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The dimensions of ethical consumption:  
A qualitative study of how consumers construct their identity through  
consumption of ecological food in Sweden

- Master thesis -

**Authors:** Karoline Bergseng and Sofia Rudell

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**Supervisor:** Marcus Klasson

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Karoline Bergseng and Sofia Rudell

## **Abstract**

**Title:** The dimensions of ethical consumption: A qualitative study of how consumers construct their identity through consumption of ecological food in Sweden

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**Authors:** Karoline Bergseng and Sofia Rudell

**Supervisor:** Marcus Klasson

**Keywords:** Consumer, identity, ethical consumption, ecological food, consumer culture theory.

**Purpose:** To explore and contribute to theory on how consumers construct their identity through ethical consumption in the context of ecological food

**Theory:** We understand this phenomenon from a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective through a review of the literature on identity, social distinction, ideologies, information society and the ethical consumer

**Methodology:** This is an exploratory research, with a qualitative method where information is collected through in-depth interviews

**Analysis:** We analyse our findings through five categories; the ecological consumers – the ideal lifestyle, it depends on who you are, ecological food consumption – knowledge is status, circumstances affect consumption, and ecological food has different meaning for consumers

**Conclusion:** The findings reveal that ecological food has different meanings and that level of involvement and interest determines how consumers use these meanings to construct their identity.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

*In this chapter we introduce the reader to the phenomenon of this research. This is followed by a problem discussion of the area, which leads to the purpose of the thesis and the research question.*

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

A recent research study shows that 89 percent of the Swedish population believes that the climate changes seen today, such as storm, floods and earthquakes are caused by human activity. One third of the population are further seen to have environmental anxiety in the way that they are concerned about how the climate changes will affect their own and the world's future (Kihlberg, 2015). Accordingly, awareness and anxiety has further made many consumers see the consequences of their consumption.

The ecological food label was introduced in the European Union in 1992 (European commission, n.d). Food products rewarded with the label are produced with concerns of the environment, animals and humans rights. Since the introduction of the label there has been a steady increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden. However, last year (2014) there was a rapid increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden with as much as 38 percent, while in the rest of Europe it only increased with 10 percent (EkoWeb, 2015).

One of the main reasons for the increased consumption of ecological food in Sweden are according to Österberg (2014) and EkoWeb (2015) connected to the different health and food trends seen in the western world today and especially among the high- and middle class in Sweden. These trends have made individuals more anxious about what their food contains and how it affects their health. In a study from the Swedish Environmental Research Institute (IVL) it can be seen that many non-ecological food products contains a handful of different insecticide and pesticides (IVL, 2015). These toxins have so far an

unknown effect on consumers' health, but with a large amount and mixed together they are seen having a negative effect on the human body (IVL, 2015).

With growing environmental and health awareness in society, many consumers have become more conscious of the consequences of their consumption (Beck, 1992). Media's increased level of information around ethical consumption in relation to environmental problems and also greater availability of ethical food (Strong, 1996) has further pushed notions of the ethical consumer to grow bigger (Harrison et al., 2005). In today's consumer culture ethical consumers are seen as a group of consumers that are able to invest ethically and spend more time, energy and money on ethical food products (Harrison et al., 2005). Consumers that buy ethical food are further seen as more knowledgeable and with better economic resources than others in society, as ethical products are more expensive than regular products (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Thus, consumption of ethical food gives these privileged and more knowledgeable consumers the ability to portray themselves as more ethical than others, which can further lead to status and social distinction (Adams and Raisborough, 2008; Andorfer, 2013).

## **1.2 PROBLEM DISCUSSION**

Since the introduction of ecological food there has been a steady growth in consumption of these products. The increase of 38 percent last year indicates that something has happened around ecological food in the Swedish society. The Swedish consumers have in general become more anxious of what consequences their consumption has on the environment. In addition to this a health trend is spreading around the globe, especially in Sweden and consumers are getting more and more conscious about their health and wellbeing. As an effect of this, consumers are getting more aware of what the food they eat contains. However, in order to understand the increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden we need to understand more dimensions of the phenomenon and further get a better understanding of how aspects such as environmental anxiety and trends affect consumers in their consumption of ecological food.

Seeing the phenomenon from a theoretical point of view we need to look at the context of ecological food in the larger perspective of ethical consumption. Previous research in the area of ethical consumption indicates that an increased assortment of ethical food in supermarkets (Strong, 1996) and more environmental information from media have made consumers more aware of ethical food products (Harrison et al., 2005). Other studies further point at ethical products as status products as they indicate economic wealth and knowledge, and it is therefore a way for consumers to show and maintain social distinction in society (Adams and Raisborough, 2008; Andorfer, 2013). Consumption of ethical products can further be seen as a search for meaning in life, where meanings are continuously constructed and reconstructed in society (Cherrier, in Harrison et al., 2005). In addition to this, Langeland (1998) mean that consumers use consumption of ethical food products to obtain a part of their identity.

We see that ethical consumption is a complex concept, which incorporates a multitude of different aspects. Previous research has explored the field of ethical consumption in different ways. Some researchers have tried to determine the size and extension of the ethical consumer market (Strong, 1996) and further found it hard to characterize individuals consuming ethically (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). Other studies on ethical consumption have focused on defining socioeconomics, demographics, psychographics, pro-social behaviours, ideologies, or beliefs, that further leads to consumption of ethical products (Rawwas, 2001; Tanner and Kast, 2003; Zhongzhi, 2001). Further, Cherrier (2005) emphasize that individual characteristics and social responsibility both affect ethical consumption. More studies also suggest that individuals consume in order to be part of society, while others have studied planned behavior in the context of ethical consumption and looked at both self-identity and ethical responsibility (Chatzidakis et al., 2004; Shaw et al., 2000).

Much research has been done within ethical consumption, however, we feel that these do not fully help us to explain our phenomenon as other aspects, such as environmental anxiety and health are also seen to influence ecological consumption. Further Chatzidakis et al. (2004) mean that there is still much to explore within the field. In regards to this



many researchers mean that a more nuanced understanding of ethical consumption is needed on how identities are constructed in the marketplace (Barnett et al., 2005; Cherrier, 2009). Accordingly, Cherrier (in Harrison, 2005) means that more individual based meanings of ethical consumption should be taken into account. According to the previous research we see the need to focus more on how consumers construct their identity through ethical consumption.

In a consumer culture, identities are constructed through consumption of specific products (McCracken, 1988; Shankar et al., 2009). Consumers do not only consume products for their function to fulfill a certain need but also for the products symbolic meanings, in order to create an identity and place themselves in society (Wattanasuwan, 2005). The meaning of possessions and that we are what we have is according to Belk (1988) possibly the most basic and powerful factor to understand consumer consumption. Holt (2002) further describes consumer culture as the ideological structure that gives an understanding on what and how individuals consume. Ideologies are common belief systems in society that affect consumers to want certain things and to desire a specific lifestyle (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Further, according to Baudrillard (in Hirschman, 1988) one of the central ideologies in consumer culture is the ideology of consumption. In this thesis we aim to understand the increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden, by exploring how consumers construct their identity through ecological consumption. We will further use underlying consumption ideologies to understand this identity construction.

### 1.3 OUR RESEARCH FOCUS

There is still much to explore within the field of ethical consumption. In order to get a more comprehensive understanding of the field, individual based meanings of ecological consumption should be taken into account. To add dimensions to our understanding of the increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden, we want to study individual meanings of consumption. The object of this study is therefore to explore how consumers create their identity through consumption of ecological food. This has further lead us to formulate the following research question:

- *How do consumers construct their identity through ethical consumption?*

In order to understand this phenomenon we study the dynamic relationship between consumers' actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings from a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). To understand the phenomenon from a theoretical perspective we have reviewed literature on the ethical consumer, identity, social distinction, ideologies, and information society. These theories helped us to answer our research question. In order to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon we have further conducted seven in-depth interviews with consumers that buy ecological food.

The findings of this research will contribute to the theory on how consumers construct their identity through ethical consumption. We aim to contribute to Strong's (1996) work on "Futures contributing to the growth of ethical consumerism". Through the context of ecological food we add to his work with a current perspective on how consumers construct their identity through consumption of ecological food. Researchers, such as Langeland (1998) have before us contributed to the field of identity creation through ethical consumption, but in the context of Fairtrade, where she means that consumers increasingly obtain a part of their identity through consumption of these products (Langeland, 1998). We therefore see our contribution as an important input to the field, as ecological food embrace different aspects than Fairtrade. The findings will further add to our knowledge

and understanding of the ethical consumer and how individuals construct their identity through consumption of ecological food. The result can further be of interest for manufactures and retailers of ecological food to better understand the market and its consumers.

## 2. THEORY

*In this chapter we start by describing our choice for a CCT perspective, followed by a review of the literature on the ethical consumer, identity, social distinction, ideologies and information society. These theories will further help us to explore the phenomenon and answer our research question: How do consumers construct their identity through ethical consumption?*

In this research we aim to better understand the increased consumption of ecological food in Sweden. In order to do so we have chosen to use a CCT perspective, which according to Arnould and Thompson (2005) can be described as the relationship between cultural meanings, the market place and consumer actions. Through this perspective we want to see how consumers are affected by each other and the marketplace to act in a certain way, and more specific in their consumption of ecological food. CCT focus on the productive aspect of consumption and how consumers actively transform symbolic meanings of products and further make their individual identity through consumption. The CCT perspective was therefore seen appropriate since we in this thesis want to explore how consumers construct their identity through consumption of ecological food. Further, the perspective is concerned with the cultural meanings and the social dynamics that form consumer experiences and identities in the many perspectives of everyday life (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), aspects that are much relevant for ecological food consumption. We start the following section with an introduction of the ethical consumers, which is then followed by three theories from the field of CCT that will further help us to better understand the phenomenon and to explore how consumers construct their identity through ecological food consumption.

## **2.1 THE ETHICAL CONSUMER**

Frederick Webster (1975) was the first to present the term socially conscious consumer and explains that these are consumers that think about the consequences of their consumption and use their consumption power to generate social change. Accordingly, these consumers are often well educated and integrated in the middle class in society. Socially conscious consumers are also individuals that are aware of the difficulties in the world, such as environmental problems, and see the opportunity to consume products that can help prevent certain environmental problems. These consumers see themselves as active, socially involved and well informed and as having the ability to influence environmental problems with their consumption (Webster, 1975). Accordingly, Brooker (1976) means that socially conscious consumers are a group, whose actions may lead to improve the life in society.

Strong (1996) argues that the ethical consumer is much like what was earlier called the green consumers. These consumers are described as an individual that avoids consuming products that are likely to “endanger their own and others health, cause significant damage to the environment during production or involve unnecessary use or cruelty to animals” (Elkington and Hailes in Strong, 1996, p. 5). Further, according to Strong (1996) the ethical consumers also hold these principles but are additionally concerned about the “people” aspect of production in relation to working conditions.

Today, an ethical consumer is defined as an individual that makes thoughtful and conscious consumption decisions based on values and ethical beliefs (Harrison et al., 2005). Accordingly, ethical consumers are seen as a group of consumers in society that are able to invest ethically and spend more time, energy and money on ecological food. But, ethical consumption also varies with consumers’ individual opinion on ethics and their individual concerns (Harrison et al., 2005).

Further, environmental knowledge is often assumed to drive ethical consumption (Peattie, 2010). According to Peattie (2010), environmental knowledge and how consumers understand the environmental problems is important for consumers buying ecological food. Ecological consumption is also influenced by how consumers allocate the responsibility for environmental problems and whether they believe that they can make a significant difference. With environmental knowledge consumers are able to make a relevant connection between their lives and the products they consume in connection to the environmental problems that they are concerned about (Peattie, 2010). George Brooker (1976) have built on Webster's (1975) theory on the socially conscious consumer and created what he called self-actualization. Self-actualization is what socially conscious consumers achieve as they consume products not only for themselves but also because the products will benefit the environment. Accordingly, as we in this thesis are exploring how consumers construct their identity through ethical consumption, this is further connected to what Brooker (1976) describe, that consumption of ecological food indicates that consumers have a concern for the long-term affect their consumption have on the environment. In relation to this, consumption of ecological food can thus be seen as a way for the ethical consumer to achieve self-actualization in today's consumer culture.

## **2.2 IDENTITY**

*"Shopping is not merely the acquisition of things: it is the buying of identity"* (Shields, 1992, p. 197).

Society has during the last century moved from a work ethic towards a consumer ethic, whereas identity formerly was part of predefined social roles. Today consumption enables consumers to be empowered and accordingly construct their identity (Shankar et al., 2009). Wattanasuwan (2005) describe that consumer culture is where consumers social life function in the scope of consumption. Consumers crave for meaning in their search for a certain identity and according to Wattanasuwan (2005) this can be achieved through everyday consumption. A central aspect of consumer culture is that consumers do not only

consume products for their functions but also for the products symbolic meaning (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Accordingly, Wattanasuwan (2005) further explain that beyond products ability to fulfill a certain need, consumers buy products with symbolic meanings to create an identity and place themselves in society. Products within a consumer culture holds an important feature that goes beyond their practical qualities, which means that products have the ability to express cultural meanings (McCracken, 1988). Further, products, activities and beliefs that are pursued by consumers can tell a story about who they are and what they identify themselves with (Wattanasuwan, 2005). However, in a consumer culture where the traditional and historical forms of identity are lost, consumers create, maintain and communicate their identity by using the symbolic meanings of products (Shankar et al., 2009). The symbolic meanings of the products that consumers buy might also represent the essence of their identity, or reflect their desirable connection with others in society (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Russell Belk (1988) was the first sociologist that presented the major theorization of consumer identity, through his article about "*Possessions and the Extended Self*", where he explains that consumers in most societies express and understand themselves through consumption and the possessions of products (Earley, 2014). His theory clarifies that consumption helps define consumers' sense of who they are (Ahuvia, 2005). In this thesis we are exploring how consumers construct their identity through ethical consumption. Hence, we see Belk's (1988) theory of the extended self, and that consumers use possessions to develop, strengthen and extend their self as central in our theory of consumers' identity creation. The relationship between consumers' possessions and their identity is not only based on the idea that this relationship alone is important in understanding consumer consumption. It is also built on the idea that by understanding the extended self we can discover how consumption contributes to consumers' broader existence as individuals (Belk, 1988). According to Belk (1988), we cannot understand consumer consumption without getting an understanding of the meanings that consumers give to their things. Individual meanings are what guides consumers and further express the underlying moral motives in their consumption (Andorfer, 2013). With the growth of ecological consumer practices, individual meanings are seen as an important factor for

consumption (Andorfer, 2013, Shaw et al., 2005 and Pattie 2010). A fundamental way to understand what the products that consumers own means to them is to recognize that knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally consumers look at their things as part of themselves. "Our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess" (Tuan in Belk, 1988, p. 139). That we are what we have is possibly the most basic and powerful detail of understanding consumer consumption (Belk, 1988).

Consumers have a core identity, which can be expanded when they include products that become part of the extended self. Belk (1988) explain that "the body, internal processes, ideas and experiences" (p. 141) are part of the core identity, while other individuals, places and products that the consumers have an attachment to are seen as a part of their extended self (Belk 1988). The term "extended self" is used by Belk (1988) to emphasize that certain products assign great personal meaning and value to individuals. Accordingly, ecological food can be seen as products that give personal meanings to consumers as they buy products that contribute to a better environment.

The sociologist Brian Turner writes about the body and his theory gives meaning to the body in three ways: 'having a body', 'being a body' and 'doing a body' (Turner in Corrigan, 1997, p. 150). We are going to emphasize the 'doing a body', as this can be relevant for our phenomenon. As Turner explains, through 'doing a body' our bodies create an identity, which belongs to the 'social world'. Consumers want to present their selves to others not only as objects but as 'objects of representation' (Turner in Corrigan, 1997, p. 151). Turner's theory of the body is closely connected to health and identity and the consumption of ecological food with the emerging health trend in Sweden (EkoWeb, 2015) and that consumers are more concerned about what they eat and want to take care of their bodies.



## 2.3 SOCIAL DISTINCTION

*“Earlier, individuals bought a collection of products for future security, but now individuals are buying products for social distinction and self-definition” (Belk, 1988).*

The American sociologist Thorstein Veblen's (in Corrigan, 1997) concepts of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure are two of the first conceptualizations to social distinction explaining that “one must consume in a proper and seemingly manner” and that this manner must be “attained through an expenditure of time and money on such unproductive matters” (Corrigan, 1997, p. 27) in order for individuals to gain status. Thus, by consuming more expensive products members of a higher social class show and maintain their social position, and claim status and distinction from others in society. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has built his class theory on Veblen's concepts. His theory explains that consumption is a way for consumers to indicate, keep and strengthen social distinction and class structures. Further, Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of social distinction is often used to explore actions of everyday class distinctions, which are achieved through consumption (Adams and Raisborough, 2008). According to Bourdieu (1984), there are three different field dependant capitals, economic, social and cultural and the aggregated amount of capital is conceptualized as symbolic capital. Hence if you have symbolic capital within a field, you will most likely have a high social position and consequently power. This in turn thus not automatically indicates that you have symbolic capital in another field (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1997). Through these field dependant capitals, economic (e.g. occupation and financial resources), cultural (e.g. education and knowledge) and social (e.g. network and social connections) consumers are empowered to define themselves in society (Holt in Coskuner-Balli and Thompson, 2013, p. 3). Further, having symbolic capital can be seen as a status and a way to create social recognition. Others, within a lower social position might also look up to and admire individuals with symbolic capital (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson, 2013). Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013) further argue that amongst the three capitals, cultural capital is the one that influence social distinction and identity creation the most.

Consumers often creates social groups around certain products, and according to Holt (2002) this is typical within a consumer culture where consumers claim to be doing their own thing while they are actually doing it with many like-minded others. Accordingly, this can be interpreted in the way that consumers buy certain products to become part of a group or achieve a certain lifestyle. In his theory about “the extended self” Belk (1988) also explains that it includes different levels of group affiliation and particularly individuals, family and a group. We review the group here, as it is relevant for our theory on social distinction. The products that are part of the group identity, such as ecological food becomes a part of the consumers extended self as they identify themselves with the group at the same time as the products are important for the groups identity (Ahuvia, 2005). Others in the society can perceive these social groups as an ideal lifestyle, which they by consumption of certain products strive to reach (McCracken, 1998). Further, McCracken (1998) talk about the displaced meanings of objects and how consumers through consumption try to reach an ideal lifestyle. He explains that through consumption of certain products, consumers chase the ideal lifestyle, which can be difficult to achieve right away.

## **2.4 IDEOLOGIES**

*“Ideologies are common belief systems in society that affect consumers to want certain things and to desire a specific lifestyle” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005 p. 875)*

Hirschman (1993) describe ideologies as meanings that consumers use to channel and reproduce their thoughts and actions through, often in a way that support superior interest in society. Further, Baudrillard (1998) identify consumer culture itself as an ideology, which includes mass consumer participation in the society. Other researchers have also researched the idea that consumer culture itself is an ideology and the means through which ideologies structure consumer practices (Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002). Hence, Holt (2002) describes consumer culture as the ideological structure that provides an understanding on what and how individuals consume. More researchers also believe that ideologies expressed through the consumer culture frames consumers perspective of possible actions, feelings and thoughts, which make certain patterns of behavior and

interpretations more likely than others (Holt, 1997; and Kozinets, 2002). One of the central ideologies in consumer culture has been named the ideology of consumption (Baudrillard in Hirschman, 1988, p. 345), and in this ideology social meaning is attached to and communicated by products (Gottdeiner, 1985). According to anthropologist Clifford Geertz (in Hunt, 1990) ideology comes from “socially established structures of meaning” (p. 109) that is associated with culture. And, as long as cultures create meanings there will be ideologies that only can be understood by entering into these cultures and interpret their meanings (Geertz in Hunt, 1990).

Within CCT research, Arnould and Thompson (2005) explains that advertisements, television and programs are seen as identity and lifestyle instructions such as look like this and act like that, and that these marketplace ideologies encourage individuals to want certain things and to desire a specific lifestyle (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Further, in a consumer culture consumers are aware that marketers are trying to create ideologies by producing cultural meanings in society. However, some consumers see themselves as more knowledgeable than the acceptable crowd in society and are able to create an individual lifestyle in a market full of me-too meanings (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). According to Hirschman (1988), through various media channels, consumers acquire information about products on a daily basis. The information contains messages that deliver symbolic meanings about the use of products to express individual values, social norms and cultural ideologies (Hirschman, 1988). Further, Silverstone (in Hirschman, 1988) argue that television messages do not only represent the consumption ideology of specific classes or social groups, but rather in general operates to create cultural consciousness. “Television is the frame par excellence of our culture; it shares with ritual the capacity to direct and redirect perception and experience [...] As far as television communicates something to each of us, and to all of us [...] the messages that television transmits are common” (Silverstone in Hirschman, 1988, p. 345).

## **2.5 INFORMATION SOCIETY**

According to Peattie (2010) information through media plays an important role in the consumption of ethical products as it provides consumers with knowledge and awareness but also concerns about the environment. These concerns can be related to Beck's (1992) concept of risk society. Risk is consequences, which is related to the power of modernization and its development of uncertainty (Beck, 1992). He further defines risk as a systematic way of dealing with threats and uncertainties brought by modernization. In a consumer culture, consumers are seen as responsible for their consumption (Hansen and Schrader, 1997). Hence, Beck (1999) argue that more of the risks, such as the environmental problems in society are created by human activity, and in a consumer culture consumers are forced to consider the increasing consequences of their consumption. Further, in a risk society many consumers have become considerably aware of these risks and take action and face the consequences of their consumption (Beck, 1992). Accordingly, in a society with risks, both social and economic knowledge is important amongst consumers, as the media have more power to influence them by distributing information and knowledge about the risks in society. In this sense, Beck (1992) explains that a risk society can be seen as the media and information society.

Through medias increased level of engagement with environmental problems, awareness around these problems is rising in the society, which has further lead to the creation of the ethical consumer (Harrison et al., 2005). However, the group of ethical consumers is often concerned about more specific problems than just the environment in their consumption, such as their own health and animals and workers well being in production of food products (Wheale and Hinton, 2007).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

*This chapter will give an explanation on how this research was conducted. It presents and argues for our methodological choices of: the research philosophy, research strategy, data collection method, sampling method and participant selection and data analysis. It further presents ethical and political considerations of this thesis. The choice of conducting this research from a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective, has further affected our methodology choices.*

#### **3.1 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY**

The ontological position for this research is relativism where no single truth or reality exists but rather many, depending on perspective (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). Relativism suits this study well as we aim at looking deeper into how consumers construct their identity through ecological consumption. Individuals that consume ecological food are not a homogenous group as they consume different products and are affected by society in different ways. Consequently, the philosophy standpoint of this study is that every individual defines and experience things in a different way, depending on previous knowledge and background. This standpoint is the basis for this research where we see no right or wrong aspects behind individuals' actions. By exploring several truths, a more nuanced reality can be created and an understanding of the phenomena can be reached. The epistemology perspective of this research is that reality is a social construction, created by individuals through sharing of thoughts and experiences. From social sharing of experiences through spoken words (Svensson, 2015) individuals make sense of the world (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). In this thesis, through an underlying consumption ideology, where social meanings are attached to products, we want to understand how consumers construct their identity through ecological food consumption (Hirschman, 1988; Gottdeiner, 1985). Further, ideologies are common believe systems, which encourage individuals to want certain things (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). And, consumers use the meanings within an ideology to channel their thoughts and actions (Hirschman, 1993). The

social constructionism (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012) together with an interpretative approach (Bryman and Bell, 2011) helped us to understand how individuals use ecological food in their identity construction. The social constructionism perspective was therefore a good fit for this research. Further, the epistemology describes how we gain knowledge in life and by declaring our angle of departure we give the reader a foundation to understand the outcome of this research.

### **3.2 RESEARCH STRATEGY**

This is an exploratory research, which aims to explore, through the use of an underlying consumption ideology, how individuals construct their identity through consumption of ecological food. The chosen design guided us during the study and assisted us to gain required information. An exploratory research suited this study well as it helped us to get great insights and understanding of the phenomena and how consumers construct their identity through ethical consumption (Malhotra, 2010).

In this research we use the design of grounded theory and take on an inductive approach with iterative elements. The inductive approach gave us the possibility to gather information and then follow with the creation of a theory chapter that matched the data at hand. Grounded theory encourage an iterative method where the researcher can go back and forth between gathered data and theory, which further help to develop and sharpen the theory chapter (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The design of grounded theory with support from the inductive and iterative approach helped to build the theoretical framework for this research. The inductive approach enhanced our knowledge within the area and helped us find relevant theories, which helped us to explain our phenomenon. With help from the iterative process we could narrow our theories and leave out redundant information not relevant in order to help us answer the research question, thereby chapter 2. *Theory* might not appear as that extensive. This approach was quite time consuming, but it assist us well in the later process of this study in order to limit the research and focus it to our phenomenon.

In the design of grounded theory we take the position of Strauss and Corbin (1998) that mean that researchers must familiarize themselves with prior research in the area in order to make sense of the gathered data. Thereby finding data explaining the phenomenon has been an ongoing process. Secondary data within CCT, on ethical consumption and identity creation through consumption has been gathered (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). In order to get deeper knowledge and understand how consumers construct their identity through ethical consumption, primary data has also been collected. This data has been searched for directly with the aim of this research in mind and is the main data collecting method used in order to understand the phenomenon.

A qualitative research method was chosen for this research. The method is appropriate for a study like this when a deeper understanding of a phenomenon is needed (McCracken, 1988) and when there are no intentions of drawing generalizations from the data at hand (Cohen et al., 2007). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon qualitative data about individuals' thoughts and feelings were captured. The epistemology choice of this research, social constructionism, together with an inductive approach further directed us towards the use of a qualitative research method (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The object of this research is to explore how consumers construct their identity through consumption of ecological food. Identity construction is a complex process and can be complicated to capture direct information about. Therefore we needed to study the symptoms of the object. In order to determine symptoms, we had to consider the context of the research question, time, limitations and the symptoms accessibility. We therefore chose the symptom of spoken words. In order to create talk and further gather knowledge and create a deeper understanding, our primary data was gathered through in-depth interviews. Conducting in-depth interviews gave us the opportunity to get deeper knowledge about the individuals' personal thoughts and feelings. This knowledge was essential for us in order to understand the phenomenon and to answer our research question.

### 3.3 DATA COLLECTING METHOD

In this research we have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews. This method does, in contradiction to surveys and databases, give participants an opportunity to talk about their lived experiences and the reasons for why they act in a certain way. It is therefore a suitable method for a CCT research like this, which builds on observed and sociocultural dimensions of consumption. Semi-structured interviews have further the advantageous of guiding the interviews in the right direction, within the frame of the purpose of the research, while also giving the participants room to answer our questions openly. Since this is a qualitative research that aims to explore and get a deeper understanding of the rapid increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden semi-structured interviews suited this study well, as we wanted to gather rich information from our participant.

To be well prepared and to know which matters we wanted to discuss during the interviews we created an interview guide (see *Appendix – Interview Guide*) (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). The interview guide was helpful in the way that it helped us stick to the topics that we wanted to discuss, with our participant, while leaving irrelevant discussion out of the interview (McCracken 1988; Bryman and Bell, 2011). Due to the time restriction of ten weeks a semi-structure interview was a good fit for our study as it frames the interviews in the way that not too much irrelevant data was gathered. Semi-structured interviews encourage the interviewees to openly discuss the interview questions, which further opened up for new insights to be found that we were not aware of before the interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The chosen method helped us apply an interpretative approach and to understand the interviewees' different perspective of our phenomenon.

In order to get the most out of each interview and gather the required information it was important for us to be well prepared. Hence, we decided to ask the participants to keep a photo diary of their consumption. This was seen as an alternative method to observations which in regards to the time frame of this research were seen as too time consuming. The photo diary was a good way for us to gain useful insights from our participant's perspective already previous to the interviews. The insights made us prepared for the interview and



helped us to faster enter into the participants personal understanding of consumption of ecological food. The photos were further seen as a good way to prevent probing amongst the respondents in case they forgot some aspects of their consumption and would then try to come up with suitable answers to our questions (Malhotra, 2010). The photo diaries were therefore a good method for both our understanding and for the participants' memory.

### **3.4 SAMPLING METHOD AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION**

In order to explore how consumers construct their identity through consumption of ecological food we needed to talk with consumers that buy ecologic food. We aimed at interviewing individuals consuming ecological food occasionally as well as consumers that consumes it more often. Individuals consuming ecological food products at a regular basis might be more aware of their consumption and why they choose ecological food products. However, getting to know why other consumers chose to buy ecological food products from time to time can give a further dimension to the research. To get in contact with relevant participants we used a snowball sampling method. This method helped us find appropriate participant for the research while it also encouraged individuals to participate and answer the questions in a more honest way since someone they know recommended them for the interview (Malhotra, 2010).

The target age group of this research was individuals between 25-30 years old. We decided on this group since they have lived by themselves for a while and been able to develop their own thought and behavior in their food consumption. Moreover a recent article showed that consumption of ecological food had especially increased amongst students and young adults in the Sweden (EkoWeb, 2015).

It can be hard to know how many participants to have in a study in order to be able to answer the research question in a reliable way. Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) argue that a research in a social constructionism perspective like this should include a sample group of

four to ten interviewees, whilst Bryman and Bell (2011) mean that the number of interviews should be as many that are needed until the research findings become repetitive. With this in mind and due to the time limit of ten weeks we have performed seven in-depth interviews. Below (Table 1) follows a chart of the participants of this study. To encourage the participants to answer our questions with rich and deep information we tried to make them feel as comfortable as possible. Hence, the interviews were conducted in a relaxed and unbiased environment. We did this in order to build a relation with the participants and create an environment where they felt comfortable sharing their own stories in their own way (McCracken, 1988). To get as much rich data as possible we further asked follow-up questions in order to a more nuanced and underlying understanding on our questions from the participants.

Table 1. - Participants of the study

Name	Sex	Age	Occupation
Hanna	Female	29	Nurse
Helena	Female	30	Nurse
Christoffer	Male	26	Student
Bella	Female	25	Marketing Assistant
Frida	Female	28	Coordinator
Mattias	Male	27	Student
Emil	Male	29	Student

\*Names given are pseudonyms

### 3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

*“There are few well-established and widely accepted rules for the analysis of qualitative data”*

(Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 571)

The objective of this analysis was to see relationships, categories and individuals assumptions of the world in general and the phenomena of this research in particular (McCracken 1988). McCracken (1988) mean that the most demanding part of a research process is to analyze the gathered data. However the first step in the process was to tape all the interviews so that no important information or nuances was lost. To ease the time consuming and repetitive work of transcribe the recorded interviews, this was done continuously after each interview. This process was done in order to make the gathered data more perspicuous for upcoming analyzing process. The grounded theory design of this research made a grounded analysis suitable for analysis process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). As suggested by Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) we started the process of analyzing by familiarizing ourselves with the gathered data. To ensure a better understanding of the gathered data and since coding is one of the key processes in grounded theory we further coded each interview after transcribing them (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The coding was based on patterns seen in the different interviews and in this process we also used the interpretative approach to better understand the data.

Both open and axial approach was used during the process of coding the data (Bryman and Bell, 2011). First we examined the data at hand and grouped the data into different categories. The categorized data from each interview was then added to and rewritten together with corresponding categories from the other interviews. In this process both similarities and differences amongst the participants where emphasized. The axial coding approach illuminated new patterns in which the data could be categorized. The process of coding was done with great concern of not losing important data (Bryman and Bell, 2011). After new categorizes where developed these where analyzed together with the theories were both conflicting and confirming aspects were emphasized. As this research has a grounded theory design, data was collected and theories were developed in an ongoing

interplay between theory and data. Data and theories at hand were therefore touching the same areas, which made them much relevant for each other.

When the process of analyzing was done and a first draft was conducted we found the lines between the different codes a bit blurry and shallow. We therefore took a decision to review all interviews once again to make sure no interesting data was missed. Thereafter we re-coded the data and rewrote the analysis in order to make it clearer and give it more depth. We finalized the analysis chapter with five main categories: the ecological consumer – the ideal lifestyle, it depends on who you are, consumption of ecological food – knowledge is status, circumstances affect consumption and ecological food has different meanings for consumers. These categories are to be found in chapter 3. *Analysis* and are used to explain the findings of this study.

### **3.6 ETHICAL AND POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical concerns in researches like this are much about protecting the participants in the aspect of privacy and anonymity (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The participants' age, gender and occupation is of interest to us when interpreting the interviews and analyzing the data. However, to protect the anonymity of the participants their names has been changed to pseudonyms names. This was further done in order to increase the participants' willingness to share their thoughts and motivations during the interviews. Further, the participants were given an explanation of the research before starting the interview. We further told the participant about their anonymity and that they did not have to answer a question if they thought it could harm their privacy (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

Other more political considerations for this research are that individuals do not want to reveal why they act or think as they do. Their motivations to act in a certain way might arise from believes that are not seen as social norms or political correct. We were also clear that is was no right or wrong answers to not place some participant in a better light then others. In order to prevent this, we kept an open mind and an unbiased attitude towards the participants both during the interviews and when analyzing the data (Easterby-Smith

et al., 2012). By taking these ethical and political precautions we wanted to reduce the risk of harming any of our respondents.

## 4. EMPIRICAL DATA AND ANALYSIS

*In this section we present our findings. We analyze our findings in five categories; the ecological consumer – the ideal lifestyle, it depends on who you are, consumption of ecological food – knowledge is status, circumstances affect consumption and ecological food has different meanings for consumers.*

### 4.1 THE ECOLOGICAL CONSUMER – THE IDEAL LIFESTYLE

A majority of our respondents see themselves as an ecological consumer as they more or less consume ecological food, but the ecological consumer they describe is not how they see themselves. However, even though most of our respondents see themselves as an ecological consumer, they still look up to other consumers that they see as more ecological than themselves. Some of our respondents explain that when they see consumers in the store that only consumes ecological food, they look up to that consumer. A common thought that our respondents have on these consumers is revealed in the following quote by Hanna:

*“Even though I consume much ecological food myself, when I see a consumer in front of me in line that only have ecological food products, I think – awesome you really care” – Hanna.*

Mattias is one of two respondents that do not see himself as ecological consumer, as he only consume some ecological food products. According to Mattias an ecological consumer is an individual that only consumes ecological food products.

Further, all our respondents describe the ecological consumer as an individual that is more knowledgeable. Emil also see the ecological consumer as an individual that see things in a larger perspective, and Bella agree but further thinks that the ecological consumer as an individual that thinks one step ahead and are more knowledgeable about the effect of their consumption. As Webster’s (1975) describe in the theory, the socially conscious consumer

are individuals that think about the consequences of their consumption and further believe that they can make a change with their consumption. This is much linked to how our respondents describe the ecological consumer, and this can indicate that the Webster's (1975) socially conscious consumer is today's ecological consumer. Other respondents also see the ecological consumer as more knowledgeable about how the food is produced and spend more time thinking about what it means to consume ecological food products. And, understand the benefits of eating ecological food. Accordingly, Christoffer looks at the ecological consumer as an individual that understand the difference of consuming ecological food instead of non-ecological food products.

Even though most of our respondents see themselves as ecological consumers their description of the ecological consumer indicates that our respondents want to achieve more with their ecological consumption. According to our respondents, how they describe the ecological consumer becomes real when they see them in the store only consuming ecological food. This further shows that consumption of only ecological food products is part of ecological consumers identity and our respondents admire and look at this as an ideal lifestyle. The following quote from Frida describe what this ideal lifestyle mean for our respondents:

*"In a dream world I would like to only consume ecological food" – Frida*

From the interviews it is evident that all our respondents look at the ecological consumer as an individual with an ideal lifestyle. We connect this to McCracken's (1998) theory about the displaced meanings of products and from what our respondents emphasize in their statement we understand that our respondents try to reach the ideal lifestyle of the ecological consumer by consuming ecological food products. This further strengthens Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998) theory in the way that consumers not only consume ecological food for their function and ability to fulfill a certain need but rather for the meanings of it.

According to what is emphasized by our respondents it seems that it exists and ideology around the ecological consumer in the Swedish society, with a common belief system that has encouraged our respondents to consume ecological food products. As described by Hirschman (1993), an ideology is a common belief system that consumers use to channel and reproduce their thoughts and actions through. Which, further strengthens the theory that marketplace ideologies are seen as identity and lifestyle instructions that direct consumers to want certain things or desire a specific lifestyle (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). As our respondents have much of the same view on what an ecological consumer is, it is seen from the theory on ideology that explains that social meanings are attached to products (Baudrillard, 1968; Gottdeiner, 1985), and that consumption of ecological food is therefore seen as a way for our respondents to achieve their ideal lifestyle.

Looking at the findings from the ecological consumer – the ideal lifestyle we confirm existing theory that an ecological consumer spends more time thinking about what it means to consume ecological food and makes thoughtful and conscious consumption decisions based on values and ethical beliefs (Harrison et al., 2005). Most of our respondents see themselves as ecological consumers even though they just consume some ecological food, and they still strive to reach for an ideal lifestyle, which is according to our respondents being an individual that only consumes ecological food. This further confirms the theory from McCracken (1988) that consumers often look up to and admire others that they see as having an ideal lifestyle.

## **4.2 IT DEPENDS ON WHO YOU ARE**

Dependent on what group our respondents see themselves as part of in the society and the structures within an ideology that guides consumers affect our respondents in different ways. Our respondents are in different stages in life, one is a mom, some are students and others are in a place where work, family and involvement are most important. Where consumers are in life, place them in different groups in society, and what group they belong to also influence their consumption. We further see this in connection to Holt's (2002)



theory that explain that consumers claim to be doing their own thing, while they are actually doing it with many like-minded others in society.

Wattanasuwan's (2005) statement that individuals consume products with symbolic meanings to create an identity and place themselves in society is something that we see from our interviews that influence our respondents consumption of ecological food regardless of what group in society they belong to. Our respondents' consumption of ecological food becomes part of their identity in different ways and e.g. for a mom consumption of ecological food indicates that they are knowledgeable and cares about their family's health. Further, as a mom it is assumed that you want the best for your children and according to Helena, this is an important reason for her consumption of ecological food:

*"After I became a mom I am first and foremost concerned about how the products we eat affect our bodies, and especially my sons, and I want to give him the best start in life and give him food that do not contain any pesticides or chemicals, that can have a negative effect on his body"* – Helena

As a student in Sweden it is not expected that you should consume ecological food, as students often do not have the best economical resources. Both Helena and Bella, which are working emphasize that when you are a student you always consume what is cheapest. Bella highlight in a statement that ecological food consumption is much connected to economic capital in the way that individuals with more money have the ability to choose ecological products, while students that have less economic resources are in a way forced to consume a cheaper alternative. Further, Helena underline that if some do not have much economical resources but still are knowledgeable about what it means to consume ecological food, they might choose to consume specific products ecological. Three of our respondents are students and they consume ecological food. Mattias emphasize in a statement that even though he is a student he has taken an active choice to consume ecological food, because he believes that it contributes to a better environment. And, also that it is better for his body to eat more ecological food. Though, he further underline that it

is not many of his friends that consume ecological food because they are students and as a student you are most often looking for the cheapest products. Emil is also a student, but he is very interested in environmental issues and what affects his consumption have on the environment in different ways. When it became much focus on ecological consumption in the society, start consuming ecological food felt like a natural step for Emil. He further highlight that his consumption of ecological food is a way for him to take social responsibility.

What we can see from Mattias and Emil's reasons to consume ecological food, this is connected to Peattie's (2010) theory on environmental knowledge and that it is assumed to drive ecological consumption. Ecological consumption is often related to how consumers allocate the responsibility for environmental problems and whether they believe that they can contribute to a change. Accordingly, with environmental knowledge Mattias and Emil are able to make the relevant connection between their lives and the products they consume, which in this study is ecological food. Moreover, all the three students emphasize in their interviews that when they start working and get a more stable economy they will consume more ecological food.

Our respondents are part of different groups in society, and we have emphasized especially two groups here, being a mom, and a student. We see a connection to our theory in the way that our respondents' consumption of ecological food is part of their identity. But, their consumption of ecological food also becomes important for the groups identity (Ahuvia, 2005).

As the environment is one of the main factors for consumption of ecological food, consumers individual meanings is seen as an important factor in the way that through consumption of ecological food consumers attain self-fulfillment (Andorfer, 2013; Shaw et al., 2005; Pattie 2010). We can further see this in one of Mattias statement where he underlines that he get a good feeling when consuming ecological food because he believes that his consumption contributes to a better environment and prevents bad food production. This further strengthen Brooker's (1976) theory on self-actualization, which is

when consumers buy products not only for themselves but also for other reasons, such as the environment.

Products symbolic meanings can also represent the essence of consumers' identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998), and for Hanna, Helena and Emil, ecological food products ability to express cultural meanings (McCracken, 1988) is important, as they are genuinely interested and involved with ecological food and how their consumption affect the environment. For these respondents consumption of ecological food is further connected to Belk's (1988) "extended self" as the environmental meanings of ecological food products assign great personal meaning and value to Hanna, Helena and Emil and helps them define the sense of who they are.

Looking at the findings from it depends on who you are we confirm existing theory that consumption of products with symbolic meanings is a way for consumers to create an identity and place themselves in society (Holt, 2002; Wattanasuwan, 2005; Ahuvia, 2005). We also confirm existing theory that more involved consumers are able to see the link between their consumption and how it positively affects their life or the environment (Peattie, 2010). However, according to our theory on how economical resources and class influence consumption (Corrigan, 1997) it is seen from our respondents who are students that consumption of ecological food is much more related to interest, involvement and their active choice to consume ecological food.

### **4.3 CONSUMPTION OF ECOLOGICAL FOOD - KNOWLEDGE IS STATUS**

Within our respondents group, being knowledgeable is emphasized as an influential factor for consumption of ecological food. Knowledge is connected to Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital, but as seen in the theory there are also two other capitals, social and economic. As mentioned in *4.1 the ecological consumer – the ideal lifestyle*, ecological consumers often spend more time thinking about what it means to consume ecological food, and according to Harrison et al. (2005) these consumers are also able to spend more money on ecological

food, which further influence their consumption. Accordingly, Hanna highlight in her interview that it is individuals' economy and the price of ecological food that often control consumption of ecological food. However, she also thinks that everyone can afford ecological food, but it just depends on how they prioritize. E.g. Hanna use one krona more on ecological eggs, and do not think that is a lot. She further underline that many consumers put these extra kronor on a latte on Espresso House, while she rather use the extra money on ecological eggs. As she have taken an active choice to consume ecological food, it is more granted for her to use some extra money on ecological food rather than other things, and she thinks that it is the same for others that also have taken an active choice.

From our interviews we can see that our respondents are aware that the price difference on many ecological and non-ecological food products have become smaller. However, all of our respondents think about their economic resources and the price difference between ecological and non-ecological food products is a factor that influences their consumption of ecological food. Further, our respondents highlight in their statements that if the price difference is minor they always choose ecological. Emil's comment describes how the price often influence our respondents ecological food consumption:

*"I am not consistent in my consumption of ecological food, because it depends quite a lot on the price difference. But if it is just a couple of kronor difference I definitely choose ecological"*  
– Emil

Hanna is one of the respondents that are much involved and interested with ecological food, and emphasize in a statement that there is four products she always consume ecological, which is eggs, milk bananas and coffee. She further explain:

*"When I'm in the store I always try to look for other fruits and vegetables besides bananas that are ecological and if the price difference is small I choose ecological"* – Hanna

Helena is another respondent that consume much ecological food, and when she is in the store she always looks for ecological food products. However, if she sees that an ecological product cost more than the double of a non-ecological food, e.g. chives, she thinks it is a little absurd to pay twice as much as the regular one.

With a combination of Bourdieu's (1984) three capitals, economic, social and cultural consumers are empowered to define themselves in society, which further conceptualize status (Holt, 1998, in Coskuner-Balli and Thompson, 2013; Bourdieu, 1984). A majority of our respondents highlight in their interviews that it indicate status being able to consume ecological food. Emil, Hanna, Helena are consumers that are interested and more involved with ecological food consumption than the other respondents, and they emphasize that their consumption of ecological food is connected to their social and cultural capital in the way that they are more conscious and knowledgeable in their consumption of ecological food. This confirm Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013) theory, that especially cultural capital is what influence consumers the most in order to create an identity, which can further lead to status.

*"It is status in being conscious and have knowledge, and when you consume ecological food it shows that you are just that, conscious and knowledgeable and take responsibility" – Emil*

Further, Frida thinks that consumption of ecological food indicates status in the way that it shows that you can afford to consume these products, because ecological food products is often more expensive than non-ecological food. Accordingly, Hanna emphasize that she feel privileged to be able to afford ecological food.

Even though our respondents have knowledge about the environment and what it means to consume ecological food, Christoffer is one respondent that even though he have some knowledge he do not consume ecological food that often. He underline in a statement that he understands that ecological food consumption is a way to support a better environment, but he is not convinced that ecological food consumption is actually better for the environment. He rather believes that ecological food is better for him to eat and for his

health. From what is emphasized in their interviews we can see that for our respondents, consumption of ecological food is more related to them taken an active choice to consume ecological food, because they thinks it has a positive effect on aspects such as the environment or their health

Looking at the findings from consumption of ecological food – knowledge is status we confirm the theory that knowledge, within cultural capital is what influence consumers the most in their consumption of ecological food and that knowledge can further lead to status (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson, 2013). We further see an oppose to our theory that explains that consumption of ecological food products was a way for privileged consumers to gain status, as these products are more expensive (Corrigan, 1997). According to our respondents there is status to consume ecological food, but a majority of our respondents highlight that being knowledgeable is a main factor to achieve status.

#### **4.4 CIRCUMSTANCES AFFECT CONSUMPTION**

It is evident from our interviews that all our respondents are affected by their circumstances to consume ecological food, but in different ways. From what is emphasized by our respondents it depends much on how knowledgeable they are, how involved they are in what it means to consume ecological food and what they are conscious and concerned about.

Further, medias increased level of information in society about environmental problems, working conditions, and what is good and bad within food creates concern among many consumers (Peattie, 2010). Frida and Bella was both affected to start consuming ecological food, and especially bananas after seeing a documentary about the Dole banana plantation and how the workers got poisoned while working. This further supports Belk's (1992) theory about risk society, and that consumers consider the consequences of their consumption. The documentary about the Dole banana plantation created a lot of fuzz in the media, and especially around bananas. Bella underline that after seeing the documentary she noticed one day in her local food store that it was a sign above the regular

bananas saying – poison bananas, and further thought that this was a clever way to enlighten and influence consumers to become more aware of ecological food.

Helena, Emil and Hanna who are more interested and involved in what it means to consume ecological food, much of their individual meanings guide their consumption (Andorfer, 2013).

However, they are still affected by society but in a different ways. By being consciously affected, these three respondents use their consumption of ecological food as Belk (1988) explain as a way to strengthen and extend their identity. Hanna emphasize in a statement that because she always have been interested and involved with ecological food, she does not feel affected by all the information in the media. However, when she see the ecological and non-ecological food lined up beside each other in the store, that reminds her that she can make a choice and that affects her to choose more ecological food products. Even though Emil also is interested and involved he is affected in a slightly different way:

*“I am affected by the society in the way that I feel more required to think about what it means to consume ecological food, and in combination with my interest for ecological food this motivates me to buy more” – Emil*

Further, through our interviews it is emphasized by many of our respondents mean that the grocery stores have a big influence on their consumption of ecological food. Hanna highlight in a statement that, especially one food store in Sweden really promotes their selection of ecological food and the ecological food products is thoroughly sorted and placed with green signs. This affects many of our respondents when they are in the store as it creates awareness around the ecological food products and it influences them to choose more ecological food. Mattias further underline this and explains that he was affected to consume ecological food, when he noticed that many of the grocery stores in Sweden started to promote their assortment of ecological food. Through their commercials he was further reminded that the products exist, and he started to look for ecological food in the store, which lead him to consume ecological food if the price difference was not too high.

We can see from what our respondents emphasize in their statements that consumption ideologies, which is common believe systems, with structures that guides consumers in certain directions frames their perspective of achievable thoughts and actions, which affect their consumption (Holt, 1997; Kozinets, 2002). We further see this in the way that Helena is affected by her circumstances. She has a lot of friends that consume ecological food, and Helena emphasize in a statement that when she is visiting her friends and look in their fridge and see that most of the products are ecological, that affects her to buy more ecological food. Bella's consumption of ecological food is also affected by her circumstances, and explain how in the following statement:

*"I was affected by my boyfriend, who is affected by his mom to buy ecological food. When we moved in together and we went to the store he always grabbed specific ecological food products, and later I also started to pick the same ecological food above the regular products that I used to choose" – Bella*

Some of our respondents highlighted that they through media acquired information about what food products that could easily be replaced with ecological food, such as milk, bananas and coffee. As seen from our interviews a majority of our respondents do consume all these products, beside ecological milk. Bella emphasize in a statement that, if it is local produced milk in the store she rather consume that, than an ecological one. Further Hanna also often consumes seasonal food, e.g. she only consumes Swedish apples. In Sweden there are some food products that our respondents are aware of is locally produced therefore believes that the products are produced in a better way. As these respondents also are especially concerned about the environment they rather consume local and seasonal produced products from Sweden instead of ecological food from other countries as these are transported a long way and that is further not good for the environment.

Looking at the findings from circumstances affect consumption we confirm the theory that a consumption ideology frames consumers thoughts and actions, which further influence their consumption of ecological food. Through the increasing concern created by media we also confirm the theory that consumers see and consider the consequences of their



consumption (Beck, 1992). However, as emphasized by many of our respondents, the assortment and signs indicating the ecological food products in grocery stores has a large influence on their consumption of ecological food. This opposes with what is said in our theory that it is through television and ads that consumers are most affected to consume specific products (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Hirschman, 1988).

#### **4.5 ECOLOGICAL FOOD HAS DIFFERENT MEANING FOR CONSUMERS**

A majority of our respondents emphasize that the environment is a central factor for their consumption of ecological food. However, for our respondents that have made an active choice to consume ecological food, their health has emerged as another important factor for consumption of ecological food. This strengthens Wheale and Hinton (2007) theory that ethical consumers often are concerned about other factors in their consumption of specific food products. Further, some of our respondents consume ecological food more for their health in the way that they are more concerned about what they eat instead of how their consumption of ecological food is better for the environment. Bella and Helena emphasize in their interviews that the main reason for why they consume ecological food are their health. Accordingly, Helena highlight that it was the health aspect of ecological food that made her interested in ecological food, which further lead her to consume more ecological. A growing health and food trend seen in the western world and especially in Sweden has also made many of our respondents more concerned about what their food contains. Christoffer underline how this health trend affects Swedes to consume ecological food:

*“As a Swede you are supposed to be very healthy, in the way that you should work out every day and eat right, and eating right is connected to what is good for you body and what food products contains, which leads us to consume ecological food as these products are free for pesticides and additives” – Christoffer*

Hanna is mostly involved with what ecological food consumption does for the environment, but as she is much involved and interested in ecological food she also thinks about the

health aspect of ecological food and that it does not contain any additives, which is better for her health. Her following quote, explains how she feels about ecological food in relation to her health:

*"Less additives, the better"* – Hanna

Many of our other respondents are also more concerned about what the food they eat contains. Frida emphasizes in a statement that she cares much about what she eats and underlines that non-ecological food can contain pesticides and additives, and she does not want to eat too much of those things as it can be bad for her health.

However, even though pesticides found in non-ecological food has an unknown effect on the body, some of our respondents say that they rather be safe than sorry. Emil further means that in the future we will look back at ourselves as stupid for eating the toxins found in much of the non-ecological food today. It is evident that health is an increasingly important factor for consumption of ecological food for many of our respondents. Emil further emphasizes in his interview that there is a need to show and make more visible what additives and pesticides non-ecological food products contain and that ecological food is free for these things on products or with signs in the store. This, in order to make consumers more aware of how regular food products are bad for the body, and in what way ecological food products is better.

As mentioned, both the environment and health are two central factors in our respondents' consumption of ecological food. Further, production of food is also seen as an important factor for why some of our respondents choose ecological food. Frida emphasizes in a statement that even though she cares about her health and is aware that badly produced food may not have a negative effect on her health. She often chooses to not consume certain products because of the principle that the products are produced in a bad way and she does not want to support that. Mattias also highlights in a statement that he consumes ecological food because of how the products are produced, and it feels better to know that the food is produced in a better way. This further shows that Frida and Mattias consume ecological

food for their symbolic meanings (Wattanasuwan, 2005), and they place themselves in society as individuals that are knowledgeable and do not support bad food production. Revealed in our interviews, consumption of ecological food also varies from what our respondents are most aware of and concerned about (Peattie, 2010). Frida emphasize that she consume ecological food products that are important for her, and explains that e.g. lemons is something that she consumes ecological because she use the shell in cooking and knows that it does not contain any pesticides or additives that can have a negative effect on her health. Strong (1996) talks about how ethical consumers are concerned about the “people” aspect of food production and their working condition. Bella further underline this in a statement that she has read much about how working condition are for people working with food production, and e.g. as she loves and consumes much coffee, she consume ecological coffee because she knows that the working conditions on coffee plantations growing ecological coffee beans is better and she wants to support that. Further, Emil consumes ecological vegetables because it is better for his health, as the ecological vegetables are not sprayed with any pesticides or other toxics. From what is emphasized in our interviews we see that a majority of our respondents consume much fruit and vegetables ecological. This is because they can taste the difference, and explain that ecological fruit and vegetables taste much better than non-ecological ones.

Looking at the data from ecological food has different meaning for consumers we can see that, what consumption of ecological food means to our respondents is different and it varies with their views and concerns (Harrison et al., 2005). A majority of our respondents are concerned about the environment, while others have become more conscious about their health and some of our respondents are also concerned and care about working conditions and how food is produced. Further, some of our respondents use their environmental consciousness and what their consumption mean for the environment in their identity construction. While others that are more concerned about their health, use this as a way to show that they are knowledgeable in the way that they care about what is better for their health.

## 5. DISCUSSION

*This chapter begins with a summary of the introduction chapter. The major findings from the analysis are presented, followed by a broader discussion on each of the major findings.*

Ecological food has existed for a while, but a year ago there was a rapid increase of consumption of ecological food in Sweden. It appears that the Swedish society has become increasingly interested in ecological food and also more anxious of what consequences their consumption has on the environment. A growing health trend has further made consumers more conscious about what food contains and how it affects their health. However, previous research means that consumption of ethical products is a way for consumers to create status and indicate economic wealth and knowledge (Adams and Raisborough, 2008; Andorfer, 2013). Consumption of ethical products is further seen as a search for meaning in life (Cherrier, in Harrison et al., 2005) and as a way for consumers to create an identity (Langeland, 1998).

Accordingly, the phenomenon of this thesis is the rapid increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden, and the aim is to understand how consumers construct their identity through consumption of ecological food. The findings of this research will further contribute to theory on consumers' identity creation through ethical consumption. From our analysis chapter we can see that much of what is emphasized by our respondent confirms existing theory in the area, however also some contradicting views are found. The major findings from chapter 4. *Analysis* are (1) Level of involvement determine consumption, (2) Consumers strive to reach an ideal lifestyle and (3) Ecological food has different meanings.

## **5.1 LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT DETERMINE CONSUMPTION**

Our research revealed that consumers level of involvement determine their consumption of ecological food. Consumers that are much involved and interested with ecological food and aware of the different aspects of ecological consumption, such as the environment, their health or how ecological food is produced in concern to humans and animals. Webster (1975) talk about that consumers think about the consequences of their consumption and use their consumption to make a social change. However, in our research we found that consumers are more conscious about others aspects, such as what food contains and what consequences their consumption have on their health, and therefore consume ecological food for more individual reasons. Further, for more involved consumers, ecological food products become a part of their extended self (Belk, 1988). Through their consumption of ecological food, these consumers tell a story and show to their surrounding, who they are and what they identify themselves with (Belk, 1988; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). In our research we found that ecological food assign great personal meaning and value for consumers that are more involved with ecological food. This is further important in how consumers create their identity through consumption of ecological food.

Consumers are affected by their circumstances to consume ecological food, but in different ways. Our research revealed that consumers that are much involved and interested with ecological food are not that affected by media. However as they often have friends and family that consume ecological food this makes them more aware and motivates to consume more ecological food when they see how much and what kind of ecological food people in their closest surroundings consume. Accordingly, as the consumers also use more time and energy thinking about their ecological consumption (Harrison et al., 2005), consumers first and foremost consume ecological food.

Our research revealed that consumers who are not that involved in ecological consumption are much affected by advertisement, price and in-store displays in their consumption of ecological food. Those factors make them more aware and remind them of their choice to consume ecological food or not. Some of these consumers are interested in ecological food, but are not consistent in their consumption. Strong (1996) means that a larger assortment of ethical food is a reason for the growth of ethical consumers. In addition to this our findings suggest that an larger

exposure of ecological food in the supermarkets affect consumers in the way that they become more aware of and can see the price difference between ecological food and non-ecological food. And as the price difference between the two has become smaller, this in addition to more exposure could be reason for the big increase of ecological food consumption. Our research further revealed that consumers that are less involved and not consistent in their consumption of ecological food attain self-fulfillment when they consume ecological. Every time they consume ecological food they get a feeling that they have done something good for the environment or for their health (Andorfer, 2013; Shaw et al., 2005; Pattie 2010).

## **5.2 CONSUMERS STRIVE TO REACH AN IDEAL LIFESTYLE**

Medias increased level of information around environmental problems and awareness around these problems has in many ways created more conscious and knowledgeable consumers (Peattie, 2010). With this information more consumers have become aware that consumption of ecological food is a way to help prevent some of the concerns that are communicated by media. Our research revealed that consumers have become more knowledgeable about what it means to consume ecological food, which has lead them to consuming more of these products. Students are a group of consumers that consume more ecological food now than before (EkoWeb, 2015). This indicates that consumption of ecological food is no longer just for a privileged few but also for more groups in society. Our research revealed that consumption of ecological food is more determined on knowledgeable consumers taking an active choice to consume ecological food. Further, as the price difference between many ecological and non-ecological food products has decreased this has made it easier for consumers to take an active choice. This can further explain the increasing consumption of ecological food in Sweden, as our findings suggest that more consumers have become knowledgeable, and regardless of occupation and economic resources consumers have the ability to consume ecological food.

Our research revealed that it exist a consumer with an ideal lifestyle in the society, which our consumers see as the ecological consumer and describe as a person who is more knowledgeable and see things in a larger perspective. The ecological consumers understand the effects of their consumption, and see the difference of consuming ecological instead of non-ecological food. Our research revealed that consumers look up to and admire the ecological consumer as they have an ideal lifestyle, and because consumption of ecological food is a large part of their identity (McCracken, 1988; Langeland, 1998). Consumers want to achieve this ideal lifestyle and strive to reach it by consuming ecological food. This can be seen as an explanation of the rapid increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden. Furthers, as consumers have become more aware of the ideal lifestyle, they consume more ecological food to become what they describe as the ecological consumer. This indicates that consumers buy ecological food for the symbolic meaning of it as they identify themselves with the ecological consumer when they consume ecological food. They further see this as a way to place themselves in society as an ecological consumer (Wattanasuwan, 2005; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Our research revealed that consumers see consumption of ecological food as status. Previous research means that consumers in higher social class with better economic resources achieved status by consuming ecological food, due to the higher price. (Corrigan, 1997; Adams and Raisborough, 2008; Andorfer, 2013). However, our findings support what Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013) talks about that cultural capital is what influence consumers the most when they want to create an identity through consumption. Knowledge is part of cultural capital and being knowledgeable and conscious is what consumers see as status. Thereby, when they see a consumer only consuming ecological food they look at that person as the ecological consumer with the ideal lifestyle.

### **5.3 ECOLOGICAL FOOD HAS DIFFERENT MEANINGS**

Our research revealed that the environment is a central factor for consumers to consume ecological food. However, because of an emerging health trend in the Swedish society, many consumers have become more conscious about what food contains and how that affects their health.

In our research we found that the different aspects of ecological food are not equally important for the rapid increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden. The Swedish society and its consumers have become more knowledgeable and conscious as they see the connection between environmental problems and ecological food consumption. And 89 percent of the consumers in Sweden are concerned about the environment, and many consumers have also become more anxious about how their consumption will affect their own and the worlds future. Peattie (2010) talks about environmental knowledge as a driving factor for ecological consumption, and with more knowledgeable consumers in the Swedish society this could be seen as a factor for the increase in ecological food consumption. Our research revealed that even though environmental knowledge is important, consumers are increasingly concerned about what their food contains and how it affects their health. Accordingly, our findings suggest health to be an increasingly important factor and a possible explanation for the increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden.

Our research revealed that different aspects of ecological food consumption, such as environment, health and working conditions and how food is produced lead consumers to consume different ecological food products for various reasons. Consumers buy fruit and vegetables with concern for their health, coffee is consumed with concern for working conditions on the plantation and eggs are consumed with concern for the animals. In relation to this, it seems that ecological food does not have a common meaning for all consumers, but it varies with their individual views and what they are most interested in and concerned about (Harrison et al., 2005). What ecological food means for consumers



further determine how they construct their identity through consumption of these products.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Ecological food has existed for a while, but a year ago, the Swedish society become increasingly interested and conscious around ecological food and the consumption of ecological food increased rapidly. This thesis aimed to understand this phenomenon through an exploration on how consumers create their identity through consumption of ecological food, with the research question - *How do consumers construct their identity through ethical consumption?*

Our research reveals that an ideal lifestyle about the ecological consumer has emerged in the Swedish society. Consumers have become more knowledgeable and aware of ecological food and the different meanings of it and want to consume these products to reach the ideal lifestyle. As the price difference between many ecological and non-ecological food products has decreased it has also become easier for consumers to take an active choice based on knowledge, regardless of occupation and economic resources. We see this as one of the reasons for the increased consumption of ecological food in Sweden.

Our research also reveals that level of involvement and knowledge about ecological food much determines how consumers use their consumption of ecological food in their identity creation. An involved consumer who are more aware of different aspect of ecological food and also see the consequences of their consumption, use the meanings of ecological food much in their identity creation. Further, for these consumers their consumption of ecological food tells a story about who they are and what they identify themselves with in society (Belk, 1988; Wattanasuwan, 2005)

The different aspects of ecological food consumption, such as the environment, health, food production or working conditions for humans and animals, have different meanings. Consumption of ecological food products further means different things for different consumers. Consumers use the different meanings of ecological food products to construct their identity depending on interest and involvement. Our research further reveals that consumers are much more concerned about what food contains and how that affects their health. The growing health trend in Sweden is an increasingly important factor for

consumption of ecological food and is also seen as one of the main reasons for the rapid increase of ecological food consumption in Sweden.

## **6. 1 IMPLICATIONS**

Our findings can have implications for different managers within the food industry. Given the specific sample group; (1) consumers are more knowledgeable about ecological food, (2) consumers are more conscious and concerned about what food contains and how it affects their health, (3) consumers look up to and admire consumers that buy more ecological food than themselves, (4) consumers consume ecological food for different meanings, (5) consumers are affected by their surroundings to consume more ecological food.

Managers in government or marketing companies that are e.g. working on creating campaigns and other consumer awareness promotions can use our findings to create marketing strategies that fit to a society with consumers that has become more aware and knowledgeable with ecological food.

Managers in companies, more specific within the food industry in Sweden that sells ecological food products to the consumer market, can also use our findings to better inform what it means to consume specific ecological products and also inform what ecological food does not contain and the health benefits of eating ecological food.

We also hope to be an inspiration for other researchers to do more research on this interesting research subject.

## **6.2 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Our research has the large limitation of a sample size of only seven respondents, with whom we conducted in-depth interviews. These respondents are Swedish consumers in the age of 25 to 30 that consume ecological food products. Another limitation was the time limit of only 10 weeks and that restricted some of our choices. Further research is needed before any generalizations can be given. But, as this is a qualitative study, the main aim is not to generalize but to get a deeper understanding of a phenomenon through a chosen sample group (Cohen et al., 2007). However, the research could be repeated with a larger group of consumers that consume ecological food to see if any of our statements could be generalized. This research could also be adjusted to a research with interviews and observations, to get a better understanding and see how consumers are affected in their everyday consumption of ecological food. As mentioned, this type of research makes it possible to find patterns in how consumers use ecological food products to construct their identity. But, a larger sample size is therefore necessary to make any generalizations. Further, to the best of our knowledge little research has been done on ethical consumption with the context of ecological food consumption. In order to conceptualize and get a more comprehensive understanding of the context of ecological food, we see that further research on other aspects than identity construction within the context of ecological food is needed.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1 – Interview guide

When did you first start to consume ecological food?

What made you start consuming ecological food?

Why do you consume ecological food? What are your thoughts about your ecological food consumption?

Which products do you consume ecological, how often do you buy these? Are you consequent in your consumption of ecological food?

Are you affected by your surroundings to consume ecological food? What is it in society that affects you the most?

Are there many people in your closest surroundings that consume ecological?

Why do you think other people do not consume ecological food?

Do you see yourself as an ecological consumer?

Do you feel as a part of the group in society that consumes ecological food?

Will you buy more ecological food in the future? What stops you from consuming more ecological food today?

Why do you think there has been such a big increase in ecological food consumption in Sweden?

Do you see any status in consuming ecological food? Do you think that other people believe it is status?