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Qualification as corporate activism: How Swedish apparel retailers attach circular fashion qualities to take-back systems

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Abstract

This paper explains how corporations can develop market-based activities to influence environmental policies. The empirical focus is on how Swedish apparel retailers qualify take-back systems for used clothes and textiles as steps toward creating circular fashion. An analysis of the qualities that retailers attach to take-back systems shows how qualification helps corporations feature fashion as potentially sustainable and able to develop circular material flows, with the aim to enroll staff, customers, and other stakeholders in new behaviors and patterns of responsibility. We apply the notion of corporate activism to demonstrate how corporations use qualification to engage in market-based activities with the aim of influencing the regulatory agenda.

Keywords

Corporate political action, corporate activism, Qualification, Take-back systems, Apparel

Highlights

- Corporations use market actions to engage in political activities
- Qualification of products and services makes it possible for corporations to conduct political actions
- Firms engage in corporate activism to set agendas and support a preferred social change

Introduction

As one of the founders of economic sociology, Neil Smelser (1963) suggests Joan Robinson (1933) may have been the first economist to theorize that on certain occasions firms and other agents can behave as *political agents*, sometimes even at the cost of their economic gain. Likewise, the political role that firms may play has not gone unnoticed for a theoretician of market governance such as Carl Kaysen who, only a few years before becoming an advisor to President John F. Kennedy, had penned a chapter entitled "The corporation: How much power? What scope?" (1959) to conclude there was already a need to limit corporate power through the promotion of more competitive markets, more control by agencies external to business, and a greater sense of responsibility in corporations for their exercise of power. Likewise, the need to limit the influence of corporations' political activities has also been put forward by anti-corporate activists with books such as *When corporations rule the world* by David C. Korten (1995), *The corporation: The pathological pursuit of profit and power* by Joel Bakan (2005), and *No logo: No space, no choice, no jobs* by Naomi Klein (2001) – all reaching sizeable circulations at the turn of the past century.

Coming from different horizons, several strands of management research have recently addressed the role of corporations as political actors (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Drawing on scholarly work from management, political science, economics, and sociology, Hillman, Keim, and Schuler (2004, p. 838) define "corporate political activity" as attempts to shape government policy in ways favorable to the firm. Typically such activity encompasses engagements of firms and industries in electoral politics, lobbying, trade associations, campaigns aimed at mobilizing the civil society, and corporate responsibility actions taken with preemptive purposes (Walker & Rea, 2014). For Lawton, McGuire, and Rajwani (2013), firms engage in such activities to develop their resources and impact their non-market environment, in particular the political environment. However, not all political activities are based on nonmarket actions, as Funk and Hirschman (2017) show; for example, companies are even actively influencing policies or mitigating their effect through market actions such as product innovations, localization of production, and mergers and acquisitions.

The practicalities of such market-based activities remain lesser studied, though. The growing acknowledgment of the engagement of corporations with politics (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo, & Spicer, 2016), is not matched by a corresponding growth in understanding the details of a firm's engagement with politics through market actions. To address this gap in awareness, we analyze the take-back systems introduced recently by a growing number of Swedish apparel retailers. These take-back systems allow consumers to return used clothes to retailers in order to source a reuse and recycle system for apparel and fibers. Retailers present them as a tangible effort to make fashion circular, and we approach them as a concrete example of how firms conduct market-based political activities.

By focusing on how apparel retailers introduce take-back systems, we unfold how they endow take-back systems with circular fashion qualities though a definitional process that Callon,

Méadel, and Rabeharisoa (2002) call qualification – briefly, the process of endowing some product or service with specific qualities. Further, we show that the qualification of take-back systems is pivotal to a *corporate activism* aimed at featuring fashion as potentially sustainable and capable of developing circular material flows and enrolling (Akrich, Callon, & Latour, 2002) staff, customers, and other stakeholders in an understanding of sustainable fashion that will not threaten either their corporate business models or their consumers' lifestyles, but is amenable to their corporate needs and possibilities as fast fashion companies.

Our purpose is to delve into the details of the qualification of take-back systems to explain how such ordinary commercial activities as the introduction of a new service to customers can be political, and, inversely, how political activities can be as ordinary as the introduction of a new service to customers. Qualification emerges as instrumental to the pervasive political efforts of corporations to produce, promote, and diffuse a self-serving version of social reality. We start with introducing the key tenets of the theoretical concept of qualification.

Theory: Introducing Qualification

The concept of qualification has been introduced by three sociologists – Michel Callon, Cécile Méadel, and Vololona Rabeharisoa (2002) – to show that the evolution of organizations and their products and services derives from a standing probing by economic actors of how goods can be established on markets. Goods are not endowed with pre-existing attributes that one simply needs to become informed about and learn. Instead, to become marketable, products and services need to go through an encompassing process of qualification and requalification that aims at endowing them with specific qualities:

> All quality is obtained at the end of a process of qualification, and all qualification aims to establish a constellation of characteristics, stabilized at least for a while, which are attached to the product and transform it temporarily into a tradable good in the market. (Callon et al., 2002, p. 199)

The process of qualification of products is one of fine-tuning that touches on all dimensions of products and services, from design to use through packaging, communication, and distribution. The process of qualification also involves both suppliers and consumers, and "[t]he functioning of the economy of qualities involves the establishment of forms of organization that facilitate the intensification of collaboration between supply and demand, in a way that enables consumers to participate actively in the qualification of products" (Callon et al., 2002, p. 212). For example, the defining, shaping, transforming, qualifying and requalifying of products by fashion-savvy apparel buyers is critical to support or create luxury retail practice (Entwistle, 2006). In addition, the process of qualification is a multi-sided process where all competitors endeavor to attach consumers to their own products and services, if necessary, by detaching them from competing products and services.

Qualification consists of endless fights over the meaning of things. These fights are settled through what Callon et al. (2002) call trials. Trials are a type of real life testing. They involve products and services being defined, typified, and classified. The use of clear measurement procedures are essential to establishing definitions, typifications, and classifications as objective, in a mutual objectification of qualities and measurement techniques (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2010). Further, the process of objectification leads to an institutionalization (Barley & Tolbert, 1997) where products and services are transformed "into packages, 'things' which can be valued" (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010, p. 7). Worthy of notice is that trials evolve as the

products or services develop and change throughout the qualification process. Trials also differ from one stakeholder to the other:

> The characterization of a vehicle in the research laboratory is obviously not the same as that on the sales brochure distributed by the dealer, even if the two lists of characteristics are related. It is also different from the one proposed to a sub-contractor who designs and manufactures parts. (Callon et al., 2002, p. 199)

In particular, trials by the customer are crucial (Pettinger, 2008), and producers go about them by "trying some positions, observing consumers' evaluations, trying to clarify their judgements, taking them into account when repositioning the product, etc." (Callon et al., 2002, p. 204). The qualities of a product or a service go from trials to trials that they need to pass to exist. The specific configuration of qualities attached to a product and service constitutes its singularity.

Analyzing the qualification of plastic bottles of water, Hawkins, Potter, and Race (2015) engage in more depth with the hows of qualification trials. They analyze "the specific techniques through which value and quality are enacted, and the ways in which qualification is always relational" (Hawkins et al., 2015, p. 69). The history of water packaged in plastic bottles shows that qualification trials involve as different techniques as developing a plastic material with adequate molding properties, recounting stories about the virtues of mineral water, and connecting and binding together different networks and agents. Nonreturnable plastic bottles were introduced at a time when most glass bottles were returnable. Thus, the quality of plastic bottles being nonreturnable did not emerge by itself all of a sudden: it was established progressively through a series of qualification trials that, successfully passed, have established the qualities of water in plastic bottles by connecting this quality to other qualities.

Likewise, the diffusion of plastic bottles for water have required what Ariztia (2013) calls a "qualification of consumers" as mobile and in a permanent need of hydration. Those engaged in the qualification trials have aligned material, technology, legislation, profitability, disposal habits, and technologies of personhood, fixing the characteristics of the plastic bottle and stabilizing its qualities – at least for the time being since, as Hawkins et al. (2015) observe, qualities are not definitive but subject to continued negotiation. As noted by Dubuisson-Quellier (2010), qualification is a plural process that shapes customers as much as products and is therefore particularly apt to create new market relationships. For example, Fuentes and Fuentes (2017) describe how the marketing of Swedish oat-based drinks rests on a simultaneous qualification of products and customers around qualities of health, convenience, and sustainability. Featuring oat-based drinks as mass-market substitutes for dairy products, for example, with a noted "like milk but for adults" campaign, a stress on their being produced with Swedish ingredients, a spatial positioning in stores of oat-based products alongside dairy products rather than on separate shelves – all are ways to create supply and demand for a milk alternative.

Finally, qualification does not end at the production and distribution stages, as Callon et al. (2002) seem to imply. As the qualification of plastic bottles as recyclable (Hawkins et al., 2015) illustrates, the qualification of goods and their consumers continues well beyond the consumption stage. Particularly in view of corporate and political objectives to turn the current linear economy into a circular economy (e.g., European Commission, COM/2015/0614 final), qualification continues at the subsequent stages of storage, resale, repair, recycling, and disposal in permanent trials of whether something is still a product or something to be discarded (Spring & Araujo, 2017). This brings us to the empirical ground of this study: the qualification of take-back systems by apparel retailers.

Methodology

Drawing on the long tradition of case studies as an epistemological means to investigate, describe, and analyze the specificities of physical (e.g., in medicine) or social (e.g., in sociology) phenomena (Passeron & Revel, 2005), our study builds on a qualitative analysis of a sample of voluntary and in-shop take-back systems for used textiles and clothes developed by Swedish apparel retailers. Adopting an approach that is highly iterative and tightly linked to data (Eisenhardt, 1989), our purpose is to provide a concrete understanding (Flyvbjerg, 2011) of what amounts to the most common ways for apparel companies to show a commitment to a transition to sustainable fashion.

Qualitative Data Collection

We selected 7 firms that design, order, and sell new garments for everyday use such as dresses, jackets, coats, jeans, polo shirts, t-shirts, and similar clothing items, and also offer take-back services. Our purpose was to choose a sample that would be homogeneous enough to provide confirmations while large enough to capture the diversity that exists among take-back systems in the Swedish clothing industry today. Thus, we excluded sportswear and footwear firms for selling much more than textiles, as well as retail actors specializing in second-hand goods for not selling new items. We retrieved turnovers for apparel retailers from the database Amadeus, and starting from the top, searched through the web pages and reports of the largest firms in the industry. We also searched news, trade journals, and relied on prior knowledge to find smaller Swedish apparel firms with take-back systems.

The firms in our sample are: H&M, KappAhl, Lindex, Gina Tricot, Indiska, Filippa K, and Boomerang (Table 1). Their take-back systems are all in-shop, in contrast to take-back

systems where used items are collected at charity shops or recycling stations. They are also all voluntary initiatives, freely taken by retailers, in contrast to take-back systems that answer to legal obligations, for example, the European legislation on electric and electronic waste. Some are open to all brands and kinds of textiles including shoes; others are limited to the company's own products. Some offer an economic reward; others do not. Their names are *The Boomerang Effect*, *We fight for change! Garment Collecting Program*, and *Filippa K collect*. Also, these 7 case firms comprised at that time more or less all Swedish apparel firms with take-back systems (more have followed since).

We investigated these 7 take-back systems during spring and autumn 2016 using a combination of qualitative methods: interviews, text analysis, and in-store observations (Table 1). The second author conducted ten interviews with Heads of Sustainability from the firms in our sample to gain first-hand knowledge about how they developed their take-back systems and how they related these efforts to their firm's sustainability strategies These interviews were semi-structured and dealt with what the system stands for, how it relates to corporate goals, and how it has been implemented. In the case of H&M, we were not granted an interview, but we used a filmed presentation of their system narrated by the Head of Sustainability. The second author also conducted an interview with a representative of the Swedish Fashion Council and another with a representative of the clothing and textile section of the Swedish Trade Federation, the latter being in charge of a recycling oriented network to which most heads of sustainability belong. The purpose of these interviews was to gain an industry-wide understanding of the efforts made in the apparel industry to become more sustainable and the role that take-back systems played in these efforts. For the sake of contrast, the authors were interested in looking at another industry that puts considerable textile on the market. The Swedish furniture company IKEA was chosen because generally

speaking, it is a role model for retail in Sweden, but also it had recently launched take-back projects in selected stores, and the authors wanted to hear more about why and how. Thus, the first author interviewed two IKEA sustainability officials.

Table 1: Overview of data sources2015

Company and details	Details	Interviews	Observations	Reports	Videos
H&M	Turnover: 19,712[1] Presence: 61[2] 115,000 employees		4 observations (20 minutes in total	Sustainability report 2014, 117 pp. (H&M, 2015)	"H&M 100% Circular lab", 1,5 h (H&M, 2014); "The break-up", 2 min (Borsodi, 2014); "World Recycling Week, what happens next" (H&M, 2016)
KappAhl	Turnover: 496[1] Presence: 8[2] 2,819 employees	Interview with sustainability manager (35 min)	4 observations (22 min in total)	Sustainability report 2015, 58 pp. (KappAhl, 2016)	"KappAhl – Wear, love and give back" 1 min (KappAhl, 2015)
Lindex	Turnover: 358[1] Presence: 18[2] 1,358 employees	Interview with sustainability manager (1 h 20 min)	3 observations (16 min in total)	Sustainability report 2014, 60 pp. (Lindex, 2015)	"About Lindex" 9min (Lindex, 2014)
GinaTricot	Turnover: 958[1] Presence: 5[2] 185 employees	Interview with sustainability manager (50 min)	2 observations (6 min in total)	Sustainability report 2014, 40 pp. (GinaTricot, 2015)	
Indiska	Turnover: 67[1] Presence: 4[2] 428 employees	Interviews with sustainability manager 1 (1 h 10 min) and sustainability manager 2 (1 h 11 min)	3 observations (13 min in total)	Does not issue a report	
FilippaK	Turnover: 56[1] Presence: 7[2] 153 employees	Interviews with sustainability manager (twice) (1 h in total) and store coordinator (30 min)	1 observation (10 min)	Sustainability report 2014, 75 pp. (FilippaK, 2015)	
Boomerang	Turnover: 15[1] Presence: 3[2] 84 employees	Interviews with sustainability manager (45 min) and market manager (30 min)			

Sources: [1]Amadeus.bvdinfo.com; [2] Present in this many countries in addition to Sweden

Text analysis bore on secondary materials like company reports, web pages, newspaper interviews and articles, blogs, and social media extracts. In particular, web pages convey much information about how companies work with circularity and sustainability. The focus of this text analysis was on how take-back systems are presented by the company and received by the public and the profession.

In addition, structured observations (n= 18) allowed us to note the spatial positioning and the visibility of take-back boxes in shops, for example, in relation to entrances, cashier counters, or fitting rooms. Some of these observations gave the authors an opportunity to shorter and non-structured discussions with front desk employees about how they perceive take-back systems.

Qualitative Data Analysis

We started our analysis with going through our material, company by company, to list the qualities attributed to their take-back system. Two clusters of qualities rapidly appeared: one where qualities were mostly aimed at customers, and another where they were mostly aimed at the retail companies themselves. We then made a series of iterations (Eisenhardt, 1989; (Swedberg, 2014) between qualification literature and our field material, paying particular attention, as suggested by Hawkins et al. (2015), to the communicative, technical, economic, and commercial properties that retailers attach to take-back systems. In particular, we looked for solved or on-going trials (Callon et al., 2002) to see how companies actually engage with the qualification of their market innovation. These iterations between qualification theory and our field material enabled us to identify six core qualities that retailers (try to) attach to take-back systems to singularize them: responsible, amorous, convenient, circular, pedagogic, and reticular. We have also identified key trials and things that qualification makes possible which taken together with these qualities provide a comprehensive coverage of how apparel retailers in our sample qualify their take-back systems. These analytical findings are presented in the next section.

Analysis: Qualities of Take-Back Systems

An Exemplary Film

The Breakup, a 1 minute and 56 second film by Bela Borsodi (2014) for H&M, presents a piece of cloth folded as a human face that explains to the audience why it is important to take used clothes and textiles back to a shop when they are no longer wanted. Here is a verbatim description of the film:

> Well, of course I understand if you've moved on and need space, and even that you have changed while I've remained exactly the same. Love is not forever. All I ask is, if part we must, we do so in a responsible way.

The camera travels back and one sees masked people who bring clothes to a take-back box in ballet-like manners:

> If you just throw me out it damages the planet. The earth simply cannot bear so many clothes ending their life as waste. H&M has a far better answer. They've started what they call their Garment Collecting Program to welcome any of us, of any brand, size, age, or color, and in absolutely any state. You simply come to an H&M store, drop your old clothes in a collecting box, and the rest is entirely to them.

The piece of clothes explains further that:

> The very best of us will find new homes after being resold as second hand. Others will be turned into different products, finding new work as cleaning cloths or rags. Garments in the worst condition can be transformed into isolation materials, or textile fibers, woven into cloth, reborn as fashionable new clothes of every conceivable kind, so every one of us will be reused, repurposed, or recycled. This means natural resources are saved and together we can reduce our environmental footprint. H&M calls it a closed loop for textile fibers.

Finally, these masked dancing people unfold a large H&M logo made out of clothes in the company's color code.

> This might not sound too exciting, but what H&M is doing is jolly good for our planet and for everyone. Now, perhaps, you already know that.

The end titles say "Don't let fashion go to waste," "Bring it to your local H&M store," and "H&M Conscious."

Borsodi's (2014) film is typical of how apparel retailers try to associate qualities with their take-back systems, starting with being a way to express environmental responsibility.

Quality for Quality

Responsible. Enacting the green consumer (Fuentes, 2014), take-back systems enable customers to combine the pleasures of fashion, understood as endless possibilities to update and express themselves, with environmental awareness and responsibility. Lindex sends a similar message: "When you feel ready to part with your fashion items, make them available for reuse" (Lindex, 2016b; our translation).

Take-back systems are to help the apparel industry take a responsibility for the environmental impact of textile waste. The collective responsibility of the apparel industry to make responsible use of textiles is engaged, says KappAhl:

> At KappAhl we believe that the fashion industry has a shared responsibility to ensure that the textile materials we put on the market can have as long a life as possible and be reused and recycled in several cycles before they are completely worn out. (KappAhl, 2017)

The apparel industry is to respect the planet boundaries. H&M's CEO Karl-Johan Persson explains in the 2014 sustainability report: “In order to remain a successful business, we need to keep growing – and at the same time respect the planetary boundaries” (H&M, 2015, p. 3). His statement is echoed by Filippa K which answers the question “What is sustainable fashion for Filippa K?” with “Fashion where sustainability is the guide to growth and where we do business within the planetary boundaries” (Filippa K, 2016a). Even if a critical voice can ask: “On what planet can you continue to produce 600 million garments per year and not exceed ecological boundaries?” (Whitehead, 2015), take-back systems are to demonstrate a genuine commitment of apparel retailers to sustainable consumption; they are to objectify apparel retailers’ respect for the planet’s boundaries and the long term future of fashion.

Amorous. Love is an essential element of this responsibility taking. “Love is not forever” (Borsodi, 2014) says H&M, and Boomerang explains:

> Boomerang Effect pieces have a story. They are garments that have been worn and loved by someone who has chosen to pass them on. It’s our way of giving each garment a new lease on life and saving the Earth’s precious resources. It is the opposite of disposable and embraces our philosophy that timeless style is always more important than passing trends. Some call it green fashion, but for us it’s all part of the Boomerang Effect. (Boomerang, 2016a)

Take-back systems offer a possibility to prolong one’s respect for one’s own consumption and identity history. They are to extend the possibilities of love to the post-consumption disposal stage of clothes’ life-cycle:

> An important part of ensuring that our customers love and wear our garments for a long time is to make sure that they initially choose the garment that suits them best and that these garments are of a high quality. It is then about taking care of

> their garments, and ultimately, that it is possible to pass them on for someone else to use. (Indiska, 2017)

And this expression of an extended concern for clothes that one has enjoyed and loved is merged with a respect for the future of nature. KappAhl prints "Wear, love and give back" on its take-back boxes. Take-back systems are to coalesce the love that customers have for their clothes with a concern for planet Earth. These systems are to be more than a means of managing used materials; they are invitations to distance one's self from selfish throw-away consumption and make fashion caring and generous. Conventional disposal is equated with carelessness and death, whereas take-back systems are to be expressions of care and consideration. In literary terms (e.g., Gabriel, 2000), take-back systems turn romances of loved clothes into epic efforts to maintain life on planet Earth.

And to make clear that take-back systems are not ordinary business arrangements but true love affairs, retailers stress that they do not make any profit out of collected clothes and textiles. Some retailers even donate money to charities for each collected kilo, an effort that endows take-back systems with a philanthropic quality – even if retailers do not communicate much about it.

Convenient. Take-back systems are also qualified as simple to use and expedient: "We want to make it easy for you to make sustainable choices and give you the chance to hand in your old textiles conveniently at KappAhl stores" (KappAhl, 2017). Most systems only require that customers pack used items in ad-hoc bags, close these bags, go to a physical shop, and put the bags in collection boxes – "simply come to an H&M store" (Borsodi, 2014) – which is arguably already a positive outcome for retailers. Customers do not need to prepare their used

textiles and clothes: “We accept all kind of clothes and textiles that are dry and clean, regardless of where you have bought them.” (Lindex, 2016b, our translation)

Take-back systems are thus to be an easy way for consumers to combine a love for fashion with a commitment to environmental responsibility. They are also to be easy to use for staff:

> It is very easy to leave your used clothes in our shops. The only thing we ask is that you come with your clothes in a sealed plastic bag. Our staff will take the clothes directly to our store-room for further transportation to our partner Human Bridge. (Gina Tricot, 2014; our translation)

Such convenience is a trait that we have observed directly when leaving our own clothes in take-back boxes and that sales personnel stressed spontaneously during our informal over-the-counter interviews.

Take-back systems are also practical in the sense that, “if you need space” (Borsodi, 2014), they help customers create space in their wardrobes, a proven motive of interest for fashionistas (Samsioe, 2017):

> It has become easier to clean your wardrobe – and to make something good for the world! This coming April, we will start collecting used clothes and textiles in all our shops. Everybody is welcome to leave these items – we accept all clothes, not only from Gina Tricot. (Gina Tricot, 2014; our translation)

Closets are to be carefully curated (e.g., Rees, 2017) – “We are dedicated to the curated wardrobe that is simple rather than excessive,” declares Filippa K (2016c) – and take-back systems are a means for customers to bring some order to their textile possessions.

In a paradoxical relationship to this message of making room in wardrobes, though, is that several take-back systems offer vouchers to customers who bring their clothes back:

> Return a Filippa K garment to your local store and receive a 15% voucher to be used on your next purchase. (Filippa K, 2016b)
>
> Every time you hand in a bag of clothes and textiles, you will receive a voucher for 50 SEK that can be used that same day on purchases over 300 SEK. (Lindex, 2016b; our note: one SEK is about ten Euro cents)

Here, retailers make clear that take-back systems are not about reducing consumption, but about promoting a circular growth of the industry.

Circular. The qualification of take-back systems as circular is the industry's variant of the growing interest for breaking with the conventional linear take-make-dispose resource model and developing recycling and re-use solutions that close the loop of product lifecycles (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2015). A circular economy is to optimize the use of virgin resources and reduce pollution and waste (Sauvé, Bernard, & Sloan, 2016); be restorative and regenerative by intention and design (World Economic Forum, 2016); decouple environmental pressure from economic growth, and achieve a better balance and harmony between the economy, environment, and society (Ghisellini, Cialani, & Ulgiati, 2016). A circular economy is also to make it possible to climb a few steps up the European waste hierarchy model (The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2008/98/EC), moving away from landfilling and incineration toward recycling and reuse.

KappAhl explains:

> What cannot be reused is recycled. The textiles are ground down and the fibers can be used to make new textiles or other materials such as cloths and

> insulation.
>
> The small quantity that can neither be reused nor recycled – about 3 percent – is incinerated for energy recovery. (KappAhl, 2017)

Take-back systems make it possible to leave behind a disposal of used clothes and textiles as unsorted waste, which in Scandinavia means sending them to energy recovery. These systems are to reduce the waste effect of fashion (Corvellec & Stål, 2017). For example, Lindex explains that all parts of the shoe in its *Better Denim Now and Forever* line of products are "sustainable with the denim fabric being collected from the post-consumer textile reuse and recycling flow, managed through Lindex stores and sorted by the Swedish second-hand organization Myrorna." (Lindex, 2016a)

Take-back systems are presented as instrumental in putting the apparel industry on a circular track. Filippa K states:

> We want to be part of the circular economy, where nothing goes to waste and all materials are reused or recycled. We aim to shift our production models from linear to circular, and to develop a closed loop mindset." (Filippa K, 2016a).

Others retailers convey a similar message, even if with different words. Borsodi (2014) explains that take-back systems make it possible for H&M to close the loop: "This means natural resources are saved and together we can reduce our environmental footprint. H&M calls it a closed loop for textile fibers". KappAhl declares that "Our goal is for the collected textiles to become new KappAhl garments" (KappAhl, 2017). Similarly, Lindex states that they "place great importance on sustainability in every stage of our process – from initial design to recycling when the clothing is no longer wearable (Lindex, 2018) and to be "offering customers the opportunity to recycle Lindex clothing and textiles with the aim of

closing the loop" (Lindex, 2018). And Boomerang, whose name evokes the idea of a loop, declares:

> It's our way of giving each garment a new lease on life and saving the Earth's precious resources. It is the opposite of disposable and embraces our philosophy that timeless style is always more important than passing trends. (Boomerang, 2016a)

Take-back systems are featured as a means to make fashion more circular, which is in turn presented as a necessity for fashion and the environment. As Boomerang explains, the purpose of take-back systems is to "constantly seek to reduce our impact on the environment, increase our resource efficiency and get close to a zero-impact, closed loop production process" (Boomerang, 2016b). Circular economy is not to replace sustainability; it is to answer to the challenge of sustainability.

Pedagogic. Introducing customers to circular fashion is not obvious to accomplish, though. Take-back systems are therefore also framed as educational devices. Apparel retailers explain that they give them an opportunity to learn a lot, for example: "As an extra bonus, we get a chance to prove that our clothes really do stand the test of time, in both quality and style." (Filippa K, 2016c).

But retailers also act as educators, and present take-back systems as an opportunity for consumers to overcome unsustainable disposal habits and learn how to become circular users. Customers are to invent and learn better patterns of use, ownership, and disposal, especially since their participation is a condition of success for these systems.

Take-back systems are a means to durably change consumption habits, "paving the way for more sustainable consumer behaviour," as Boomerang puts it (Boomerang, 2016b). H&M's head of sustainability explains: We have also learned that the key to success is not only to make fashion sustainable, but to also make sustainability fashionable" (H&M, 2014, p. 8'49"). Consumers are invited to become part of a new global social movement: the community of responsible fashion actors who return their clothes and textiles that are used, damaged, or no longer desirable. "The challenge ahead for all of us is nothing less to change the way that fashion is made and enjoyed" (H&M, 2014, p. 11'45"). "We fight for change," says Indiska (2016), in nearly a revolutionary tone.

Reticular. Finally, take-back systems are qualified as active nods in a net of circular actions. Apparel retailers stress that they do not develop take-back systems alone, for example:

> Indiska is part of a network, T4RI (Textile Recycling Initiative), together with several of our colleagues in the textile industry. There, a dialogue is carried out in consultation with the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, with multiple stakeholders, regarding how future recycling challenges can be met. The aim of the network is to create a system so that all textiles that cannot be reused are taken care of, so that we can close the life cycle, and to a large extent, use recycled fibers in new products. (Indiska, 2017)

In addition to customers who do the reverse logistic work of bringing items back to the shops, retailers operate take-back systems together with organizations with a competence to manage used clothes and textiles, for example, charities such as Myrorna for Lindex and Indiska, Stadsmissionen for Filippa K, and Human Bridge for Gina Tricot, or private companies such as the German SOEX group that runs the recycling company I:Collect (I:Co) for KappAhl and H&M.

Qualification is relational (Hawkins et al., 2015), and the development of take-back systems rests on the creation of action nets (Corvellec & Czarniawska, 2015; Czarniawska, 2004): practical patterns of actions and interactions. Examples of such actions are recycling organizations that place containers in retailers' shops and empty them regularly; customers who pack used clothes in bags and bring them to collection boxes; employees who give away a voucher for each donated bag of clothes; retailers that keep a record of collected items and transfer agreed upon money to receiving charities; bloggers who write posts on take-back systems; and pop stars who sing on recycling. None of these actions is obvious in the sense of being taken-for-granted. For example, it is far from obvious that staff used to selling new items will positively collect used ones. Each connects materials and actors in ways that did not exist before, challenging the established social order and laying the groundwork for new patterns of action; each is a trial (Callon et al., 2002) that has to be won to endow take-back systems with circular qualities. This conclusion leads us into a discussion of how apparel retailers use a qualification of take-back systems to engage in market-based corporate activism.

Discussion: Qualifying take-back systems

Key qualification trials

By singularizing take-back systems as responsible, amorous, convenient, circular, pedagogical, and reticular, apparel retailers create a kind of showroom for circular fashion. Qualification allows them to communicate to their employees, customers, competitors, and other stakeholders, including politicians with an interest for sustainability and circular economy issues, that the fashion industry can actually be sustainable.

Retailers are not only trying to enroll (Akrich et al., 2002) love, convenience, learning, the competence of their partners, and ethical responsibility into their own understanding of take-back systems and circular fashion. Their references to the European waste hierarchy model are also efforts to stitch an intertextuality (cf., Murray, Nyberg, & Rogers, 2016) with the circular economy strategy of the European Commission (2018). Drawing on the European Commission's circular economic ambitions and its program for sustainable material flows, retailers claim that take-back systems are concrete steps in the direction of creating circular fashion. In contradistinction to the Commission's strategy, which is formulated in an abstract way to apply to all industries, apparel retailers feature take-back systems for textiles as a specific way for the fashion industry to become circular. Obfuscating the massive use of chemicals in the industry, a production of clothes designed to be short-lived, or the fact that most collected materials are down-cycled rather than re-cycled (Morlet & Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Reike, Vermeulen, & Witjes, 2017), apparel retailers qualify take-back systems as unique ways to mitigate the disposable nature of fast fashion and make a more effective use of resources. A key trial of their qualifying efforts is to gain acceptance for take-back systems as a potential means to make fashion circular and sustainable.

A second trial is to succeed in initiating circular material flows. Take-back systems are qualified as the means to promote recycling and thereby to retrieve value, exploit residual value, and reduce waste, as the European waste hierarchy recommends. They are also to develop a new sourcing strategy for cotton, one that addresses a future risk of shortage that will increase prices of virgin fiber supply (e.g., H&M, 2014). The recycling of fibers is making rapid progress (RISE, 2017) but still must pass many technical trials. Yet, advocates of take-back systems claim these systems already, in the here and now, have the potential to supply recyclers with secondary material to process. Retailers hope that these systems will

create large enough volumes of secondary material to help in the development of retrieving technology, in particular technologies able to process mixed materials (e.g., polyester and cotton) that most designers are not ready to abandon. Diverting textiles from incineration and rerouting them toward future production is a condition of any actual progress toward creating a circular economy. Getting customers to bring back used clothes and textiles and use take-back systems is therefore necessary to fulfill circular ambitions.

A third and related trial of qualification is to introduce new patterns of behavior, responsibility, commitment, obligation, and accountability among personnel, customers, and other stakeholders. Qualification is built on a serious, even dramatic, observation that fashion simply cannot continue as it is, but it introduces take-back systems as convenient expressions of voluntarism, one could even say optimism. The cardboard boxes of take-back systems are to produce a mundane governance (Woolgar & Neyland, 2013) by evoking positive emotions and a sense of environmental responsibility that isolate the love of clothing from the downside of overconsumption and relieve consumers' eventual guilt from participating in the fashion industry. Take-back systems exist to convince stakeholders that circular fashion does not call for radical changes in the business models of producers and retailers, the lifestyles of consumers, or textile policies. Consumers can express their love for fashion by shopping as much as they want, as long as they adhere to the new pattern of responsibility of bringing their clothes to the store once they are no longer appreciated. Likewise, employees and financiers can rely on the willingness and ability of retailers to create circular material flows that secure the long term interest of the company and the planet. To pass qualification trials that will enroll and align (Akrich et al., 2002) staff, customers, and partners with used clothes, recycled fibers, and textile waste, the qualification of take-back systems combines the demanding language of responsibility and sustainability with the escapist language of fashion and shopping as something fun and easy, a get-away from the stresses of everyday life.

What qualification makes possible

Qualification makes things possible. Along with an offer of clothes in organic cotton, take-back systems are part of the greening of the organizational behavior (Andersson, Jackson, & Russell, 2013) of apparel retailing. Combining a greening of practices, materialities, and images (Fuentes, 2015), qualification features take-back systems as sustainability objects (Corvellec, 2016) that answer to consumers' presumed interest in sustainable fashion (cf., Morlet & Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

Qualification also makes it possible to present, promote, and diffuse an understanding of circular and sustainable fashion that is amenable to corporate strategic needs and possibilities. Retailers exploit fully the ability of mundane material tools, as Arnaud, Mills, Legrand, and Maton (2016) have observed, to translate abstract and global discourses into local applications while simultaneously fitting corporate objectives. In other words, a cardboard box in the store seems to show to customers what the abstract ideas of circular economy can mean. Still, the moral and social norms retailers advance for disposal of used items are fully compatible with their fast-fashion business model, a model that entails an ever intensifying throughput of cheap textile products (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). Fast-fashion seems far from the business models for sustainability that researchers recently have suggested (Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008). Take-back boxes are not only a way to deflect the critical attention that is paid to the massive negative environmental impacts of the fashion industry (Fletcher, 2013; Roos, Zamani, Sandin, Peters, & Svanström, 2016). These boxes also propose an understanding of the circular and sustainable fashion that serves the corporate interests of the fast fashion industry: creating an image of being responsible companies, securing customers'

loyalty, developing a new source of material supplies, and ultimately creating the conditions of possibility for a lasting growth of the fashion industry.

The promise retailers make that it might become possible in a distant future to run the fashion industry on recycled materials and without waste is yet an instance of what Milne, Kearins, and Walton (2006) call the journey metaphor of environmental sustainability: a way to legitimate today's unclear results by postponing actual commitments to a distant future. The understanding of circular and sustainable fashion that retailers promote via their qualification of take-back systems is thus an invitation made to personnel, customers, and other stakeholders to accept the current lack of sustainability of the industry. In fact, take-back systems even invite an acceleration of the consumption cycle of clothing: clothes are not to remain in wardrobes unused but are to feed take-back systems, which makes room for new items (Corvellec & Stål, 2017). Circulation is raised to a founding principle of sustainability that fits the business logic of fast-fashion with its advocacy of ever faster consumption of ever faster renewed trends and garments. In contradistinction, a commitment to what Stål and Bonnedahl (2016) call strong sustainable entrepreneurship would entail the slowing and extending of garment use to promote sufficiency. Slowing and extending garment use is also a possible interpretation of circularity (Bocken et al., 2016), but one that would run against the fast fashion business model and thus challenge the industry's long-term business interests (Stål & Corvellec, 2018). Instead, take-back systems make for an interpretation that is amenable to their interests and does not call for a business model change.

Finally, this commitment of retailers to a sustainable circulation of textiles makes it possible to influence the regulatory agenda in corporate friendly directions. Take-back systems are already a *fait accompli* that breaches the monopoly that Swedish municipalities have on the

collection of residual household waste. Retailers do not oppose this monopoly explicitly, though; they say that it is important to collect used textiles and clothes to reduce waste, but they do not qualify their take-back activities as waste collection. Saying that they are collecting textile waste would be challenging the Swedish legislation on waste head-on. In practice, they argue for a different understanding and implementation of the Swedish waste legislation: one that entitles corporate actors to take over from municipalities the right to collect selected waste. And they claim to provide an innovative solution as municipalities do not address the textile waste challenge. More generally, take-back systems create a *de facto* situation that is difficult for eventual future regulations to ignore. These systems make it possible for retailers to preempt coming regulation, for example, a ban on planned obsolescence for clothes or a mandatory European collection system of used clothes. Apparel retailers exploit that the circular economy is evocative but still sufficiently vague to create any concrete policies (Lüdeke-Freund, Gold, & Bocken, 2019) that might hinder their freedom of action (Corvellec & Stål, 2017). Their business-centered qualification of take-back systems amounts to an engagement in "market action (…) as leverage to push policy makers to create or repeal particular rules," as Funk and Hirschman (2017:33) put it.

Corporate activism

What qualification makes possible, coupled with the distinctly practical nature of firms' activities, motivates us to think of these market-actions as political. More precisely, we choose to refer to the combination of attaching qualities, passing trials, and making things possible as what is increasingly called *corporate activism*[1] to stress that these are concrete issue-raising, agenda-setting, market-based actions that can be taken by firms to objectify

[1] The expression "corporate activism" has appeared, without being theoretically elaborated on, in discussions about social intrapreneurship (Davis & White, 2015), corporate presence in social media (Wilcox, 2019), the activist behaviors of some top managers (Böhm, Skoglund, & Eatherley, 2018), or the use of value-based management outside corporations (Disparte & Gentry, 2018).

(Callon et al., 2002) and institutionalize (Barley & Tolbert, 1997) a corporate-friendly agenda – in the case at hand, a retailer-centered design of take-back systems. The qualification of take-back systems is a concrete form of market-based political action that is akin to the concrete forms of cause-oriented actions that some activists such as those who oppose nuclear power or defend animal rights are fond of using: tangible opposition alternatives to radical questioning of the right of fashion to exist. Qualification takes us into the details of the new political role of corporations (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), including preemptive purposes (Walker & Rea, 2014), here of future textile and sustainability policies (Table 2).

Table 2: The qualification rationale of corporate activism

Qualification		
Qualities	Key trials	What qualification makes possible
Present take-back systems as: • Responsible • Amorous • Convenient • Circular • Pedagogical • Reticular	• Feature circular fast-fashion as potentially sustainable • Develop circular material flows • Enroll customers, employees, and other stakeholders in new behavior and patterns of responsibility	• Develop a sustainable fashion offering • Present, promote, and diffuse an understanding of sustainable fashion that is amenable to corporate strategic needs and possibilities • Influence the regulatory agenda in corporate friendly directions

A key function of take-back systems, as shown by how retailers qualify these systems, is to demonstrate, *in practice*, that circular fashion infrastructures are ready to use, already here, already now, and thereby preempt the design of alternative take-back and circular fashion systems. Qualification makes it possible for firms to go beyond adapting to their political environment. Instead, they use market-based activities to leverage political resources, influence policy, and impact this environment, as they do with non-market corporate political

activities (cf., Lawton et al., 2013). In the case at hand, qualification enables apparel firms to take the lead in defining circular fashion as a corporate-centered arrangement, potentially outcompeting alternative understandings that might threaten corporate interests, for example, a national or European system of extended producer responsibility for textiles. By engaging in corporate activism, corporations can buffer and protect themselves from demands for more radical changes to their business models. At least temporally, corporate activism makes it possible for firms to highjack the sustainability agenda by translating calls for radical change into business-as-usual practices (cf. Welford, 2013; Wright & Nyberg, 2017) (Wright & Nyberg, 2017).

Conclusions: Qualification as activism

To summarize, this paper uses the notion of qualification (Callon et al., 2002) to explain how Swedish apparel retailers combine discursive, material, and organizational practices to promote their efforts to develop take-back systems that support a business-centered understanding of circular fashion. We show that apparel retailers seek to attach six core qualities to these systems – responsible, amorous, convenient, circular, pedagogic, and reticular – in order to create social norms and material flows that they can call circular. Their aims are to develop a sustainable fashion offering, create an understanding of sustainable fashion that is amenable to corporate strategic needs and possibilities, and orient the regulatory agenda in corporate friendly directions. With circular economy remaining a political ambition in need of concretion (Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2019), apparel retailers promote a local understanding of circular fashion that amounts to an engagement in what Hillman et al. (2004, p. 838) call "corporate political activities." More specifically, they

engage in a form of activism that aims at influencing the political, industrial, and commercial agenda for the apparel industry that we refer to as *corporate activism*.

Although situated in time, space, a specific industry, and the case of take-back services, our study substantivizes the claim made by Funk and Hirschman (2017) that corporations use not only non-market but even market actions to engage in political activities. Funk and Hirschman single out two pathways by which firms try to produce policy change through market actions: implementation-driven initiatives through which companies work at influencing the interpretations of incomplete laws, and innovation-driven initiatives when firms engage in novel activities that do not fit existing regulatory frameworks. We claim that qualification-based corporate activism runs through both these pathways in that qualification aims at featuring products and services, novel as well as existing ones, as practical answers to issues in need of an attention that is not being provided in a satisfactory way by existing rules and regulations. Qualification caters to corporate activism in that it is a matter of strategically raising issues and setting agendas to support a specific and preferred social change, here a transition toward circular and sustainable fashion.

Corporate activism is to be seen as the corporate counterpart to anti-corporate activism mentioned in the opening of this article (e.g., Bakan, 2005; Klein, 2001; Korten, 1995), but also to age-long consumer activism (Glickman, 2009) and conventional political activism (Norris, 2009). It is an activism that takes place in social arenas such as the media and gallerias instead of political parties and parliamentary institutions. And corporate activism participates in the efforts of corporations to actively shape their institutional environment by influencing, for example, the nature of competition, existing legislation, or social standards.

Contemporary corporations act as full-fledged political actors (cf., Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Scherer, Palazzo, & Matten, 2014). As widely publicized examples such as Tesla cars, Uber platforms, or online gambling sites illustrate, corporations use their products and services to influence future regulatory decisions in ways that are friendly to their business model. Thus, take-back systems are but one example of how corporations engage through qualificative practices in concrete forms of cause-oriented actions that activists are fond of, for example, to oppose nuclear power or defend animal rights – except that the cause of apparel retailers is to demonstrate that a sustainable fashion is within reach.

What emerges from our analysis is therefore that qualification is not only central to marketing, as Hawkins et al. (2015), Ariztia (2013), and Fuentes and Fuentes (2017) have shown: qualification is also an instrumental means to conduct corporate political actions. More specifically, qualification makes it possible for corporations to use their privileged access to markets to give themselves a voice, elect issues, define the terms of problems at stake, point to solutions, and establish scales of success. It is a means to create concrete situations able to influence future governmental decisions and courses of action. Correspondingly, qualification theory offers a way to understand how corporations engage with political actions through the development and offering of products and services.

Our earlier research (Stål & Corvellec, 2018) leads us to surmise that corporate activism is likely to thrive where public policies are vague, unrealistic, or even nonexistent, as unclear policies create windows of opportunity for corporations to claim an offering of products and services able to provide concrete here-and-now answers to social demands. Inversely, we surmise that an intensive corporate activism makes it all the more likely that policy makers may renounce their aspiring political ambitions if they are given reasons to believe that

corporations can deliver desired outcomes in lieu of conventional political action. These are speculative claims, though, and we call for further studies into corporate activism to more precisely uncover its drivers, dynamics, and outcomes.

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