separation between human action and their ecological and social consequences.
3. **METHOD**

The following chapter describes the scientific methods and approaches of the study. We also discuss its reliability, validity and criticism of sources used.

3.1 **Scientific and research approach**

The chosen research area is relatively unexplored and we have therefore done an *explorative study* to investigate a phenomenon and highlight a potential problem in this field of studies (Andersen, 1998). We have chosen a hermeneutic scientific approach, which focuses on the interpretation and understanding of a problem as a whole. The interpretation of the problem is influenced by our preconceptions and expectations (Widerberg, 2002). A deductive approach is used in which we based the empirical investigation on theory and previous research. The aim is that the results can be used as a starting point for further research regarding the possibilities and difficulties concerning sustainable fast fashion.

The purpose of the empirical investigation is to gain insight of the consumers’ knowledge and attitudes towards sustainable fashion, and from that draw conclusions on the impact this might have on the fast fashion sector. Because of this, the study is to a large extent qualitative. However, the methods used for gathering the data are both qualitative and quantitative. The survey will contain questions of both kinds, as we want to examine general behaviour as well as get an understanding of why this behaviour occurs. The aim of the qualitative study is not to present data that is generally representative and the researchers own interpretation of the data plays a significant role to the results (Holme & Solvang, 1997).

3.2 **Information gathering**

Initially, sources such as newspapers, research articles and websites were used to create an overview of the area of interest. At this point we became aware of a practical problem in the fast fashion business and we developed our research question. This was followed by further research as we gathered information and theories to build our frame of reference. The circumstances of the collection of secondary data and the aims of the study may influence the results of it. Therefore
secondary data was only used as a tool to gain a deeper understanding of the subject of investigation (Wiedersheim-Paul & Eriksson, 1991).

The primary data was gathered through research on what sustainable options fast fashion companies offer. We decided to investigate nine fashion chains with stores all over Sweden and the research included store visits, looking at websites and researching each company’s marketing activities. In the cases when the company is part of a bigger corporation we took the decision of not investigating into the policies of the parent company, since we want to look at the information that a customer would naturally be exposed to.

In order to get empirical knowledge about the consumers’ view on sustainable fast fashion a survey was conducted. This involved an active attempt to go out, observe and relate to the present state of affairs at the specific time at which the data are collected (Denscombe, 2010). Conducting a survey is in line with our purpose and it also has an advantage in the fact that is allows a collection of both quantitative and qualitative data (Denscombe, 2010). This method of research is not just about the routine of gathering and tabulating figures, it also required careful analysis and rational interpretation of the findings (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad, 2010).

3.3 Implementation of the study

The decision to make an Internet survey provided us with a relatively wide coverage within a short time frame and at a minimum cost (Denscombe, 2010). The survey was conducted in Swedish to avoid misunderstandings based on language (Dahmström, 2005), and the answers were later translated. The response rate from a survey on the Internet is, as with any other type of survey, influenced by its ease of use and visual appearance (Denscombe, 2010). The decision was therefore made to use the service “surveymonkey.com” to construct a functioning and appealing questionnaire. It was designed as a simple web page to which the respondents were directed through a link that could be distributed via e-mail or at social networks. The response rate is boosted when potential respondents are contacted in advance and in a personalized form (Denscombe, 2010). Therefore, we sent out a Facebook-event, inviting 20 possible respondents, to present our idea, the survey and the attached link. One disadvantage of using a survey is that there might be a lack of detail and depth of the data (Denscombe, 2010). However, our intention is to get a broad picture of the customers’ behaviour and thoughts, which means that it was considered to be the most useful approach.
3.3.1 Sample selection

For this study exploratory samples are used since it is a way of probing relatively unexplored topics and discover new ideas or theories (Denscombe, 2010). It is often used for small-scale surveys with qualitative data and in this sampling it is not always necessary to select people in terms of getting an accurate cross-section of a population (Denscombe, 2010). We chose to use a non-probability sampling to produce the exploratory sample, which means that the approach did not operate on the principle of random selection (Denscombe, 2010). Purposive sampling was used to get the best information, this means that we selected people with the right experience who could provide valuable insights on the research topic (Dahmström, 2005). Since we wanted the respondents to be young female consumers and fulfil certain criteria, it was not desirable to choose a sample on the basis of pure chance (Denscombe, 2010).

To broaden the span of respondents we used snowball sampling. In this strategy the sample emerges through reference from one respondent to another, and as a researcher one can ask people only to nominate others who meet certain criteria (Johannessen & Tufte, 2003). This was beneficial for our purpose and compatible with the choice to do non-probability sampling.

Since our study is of a small scale it was difficult to use a statistical approach to the sample size. Instead we chose to have a cumulative approach in which we continued to add to the sample group until we reached a point in which we were satisfied with the information and data collected (Denscombe, 2010). We followed two general rules, first we compared the sample size to other similar research so that it would not be too small and then we stopped when it felt like no benefit would be derived from adding more respondents (Denscombe, 2010). We decided to end the research at a relatively early stage if it resulted in similar answers from all of the respondents. However, if it was difficult to find a pattern we would continue to let the survey travel until we felt that we had enough answers to draw conclusions from the findings. Exploratory sample sizes are not dependent on accuracy but by how informative the sample is considered to be, and we decided to stop when we had 50 responses (Denscombe, 2010).

3.4 Validity and reliability of the study

The purpose of the thesis is not to generalize but rather to raise a discussion concerning the sustainability of fast fashion and consumers perceptions of it. Since the size of the sample was relatively small one cannot draw conclusions for the entire population. However, the survey was
completely anonymous and built on objective questions that often gave the respondents the possibility to elaborate on their answers, which minimized the risk of misinterpretations when analyzing the findings. We chose to set up questionnaires, which mean that all respondents received the same questions, which gives the study higher reliability. The answers are, as it was an electronic survey, stored and can be retrieved again to assure that the study was properly interpreted. The validity of the study can be affected by the fact that we have interpreted the answers given in the survey.

3.5 Source criticism

As this is a field of studies researched recently, many of the theories and ideas are developed from the findings of single researchers which give a limited credibility. Many of the theories used are based on surveys and therefore one can question if they are generally applicable.

The investigation concerning the companies’ sustainability actions, focused on their more sustainable collections and the information given about sustainability, is rather shallow and is not suitable for drawing conclusions regarding the environmental or ethical actions of the different companies. Nevertheless we chose this approach, as we only wanted the information easily accessible to the consumers from the companies own websites and stores.
4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The empirical investigation begins with a short overview of the more environmentally friendly options available at three of the largest fast fashion companies in Sweden. This is followed by the findings of our survey.

4.1 What is sustainable fast fashion?

All of the investigated companies had CSR-related information presented on their websites. Most often this included a presentation of a responsible supply chain, with the mentioning of a code of conduct in regards to the company’s suppliers. Some of the brands discussed the choice of used material in the clothing, for example by renouncing mulesing in the process of making wool fabrics. Out of the chosen companies three promoted more sustainable lines or products in stores and through marketing: Lindex, H&M and Gina Tricot.

4.1.1 According to Lindex

All of the departments at Lindex include a selection of clothes made in organic cotton, recycled material or other alternative fibres that affect the environment less than conventional fibres (Lindex 1). To make it easier for customers who demand clothes from the sustainable range the company have chosen to label all the above mentioned materials with “Organic/Recycled” in the online shop, and with special labels in store (Lindex 2). Organic Cotton at Lindex means that the clothes contain ecological cotton certified according to Textile Exchange Standard, which is produced without chemical pesticides and artificial fertilizers (Lindex 2). Dying and production follow the company’s set demands regarding the environment and use of chemicals (Lindex 2). Clothes labelled as Recycled can be made out of different types of recycled material, such as polyester, polyamide or cotton (Lindex 2). Through the use of recycled material it is possible to reduce the consumption of energy, natural resources and chemicals, compared to what is required in the use of newly produced material (Lindex 2). Some garments are also made in renewable synthetic fibre based on wood and they are labelled with Tencel® (Lindex 2). At the company’s online shop the labelled clothes can be found under the tab “Sustainable choice”. Lindex have a special collection called Affordable Luxury – the Sustainable Collection that promotes more fashionable pieces made from sustainable materials (Lindex 3).
The information about the more sustainable choices was easily accessible on Lindex’s website, they provided information about where to find the products that are part of their “sustainable assortment” as well as information about the different materials used (Lindex 2) (Lindex 4). In addition to this they also provided information about what to keep in mind when caring for the garments, in a way that is less harmful for both the products and the environment. (Lindex 5)

![Figure 7 Lindex's sustainability label.](Lindex 2)

### 4.1.2 According to H&M

H&M is the world’s largest user of organic cotton and the material used is certified by accredited certification bodies such as Control Union and IMO according to the relevant Textile Exchange standards (H&M 1). The company also make clothes out of organic linen and hemp, whereas the recycled materials are made from polyester, polyamide, cotton or wool (H&M 1). They also use a material made out of cellulose fibres labelled Tencel®, which is a brand owned by the fibre manufacturer Lenzing (H&M 1). H&M has a special collection of sustainable clothes called Conscious Collection, which is strongly marketed in store, at the website, through commercials on TV and ads in magazines.

The information about the more sustainable choices from H&M is available at their homepage; they provided information about the materials used and their collaborations with, and participation in, different initiatives working for a more environmental friendly and sustainable supply chain (H&M 2). H&M annually releases a sustainability report describing the company’s actions to improve their operations in order to make them more environmentally and socially responsible. (H&M 3, 2012).
4.1.3 According to Gina Tricot

Gina Tricot wants to make it easy for the customers to shop consciously and therefore they constantly try to increase the share of products made from organic or recycled materials in the stores (Gina Tricot 1). Clothes made in sustainable materials are considered the part of the company’s environmental work that is most easily recognizable for the consumers (Gina Tricot 1). Therefore Gina Tricot label the garments made from more sustainable material with green labels, and the products are also collected under its own tab on the website (Gina Tricot 1). The organic cotton contains certified organic cotton and is traceable all the way from fibres to finished products (Gina Tricot 1). When visiting the tab for garments in sustainable materials the company states that “There are no downsides to our basic garment in organic cotton.” (Gina Tricot 3). Just as H&M and Lindex, the company also sell clothes made in recycled polyester or polyamide and clothes labelled with Tencel® (Gina Tricot 1). At the moment, Gina Tricot does not have any additional marketing activities for their sustainable clothes.
The information regarding Gina Tricot’s environmental and social responsible actions was available on their website. They provided information about the organisations of which they are members (Gina Tricot 2) as well as information about the materials used in their more sustainable products (Gina Tricot 1).

4.4. Sustainability labels used in Fast Fashion

It can be concluded that the investigated fast fashion stores use similar types of labels on their more sustainable options. The most apparent terms used are summarized in the table below.

![Figure 10 The five most apparent sustainability labels](image)

4.2 Results from the survey

In the following paragraphs the result of the survey is presented. The section is divided into three parts: consumer knowledge, purchasing behaviour and consumer thoughts on sustainability marketing.

4.2.1 Consumer knowledge

As can be seen in the chart below H&M is the company from which most respondents have acknowledged environmentally or ethically related activities, with a positive response rate of 94 percent. The runner up, Lindex, is well behind with 40% of the respondents having noticed these
types of activities from the company. Less than 20 percent of the respondents have acknowledged this type of activities from Gina Tricot (18%), TopShop and Zara (16% each) and less than 10% have noticed activities from the remaining companies Vero Moda (8,3%), Monki (4,2%), Cubus and Bik Bok (2,1% each). Even though many respondents had acknowledged activities from the companies, few stated any of the companies as sustainable. If any of them was stated, H&M was the most common answer.

The majority of the approached female shoppers seemed to find it difficult to describe the different sustainability concepts and labels used by fast fashion companies. The most recognized term was organic cotton, which is referred to as a softer material that is ecological and better for the environment. “I understand this concept even though I am not in the industry”, said one respondent. Many refer to the fact that it is produced without pesticides and a more natural and genuine material than others. A common conviction among the respondents is that organic cotton is unbleached and not colour dyed, and therefore better for children or people with allergies, whereas one said that it is recycled cotton. Some stated that it is of better quality and more expensive. Two people referred to organic cotton as H&M’s environmental label. One respondent questioned the term because she did not know what the companies meant by using it, and stated that she did not find it trustworthy.

More than half of the respondents did not know what the term recycled polyester meant, one of them said that she did not know, but that it might be polyester made from recycled products. A few...
respondents believed that it is polyester that can be recycled, and used again and again. Two respondents said that is was greener or better for the environment, and one that is was cheaper. Another young woman said that recycling always is good for the environment and whereas another said that everything with the word recycled in it sounds good. One answered differed greatly from the rest as she said that recycled polyester “sounds disgusting”.

A vast majority of the respondents stated that they did not know the term tencel or what it stands for. Only three respondents gave an answer other than “I don’t know” or “no idea”. Of those, one believed that it is a natural material, one that it has a positive meaning since it is made of some sort of renewable material and one said that it “feels like a finer material, like cotton, but thinner”.

About three out of five respondents declared that they did not know what the Conscious Collection was or the difference between this line and the regular assortment. Two of the respondents believed that there was no difference. Only four of the respondents connected the conscious collection with H&M, one of them said that it was of higher quality with a higher price, and one that it can mean any kind of sustainability. A few of the respondents stated that there were good intentions behind the collection. In these cases it was considered a collection where the company have focused on conscious choices during the production, with less environmental impact and better working conditions. The response that it is an entire collection made of environmentally friendly and recycled materials occurred, as did the belief that it is a generic term for fewer chemicals, as an example. Expressions such as more expensive and sustainable were also amongst the replies. Whilst most of the respondents had a positive attitude towards the conscious collection, one of them said that it is a sales stunt from H&M to make people believe that they buy environmentally conscious.

The majority of the respondents answered that they did not know of the Affordable Luxury – the Sustainable Collection. Two of the respondents said that it was positive, two of them thought of this as something more expensive. A few of the respondents thought of it as a collection of higher quality but with reasonable prices and one described it as cheap luxury. One young woman said it was a cheap but environmentally friendly choice. The notion that the carbon dioxide emissions were low occurred, as did the view of it being garments good for the environment without losing their fashionability. One respondent believed it to be garments with high fashionability and a low price due to the fact that they have used recycled materials. One respondent answered that is was better for the environment and better working conditions while another perceived it as clothes designed to further sustainable development.
14 percent of the respondents had searched for additional information regarding an environmental or ethical label seen in a store. The most common explanation for not doing so was a lack of interest, as an entire 48% stated this as the reason for their actions. Some of the respondents stated that they had not thought of it, and a few said they had not bothered to make an effort. One respondent said that she had been close to doing so several times, and that it is something she is interested in knowing more about, but gave no reason to why she had not gone through with it before. One respondent stated that she trusted the company, one that the information given in the store had been enough and another one that the labels in the garments tell you about its sustainability and that no additional information is necessary.

Two of the respondents had a less positive attitude towards the phenomenon of labelling garments within fast fashion. One stating that she did not believe in it and that it is done for show. The other stated that it is only a small part of the company’s collections and that the biggest problem lies in the amount of garments bought, not the manufacturing of them.

Almost three quarters (72%) of the respondents said that they believed that the production of clothes affects the environment the most. Some thought that the recycling and waste management was most harmful (16%), whereas both retail and use got one respondents vote each. However, it is worth noting that a few respondents mentioned that several of the alternatives are equally harmful. Two respondents also added the transportation of goods as something that has a great effect on the environment.

![What affects the environment the most?](image)

Figure 12. Product Life Cycle Effects
4.2.2 Shopping Behaviour

The amount of money spent on clothes during the last month is varied among the respondents, but most people stated a sum in between 500 – 2000 SEK. A more apparent result is that the money is mostly spent in fast fashion chain stores. For example, only two respondents did not mention H&M as one of three stores visited most often. The most common stores visited overall were H&M, Gina Tricot and Zara. Although a few mentioned alternative shopping outlets, such as second hand or more expensive brands like Acne, the results indicate that the wardrobes of young female Swedish fashion consumers are built on fast fashion.

When stating the most important features in the latest purchased fashion item the results clearly shows that price was most important among the respondents. This was closely followed by trendiness. One respondent chose environmentally friendly as an important factor.

Almost 70 percent of the respondents had purchased a garment with an environmental or ethical label. Around 20 percent had not purchased a labelled garment and 10 percent was not sure whether they had bought such a product or not. Though a majority of the respondents had purchased a labelled product the motivation of their actions and the reasoning behind their behaviour differed. More than half of the respondents who stated a reason to why they had or had not bought garments with environmental or ethical claims stated that the label itself had nothing to do with the purchase decision, but rather that they just liked the garment. One respondent stated that the environmental label was a plus when buying basic tank tops, but nothing more. Of those respondents who included
environmental care in their motivation, seven stated that they either want to support the environment or that they want to do a good deed, but they also stated that the garment looked good. One respondent expressed that she tries to think about the environment when shopping. Another stated that she liked the garment and that the environmental label added value to it. She also stated that she had been enticed by these types of labels, which might have affected her purchases. One respondent said that she buys labelled garments partly because it feels like you are contributing to the environment in some way, but also because eco-labelled garments are typically very simple, stylish and with natural colours, something that she likes. Three other respondents agreed that it “feels good” to do so.

Two of the respondents who had not purchased a garment with an environmental or ethical label motivated their actions. One said that the selection was not big enough and the other stated that many of the garments with those label are basic garment and that she had not been in need of it and that other garments with these labels have been too expensive.

One fourth of the respondents said that eco-labels had a positive effect when purchasing clothes from fast fashion brands. After adding the partially positive respondents, 64 per cent stated that labels have a positive effect. The most common reason was that it feels good to buy more sustainable items or that it adds additional value to an item already chosen for the sake of its appearance. One respondent stated that, “It does not affect my choice of store, but the choice of a garment inside the store”. One mentioned that environmental issues is an important and current issue and that it is positive and essential that clothing chains keep up with the changes on the market. Another respondent highlighted the importance of labelled clothes because the choice of buying them should always be available to consumers. However, a crucial finding is that almost half of the young female shoppers stated that labels in fast fashion stores do not affect their shopping at all. At the same time, no one said that labels have a negative impact either, but two chose to question the use of them. “If I want to buy environmentally friendly garments I choose second hand”, said one respondent. The other one stated that the companies in the survey mass produce clothes with inadequate quality and that this contradicts the environmental aspect.

4.2.3 Consumer thoughts on sustainability marketing

Responses varied greatly when the respondents were allowed to elaborate freely on their thoughts about sustainable marketing from fast fashion companies. A few respondents were unsure because
they had not acknowledged enough sustainable marketing or because they were not interested enough. However, many had a positive view of it and highlighted the importance of companies taking responsibility and showing awareness about issues in the fashion industry. One respondent stated that it is sensible for the companies to take responsibility and that the initiative creates reflection among consumers, something that is needed for a fair and environmentally friendly market. Several respondents agreed that it is likely that the marketing will increase ethical and ecological awareness among consumers. "The marketing serves as an eye-opener or reminder about our consumption, if you’re going to shop you can do it with the environment in mind", said one of the young women.

Another respondent believed that the marketing will increase the likelihood of consumers buying more eco-labelled clothes, something that she considers a win-win situation. Some respondents stated that the sustainability approach is a positive response that is driven by emerging consumer demands.

A noteworthy part of the respondents chose to question the sustainable marketing from fast fashion companies in one way or another. One respondent saw it as a way for companies to avoid negative publicity that potentially can destroy business. Some stated that it is a way of selling more products since consumers today are becoming aware about environmental and ethical issues. It was considered a modern way of marketing and the fashion companies engage in sustainability mainly to increase profits instead of actually trying to make a difference. “Sometimes you can not help but questioning if one does it for the environment or for one’s own purpose, therefore it decreases the credibility”, said one respondent. Another respondent said that ethical thinking and labels on products is about adding value to the brand.

Some were critical due to the fact that sustainability seem to be taking up such a small part of the overall business. Two respondents stated that environmental and ethical claims only are set on small collections and that is does not permeate the entire companies. “If it is so easy and great, why aren’t all clothes made in the same way?” asks one woman. Another respondent said that she thought that the companies could do much more, and be more open about it. One respondent was torn because the idea of companies paying attention to the issues is positive, however she thought that it is difficult for cheap fashion chains to go through with it because their business is built on mass production and a throw-away culture. “It is a lot of talk, but no action.”, she concluded.
5. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter contains our reflections and analysis of the empirical data in relation to the theoretical framework.

5.1 Consumer responses towards sustainable marketing

The three chosen companies that provide customers with more sustainable options market this opportunity in slightly different ways. H&M is by far the most apparent company when it comes to using marketing with a sustainable approach, especially due to its Conscious Collection that is supported by commercials and extensive media coverage. According to results from the survey, the message is getting through since 94% of the respondents stated that they had noticed environmentally- or ethically related activity from the company. H&M was also the most common store to purchase clothes in, which indicates a positive brand equity and awareness. Whether this is enhanced due to the increased focus on sustainability is however difficult to prove. The results show that only a few respondents stated that H&M could be seen as an overall sustainable company. This is the case for the other companies as well. Although 40% had noticed activity from Lindex, only two respondents stated the company as sustainable, whereas none said the same thing about Gina Tricot. From these results one can interpret that the consumers do not necessarily connect sustainable marketing with a virtuous company and corporate brand.

According to Peattie & Crane (2005), a company should embrace all aspects of their business in order to avoid hypocrisy and accusations about green washing. The fast fashion companies, in this research, all put a lot of emphasis on the sustainability of supply chains and materials in the marketing and use of eco-labels. What they do apart from that is difficult for consumers to find information about. One reason for this can be, as stated on the website of Gina Tricot, that the use of sustainable materials is the easiest environmental work to recognize as a customer. However, the extensive marketing combined with the lack of shown balance in the companies’ undertakings may invite cynicism and questioning from the customers. As mentioned by Peattie & Crane (2005), companies that publicize a green approach are often those that become the biggest targets for criticism. For this reason the fast fashion companies should be aware of the risks of marketing their sustainable clothes in such a strong manner. Some of the respondents had a very critical view of the companies already, and if the industry continues to use sustainable marketing without making
further improvements of their business it is likely that these consumers will become increasingly dissatisfied.

Many respondents had a positive view on the companies’ sustainability actions, even though they seem to be taking up such a small part of the overall business. Some consumers seem to be satisfied when the companies show that they are aware about environmental issues and do something about it, whereas other put a much higher pressure on the activities. This can be connected to Brunsson’s theory of organized hypocrisy. By acknowledging the issues in the fashion market in some way the companies can, more or less, continue their business in the same manner as before. The talk, which involves commercials, eco-labels and other means of marketing, makes most external stakeholders satisfied enough. This mean that they might not take the information to another level by investigating more closely what the company actually does after the promises has been made. 86% of the respondents said that they had not searched for additional information after seeing an eco-label in store, due to a lack of interest or because they trusted the companies and thought that the information on the labels was sufficient enough. According to Brunsson (2003), talk and decisions can be counted as value output in the modern economy, since it is a way of adding value to the corporate brand. As long as the consumers does not question the information that the companies gives them or does further research on it, the sustainability talk can be considered successful from a business perspective.

Van de Ven (2008) highlights the importance for a company to follow a process when building a virtuous company through marketing, see figure 1. The fast fashion companies in this research seem to focus more on reputation management and ethical product differentiation than building an all-embracing virtuous corporate brand. This thought derives from the fact that they market their sustainable products much more strongly than other sustainable efforts made in their business. As stated by van de Ven (2008) environmental and ethical claims on products tend to be questioned the most by consumers and some respondents in the survey gave answers that indicate that they do see a gap between promises and performance in the fast fashion business. Examples of reasoning are that mass production contradicts the environmental aspect or that sustainable claims are just a mean used to sell more products.

Apart from Lindex, that encourages the customer to take care of their garments in a more sustainable way, the companies seem to forget or ignore the importance of sustainability in the other stages of the product life cycle. This is also apparent in the survey results, where almost three
quarters of the respondents stated the production of clothes to be the most harmful factor in regards to the environment.

5.2 Fashion Purchasing

It is evident that the environmental or ethical aspect of a fashion garment is valued lower than other attributes, as suggested by Bray (2009). Only one of the respondents chose this as one of the two most important factors for her last purchase. Even when the garment had an environmental or ethical label, the majority of the respondents said that this had not affected their choice of product.

Our findings show that the fashion purchasing process (figure 2), rather than the ethical decision making process (figure 3) is applicable for this type of purchases, as the respondents were not willing to sacrifice other factors to benefit a moral behaviour. Though some respondents admitted to being encouraged to making a purchase decision because of environmental or ethical labels, a liking for the product still plays a fundamental part in the decision. A label of this kind can work as a means of differentiation for products such as basic tops, where they contribute to an increased value for a product similar to others in most other aspects. But when it comes to pure fashion products, the environmental or ethical aspect is surpassed by other factors or characteristics of the garment. This is coherent with the theory of ethical clouding.

The overall attitude towards environmental and ethical labels was positive, this might enhance the possibility of a purchase according to the experiential perspective (Solomon & Rabolt, 2009) which emphasizes the totality of the purchase. Positive feelings (Ko, 1993) induced by the labels might lead to an impulse purchase. Since emotional preferences are likely to motive purchases (Park, Kim, & Forney, 2006) this creates an oxymoron as a label promoting environmentally conscious behaviour may induce or justify a purchase which might not have been made otherwise.

As Bray (2009) stated, some consumers have more positive feelings during their post purchase reflection when having purchased a more ethical product. This was an emotion also apparent in our survey as a few of the respondents expressed that buying environmentally or ethically labelled clothing made them feel good. These feeling can be emphasized by corporate social marketing (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002) which all of the companies, but particularly H&M, engage in.

When examining green consumer behaviour, one must not only look at the purchasing decision but rather the entire consumption process. By separating the process into stages, as suggested by Peattie
(2001) we can examine the consumers’ environmental orientation. He states that many consumers make green purchases but have no intentions to change their behaviour in the other stages of the process, putting them in the “fit and forget” green purchasers’ category (figure 4). However, as the more sustainable options are now easily accessible when sold in fast fashion stores and does not differ from the rest of the assortment regarding design and fashionability, the consumers green behaviour in the purchasing phase might not be deliberate. It was evident in our survey that many of the purchases with an environmental or ethical label were unintentional, as the label itself had nothing to do with the purchase decision. This puts their actions in the “fit and forget” category, while their thoughts are separated because they are in the “grey” consumer category, as they had no intentions to act in a more environmentally friendly manner.

The shown lack of interest regarding the environmental and ethical labels, combined with the general perception that the manufacturing part of the product life cycle was the most environmentally impacting phase, indicates that the interest and actions for a more environmentally friendly behaviour is low. Taking this in consideration, one can assume that the post purchase behaviour, including product use and products disposal is not done in a way consistent with an environmentally conscious behaviour. However, whether this is due to a lack of interest or a lack of knowledge is beyond the purpose of this thesis to answer.

5.3 Barriers to eco-fashion

Some of the barriers that Hiller Connell (2010) found to stand in the way of eco-conscious apparel acquisition seem to be diminished when sustainability is introduced in the fast fashion market. Only one of our respondents expressed the opinion that the selection of environmental or ethical labelled garments was not big enough. The more sustainable options are now easy to find, as cheap, stylish and comfortable as other clothes in the same store. Our results showed that young female consumers value price and trendiness higher than other features when shopping for fashion items. This indicates that if fast fashion wants the customers to become more sustainable they are using the right approach. However, the most important barrier towards a more sustainable market is the lack of knowledge. Our survey showed that there was a substantial gap between the concepts presented by the industry and the knowledge among the consumers. A common misperception is the idea that natural materials are both better for the environment as well as being of higher quality. If customers knew more about the concepts used and the fashion industry as a whole they might revise their list of preferences.
The lack of interest in more sustainable fashion from the respondents might be explained by the barriers between them and those affected by the fast fashion industry. The three barriers described by Woollard (2000) are all distancing the consumers from the problems connected to fashion production and consumption. The consumers do not experience the consequences of their actions, and the only difference for them between purchasing a product with an environmental or ethical label or one without might be a feeling of accomplishment or pride. The information regarding the environmental and social impacts of the fast fashion industry is not hard to find, and time after time discussed in media. Still it seems that the interest of changing one’s own purchase habits or behaviour is low if not non-existing, as the consequences do not directly and immediately affect the consumers.

The introduction of more sustainable options in fast fashion stores might cause problems for environmentally or ethically conscious companies, who have to set their prices accordingly. Not only can the difference in price be difficult for the consumers to comprehend, but also the motivation to purchase these products when they believe that the fast fashion companies’ alternatives are just as good.
6. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we present our conclusions from the study, based on our problem and purpose. This is followed by a closing discussion and implications for further research.

6.1 Conclusions

The fast fashion companies that provide customers with more sustainable labelled garments often encourage the customers to purchase these options through marketing and in store merchandising. Even though many customers had noticed environmentally or ethically related activity from the companies most did not consider the companies in the fast fashion industry as sustainable. This creates a gap for the companies if their quest is to become virtuous corporate brands.

Even though many of the respondents did not understand the meaning of the labels, it is important to consider that some of the consumers in this research were critical towards the use of sustainability within fast fashion. The fast fashion companies put a lot of emphasis on the product differentiation of more sustainable products, whereas other endeavours are less clear to the customers. One intention with the use of labels is to educate about the issues regarding the fashion industry. However there is a risk that consumers will start to question the companies even more if they gain more knowledge about the problems concerning the entire lifecycle of fast fashion.

In the fashion purchasing process young female customers value other factors higher than environmental and ethical aspects. Sustainability seems to serve as added value on garments that are already in the scope of interest. Sometimes it is likely that it even encourages and justifies new purchases. The majority of the consumers in this research can be classified as “fit and forget” or “grey” consumers. This means that they care about sustainable aspects only at the time of purchase, but not in other stages of the product lifecycle. Some even buy labelled products without making an active decision to do so, due to the fact that the more sustainable products are mixed with other garments in the same store and equally fashionable. Some of the barriers against sustainable apparel acquisition are therefore diminished.

There is however a lack of interest for sustainable products among the female consumers and it is possible that the lack of knowledge is a contributing factor to this way of thinking. Separation barriers, in which the problems and consequences are decoupled from the daily life for various
reasons, seem to be accurate regarding the consumption of fast fashion. This lack of adapting knowledge can be considered as a distinctive barrier towards a more sustainable fashion future and the motivation for companies to sell labelled products.

6.2 Closing discussion

According to the results of this research labels has not increased consumer interest to a high degree. Neither has it increased the knowledge base and behaviour of the fast fashion shoppers. In some cases the labels seem to serve as an eye opener, but they are not considered important enough to make the customer search for further information about the companies’ endeavours. One may question if labels is a temporary fix used by the companies, consciously or subconsciously, to show that they care and to cope with conflicting demands from different stakeholders. The idea of using sustainability labels might not be perfect from an environmental or ethical perspective since the phenomenon has not yet encouraged to more sustainable fashion consumption. With the use of labels companies are at least trying to do something good, which obviously can be considered a positive thing. However, this does not make an overall virtuous company.

Our findings show that the consumers do not know the meaning of many of the labels used for the more sustainable options, and that the labels most often are not affecting their purchase decisions, so what is the point of using them? When the labels are not adding enough value to the products to cause a positive purchase decision, nor improving the brand image as a whole, it could be better to put the effort and energy into making the entire assortments and all operations more sustainable. To add value to the entire company and not just specific products might create a competitive advantage, using corporate branding as a way of attracting consumers who does want to shop more consciously and have the opportunity to do so without it having to affect which garment to purchase. This makes the company, rather than some of its garments or collections, the more sustainable choice.

Sustainability labels can be considered successful from a business perspective when it adds value to the products and if consumers are interested in a green approach. However, there seem to be a balance of how much knowledge the consumer has before they start to question the phenomenon and why fast fashion companies set sustainable claims on their products. When taking the entire product life cycle into account it is difficult to state that fast fashion is sustainable when their business idea is built upon endless mass consumption. The fast pace business model encourages the
customer to shop new fashion items and discard of old ones. There has been a lot of focus on the production process and its effects, it might instead be useful from a sustainability perspective to inform and encourage consumers to engage in a more sustainable behaviour throughout the entire consumption process. It is likely that a well-educated fashion consumer looks at the entire picture and does not adopt the idea of labelled fast fashion. Since one of the intentions of using labels is to educate customers a contradictory situation emerges.

A big issue regarding knowledge about sustainability is that it is difficult to state whose responsibility it is to search for information and to make the fashion industry better. The companies provide the consumers with environmentally preferable products and market it in store, on their websites, through specific reports and various other ways. Some respond positively to it, whereas others simply do not care. Some consumers put high pressure on the market and boycott sustainable initiatives from fast fashion companies overall since they are not doing enough. Other consumers lack so much knowledge that they do not even know what to demand or expect from companies. If customers do not demand or buy more sustainable clothes the companies might not find reason to invest in making them available. The situation is a so-called catch 22. The companies large enough to make a substantial difference does to a large extent serve a consumer group with a low interest in sustainable fashion, making further investments in sustainable processes unprofitable at the moment.

The classical definition of sustainable development is the ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The very foundation of fast fashion is continuous consumption and disposal. A strive for constant renewal and a consumption based on want rather than need from the consumers, creating a situation where garments are thrown away because we are tired of them or they are out of style. Is it possible for companies dependent on consumers acting like this to become sustainable? Can the two opposites be combined or is an unavailing quest for an unattainable goal?

Despite the fundamental contrasts, sustainable fashion or eco-fashion is manufactured and marketed by several companies. There is an issue in the fact that the companies and the fashion industry sometimes do not even seem to know what sustainability is all about. Though the labelled garments have less impact on the environment than their regularly manufactured counterparts, they still satisfy a perceived need created by marketers and society. Can it be possible to continue consuming like we do today and be sustainable? Maybe we must change our views on consumption altogether.
and go against the norms and habits that the fast fashion companies rely on. Do the more sustainable garments and eco collections really make a difference or is it a way to ease our guilty conscience, a temporary fix and an effort to justify and make our consumption behaviour acceptable?

*Implications for further research*

There are many opportunities to develop the findings and the discussion points of this thesis into further research. For example it is clear that it is of interest to find a way to educate today’s fashion consumers in order to create a more sustainable future consumption of fashion. It would also be valuable to increase the span of the research and incorporate a larger target audience in the population to be able to draw conclusions about different groups of fashion consumers. The thought of evaluation the use of labels from a company perspective is also an intriguing research idea. The biggest question of all is however to further discuss the idea of sustainable fast fashion - is it possible?
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX

The survey was conducted in order to get information to help us reach our purpose.

The first question helped us determine the volume of garments bought in an average month. We also wanted to know where they shopped, in order to determine if they had knowledge of the assortments in fast fashion stores. The questions two, four, five and seven helped us establish the degree of interest and attitude towards sustainability labels amongst the respondents. To which extent the respondents were affected by these types of labels and if they influence their purchase decisions.

The third and eight questions were there to give us an insight in the consumers’ perceptions of sustainability marketing and their opinions of it in these types of circumstances. Question six helped us determine whether the sustainability labels have had any impact of the knowledge possessed by the respondents, as it is said to be one of the reasons they are used.

Survey

1. Hur mycket pengar har du lagt på klädinköp den senaste månaden?
   - □<500 SEK
   - □501-1000 SEK
   - □1001-2000 SEK
   - □2001< SEK

Vilka tre klädbutiker handlar du oftast i?

........................................................................................................................................................................

2. Vilka var de 2 viktigaste egenskaperna hos det senaste modeplagget du köpt?
   - □Trendigt
   - □Praktisk
   - □Hållbar kvalitet
   - □Pris
   - □Material
   - □Varumärke
   - □Miljövänlig
   - □Övrigt: ............................................................................................................................................................

........................................................................................................................................................................
3. Har du uppmärksamt miljö- eller etiskt relaterad aktivitet (reklam, debatt, märkningar etc.) från följande företag?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ja</th>
<th>Nej</th>
<th>Vet ej</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lindex</td>
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<td>Topshop</td>
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<td>Monki</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gina Tricot</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cubus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bikbok</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Vilket/vilka av dessa företag skulle du kassa som “sustainable”?

........................................................................................................................................

4. Har du köpt ett plagg med en miljö- eller etisk märkning från något av dessa företag?

☐ Ja
☐ Nej
☐ Vet Ej

Om du svarat Ja eller Nej, beskriv varför du agerat som du gjort:

........................................................................................................................................
5. Vilken inverkan har miljö- eller etiska märkningar från den här typen av företag på dina klädinköp?

☐ Positiv. Jag köper gärna märkta kläder från dessa butiker.
☐ Delvis Positiv
☐ Varken eller. Det påverkar inte mina inköp.
☐ Delvis Negativ
☐ Negativ. Jag köper medvetet inte märkta kläder från dessa butiker.

Varför?

6. Tänk noga igenom vad de här begreppen betyder för dig. Vad är skillnaden på plagg märkta med dessa begrepp gentemot andra kläder i samma butik?

- Organic Cotton
- Recycled Polyester
- Tencel
- Conscious collection
- Recycled Cut Remnants
- Affordable Luxury – the Sustainable Collection

7. Har du någon gång sökt mer information gällande en miljö- eller etisk märkning du sett i butik, tex via företagets hemsida?

☐ Ja
☐ Nej

Om du svarat nej, varför inte?

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------

8. Vilka tankar har du kring den här typen av modeföretags etiska och hållbara marknadsföring?

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------
9. Vilken fas i ett klädesplaggs livscykel tror du påverkar miljön mest?

☐ Tillverkning
☐ Försäljning
☐ Användning
☐ Återvinning/Sophantering
☐ Övrigt

........................................................................................................................................