

What's the meaning of green?

A case study of a retailer creating meaning for green products

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Abstract

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In the prevailing retail climate sustainability has become an important factor of competition actualizing questions about why we buy green products, how we buy them and how they are marketed. These questions touches upon the contextualization of green products, they need to be made meaningful and functional to consumers. It is therefore interesting to study the processes involved in the production of values that makes green products attractive. The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the understanding of how green products are created as meaningful by retailers. The results indicate that the retailer uses in-store contextualization and a multi-channel approach in order to add values to green products and thus make them meaningful.

Key words: meaningful, green products, retail, sustainability

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1 Introduction

Green actions are becoming a basis of competition with the rising awareness of the state of the world from consumers and governments. Organizations are loudly communicating their commitment to sustainability through reports on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), through websites and in-store actions (Jones *et al.* 2005; Jones *et al.* 2008; Jones *et al.* 2013). Not only are green actions important in the current competition; it is argued that future success depends on the ability to add environmental and social value to economic value as part of the triple bottom line – the focus on people, planet and profit (Elkington 2004).

Although green is trending, it is important to note that retailers' commitment to sustainability is driven as much by business incentives as by a commitment to sustainability (Jones *et al.* 2013). We have to be aware of greenwashing; a socio-political motivation where companies portray themselves as committed to social and environmental issues to influence stakeholders while carrying on their business in an unsustainable manner (Mahoney *et al.* 2013). Socio-political motivations and monetarily driven environmental commitment is not necessarily a solely negative trend for the environment. Rather, it can be argued that due to public pressure and green pioneer companies, sustainability is becoming part of the capitalist business environment and hence, a global discourse upon which competition is based. However, one has to question the notion that we, the consumers, can save the planet through consumption of green products when the rational thing would be for companies to promote a change of our consumption patterns in order to decrease our carbon footprint and by doing so help ease the pressure on the world and its natural resources.

1.1 Problem discussion

In this prevailing green discourse, that sustainability is becoming a competitive advantage, the retailer has a pivotal role. According to Jones *et al.* (2013), they are the active intermediaries between primary producers and manufacturers on the one hand and consumers on the other.

[The retailer] can be seen to be in a singularly powerful position to drive sustainability in three ways, namely, through their own actions, through partnerships with suppliers and through their daily interactions with consumers (Jones *et al.* 2013).

The retailers' key position between the producer and consumer gives them power and thus, responsibility to influence green actions upstream, in-store, and downstream. Making green alternatives available is not enough (Stern and Ander 2008:113; Fuentes 2011:224). Retailers should, in order to become truly green, be thinking green, acting green, selling green, and conveying green (Stern and Ander 2008:113). In this study, the focus will be on the interaction between in-store and downstream (toward the consumer); the process where products are made "meaningful and functional to consumers" (Fuentes 2011:224).

The question how retailers are working with their green actions, as well as communicating and marketing them can be found in various forms (Jones *et al.* 2005; Jones *et al.* 2007; Jones *et al.* 2008; Jones *et al.* 2013), and the green products and their characteristics have also received attention (Anselmsson and Johansson 2007). Less attention has been devoted to the question how green products are made meaningful by retailers. Therefore this study will focus on this field. It means assessing the socio-cultural aspects of the consumption and marketing of green products and instead of neglecting the social complexity, as is the case in a strictly managerial green marketing approach, the wider social and cultural processes will be taken into account and examined (Fuentes 2011:23).

By assessing the question how green products are made contextually meaningful and functional; a socio-material analysis on green products will be carried through. The socio-material approach is presented by Fuentes (2011:26-28) as a socio-cultural practice with the addition of the concept of materiality, that is the artifacts, the consumption, and the retail sites involved in the process of making green products meaningful.

1.2 Aim and research questions

With the problem area being assessed and presented as the socio-material marketing and conveying of green products, the aim of this thesis is to contribute to the understanding of how green products are created as meaningful by retailers.

The aim will be examined with the following research questions:

RQ1: How are green products being created as meaningful by retailers and how do they differ regarding product category?

RQ2: How does the meaning creation process differ in regards to product category?

2 Theoretical background

This chapter provides a background to the green retail context starting out with a definition about sustainability leading in to a theoretical discussion about green consumption from a socio-cultural perspective and the retailers' role in a socio-cultural perspective.

2.1 Defining sustainability

In all research regarding CSR, green retailing, and green consumption the word sustainability is commonly used. It is used as a generic term to describe the greening of business and the development towards a more sustainable and responsible stance towards people, planet, and profit in all steps of an organization's activities (Elkington 2004) and a product's journey from cradle to cradle (the cradle to cradle concept was introduced by Braungart and McDonough 2002 assessing the importance of recycling and reusing of components and materials).

Historically, the sustainability concept has been around since the 13th century (Jones *et al.* 2013). In a modern context the concept reappeared in green literature during the 1970s (Kamara *et al.* 2006 in Rudolph *et al.* 2012:2). Diesendorf (2000) is one of many who have attempted to define sustainability. He argues that sustainability can be seen as “the goal or endpoint of a process called sustainable development”. The variety of existing definitions may cause confusion and dilution about sustainability. One might even argue that it makes the concept insipid since companies can develop their own definition and strategy not at all correlating with the definitions of other, less subjective parts (similar argument was presented by Jones *et al.* 2013).

However, while the concept can be both complex and technical in a professional context, “most people's thoughts about the meaning of sustainability are probably simple and grand: sustainability is about human survival and the avoidance of ecological disaster” (Jamieson 1998). According to Jones *et al.* (2013) the most widely used definition of sustainable development is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Analyzing the definition, Diesendorf (2000) argues that it “emphasizes the long term aspect” as well as “the ethical principle of achieving equity

between present and future generations”. In a similar definition Stern and Ander (2008:40) presents sustainability as “a system utilizing renewable resources that meets the requirements of the present without compromising the requirements of future generations or disrupting present or future environmental balance”

Acting sustainable according to the definition means not only doing efforts to greening aspects of the retail business; it is also necessary to utilize the economic resources and take responsibility for future generations. McCann-Erickson’s (2007) takes the economic sustainability into account stating that “sustainability is a collective term for everything to do with the world in which we live. It is an economic, social and environmental issue. It is about consuming differently and consuming efficiently. It also means sharing between the rich and the poor and protecting the global environment while not jeopardizing the needs of future generations”.

As the consciousness raises about green retailing and all of its aspects people do not only ask for companies to offer ecological and fair products – they require it – and they demand companies to take responsibility for their impacts on environment and society (Stern & Ander 2008). According to Stern and Ander (2008:40) a successful greentailer (green retailer) *think green, act green, sell green, and convey green*. It is also important to have in mind that thinking environmentally sustainable does not contradict thinking economically sustainable, instead companies can use sustainability to create competitive advantages, both in their supply chain as well as in their service offering and marketing efforts.

2.2 A critical approach towards sustainable retailing

To stay on top of competition, retailers are seeking ways to incorporate green efforts and CSR models into all aspects of business, and not least; making them measurable (Stern and Ander 2008:113). The movement into green retailing is based on the awareness that green is not just politics but can be profitable and hence, be a way to spur business (Stern and Ander 2008:113). For green retailing to be successful the incentives must therefore not only be a more sustainable development in regards to social and environment, but also in monetary terms. However, it is important to note that retailers’ commitment to sustainability is driven as much by business incentives as by a commitment to sustainability (Jones *et al.* 2013). This is the oxymoron of sustainable retailing; sustainability through consumption promoted by retailers seems to be a rather complex way to save the planet. As a part of a capitalist

structure, retailers are ignoring the fact that the current patterns of consumption are unsustainable in the long run (Jones *et al.* 2013).

Working towards distinctively different goals, sustainability and capitalism can however be argued to benefit from each other. Instead of rejecting capitalism, the prevailing sustainability discourse should be used in order for green issues to benefit from it (Prothero and Fitchett 2000). Many areas of the green marketing and green consumption research involve making sustainability accessible, attractive and necessary. Fuentes (2011:232) calls this issue “recoding capitalism”; using traditional retailing to promote green products, making sustainability a part of the retail capitalism. In this recoded, green capitalism the upside is the increased awareness and sales figures in green consumption, and undoubtedly the greener option in relation to traditional, non-green consumption. However, as Fuentes (2011:232) critically stresses, the recoded capitalism might also give a false feeling of security; the efforts to market green products can “lead to the individualization of green politics, the exclusion of other forms of green consumption, the simplification of environmental problems, and the reinforcement of the role of consumers and commodities.”

Keeping a critical approach towards retailers’ sustainability actions is therefore of importance when assessing the issue of retailers’ creation of green products as meaningful. The green retailing might indeed lead to a simplified picture of environmental problems where green consumption is the answer to unsustainable consumption patterns. Needless to say; consumption cannot be the answer to consumption based problems. However, as Jones *et al.* (2013) points out; retailers holds a unique and powerful position between manufacturers and consumers. Hence, they can influence their suppliers, their own actions and their consumers’ choices and while doing so, creating a context in which the green products become meaningful and functional.

So far I have only discussed the meaning and development of sustainability and its impact within retailing. The prevailing sustainability discourse in the world today leads to opportunities for organizations to capitalize as well as sustainability and the circulation of green products can benefit from capitalism. However, in order to understand green consumption and how green products are constructed as meaningful by retailers, we need to understand the socio-cultural aspects of consumption. “Green consumption, like all consumption, is a thoroughly social and cultural matter” (Fuentes 2011:19). The marketing and retailing of green products is not made meaningful as an isolated event without a socio-

cultural context in which consumers' identities, experiences, and group community are assessed.

2.3 The socio-cultural perspective on sustainability

To be able to create a meaningful context for the products in relation to the consumer, the retailers must be able to understand the consumers. Asking the question “what do we know about why consumers buy green products?” might be a basis for green marketing. However, the circulation of green products can easily become a marketing question no different from traditional marketing. Therefore, I will discuss the socio-cultural aspects of green retailing.

One term that is found within socio-cultural consumption theories are the Consumer Culture Theory, approaching consumption not from a traditional economic or psychological point of view (Arnould and Thompson 2005), rather CCT approaches consumption by viewing the cultural meaning “created, sustained, and transformed by larger social and cultural forces such as myths, narratives, and ideologies” (Joy and Li 2012). These aspects are central to consumption within CCT, instead of viewing consumption as a necessary satisfaction of basic needs (Östberg and Kaijser 2010:38). One aspect thoroughly studied within CCT is consumer identity projects with a number of theoretical and methodological contributions from researchers (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

The topic of identity creation through consumption involves person-object relations, “in all its complexity and variations” (Joy and Li 2012). Objects become extensions of the self when defining the self through objects (Ahuvia 2005; Tian and Belk 2005). Since green consumption is driven by much the same factors as any type of consumption, the presence of identity creation in this type of research is high. For instance, Connolly and Prothero (2008) discusses self-identity in a green consumption context where the consumer becomes individualized and thus, responsible and empowered to deal with the environmental challenges. This is an interesting development that highlights a special connection between identity creations through consumption and the nature. Carrying the sustainable development on ones shoulders is arguably a heavy burden, however it highlights an interesting aspect of green consumption. In order to construct green products as meaningful the retailer will need to create co-responsibility for the greening of the world, and thus create a sense of community towards sustainability issues. Being a green consumer means creating a green identity (Connolly and Prothero 2008) as well as questioning our current ways of consumption, both collectively and especially on an individual level (Cherrier and Murray 2007).

While green consumption is involved with identity creation, a set of questions yet occur about retailers are to reach a wider audience. While green consumption is spreading, there is still a gap “between articulated positive attitudes toward sustainability and people’s actual (mostly unsustainable) consumption behavior” (Prothero *et al.* 2011). The study presents figures showing that while 40 % of the consumers are expressing a willingness to buy green products, only 4 % actually buys in accordance to their positive attitude (United Nations Environment Programme 2005:15). The exact numbers is not of importance here, nor are they accurate for the Swedish market. However, the figures showcase a general issue in regards to green retailing – positive attitudes but unchanged consumption patterns. It is comparable to the discussion about greenwashing where companies portray themselves as green while doing (non-green) business as usual (Mahoney *et al.* 2013). While companies are driven by image creation and therefore are using a green suit to look good, why is the gap between articulated support for green products and actual purchasing behavior so significant? Do consumers want to look good without having to change the way they consume? Perhaps they are not convinced by the way that retailers are constructing a meaningful context for green consumption.

Thøgesen (2005) also urges researchers to understand the gap, asking “why consumers do not behave in accordance with their articulated, prosustainability values.” Drawing the parallel to greenwashing once again, companies involved in that sort of false marketing does so in order to carry on with their successful not-so-clean strategies while profiting from being competitive in the sustainability paradigm where CSR strategies and such is requirement from media, customers, and other stakeholders (Stern and Ander 2008). Not changing an unsustainable business strategy because it is profitable means putting the company’s best interest, convenience, and short-term profit before a sustainable development. Can the same gap in green consumption be derived to consumers’ convenience, price sensitivity, and ego – in this case, a lack of care for the people and planet involved in the production process?

There have been some attempts to understand the gap; including Ehrich and Irwin’s (2005) “willful ignorance” of information about product ethicality. Their studies indicate that consumers show more interest in ethical attribute information of a favorable nature than information with potentially negative emotional consequences. The dilemma in the study is that ethical attribute information is often used in purchasing decisions, if available, but to a significantly lower rate requested, if not available. The study concludes a discrepancy, but not hypocrisy; the willful ignorance is rather a way to protect the consumers’ moral values. The study also concludes that (lack of) market success is dependent on the marketing. Consumers

tend to use ethical attribute information made available and hence, purchasing with complete information about product attributes and ethicality would potentially lessen the gap between green purchasing attitude and behavior.

Another explanation about the gap between the positive attitudes toward sustainability and people's actual consumption behavior is offered by Luchs *et al.* (2010); that discusses the relationship between functional performance and sustainable products. The study shows that ethical products are considered safer, healthier, and gentler than other products which lead the authors to propose a "positive association between ethicality and gentleness" along with a "negative association between ethicality and strength". Translated into product categories, this leads to preferences for less sustainable product alternatives when consumers are valuing strength-related attributes (products such as car tires and hand sanitizers), while preferring more sustainable product alternatives when valuing gentleness-related attributes (products such as body lotions and baby shampoo).

Both the explanations (Ehrich and Irwin's 2005; Luchs *et al.* 2010) as well as the questions (Prothero *et al.* 2011; Thøgesen 2005) contributes to the complex picture of green retailing; the fact that the products are green and sustainable contributes to the complexity and therefore "we must to understand the social complexity involved in circulating green products" (Fuentes 2011:223). The explanations about the gap offered involve another aspect of the socio-cultural approach towards green products; the physical attributes of the products. While neglected in many socio-cultural studies about green products, Fuentes (2011) involves the materiality of green consumption, stressing that materiality are highly involved in the marketing and consumption of green products. While green products have been viewed as symbols of value in the construction of identity, Fuentes (2011:26) argues that the socio-material artifacts "such as signs, display tables, catalogues, cash registers, telephones, products, and racks" are not just passive requisites but has "an active role in the marketing of green products" (Ibid.).

2.4 How do we purchase green products?

The theory presented in the previous section assesses the gap between a positive attitude towards green products and actual green consumption. Analyzing Ehrich and Irwin (2005) and Luchs *et al.* (2010) there is a need to make ethical information accessible to consumers in their purchasing process as well as connecting the green values (or gentleness-related values) to product attributes and application, showcasing that there could be a positive association

between ethicality and strength. When targeting the green consumer, a member of the 4 % (out of 40 %), retailers might think they can be able to sit back and relax since green consumers, in relation to the conventional consumer, tend to seek more information and be critical towards advertising (Shrum *et al.* 1995). However, for others to be convinced retailers must also make the green products a part of everyday life, a tool for consumers' activities and also provide the context in which the products are to be used in.

As there have been attempts to define a truly green retailer (Stern and Ander 2008), however; from a product perspective, Fuentes (2011:224) offers an example where his case retailer uses socio-technical marketing devices that serve “not only to attract consumers to the shops and make environmentally friendly products available, but also to make these products meaningful and functional to consumers.” The defining moment is a set of processes and interactions where the green products are co-created between retailer and consumer as well as placed within a context and made meaningful and functional. In order for green consumption to be more attractive, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) argues that there is a need to produce green experiences engaging and captivating the consumers' emotions and experiences.

The shop should enact a world in which green products are indispensable as well as problem solvers. Fuentes (2011:224) describes his study object doing this with its green outdoors products where the world is the outdoors. For a grocery retailer, this could mean enacting cooking and eating food as pleasurable and rewarding. In the world enacted at the grocery retail site, products grant access to the dinner table, making cooking and eating feasible and mediating the human-food relationship. The role of the grocery products is to make cooking and eating practices possible, comfortable, easy, and healthy.

Fuentes (2011:224) then shifts the focus when introducing the green products, in his study being outdoors becomes the problem for the outdoors, not the humans. Consequently, the marketing of green grocery products becomes an issue for the nature. Consumption is introduced as an environmental problem where the manufacturing and consumption of food impacts the state of the world. In short, the grocery retailer enacts a world where consumers want to cook, eat and use the products they offer but by doing this, they risk destroying the environment in which these products are grown, reared and produced. In this world, green grocery products offer both a “solution” to this problem and a means by which to transform a problematic practice into a rewarding one (Fuentes 2011:224-225). Jones *et al.* (2013) also

highlights the importance of retailers’ recognizing that “their activities have an impact on the environment and on the communities and economies in which they operate.” The way to create a contextual meaning and function for ordinary, non-organic products could be translated from Fuentes (2011) to Figure 1.

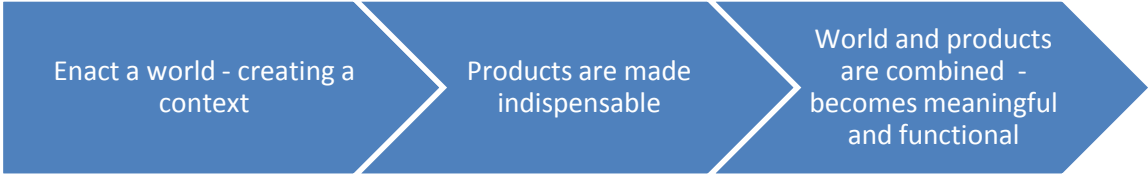


Figure 1: Creating meaning for products

However, in the context given by Fuentes (2011:224-225) green products are inscribed with yet another ability; the ability to solve the problems that emerge with consumption – the environmental impact that eventually causes ecological disaster. The added ability leads to the configuration of the figure into Figure 2.



Figure 2: Creating meaning for green products

This process empowers the consumers to solve environmental problems, making them co-responsible for the consumption culture (Fuentes 2011:116). This can however, as argued earlier, give a false picture of security about consumption as a solution to environmental issues and also exclude consumers who cannot afford green products or in other ways fail to live up to the consumption standards set by the market (Fuentes 2011:117). Both Jones *et al.* (2013) and Reisch *et al.* (2008) critically discusses the sustainability agendas at corporate level as a complex development since it legitimates continued resource consumption as long as consumers perceives the companies and their own consumption as green. Yet again – as discussed earlier – the tension between sustainability goals and capitalism is an inevitable discussion.

The discussion about creating a co-responsible relationship between producers (retailers) and consumers assesses the socio-cultural aspect of community. Building bonds through eco-communities can be seen in Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007), where they study community supported agriculture (CSA) as a form of ethical consumerism. The co-produced

bond when consumers and producer is taking part in an alternative movement questioning the prevailing consumerism. In the study, the establishment of a long-term relationship creates a community in which an ecological production process involves both consumers and producer.

To summarize, this chapter has dealt with the theoretical approach of this thesis. First I started out by giving background and understanding about the sustainability context in which retailers is doing their business. This lead to a discussion about how retailers are using this context, capitalizing on sustainability in order to market and sell green products, by recoding the capitalism however, the sustainable development can benefit from the capitalistic business society. The socio-cultural perspective on sustainability then was discussed taking consumers identity creation through consumption of green products into consideration. While the interest in green consumption is high there are still some issues about how to create meaning for some consumers that still consumes in a less sustainable way – the gap between positive attitudes towards green products and unchanged consumption behavior. This introduced the socio-material aspect of green consumption actualizing the role of the physical artifacts in constructing green products as meaningful. The last section involved the building of bonds between consumer and producer as well as social eco-communities and how green products can be made meaningful and functional to consumers by enacting a world in which products are made indispensable. The ability of green products as planet-savers was both discussed and problematized. The following chapter will discuss my methodological approach, the process where this study is made real out on the field through the case study of the grocery retailer Coop.

3 Methodology

In this chapter, I will explain and motivate the thesis' research design and methodological approach in relation to the research questions 'How are green products being created as meaningful by retailers and how do they differ regarding product category?' and 'How do the meaning creation process differ in regards to product category?' The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the understanding of how green products are created as meaningful by retailers.

The field work of this study was conducted through a multiple case study design using observations and document studies. The document studies were mainly conducted assessing

the case company's online sources. My 10 observations were conducted at one Coop store in Lund, Sweden.

3.1 Research context

The empirical focus of this study is focused on the Swedish grocery retailing industry. The issue of sustainable development is a collective responsibility concerning all types of business and industries today. At an individual level the private consumption can influence our environmental impact. Choosing public or alternative transportation, environmentally friendly electricity, and purchasing second-hand products are all ways to reduce or minimize our carbon footprints. There are different shades of green; some people choose to grow their own vegetables, become vegetarians or vegans, others try to buy only what you eat, choosing locally produced and/or organic products and others might just go on like it is business as usual.

The food we consume does not only affect the environment. There are other reasons why people choose to consume sustainable; the private health of you and your family as well as fair wages and working conditions for the people involved in the process from earth to table. Food consumption accounts for over one fourth of the emissions affecting the climate from Swedish private consumption. Meat is the product category with the greatest environmental impact (The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2011). The intermediary position of the retailer (as discussed earlier and cited from Jones *et al.* 2013), between suppliers and consumers' combined with the large impact of the industry implies the responsibility of the retailer and hence, makes it an interesting research area. The connection between food, nature, animals and human also creates a special tension between our food consumption and sustainable consumption.

3.2 Research approach

The issue of this study is explored using a multi-method qualitative method. The social and cultural complexity in consumption in general and the circulation of green products in particular motivates a qualitative research approach. A social phenomenon involves a complexity which does not facilitate for quantitative measurements, according to Sullivan (2001:333). When trying to understand behaviors and attitudes, qualitative methodologies are appropriate, according to Silverman (2010:10) and Sullivan (2001:333). Making sense of socially constructed meanings about a phenomenon is enabled through the interpretive nature of qualitative research (Saunders *et al.* 2007:106). The study of people and their institutions

differ from natural science; the phenomenological approach involves human behavior and how they perceive and interpret values “the study of social reality therefore requires a different logic of the research process, one that compared with the natural order reflects what is special for human beings” (Bryman 2002:25).

3.3 Research strategy

In order to make sense of the studied phenomenon an exploratory case study design was chosen. Robson (2002:178) defines the case study as “a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence”. A similar definition is offered by Yin (2009) who explains case study as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" especially appropriate “when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin 2009:18). The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the understanding of how green products are created as meaningful by retailers and thus, aiming at understanding the phenomenon, the context and the interrelations and variations within the social environment. The exploratory nature of the aim and the defined research context; the Swedish grocery retailer Coop correlates with the factors that makes an exploratory case study strategy appropriate.

Also, when looking at the research questions this method appears as suitable. When using “how” and “why” questions as well as using multiple sources of evidence the case study design correlates well to the purpose, according to Yin (2009:6) since they are of a more exploratory nature; they need time rather than frequency or incidence (Ibid.).

Inspired by Fuentes (2011:43) who conducted “an ethnographic study of a Swedish chain of outdoors stores, the Nordic Nature Shop”, this case study strategy will borrow elements of the ethnographic approach regarding the socio-material construction of green products. However, focusing on the retail site’s material aspects such as outlet design, signs, displays, products and marketing material and less on human interaction, observing and interviewing groups of people in order to understand, describe, and interpret their shared and learned “patterns and values, behaviors, beliefs, and language”, as the ethnographic design is described by Harris (1968 in Creswell 2007:68) the ethnographic methods could not be motivated in this study. The idea is that even if much of the empirical material is based upon marketing material and other non-human interactions aimed at promoting green products, even these aspects holds a large amount of socially constructed values and symbols, even expected behaviors, beliefs

and language. The material is designed and developed by people for people in order to appeal to their needs and identity creation through consumption and can therefore motivate elements of ethnography into the case study design.

The study assumes a comparative research strategy where the phenomenon of green retailing is studied through the case company, Coop, which is assessed through the use of multiple cases in order to generate understanding from more than one point of view. The multiple case study design is appropriate when the researcher want to compare cases and describe common and unique features (Bryman 2002:71). In this study, multiple cases are represented by three different product categories within the company's assortment of food. Examining three different product categories will potentially lead to distinctively different ways of the way in which the green products are socially constructed as meaningful and functional to the consumer. By comparing the differences and similarities one can find out what sort of factors are more important in one category of green products, what type of different information and strategies is used to make one product category meaningful and (why) do they differ? This will create an increased understanding about the different features involved in the construction of products with different target consumers, different features and different application areas.

3.4 Research methods for data collection

The research approach of this study is a multi-method qualitative method through an exploratory multi case study design. Since a case study research, according to Creswell (2007:73), requires the investigator to explore “a bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded systems (*cases*) over time” there was a need to choose qualitative methods corresponding to those requirements. To do so, Creswell (2007:73) stresses the importance of “multiple sources of information” to attain detailed, in-depth data using methods and material such as observations, interviews, audiovisual material and documents and reports. Yin (2003 in Creswell 2007:76) recommends six types of information sources to collect empirical data: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, and physical artifacts. The chosen methods for this case study research were observations (both within-site and of the organization's online channels), and analysis of documents such as audiovisual material, websites, and printed material.

The data could have become even more detailed and in-depth from completing the used methods with interviews of employees, consumers, and experts. However, observing and

studying the construction of green products as meaningful and functional I assume to role of a critical consumer examining the material, physical and non-physical, available to the consumer that is the actual target of the attempts to circulate green products. A possible limitation of this strategy is that the true intention and purpose of some of the communication is lost in my interpretation. However, by using triangulation – “the use of different data collection techniques within one study” (Saunders *et al.* 2007:139) – the data analysis is more likely to be correctly interpreted. Using multiple sources to triangulate the data thus gives the study a more validity and reliability. Triangulation is often used to complete a quantitative method with a qualitative one (Bryman 2002:411; Saunders *et al.* 2007:139). However, triangulation is also used within one approach to strengthen an interpretation from another point of view as well as enriching the study with new insights within one approach, as in this study (Patel and Davidsson 2003:104).

3.4.1 Secondary data: documents

The first type of data, documents, are secondary sources of data that have been produced for other purposes than research, that is; they have not been produced because the researcher have asked for it, as in the case of for example interviews or questionnaires (Bryman 2002:356; Saunders *et al.* 2007:246). The aim to understand how green products are created as meaningful by retailers makes secondary data appropriate as source of information because they were produced in order to promote the organization’s (potential) commitment to sustainability issues and green products, not in order to answer the researcher’s questions. Secondary data are most commonly used as part of case studies or survey research strategy, and often as part of a case study of a particular organization (Saunders *et al.* 2007:249). Studying the issue by investigating a case company and in detail through multiple cases (the three product categories) in order to compare the results, using documentary secondary data seemed appropriate.

Documentary secondary data include written materials both private and public. The private documents include diaries, correspondence, and minutes of meetings. The public documents include official reports, public records, websites, journals, and newspapers (Bryman 2002:356; Saunders *et al.* 2007:249). In this study the emphasis are put on documents produced for public purposes made available by the case company, such as marketing material, website, social media communication, and folders and leaflets available within retail outlets. Other public documents such as news articles and online documents about the company from other sources than their own channels were also collected.

The online observations were conducted during April and May 2014. During the previous stages of the research I visited the website strategically searching for all available information concerning sustainability. This included visiting tabs about their CSR commitments, their marketing material, and other types of policies and educational material concerning CSR aspects such as product safety, environment, social responsibility, and health. About 20 screenshots were taken at the website from different campaigns and information. Further, I studied Coop's communication through social media looking especially on their CSR communication and also social media-users (customers and other people "liking" their channels) reactions to their posts. Screenshots was taken and pictures, links and videos were studied. The general questions I asked all the material was how it contributed to the construction of green products as meaningful, how the organization used their channel to communicate their commitment to sustainability, and whether specific product categories were communicated and constructed more or less.

3.4.1 Observations

In this qualitative method the research was inspired by Fuentes (2011) ethnographic study of the Nordic Nature Shop. The socio-material practice approach assumed by Fuentes (2011) led him to the task of "understanding how green retailing works in the studied context". However not as holistic as Fuentes (2011), this study tries to take an approach where some ethnographic methods are used "to examine the process through which green [...] products are socio-materially constructed, distributed, and consumed" (Fuentes 2011:45). Bryman (2002:276) discusses the blurred lines between participant observations and ethnography. The main character of the two methods is that they require a long term engagement from the researcher in order for him or her to gain access and understanding of a social context (Bryman 2002:276; Creswell 2007:68).

Traditionally, the qualitative observation is often referred to as participant observation and is focusing on people's behavior and the meanings of their actions. Saunders *et al.* (2007:282) states that essentially observations involve "the systematic observation, recording, description, analysis and interpretation of people's behavior". The twist within this study, and why Fuentes' (2011) socio-material approach is referred to, is that the observation of people's palpable or tangible behavior is not the key focus within this study. Rather, by observing how the retailer is constructing a context in order to make green products meaningful and functional the observation are focusing on how products are displayed, presented, and communicated. While Fuentes (2011) approaches the whole social setting, including

employees, consumers, materials, store design, and how products are used and shopped for, this study is assessing the material aspects. So why am I referring to the socio-material approach? I argue that even if the observations carried through in this study is recording, describing, analyzing and interpreting the material aspects of the construction of green products as meaningful, the processes involved in the marketing, displaying, and communication is made by people targeting people the social aspects of the construction process is embedded in the material. Thus, the observations carried through are approaching the socio-material construction of green products.

First, a pre-observation was carried through at a Coop store in Lund, Sweden in order to identify which product categories that were to be used as cases. The following product categories were identified as interesting from a green retail perspective: High environmental impact products such as meat and other animal products; Baby food; Fruit and Vegetables. The green assortment involved a wide range of products and the motives behind choosing the three categories were due to its different ways of presentation, displaying, characteristics, and target audiences. Baby food might be seen as the odd one out compared to the two fresh foods categories meat and fruit and vegetables, however, this is something that can be used in the study to see if the results differ and if they do: why and how?

After defining which categories would be included in the study, the observations were conducted one to two times a week during a period between 31st of March 2014 8th of May 2014, a period of six weeks, resulting in 10 observations on-site. The observations were carried out at the same store in Lund as the pre-observation. The observations lasted 20-40 minutes each and I took notes on-site and wrote field notes within a day of the observation, something that is important when conducting observations (Patel and Davidsson 2003:95). The observations can be categorized as unstructured in regards to the exploratory purpose where I aimed at collecting as much information about the store and the different product categories as possible. My observations were participant in the aspect that I participated in in-store activities such as shopping for green products and acted as a consumer. However, I did not articulate my purpose to anyone in the store. It can also be argued that my observations was non-participant (Patel and Davidsson 2003:97) since I observed without anyone noticing my purpose. The observations included taking 74 photographs inside the store as well as collecting any information folders and marketing material available to the customers. My field notes generated 10 pages of written material. The general questions I asked all the material was how it contributed to the construction of green products as

meaningful, how the organization used their channels to communicate their commitment to sustainability, and whether specific product categories were communicated and constructed more or less. Specific to the observations was that I observed the material artifacts closely in order to see how they are used to construct the products as meaningful.

3.5 Keeping a critical approach towards the research

3.5.1 Research Quality

The quality of any empirical social research, and therefore relevant for case studies, can be assessed using a number of tests including *construct validity*, *internal validity*, *external validity*, and *reliability* (Yin 1994:33).

3.5.2 Validity

Within qualitative research, validity is a concept concerning whether the researcher observes, identifies, or measures what they say they do (Mason 1996:24). Yin (1994:33) presents the *construct validity* as “establishing correct operational measures for the concepts being studied”. This is a question of objectivity; collecting data through case study methods often leads to questions of the extent to which subjective judgments are involved (Yin 1994:34).

In order to increase the construct validity the researcher should use “multiple sources of evidence”, “establish a chain of evidence” and have “a draft case study report reviewed by key informants”. This study uses multiple evidence as presented earlier, the evidence is established through field notes, photography, and screenshots.

A strong internal validity is presented as when there is a strong correlation between the researcher’s observations and the theoretical ideas developed (Bryman 2002:257). However, the internal validity is for explanatory or casual case studies only, according to Yin (1994:33). The exploratory nature of this case study leads to no further discussion about the internal validity.

The external validity concerns the generalizability of the case study: are the findings generalizable “beyond the immediate case study”? (Yin 1994:35). The limited sample of this study comes with a problem of generalizability, is the result applicable to other social contexts and situations? However, this study does not claim any generalization outside the context in which it is conducted.

3.5.3 Reliability

The reliability is concerned with the question of possibility for replication. Yin (1994:36) explains the objective of reliability: “If a later investigator followed exactly the same procedures as described by an earlier investigator and concluded the same case study all over again, the later investigator should arrive at the same findings and conclusions”. One way of ensuring the reliability is the establishing of a case study protocol (Yin 1994:37) or in this study rather a file including field notes from in-store observations, notes from online observations, screenshots from online channels, photos taken and folders collected.

4 Analysis

The chapter is introduced by a presentation of Coop to create an understanding and context for the empirical case. Thereafter, the empirical material from the observations and document analysis is presented in an analysis examining the cases in a theoretical perspective.

4.1 The Case Company

Sweden's second largest grocery retail chain, Coop, was named Sweden's most sustainable grocery chain 2014 in the Sustainable Brand Index, Scandinavia's largest annual brand survey with focus on sustainability conducted by Sustainable Brand Insight "In the study [Sustainable Brand Index] 24.000 consumers evaluate how sustainable a brand is" (Ibid.). In the index, Coop was named the third most sustainable brand 2014, surpassed by Lantmännen (first) and Saltå Kvarn (second), both placed in the category groceries and daily goods (product brands), not to be confused with the category grocery/daily goods retailers and stores (chains).

The organization's purpose "Together with our members we develop and offer daily goods and services to people that will lead to an economic benefit and a better life" and their vision "People think that Coop is worth a detour" is a part of an organizational change initiated after years of struggling with weak profitability and loss of market shares. The market shares were lost both to Sweden's largest grocery chain, ICA, but also to Axfood, who nearly caught up to the same level of market shares as Coop as well as smaller actors such as Bergendahl's; because the consumers' did no longer see Coop as a company offering value for money (Coop, Our Idea 2012).

This insight, portrayed by the organizational leaders in the employee change handbook "Our Idea" (Coop, 2012), revealed the naked truth about Coop's flaws, their scattered image lacking consistency between intended communication and consumers' perceptions. From this insights the new purpose and vision mentioned above was formulated along with the customer promise "for you, together with you" and a number of goals and values. The goals included having Sweden's best loyalty program, "to be the best friend of families with children" (identified as their target consumers), and "to be the good force within Swedish grocery retailing" (which concerns care for sustainability issues; the world and the people). The idea that Coop should be the good force within Swedish retailing originates from their emergence in 1899 as the cooperative association – Kooperativa Förbundet, KF – an alternative to the reigning retailers charging high prices for bad products. The cooperation wanted a change; lower prices and higher quality. Today KF is the

owner of Coop Sweden AB which includes the retail business Coop Stores and Supermarkets (Coop website, 18 May 2014).

4.2 Defining sustainability – Labels and their meaning

Inside retail outlets there is a variety of product labeling building upon ethical stances from various organizations controlling products safety, human labor- and living conditions, environmental- and animal care. One leaflet found inside a Coop store informs about seven different product labeling. In order to facilitate for the reader some of the labels will be presented. The first three labels concerns fair production and trade. The Fairtrade label, The House of Fair Trade and IFAT: Fair Trade Organization. Coop's fair trade labeled products are either labeled with Fairtrade/Rättvisemärkt or produced by members of the IFAT organization (The "Good to know" leaflet 2007:5; rattvisemarkt.se; rattvishandel.se; ifat.org, 18 May 2014).

The next four labels concerns environmental- and social responsibility. The KRAV label is an organic control organization guaranteeing food without chemical pesticides, artificial fertilizers, or genetically modified organisms (GMOs), something that benefits both the agriculture and the environment (The "Good to know" leaflet 2007:6; KRAV website).

Rainforest Alliance (RFA) is a certification aiming at bettering conventional farming and includes rules about environment and social responsibility. However, unlike KRAV the RFA label allows toxic pesticides and there is no guaranteed minimum prize for what is produced as in the case of Fairtrade/Rättvisemärkt.

Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is an international foundation that certifies and environment labels fish and seafood products. If the products and fishery meet the standards set up by MSC regarding maintaining the diversity, productivity, and ecosystems of the marine they can become MSC labeled (The "Good to know" leaflet 2007:6).

Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) "is a labeling of forest products indicating that the products come from environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable forestry". In Sweden you can buy FSC-labeled products such as charcoal, wooden floors, gardening and office furniture (The "Good to know" leaflet 2007:6).

The leaflet ("Good to know" 2007:6) also presents a heading they call "Products without labels" where they present the import partner in Asia, Intercoop Ltd. They control Coop's

suppliers of toys, house wares, fabrics, and tools and that they maintain standards of working conditions, salaries, and working environment.

4.3 Analyzing the online channels

Starting out the empirical study, I continuously visited Coop's website during April and May 2014 to search for themes and material on how they are constructing green issues and products as meaningful.

Visiting the company's website the central and most apparent thing that meets the eye of the online visitor is a banner that communicates a message. Over time the message is replaced with new ones. One week the banner is showing Coop Änglamark ecological and Fairtrade labeled bananas to a price of 10 SEK per kilo for members of their loyalty program (Online observation, 10 April 2014). From the end of April the banner "Everyone can grill/barbecue" is introduced to welcome the sun and barbecue season to Sweden (Online observation, 29 May 2014). On the 11th of May 2014 the banner is once again changed on the website. To communicate their commitment to sustainability, Coop introduced something they call "the eco-promise". In times of the upcoming election to the European Parliament (25 May 2014) and the general election in Sweden (14 September 2014) they have made the following statement:

"What do the political parties want to do to spur the ecological growth?" The banner on the website is graphically designed with letters in three shades of green on a light green background. In the bottom right corner there is a clickable button reading: "See the parties' eco promises". (Online observation, 11 May 2014)

Following the link, one is introduced with a page mapping the Swedish parties' ecological visions and promises concerning sustainable food production and consumption.

"We have asked all the parliamentary parties what they want to do to stimulate production and consumption of organic food in Sweden, and we will collect the answers here, as they arrive. In order for you to not miss any eco promises you can follow us on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter" Promoting their social media platforms they also introduce the hashtag #ekolöftet (the eco promise). (Online observation, 11 May 2014)

The page can be seen as a statement; a commitment to a sustainable development in the Swedish food industry, and it can of course also be seen as a green campaign to build Coop's identity as the good force within Swedish grocery retailing. Underneath the mapping of the

political parties' standpoints in sustainable food development, Coop's own promise and commitment to sustainability is communicated:

This is what we at Coop do for the ecological growth: Every week we are heavily reducing prices on several organic products. We call it Organic of the Week. The more you buy, the more we can do in order to make eco food available for all. The goal is that 20 percent of all the food we sell is organic by the year 2020. (Coop website, 16 May 2014)

Keeping a critical position towards Coop's own promise, one can say that they are using the recoded capitalism to empower their consumers and individualize the environmental problems, as proposed by Prothero and Fitchett (2000) and Fuentes (2011). When they argue that we should buy more green products in order for it to grow and spread to become an including activity and thus, affordable for all; they are giving the consumer the key to solving environmental problems – consumption. However, the eco promise campaign is not solely individualizing; they are also connecting sustainable consumption and politics and thus creating it as a collective responsibility. With this promise they stating that they want to their position between producers (Jones *et al.* 2013) and consumers to increase their organic sales figures; they express a will to use their power to enact a world where our consumption matters (Fuentes 2011), the solidarity thought of a collective responsibility for Sweden's environmental development.

The next thing found on the website is Coop's weekly special offers. Advertising value for money and price reductions is nothing new of course; the advertising material on the website is just another channel for communicating their weekly physical advertising brochure containing temporal offers at their stores as a part of the traditional retail marketing mix. However, efforts in promoting green products have become a part of their weekly offering. As mentioned in the part about the eco promise, Coop include a number of green products in a permanent campaign they call "Organic of the Week" in addition to their weekly price reductions on non-organic products. To exemplify, week 19 their online brochure consisted of 18 products offered at a reduced price. Out of these 18, 12 products were green products, 11 of their own organic brand Änglamark. Only six products were conventional, non-green products. (Coop website, 8 May 2014)

Continuing to scroll down with ones green glasses on, Coop is having an eco-experiment with the question "Does your family never eat organic [food]?" Visiting the experiment, it says:

“We are looking for a family who does not usually eat organic food for an experiment. For a few weeks you will get all the food from us. 100 % organic food, to see if you experience any difference. This will be done in the summer, so in order to participate; you must be in Sweden during that period. Oh, right. We also offer food for the rest of the year (to a value of SEK 30 000) as a thank you for participating. If this sounds interesting, you can apply here!” (Coop website, 2014-05-08)

The experiment can be seen as a way to convey the message of green products, making them indispensable for a period of time with the potential of convince a family to become green consumers. In this experiment, they create functionality and meaning for their green products (Fuentes 2011) and at the same time they are promoting their commitment to sustainability (Jones *et al.* 2013).

To summarize the online channels of Coop there are a lot of information about their commitment to sustainability available on the website; their eco promise, a tab committed to their social and environmental responsibility where they communicate their policy in animal welfare issues, about organic eggs, about responsible soybean cultivation, the Änglamark prize (their own reward for ideas regarding sustainable Swedish food or food production), 10 advices for sustainable food consumption, climate goals and a range of other engagement to sustainability issues (Our responsibility, Coop website, 18 May 2014). The question that arises when searching through the extensive material is whether they enact a world of sustainability within their retail outlets? The following section will move towards the consumer’s main interaction with the organization; the store.

4.4 Inside the store

From entering a Coop store it is evident that the people taking care of organizing and designing the retail space want to create a natural feeling in their more flexible departments. While the majority of products within the store is arranged at store shelves arranged in isles and different product categories, the creativity of displaying products in other ways are being experimented with in areas such as special offer spaces, fruit and vegetable spaces, shelf ends, bread shelves, and other areas besides the ordinary isles of products.

When I enter the store through the gates, I am immediately encountered with a table dressed in sackcloth. The table is full of fresh bread from a local bakery; on the floor there is a wooden barrel and what look like a fire basket in iron which both contains baguettes from the same bakery. Behind the table are stacked packing crates in wood with hard bread from the bakery. The black and white information and price signs resemble miniature blackboards. In all the visual merchandising creates a rustic feeling. (Field notes, 8 May 2014)

Drawing from Fuentes (2011) theory about the enactment of a world to create a context for the products offered, it seems like Coop are trying to create an atmosphere in-store where the standardized store design built according to centrally developed planograms and straight isles of products are being questioned, or rather completed, with rustic elements to play with the feeling of an old country shop and thus, flirt with Coop's history as an old cooperative institution.

4.5 Creating meaning for green fruit and vegetables

The product category *green fruit and vegetables* was chosen from observing the amount of green marketing material provided in-store as well as in TV-commercials and printed material and the way in which they were presented combined an interest for the obvious connection between nature and fruit and vegetables as well as the sustainability aspects of the category involving import, toxics from pesticides, working conditions (communicated in media especially about banana plantations). The results were collected through my empirical study of the store and my document studies of the website, social media platforms, and printed and visual marketing material.

The first thing that meets the eye in the fruit and vegetable section is the white painted wooden shed built along the wall. It creates a feeling of visiting an old market place, resembling a market stand with its vertical dividers and wooden roof. Instead of market vendors manning their stands they have built one section with wooden packing crates filled with prepackaged potatoes, onions, and garlic; most of them organic, but they are mixed with non-organic extra fine products, as well as loose weight baking potatoes and sweet potatoes. The other five sections are dedicated to three sorts of bulk potatoes (one organic kind), one section of yellow onion and one section of red onion, garlic and shallots. (Field notes, 16 April 2014)

The fruit and vegetable section is further built with ordinary store counters along the walls and the section also contains various squares displaying their ordinary assortment, their special offers, the fruits and vegetables of the season and fresh and frozen berries. The section displaying the seasonal products is built on and around an old wooden trolley and the fresh herbs and spices in pots is placed in wooden crates stacked in pillars of five, the majority of the herbs and spices are organic from Coop Änglamark (Field notes, 16 April 2014). Besides the visual elements of various merchandise disks, racks, and stands there are price and information signs and tags.

On the slanted roof of the white painted wooden shed there is a banner, approximately seven meters wide, displaying the message "Fruit and vegetables in all flavors. Try our private brand of

organic and environmentally friendly alternatives. Our eco-favorite!” alongside a picture of selected fruit and vegetables and the Coop Änglamark logotype. (Field notes, 16 April 2014)

In the fruit and vegetable area I continued seeking signs and information with green messages and encountered the banana stand with two ordinary signs; one with the price and information about their organic bananas and one with price and information about their organic and Fair Trade labeled bananas. Hanging from the roof over the bananas were a sign in A1-format with green background and light green and white letters stating:

“Here we sell only organic bananas” (Field notes, 8 May 2014)

The large message was completed with a smaller A4-sign placed among the bananas with the same message. The statement was backed up with the fact that nowhere in the store there were any non-organic bananas to be found.

I asked a passing employee where I could find ordinary bananas, and when I was informed that they only sold organic and Fair Trade bananas I asked why. She told me that it was a statement from the store because of the rising interest in organic products, especially organic bananas. (Field notes, 8 May 2014)

Later, I searched online and found that it has become popular for some grocery retailers to only sell organic and/or Fair Trade bananas because the banana production and retailing have gained a lot of attention in media for quite some time (see for example the movie *Bananas!** by Swedish journalist Fredrik Gertten; and the news about Testfaktas toxic discoveries in non-organic bananas during 2013 – DN website, 24 January 2014). (Field notes, 8 May 2014)

Discussing the theory (Stern and Ander 2008; Fuentes 2011; Jones *et al.* 2013) one thing that reoccurs is the difference between routine marketing of green products and the “true” green marketing, described in different ways; the difference between including green alternatives into the retail assortment on the one hand, and standing on the barriers communicating, informing, and teaching consumers about the benefits of purchasing green products on the other. Looking at the statement communicated about the exclusion of non-organic bananas this can arguably be said to be an example of the latter, although no information about “why” was to be found at the banana stand, as stressed in the theory by Ehrich and Irwin (2005).

The last section I come across before leaving the fruit and vegetable area is the “organic square” – a floor space which the employees has dedicated solely to their organic products of the week from Coop Änglamark. Placed in the middle is a refrigerator filled with organic ground beef and organic parmesan cheese. Surrounding the refrigerator is, once again, the wooden boxes piled on top of

each other and next to each other building a semicircle. The wooden boxes are packed with organic apples, mushrooms, and canned corn – all from Coop Änglamark. The message communicated from a large green sign read “Organic of the week is growing! We now have substantially reduced priced on an increased number of organic products every week. Keep an eye out in your store”. The concept “Organic of the week” seems to have developed during the weeks of my observations; from a weekly campaign communicated through marketing material to also include a distinct communication in-store, both through signs but also backed up with a specific display area. (Field notes, 12 May 2014)

The recoded capitalism discussed in the theory (Prothero and Fitchett 2000; Fuentes 2011), where the trendiness in communicating oneself as dedicated to sustainability, either by business incentives or as a means to truly show dedication to a more sustainable development, are becoming a way to spur business (Stern and Ander 2008; Jones *et al.* 2013) indicates that consumers need to be aware of potential greenwashing (Mahoney *et al.* 2013). The fruit and vegetable section is playfully built with elements from nature, the green products are well displayed and they offer weekly discounts on selected green products of fruits and vegetables. Are they meaningful and functional to the consumers? How do they differ from other product categories? Coming up is the next sub-case; the product category *baby products*.

4.6 Creating meaning for green baby products

The product category *green baby products* was chosen partly because of the discussion by Luchs *et al.* (2010) regarding the functional performance of products where consumers see ethical products as gentle and therefore considers organic products to a higher degree when consuming products where gentleness-related attributes are valued. Consuming products to one’s baby can arguably be considered a category where consumers are valuing safety, healthy, and gentle attributes. The results were collected through my empirical study when observing inside the store, analyzing the material artifacts at site as well as my document studies of the website, social media platforms, and printed and visual marketing material.

The section of baby products differs from the fruit and vegetable section in many ways. The most obvious reason is that the products are presented in an ordinary product isle on ordinary shelves. However, in order to create a playful feeling there is a hopscotch playing area glued to the floor as well as a toy train and a table with paper and pencils with the invitation: “Hello all children! Draw a nice picture or play with our nice train!” (Field notes, 8 April 2014)

The environment, however, does remain less esthetically playful than for example the fruit and vegetable area because of the high shelves and straight lines of products. Focusing on

how they communicate their green messages there are a lot of signs to be found in the baby product aisle.

One sign communicates “Always 20 % discount on HIPP organic baby food in glass bottle when you swipe your membership card” and a picture of four selected HIPP products. Underneath the picture is a logo of something called “Coop Baby”. (Field notes, 11 April 2014)

Coop Baby is a sub-brand including diapers from Pampers, toys from LEGO DUPLO, toothbrushes and toothpaste from Oral-B and the mentioned HIPP baby food (Coop website, 16 May 2014). A way to make green products attractive and accessible, as well as overcoming the gap between attitude and actual green purchasing behavior (Ehrich and Irwin 2005; Thøgesen 2005; Luchs *et al.* 2010; Prothero *et al.* 2011) is showcased with the retailer’s reduced price on HIPP organic baby food. The studied connection between consumers’ perception of gentleness and organic products (Luchs *et al.* 2010) exemplified with products such as body lotion and baby shampoo increases the connection between baby products and ecology. Combining this correlation with the idea of contextualizing, making products indispensable and thus, making products meaningful and functional (Fuentes 2011) the fact that Coop offers a wide assortment of organic baby products as well as positive attribute information (Ehrich and Irwin 2005) could be said to be contextualizing and creating a meaning without enacting the same type of world as in the case of fruit and vegetables.

On the roof of the shelf there is an upper edge facing the consumer where the employees have attached further marketing material. Three signs displaying three different baby snacks; a fruit drink, a smoothie, and puffed corn snack from Coop Änglamark displayed on a pink background with white letters. The signs communicate the message “Set requirements for the snack” and a smaller banner reading “Organic energizers”. When I find the products in the shelf I see another set of signs reading “Organic news” indicating that the products are new in the assortment. The puffed corn snacks includes a long-term offer to buy two for a price of 48 SEK. (Field notes, 11 April 2014)

The marketing material communicates an empowering message; “set requirements for the snack” making the consumer co-responsible for the quality and control of the products they are buying for their children and thus, using their intermediary position to influence the consumers to a more ethical consumption behavior, as proposed by Jones *et al.* (2013). In the baby product section, there is also product information from one of the non-private brands, the diaper company Libero. The information folder is showing the product range (diapers, napkins, skin products and other baby accessories) highlighting the fact that they are Svanen-labeled, a label part of a Swedish environment labeling organization responsible for both

Svanen and the EU Ecolabel in Sweden; the latter on assignment of the Swedish government (Svanen webpage, 16 May 2014). However, as the observation continues and I inspect the products it becomes clear that also the private brands Coop and Coop Änglamark offer Svanen labeled diapers; the only non-labeled diaper available is Pampers. (Field notes, 11 April 2014)

The main environmental impact of Svanen labeled diapers, sanitary napkins, tampons, breast pads and incontinence products come from the production of raw materials that make the products. The raw materials are cellulose pulp, cotton and various plastic parts. Svanen's requirements include energy consumption, emissions to air and water and chemical use. The cotton has to be organically grown. (Svanen website, 16 May 2014)

Compared to the previous category *green fruit and vegetables*, the green baby products are rarely communicated within the marketing material except for the signs and artifacts in close connection to where the products are placed within the store. There is for example little or no sign of the category within their online channels, the "Coop Baby" information online being the exception. Because the product category is so closely related to the personal health of babies and therefore the organic aspect is associated with gentleness and thus, in this case, less care for larger sustainability issues might come in second hand. The socio-cultural aspect can of course not be neglected. However, the analysis indicate that green baby products might be differently constructed as meaningful by appealing to consumers' care for their children rather than the care for the world.

4.7 Creating meaning for green meat and eggs

The five largest individual activities that generate about half of the Swedish emissions is how much and in what car we travel, how we heat our homes, our electricity use, how much and what meat we eat, and how far and how often we travel by airplane (the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2011:7).

Being one of the major polluters, assessing the product category meat came naturally. To widen the category I also chose to include another product from the animal industry: eggs. They case of the eggs became interesting during the period of my observation why I chose to include it in my study; I will come back to that later. First, I will present the observation of the retailer's creation of organic meat as meaningful.

A majority of the organic meat comes from their own brand Coop Änglamark. They are packed in green boxes to stand out from the conventional products packed in black boxes. The assortment of

organic meat is wide; there is organic alternatives to all conventional types of meat, as far as I can see. (Field notes, 21 April 2014)

While the assortment is comprehensive, there are few things to inform the consumer about the positive ethical attributes of organic meat as proposed by the theory (Ehrich and Irwin 2005). In this food category, communicating the inscribed ability of green products to solve environmental problems (Fuentes 2011) could potentially be the most valuable meaning and function, due to the high impact on the environment. Instead, the consumer is left to choose between Swedish organic meat, Swedish non-organic meat, and non-organic meat from foreign countries, mainly Denmark without any extensive product information. Taking the research on the gap between purchasing behavior and articulated support for green products in consideration, there is a potential gap due to “willful ignorance” (Ehrich and Irwin 2005) in this food section. The information available is however enough to argue that purchasing non-organic meat might not be a case of willful ignorance.

The information on the product packaging clearly states the origin country and whether it is organic or not. (Field notes, 21 April 2014)

In relation to the fruit and vegetable category where a nature close world arguably was created with natural materials such as wooden elements and an old wagon, and the baby product category where hopscotch squares and a table for playing and painting created a context of playfulness and childhood, the third product category including meat, fish, and eggs left a lot to be desired.

Continuing my observation round I walk up to the egg shelf to see how they are making organic eggs stand out from the others. Previously in April I saw a movie in Coop’s series of “Swedish Eco Heroes” about organic eggs. Do they highlight organic eggs within the store as well? Approaching the shelf I see that the three central shelves out of five are stacked with Coop Änglamark’s green cartons containing organic eggs. The bottom and the top shelves are smaller and it is evident that they are trying to highlight their organic eggs. (Field notes, 2 May 2014)

The movie referred to was communicated through their website and their Facebook page with a post reading “The demand on organic eggs increases in Sweden. This short movie shows why it is a good choice. On the KRAV-certified Görslövs farm in Scania Ulf Bonde is breeding ecological hens. Every day 22.000 organic eggs are produced.” They end the post with the urging hashtag “change to eco” (#byttilleko) (Coop Facebook, 3 April 2014).

In the video they begin with the words “22 000 organic eggs – every day. A sustainable business idea” followed by “Coop presents: Sweden’s Eco-heroes” In the video, the ecological farmer, Ulf, talks about his farm, why he became an organic farmer, how the hens live and a speaker voice informs about the requirements and practices for organic egg producing (Coop video, 3 April 2014). Back at the store, I looked for information about the eggs.

“We now remove eggs from caged hens – Through your choices you help us improve our assortment.” The sign was clear, the statement as well. No more eggs from caged hens. (Field notes, 2 May 2014)

The statement can be compared to the one where the non-organic bananas were excluded from the assortment. However, the assortment still includes non-organic eggs, as long as they are from free range hens. The sign is also completed with an informative sign describing the differences between the three types of eggs they are providing:

“In our assortment there are three types of eggs to choose from – Coop Änglamark [organic], Coop Sprättägg™ [private brand free range] and Eggs from free range hens.” The sign also clarifies the differences in regards to number of hens/m², feeding, breeding method, and living conditions (possibility of being outdoors, inlet of daylight) and whether they are organic or not. (Field notes, 2 May 2014)

The movie showing the organic egg farmer is showcasing a creation of a community where the consumer have the possibility to attend the green production process, although not to the extent as in Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) the socio-cultural aspect of community can be argued to work to create meaning for organic eggs.

Also, the possibility of consuming with complete information is met and indicates a possibility to overcome the gap between positive attitude towards green products and actual purchasing behavior as presented in the theory by Ehrich and Irwin (2005) and Prothero *et al.* (2011). The in-store statement is also backed up with a press release from Coop declaring that in order to follow their sustainability policy where it is articulated that “production methods which promote natural behavior of animals, must be supported“ and that they are phasing out all eggs from caged hens until the end of 2014 (Coop website, 9 April 2014).

Promoted in-store, from the head office, and through online channels such as social media the statement about eggs from free range hens creates a united picture of a sustainable strategy from the company’s side. However, there are examples where the sustainability commitment

might be questioned. The 28th of April, Coop is communicating their weekly TV-commercial through their Social Media channels. One of the products in the commercial is a pork sirloin from Denmark. The responses in the commentary box are not very positive towards this.

[...] for me it is totally unacceptable to advertise Danish meat stuffed with antibiotics from animals that live a life that you would not even wish to your worst enemy! Support the Swedish farmers instead and advertise real meat not packed with a bunch of crap! Long live the Swedish farmers! (Malin, 28 April 2014, 21:45)

The comments continue in a similar way. Jan-Erik (28 April 2014, 21:50) states that “we as owners demand KRAV” and Maria (28 April 2014, 22:13) finishes a similar argument to Malin’s with “[...] I will not be shopping from you [Coop] until you stand on the Swedish farmers’ side”. Most of the comments with negative feedback seem to include an amount of disappointment, Maud (2 May 2014, 15:26) even states that she has “stopped shopping at Coop because you are betraying your customers”. The fact that they are building a case of having Sweden’s largest organic assortment (Coop website, 18 May 2014) and communicating their commitment to a sustainable development through their social media platforms, general advertising, and in-store makes the fall a bit higher when they decide to promote products that are controversial from a sustainability perspective.

This was the analysis of the case company and the three category cases assessed in order to create understanding about the complexity involved in constructing green products as meaningful. The next chapter will discuss the results of the analysis followed by the conclusions.

5 Discussion of results and limitations

The aim of this thesis was to contribute to the understanding of how green products are created as meaningful by retailers. Green products are made meaningful by enacting a world, a context where the products are made indispensable. In this world, the products are made meaningful and functional because they serve a purpose. The added value of green products, in contrast to conventional products, is that they serve the purpose of helping solve environmental problems, political- and social problems, and health problems.

This is the world that the retailer needs to create; a collective responsibility for the planet and the people, and at the same time not damaging the profitability or consumers' private economy. Paradoxical, the individualization of power, empowering consumers to save the planet through consumption is one of the ways to create this world. Green products are made meaningful by the creation of a world where every single purchase is a choice between helping save the planet, or to ignore.

Coop creates a meaningful context for their green products by building their image as a good force within Swedish retail. Communicating their commitment to sustainability through inviting political parties to explain their plans for a sustainable development in Swedish agriculture and food, stating that they have the largest assortment of organic products in Sweden, promoting their campaign "Organic of the Week", creating short movies about "Sweden's Eco Heroes" and promoting them through their online channels, and making own promises that 20 percent of all food sold at Coop are organic by the year 2020.

The in-store context that enacts a world where products are made indispensable is achieved by making green products accessible, attractive and necessary. These three are in turn achieved by providing and reducing prices on green products, informing about the benefits. They are also made necessary by forcing the consumer to purchase green products as in the case of organic or Fair Trade labeled bananas by removing the conventional product; or semi-green as in the case of eggs, where they removed eggs from caged hens from the assortment.

One very clear strategy to create green products as meaningful is the price, however not accounted for to any wider extent in the theoretical chapter, Coop are using this strategy in order to convince people to purchase green products. The "Organic of the Week" has been mentioned before but seems to be a strategy to lessen the gap between attitude and actual

consumption. The excluding nature of green products in regards to its premium price is not an argument when the price is subsidized. In the case of baby products the fact that there is a permanent 20 percent off on HIPP organic baby food for members makes a good illustration of the way that Coop wants to use their power as retailers to promote green consumption behavior.

The creation of green products as meaningful is a complex process where a multitude of channels needs to be incorporated. Communicating a commitment to sustainability needs to be consistent throughout these channels in order for the message to be well perceived. Expressing care for the animal welfare while reducing prices on imported meat can harm consumers' perception of the entire green commitment and even indicate greenwashing.

By using the powerful position between suppliers and consumers, the retailer can take a stand and force change. While enacting a world where they are a good force within Swedish retailing they create a context in which statements against certain products become appreciated by the consumers.

The retailer is using their private green brand to promote green consumption. By reducing prices on green products on a weekly basis they are making green products affordable and thus, accessible and functional in consumers' everyday life.

The organization's commitment to sustainability is widely communicated and influences the retailer's strategies for creating their green products as meaningful. Developing their own in-store dedication towards sustainability deriving from central guidelines such as "Organic of the Week", exclusion of eggs from caged hens, and even excluding non-organic bananas without central requirements shows a commitment to sustainability.

The product categories differ in regards to the amount of marketing attention they receive. The fruit and vegetable category is widely communicated in the "Organic of the Week" campaign. The meat and egg category receives attention through their online channels while the green baby products are mainly created as meaningful through in-store actions using a multitude of signs and information.

The aim to contribute to the understanding of how green products are constructed as meaningful by retailers is somewhat fulfilled, although the generalizability can be questioned

due to the single-sited store observations. However, as the intention was not to generalize beyond the social context the aim can be argued to be fulfilled.

The study could have increased the understanding further by completing the research methods using interviews. The complexity involved in constructing green products as meaningful and functional to consumers would potentially benefit from views from both employees and consumers. The discussion of the study and its limitations leads to the final conclusions presented in the next chapter.

6 Conclusions

The analysis has been carried through based on the research questions: *How are green products being created as meaningful by retailers?* and *How do the meaning creation process differ in regards to product category?* From the empirical analysis the following conclusions can be drawn:

The case company, Coop, is building themselves as a “good” and green force within the Swedish retail climate through communicating their commitment to sustainability. Through making sustainability promises and reducing prices on green products they are using their power as retailer in order to take responsibility.

Comparing the different available channels through which Coop are promoting their commitment to sustainability, the social media and company website gives a green impression of the company since much of the material published gives green consumption a context. Movies explaining the challenges in the Swedish food industry as well as highlighting ecological production as in the case of the organic egg producer constructs a meaningful context for green consumption. The in-store creation process involves creating a context where product information, pricing, and the enacting of a world through material artifacts such as wooden displaying tables and other displaying solutions.

The way in which green products are made meaningful by the case retailer differs regarding product category. *Green fruit and vegetables* are firstly naturally displayed using wooden crates and communicated through green signs. They are also taking an environmental and social responsibility by only selling organic and fair-trade labeled bananas. This means using their power to influence suppliers and consumers, as discussed by Jones *et al.* (2013). Combining this with the frequent reducing of prices on *green fruits and vegetables* in the “Organic of the Week” campaign, they are enabling for green consumption to spread past the exclusivity of people actively using green consumption as identity creating. Green consumption can therefore be argued to likelier become a mainstream phenomenon through their actions. *Green baby products* are mainly created as meaningful through in-store actions, the amount of information and marketing material available facilitates for the consumer to consume with complete information. The category is created by the retailer in a context where product safety, health aspects and the perception of organic products as gentler are

communicated. Also the “Coop Baby” program enables for more people to consume green baby food, by reducing price. *Green meat and eggs* are made meaningful partly through their online channels by educating consumers about the benefits of organic production. However, the actions are also undermined through the low-price campaigns of criticized non-organic Danish meat. With green packaging the green products are made distinguished, and the retailer is providing full information about the differences between eggs.

This study contributes to the understanding of green consumption in that it assesses the socio-cultural aspects as well as combining this with the study of material artifacts meaning for the creation of green products as meaningful. The study gives some insights to how retailers’ actions are correlated between in-store activities and online channels. At the same time, stores taking responsibility removing certain products might be undermined in their work towards circulating green products when the company centrally decides to promote certain, questionable products through their campaigns.

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