

# The Ikea message

*Deconstructing Ikea's environmental discourse –  
Sustainability and profit*

Kenneth Ravn

**Bachelor thesis in Human Ecology**

**HEKK02 Fall 2015**

**Supervisor: Anders Burman**

**Department of Human Ecology, Lund University**



## Abstract

*During the recent decades, concerns about the environment and climate change have progressively gained importance in political, social and economic arenas. Amid environmental conferences and international political negotiations, on the business side corporations have scrambled to find ways to secure themselves and even prosper on an environmentally aware consumer base.*

*This thesis examines how Ikea conceptualizes environmental problems and solutions. It will be argued that the company draws heavily on the theory of ecological modernization in its environmental policymaking. In short, ecological modernization is a set of principles that presupposes that resolving the environmental crisis can be done within the current capitalistic system.*

*The aim of this thesis is to investigate the logic of the discourse of ecological modernization and Ikea's environmental policies in particular. Indications that this logic is fundamentally based on continuing consumption and economic growth will be presented.*

*By taking the standpoint that overconsumption is a cause of environmental degradation, a central question is how Ikea draws attention away from this issue. To this end, the theoretical approach of human ecology is employed and a critical discourse analysis is conducted on three Ikea documents that details the company's environmental policies and strategies.*

*The results show that Ikea refrain from formulating consumption as an issue of concern, and instead focuses on conceptualizing environmental solutions in innovation, technology, and unclear definitions of sustainability. Additionally, the results reveal that Ikea seeks to increase consumption (defined as sustainable) as part of its environmental policies.*

Key words: Ikea, ecological modernization, sustainable development, consumption, discourse, critical discourse analysis, human ecology.

# Table of contents

- 1. Introduction..... 1
  - 1.1 Purpose and research questions..... 2
  - 1.2 Background – Ikea's foray into ecological modernization – profit and sustainability..... 4
  - 1.3 Scope and delimitation..... 6
  - 1.4 Outline of the thesis..... 6
- 2. Theoretical framework..... 8
  - 2.1 An introduction to discourse..... 8
  - 2.2 A history of the ecological modernization discourse..... 10
  - 2.3 A human ecological approach to discourse..... 13
- 3. Method..... 16
  - 3.1 Method of analysis: Critical discourse analysis..... 16
    - 3.1.1 Methodological approach..... 17
  - 3.2 Presentation of empirical material..... 21
  - 3.3 Reflections on CDA..... 21
- 4. Analysis..... 23
  - 4.1 Conclusion of analysis..... 28
- 5. Conclusion and discussion..... 30
  - 5.1 Results..... 30
  - 5.2 Discussion..... 32
  - 5.3 Suggestions for future research topics..... 33
- References..... 35

# 1. Introduction

At a recent visit to Ikea, I stopped by the restaurant for a quick lunch. As I picked up coffee and some napkins, I noticed a small sticker attached to the napkin dispenser. Its message told me that for environmental reasons, I shouldn't take more napkins than I needed. At first, I was somewhat amused at the quite paradoxical statement in this message. In my opinion, free paper napkins are hardly the biggest threat to the earth's environment. Why wasn't I instead told not to buy more furniture than I needed? Surely the environmental cost of a new bookshelf is greater than that of a few extra napkins?

So initially I shrugged it off as a funny example of how a company wants to be seen as green, and how it is convenient that the only time I'm told to hold back is when there's an economical incentive for Ikea. I have experienced similar messages in a lot of places. But after a while, that sticker started a whole range of thoughts and questions to pop up in my head. The answer to why a multinational corporation would hesitate to promote less consumption is quite self-evident, but I wasn't as interested in that question as to how a company like Ikea so successfully dodges that uncomfortable issue, that of overconsumption.

I also suspected that some complex and quite subtle, but very deliberate processes were at work. Because somehow, Ikea manages (or tries) to *not* make us feel guilt ridden when we leave the store, no matter if we filled the shopping carts to the brim. These thoughts marked the intellectual starting point for this thesis, in which I set out to analyze and deconstruct parts of Ikea's environmental discourse, and find out more about those hidden processes that alleviates our doubts over consumption.

In a time when concerns about environmental problems and rampant climate change seems to permeate everything from public discussion to the political arena, companies – large and small – are required to use various strategies in order to adapt to the needs of a new, socially conscious consumer base. One of those companies is Ikea.

Ikea has become an international household name as a provider of inexpensive furniture, and as is the case with probably the majority of companies in the retail industry, it wants to be seen as “green”. For Ikea, this means to first recognize that there are environmental

problems in the world today, and that Ikea itself, to a certain point plays a part in how and why these problems arise. Admitting to this, Ikea has committed itself to “take responsibility” and to “do its part” to limit environmental problems and climate change.

But isn't unchecked consumerism a threat to nature and of our survival? What is the Ikea message here? How does a company whose ultimate purpose is to generate increasing amounts of revenue rationalize its business model in the face of such a critique?

## 1.1 Purpose and research questions

In essence, I am interested in how Ikea, through its use of the good word of ecology, is influencing, shaping and furthering the public discourse of sustainable development. Or in other words, in what way Ikea is telling us how to be enviro-friendly consumers, and all-round good human beings. Furthermore, I aim to shed some light on how they inform customer perceptions of Ikea as a green company and of the nature of the environmental issues Ikea claims it is addressing.

Ikea is far from the only retail company that engages in environmental discourses and that develops environmental and philanthropic strategies in order to adapt to a changing consumer climate. However, the issue of consumption seems to be an achilles' heel, or rather the proverbial elephant in the room. Today, it is hardly controversial to link consumption to environmental problems. The issue has been a focal point at every global conference on the environment and climate change of late (Wilk 2006:420). The resulting consensus is that the consumption of rich nations in the North can directly be attributed to vast quantities of waste around the world (Ibid).

The ecological footprint is a method devised by Mathis Wackernagel and William E. Rees that measures the demand human population places on the Earth's ecosystems. Among other things, it allows one to show and compare the ecological impacts of different countries consumption patterns. The focus on global connections inherent in the ecological footprint underscores also an added awareness of the transboundary nature of consumption and its demand and use of resources and land (Heyman 2005:113). The uneven distribution

of resource consumption and greenhouse gas emissions across the globe is staggering; the average North American consumes every day thirty to fifty times more energy and materials than the average Honduran (Wilk 2006:421). If everyone lived like a Swede, we would need almost four planets to sustain us. In fact, Sweden is ranked at number ten in the list of the most resource demanding and polluting countries (WWF 2014).

The best route Swedish citizens are encouraged to take in order to resolve the environmental crisis is ultimately structured in the context of capitalism and individuality. The current sustainability consensus holds that by making sensible consumer choices and increasing consumption of “eco-friendly” products et cetera, consumers together with corporate enterprises have the power to turn the ship around (see for example targets eight and twelve in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals). The retail industry claims it has already adapted to this new reality and is ready and willing to supply for the needs of this new consumer awareness. In this thesis, I will dispute this consensus by arguing that some retail corporations, in this case Ikea, deliberately omits questions of overconsumption in their communications with its consumers. The reasoning behind these omissions are interesting as they reveal a weakness, or flaw, in the widespread discourse of ecological modernization. This systemic fault will be a topic of discussion later on in the paper.

The purpose of this thesis is to expose the logic of Ikea's environmental discourse, a logic that probably shares similarities with other multinational corporations. People are constantly manipulated by the workings of this logic, and a clearer public awareness of Ikea's true capitalist foundation is effectively parried and steered away. At the same time, such an awareness is further obfuscated by the abstract and hard-to-grasp concept of sustainable consumption.

The importance of revealing any hidden agenda within Ikea's discourse cannot be overstated. If a true sustainable future is what we want, the political discursive power held by actors like Ikea must be thoroughly understood for what it is. Furthermore, this discursive power needs to be questioned at all times and regularly opposed by counter-discourses. Otherwise, our ability to make ecologically sound consumer choices, what we

have come to call consumer power, will be nothing more than a castle in the air. It will continue to be manipulated and turned against us and the environment, (the recent disclosure of the actual emission rates of Volkswagen vehicles is a prime example of this).

From a theoretical standpoint in human ecology, and using critical discourse analysis as method, the following research question will be answered:

- *Which words, actions and ideas are accentuated and favored in Ikea's sustainability reports? Which are downplayed or avoided? In what way are they articulated or glossed over?*
- *How does Ikea handle the issue of overconsumption in their sustainability reports? What rhetoric does Ikea in the guise of an ecological modernization advocate use to conceptualize environmental problems and solutions?*
- *What (environmental) contradictions can be found in Ikea's environmental discourse?*

## 1.2 Background – Ikea's foray into ecological modernization – Profit and sustainability

An attempt to give a complete and nuanced treatment of Ikea and of its history is not only well beyond the scope of this thesis, but probably also superfluous. Instead, what is of importance for this study is when and how Ikea moved into the realm of eco-modernist policies, and in what way eco-modernism functions in Ikea's business operations. Another important aspect to consider is how environmental notions fit into Ikea's existing narratives and story-lines.

Finding literature that explicitly details Ikea's move into ecological modernization has proven difficult. In fact, it has been hard to find any literature on Ikea that isn't permeated with bias, subjectivity or lack of scientific transparency. This is also a problem that author of the book "Design by Ikea" Sara Kristoffersson, has brought up; by financing books and exhibitions about Ikea, the company in effect controls much of its own self-image as it is circulated and promoted in the outside world (Kristoffersson 2014:2). Nevertheless, certain snippets of information can be gleaned from the company's external communications, as

long as one is aware of the context in which such information is produced. Much of this section draws however on Kristoffersson's critical assessment of Ikea's history, in which she sets out to investigate how the company has been so successful in creating its brand identity. As an elaboration of that study, I propose that the more recent undertakings in environmental strategies, policy-making and especially eco-modernism fits the narrative 'mold' that Ikea has so carefully nurtured over the years. The narrative in question draws heavily from a more or less fictional image of 'Swedishness', as well as of democracy and social responsibility. Some of the narratives, or story-lines, are attributed to a notion of Sweden, while others are associated with Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of Ikea. In any case, what is important here is that some of the traits that Ikea prides itself on are practically interchangeable with the optimistic and ethical overtones of eco-modernism. Strong statements such as innovation, frugality and social responsibility are salient in Ikea's external and internal communications.

A large part of Ikea's success can be attributed to the company's narratives. However as Kristoffersson points out, several contradictions emerge when one compares some of the narratives with the actual corporate business strategies. In a book published by Ikea, the company asserts its social commitments by saying that *“at IKEA it is not just a matter of earning money or of expanding just for the sake of growth. Our task is to make life a little better for the broad mass of people”* (cited in Kristoffersson 2014:29). By contrast, in other texts directed towards Ikea staff, instructions for how to make people buy as much as they can is presented (Ibid). There are other examples of how Ikea, like any other commercial organization, is driven by expanding sales and growth; for example, the way an Ikea store is arranged and organized is designed to make customers buy more. Ikea prides itself on the claim that because of this, almost all of their customers buy more than they had intended to (Ibid:27). Summing up, the contradiction lies in the fact that Ikea is essentially a growth driven corporation, a part of the consumer culture, but that presents itself in its narratives to the outside world as a philanthropic benefactor, a socially driven organization that strives to provide good products for everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status.

A trademark of Ikea is low prices, which the company sees as an imperative for their



social mission. As to how Ikea can squeeze the prices to such an extent is due to a thrifty and efficient attitude, in Ikea's own words (Ibid:18). So far, the preexisting narratives and business philosophy would seem to need little adjustment for Ikea to be called sustainable, and it may come as no surprise that Ikea has collaborated with organizations like Greenpeace and WWF (Ibid:102). However, what constitutes low prices in Europe is not the same in poorer regions of the world. Furthermore, one could safely assume that cheap products entails larger overall consumption, and what does that mean for the environment?

### 1.3 Scope and delimitation

One of my claims is that Ikea chooses to avoid bringing up notions of overconsumption in its communications with customers and the public as a whole. However, for the sake of the scope of this thesis, focus will exclusively be put on the text and image materials found in documents available on Ikea's Swedish website. The documents that will be analyzed in this thesis are: (1) People & planet positive - Ikea group sustainability strategy for 2020. (2) Ikea group sustainability report FY15. (3) Ikea group position on climate and energy. The first document, People & planet positive, is a public-oriented information 'leaflet' consisting of 21 pages that strongly emphasizes Ikea's visions of sustainability.

Ikea group sustainability report is also public-oriented. This 94 pages long document highlights some of the milestones Ikea says it has achieved, as well as some of the social and environmental goals it has set for the future. The document is also richly illustrated. The last document, Ikea group position on climate and energy consists of only one page. Its colorful graphical design gives it almost the qualities of a poster.

### 1.4 Outline of the thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters, each with several subsections. The first chapter introduced the reader to the theme of this study, the purpose, the research questions posed and a discussion on Ikea and some of its characteristics. The second chapter describes the theoretical framework I have employed. This chapter is rather lengthy so it begins with

an outline of its own. The chapter consists of a discussion of discourse, a brief history of eco-modernism and finally a section on human ecology. In the third chapter I describe critical discourse analysis and how this method can be applied to the empirical material. In chapter four I briefly describe the documents to be analyzed, the actual discourse analysis is then conducted and presented. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the analyses. The fifth and final chapter is a conclusion and a discussion of the study, where I present my findings and whether or not they answer the research questions.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this section, I will in broad strokes present some of the theoretical concepts that the theme of this thesis revolve around. The chapter begins with an introduction to the concept of discourse. Discourse is an encompassing concept so in this section I make a delimitation as to what definition I will use. To approach in an analytical manner the environmental discourse of Ikea without treating the historical and political context of the matter would surely result in a fruitless endeavor. Therefore the chapter expands with a treatment of the crusade of ecological modernization in the domain of environmental discourse. One of the ways eco-modernistic hegemony manifests itself in the world is the widespread commonality of structures of language (discourse). I posit that Ikea has embraced eco-modernist policies wholeheartedly and successfully introduced it in their characteristically 'responsible' brand image. At the end of the chapter, ideas formulated within human ecology, the discipline from which I write, will be put forth to analyze and criticize the predicaments of the political orientations surrounding ecological modernization and the sustainable development paradigm. In addition, critical discourse analysis functions not simply as a method isolated from its theoretical positions. The theoretical perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA) focuses, amongst other things, on how language is an important element of material social processes. It studies how semiosis ("meaning-making" - e.g. language and visual images) interacts with other aspects of social practices. (Fairclough 2001:121-123).

### 2.1 An introduction to discourse

The term discourse has been used in academic circles in rather diverse ways since it was first coined. Though it has always entailed a concern about communication, the more sophisticated definitions of it have not been clear-cut, and researchers have often been quick to formulate their own versions of the term. It could almost seem that its ubiquity have made an explanation of it redundant. As Sara Mills points out in 'Discourse', "*It has perhaps the widest range of possible significations of any term in literary and cultural theory and yet it is often the term within theoretical texts which is least defined*" (Mills 2004:1). Therefore, what

follows is a concise presentation of one definition of discourse which hopefully also covers some of the aspects of other interpretations. Most of this discussion is based on Maarten Hajer's definition of discourse in his 1995 book 'Politics of environmental discourse'. Since much of critical discourse analysis, the method employed in this thesis, draws on the notion of discourse as defined by Michel Foucault, I will cover some of his perspectives as well in order to paint a broader picture of the concept.

In its most basic form, discourse can be understood as a 'mode of talking' (Hajer 1995:44). But this simple interpretation only scratches the surface and does little to provide any analytical framework to work with. Hajer provides instead an approach to discourse that for example emphasizes the various social backgrounds in which statements are made, and that underscores the contextual basis of statements. He describes discourse as “*a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities*” (Ibid). Another way of seeing it, but that in my view doesn't clash with Hajer's definition, is that discourse refers to “*groups of statements that structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking*” (Rose 2012:190).

The concept of power is central to understanding discourse. Instead of viewing power as something that is in some way inherent in institutions and actors that are typical wielders of power, it lies in the discourses that is being reproduced by those actors and institutions (Hajer 1995:49). Hajer gives an example of this in how people usually stop in front of a traffic-light; people do this not because of some power inherent in the traffic-light, it is the rules and conventions contained within a particular discourse that makes people stop (Ibid). Foucault was particularly concerned with the aspect of power constituent in discourses. That power is noteworthy since it is a productive form of power, that not only shapes our way of thinking but also produces our understandings of ourselves (Rose 2012:192).

According to Foucault, patterns of power should not be described as it usually is, as a case of haves and have-nots, or that power is held and exerted by the society's top layers and that subjugates the bottom layers. As discourse is everywhere, so is power. As one

discourse gains dominance, other discourses fight to challenge it (Ibid). As Foucault put it: “*Where there is power, there is resistance*” (Foucault 1979, cited in Rose 2012:192).

Therefore, discourses are dynamic, and are in constant development in relation to other competing discourses and events external to it. Often they are defined partly in reaction to contrasting discourses. For example, environmental groups have in recent years tended to move away from their more informal tone and instead adopted the language used by scientific and governmental institutions. At the same time, governments have become more accommodating to the requests of environmental groups (Mills 2004:10).

Another central concern for Foucault was the connections between power and knowledge. According to him, power embodies knowledge and vice versa. That a certain institution's discourses gains dominance over others cannot simply be explained by that institution's position in society alone. It is those particular discourses claims to truth that imbue them with power; the potential for a discourse to compete and gain dominance is dependent on its ability to claim that its knowledge is true (Rose 2012:193). The origins of environmentalism and the birth of ecological modernization – a topic discussed below – fits Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, insofar as the discourse of eco-modernism claims that it speaks the truth about the environment, and that it is widely considered to be the dominant discourse in western environmental thinking. An important implication of Foucault's notion of power and knowledge is that discourses mostly act in a limiting, excluding, and ultimately repressive manner; as a discourse gains dominance, its claims to truth shapes how people view the world and act upon it. However, other ways of thinking and acting within those discourses are excluded (Falkengren 2005:65).

## 2.2 A history of the ecological modernization discourse

Modern, Western environmentalism can be traced back to at least the late 1960s (other definitions exists, this treatment of environmentalism focuses solely on the phenomena as it has developed in USA and certain European countries, since I judge this movement to be of most relevancy to the subject). This was a time when culture and political thought in the

West was bombarded by what Hajer has called 'emblematic' issues (Hajer 1995:73). Topics ranging from nuclear holocausts to dwindling natural resources brought together a collective concern about the future of humankind and of nature. It would be easy to suggest that a growing awareness of ecological issues and the consequent political mobilization directly corresponded to the actual state of the natural world. However, this is according to Hajer a common mistake, as it fails to recognize that changes in policies and patterns of institutionalization are actually conditioned by “certain macro-changes in value-orientations” (Ibid:74). Following this line of thought, one can posit that environmental politics is not an unproblematic and symmetric relationship between societal awareness and political action, it has more to do with how emblematic issues are conceptualized and injected into public thought.

Hajer also provides an insightful theory as to the roots of modern environmentalism and to how it lay the foundation for ecological modernization. According to him, ecological modernization is the result of an “argumentative interplay” between different social actors and institutions in the 1960s and 70s (Ibid:100). It emerged as a common voice for articulating and framing the environmental crisis, even though these social forces originally had very contrasting views about the problems and of their solutions (Ibid). Furthermore, the formation of eco-modernism effectively made it possible for governments to consolidate the different environmental discourses, some of which had a radical and anti-technocratic stance, and formulate a new, more pragmatic discourse.

It was with the Brundtland report, a document published by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also known as “our common future” in 1987, that ecological modernization experienced one of its defining breakthroughs as a dominant environmental discourse (Ibid:26). With the Brundtland report, the concept of sustainable development finally established itself on the global arena. Sustainable development is described here as such “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. (Fricker 2006:191-192).

The concept of sustainable development has been used and abused by a host of actors with different agendas to such an extent that its usage can sometimes seem meaningless. Indeed, there is a vast number of working definitions of it. But for the purpose of this thesis, I will use this concept as it is described in the Brundtland report, which is also the way it is usually formulated in politics, the media and in the business world.

Hopefully, it's already apparent to the reader why an analysis of ecological modernization is relevant to the discussion of Ikea's discourse and consumption. However, it will become even clearer in my examination of the company's sustainability reports that Ikea does indeed follow the discourse of ecological modernization.

There are a number of reasons why eco-modernism has become the dominant way of conceptualizing the environmental crisis and the appropriate actions to be taken to remedy it. Just as there are a number of reasons why critical voices are raised against eco-modernism. First, let me describe some of the defining characteristics of the discourse. The import of these characteristics to eco-modernism are its selling-points, and they are also those which are the main focus of criticism from more radical thinkers in environmental schools of thought. Ecological modernization views the environmental problem as a invigorating challenge for the prevailing capitalist system; instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, the market economy could actually be stimulated by the new challenges that the ecological crisis poses. The discourse rejects the notion of the crisis as a threat to the functioning of the economic system and instead tries to frame it as a motivation for innovating and improving the existing capitalist logic. It is such an attractive concept since it doesn't pose any danger to the market; it points to innovations in production, transportation and efficiency as some of the solutions to the ecological crisis. To stress the need for less consumption is not part of eco-modernist thinking. The business sector can obviously benefit tremendously from this.

In short, it takes what was considered a zero-sum problem and applies a positive-sum solution to it. The zero-sum problem being here the idea that environmental recovery required putting constraints on industry. But rather than doing that, eco-modernism formulates the environmental issue in the language of business and approaches

environmental problems as problems of inefficiency (Hajer 1995:31-32). Eco-modernism is, as Hajer points out, the “*positive approach to environmental policy*” (Ibid:31). Simply speaking a win-win ideology. It should be noted that the pillars of eco-modernism is rooted in dominant views of development, in which GDP per capita has been the main way of measuring this development. Constituent in this discourse of development is the belief that the only way for a nation, and indeed the world as a whole, to improve its environment is to first achieve the capital necessary for such improvement. Thus, economic growth as measured by a drive for increasing GDP is assumed to be a precondition for any sustainable development. The positive approach of eco-modernism follows the reductionist view of development in that resolving the environmental crisis is fully compatible, in fact dependent, on an economy focused on expanding GDP. It rejects the idea that it was such developmental thinking that in many cases were the causes of environmental problems to begin with (Öckerman & Friman 2003:22-23). Following the rhetoric of eco-modernist thinking, one would believe that we could have the cake and eat it at the same time. Notions like this are topics for much debate and criticism in schools of thought such as human ecology.

### 2.3 A human ecological approach to discourse

There are different views of what constitutes human ecology, and the term has been used in various contexts over the years. In the US and England, the terms human ecology and ecological anthropology are more or less interchangeable (Hornborg 2010:204). The Swedish education authority defines human ecology as the study of the relationship between the human being and the environment. Focus is on how humans adapts and uses the environment, as well as on how the environment affects and impose limits on human activity (Ibid:205). Hence, the human ecological perspective necessitates the bridging of the boundaries between natural science, social science and the humanities (Ibid). This definition points out the interdisciplinary trait of human ecology; in order to study phenomena that stretches into many domains, one has to bypass existing disciplinary schisms and embrace a



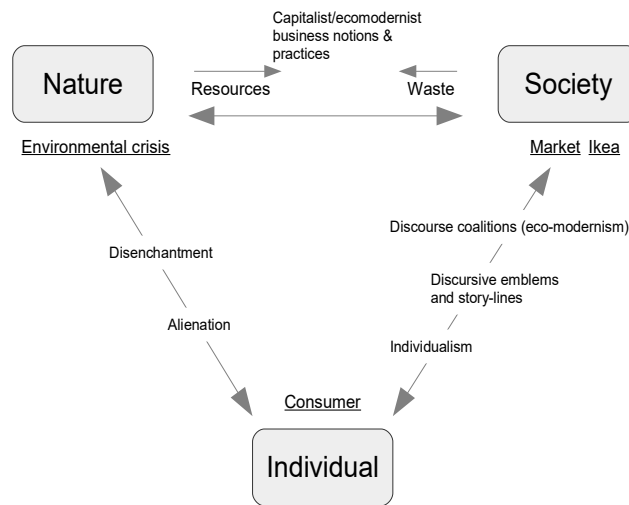
perspective that borrows tools and insight from different intellectual domains. Nevertheless, some writers of human ecology such as Dieter Steiner and Markus Nauser propose that the main body of thought in human ecology should lie within the social sciences rather than the natural sciences. Steiner and Nauser also stresses the normative aspect and critical thinking as fundamental to the human ecological objective (Ibid). Proponents of human ecology are therefore not necessarily content with being impassive observers of the subject of their research.

The human ecological triangle, as developed by Steiner, is a way to conceptualize the three dimensions of human-environment interactions. Its three corners; society, nature, and individual, represents the recursive relationship between the domains. The corners are also representative of the interdisciplinary nature of human ecology, as each are traditionally studied within the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities (Ibid:211).

The recursivity of the model proposes that its parts are engaged in complex interactions that cannot simply be described by a linear chain of cause and effect (Ibid:212). As individuals, our actions and behaviors are influenced and shaped by the social situation we find ourselves in. The limits to what we can do are set by the structure of society and of the environment. But at the same time, individuals themselves affect the social and environmental dimensions of the triangle. It is fundamentally a holistic perspective of the human/environment interaction. Consumers do indeed have their own preferences as to the kind of life they want to live, but they are also more or less forced to submit to prevailing discourses set by economic and political forces in the society. These are in turn in a constant recursive interaction with the biophysical environment.

Ikea can therefore be viewed as a mediator of eco-modernism – in this context as a way of seeing the natural environment, and as a way for consumers to apparently assess and control the consequences of their lifestyle. And as a global corporate enterprise, Ikea is definitely engaging in the environmental corner of the triangle.

The model of the human ecological triangle could be complemented with the concept of discourse. Consequently, I have made an attempt to combine elements of both into a model of my own:



*Discursive/Human ecological triangle. Elaborated by the author. Based on Hornborg 2010:212.*

Of course, the workings of discursive structures are implicitly accounted for in the original human ecological triangle. The purpose of the model above is to schematically show how human notions of nature are influenced by discursive structures. It suggests that how and to what extent people as consumers can interact and relate with nature is in many ways constrained by whatever dominant environmental discourse is in fashion at that time and in that place. Note that the model considers a western, capitalistic setting and is as such in no way universal.

Discourses are so firmly entrenched in politics, industry, media and our everyday practices and thinking that we are almost not aware of them. When discursive structures are put under the spotlight, focus is often on relations of unequal power between a powerful actor (e.g. Ikea) and a subordinate actor (e.g. customer). But I would contend that companies base their business operations on discourses as well, discourses about nature set in motion by scientific, economic and political institutions. The controlling nature of discourses does not exclude big business.

### **3. Method**

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this study is to analyze and expose the inner capitalist logic in Ikea's environmental discourse. The study concentrates on the textual and visual materials in Ikea's sustainability documents. Since I am interested in how Ikea uses the discourse of eco-modernism to style itself as a promoter of sustainability, and how careful usage (and avoidance) of certain words and meanings is instrumental for achieving such a standing, I will make use of Norman Fairclough's model of critical discourse analysis in an attempt to deconstruct Ikea's discursive framework.

Critical discourse analysts such as Fairclough speaks of CDA as being both a theory and a method, that transcends the usual disciplinary rigidity of other theories. CDA therefore can be used in a transdisciplinary fashion, in a dialogical relationship with other social theories about social processes (Fairclough 2001:121-122). Hence, the theoretical perspectives gained from fields such as human ecology can be used throughout the analysis as critical commentaries on certain statements. This chapter begins with a presentation of CDA and of the methodological model which will be used on the material. The chapter concludes with a short reflection on some questions of CDA and subjectivity.

#### **3.1 Method of analysis: Critical discourse analysis**

Critical discourse analysis distinguishes itself from other forms of discourse analysis since it is influenced by critical theory and is consequently concerned with questions of ideology and inequality (Wodak 2001a:10). Thus, the focus for CDA is not only on how language produces ways of thinking, but also on how discursive practices links to broader issues of power and ideology in society. In other words, CDA aims to reveal more or less visible structures of power and inequality as it is expressed and legitimized through discourse in society (Ibid:2). As to eco-modernism and Ikea, I would contend that Ikea as a multinational corporation that makes use of a dominant discourse is indeed partaking in unequal power-relations, exercising control over what is considered true knowledge. That claim stretches into the inequality and injustice faced by people in developing countries, people and

ecosystems that have been negatively affected by the company's operations. For example, in 1997 it was discovered that Ikea employed child labor in Asia. And in 2012, a subsidiary of Ikea was accused of felling portions of virgin forest in Russian Karelia (Kristoffersson 2014:101).

Since I am not just interested in doing a linguistic analysis of Ikea's documents, in disengagement from the ramifications such discursive structures have on societal norms, politics and public thinking, I have chosen CDA as a method of analysis. In my view, CDA offers a way of doing textual analysis in conjunction with social analysis.

I follow some of the guiding principles for carrying out a critical discourse analysis as detailed by Fairclough, but at the same time not refraining from modifying or simplifying it in various ways that the analysis of the material would benefit from. The analysis itself has a dual investigative approach; while the aim is to glean pertinent information about Ikea's discourse from the linguistics in the material, certain statements are to be critically scrutinized as examples of eco-modernism and thereafter contrasted with concepts from the theoretical framework.

### *3.1.1 Methodological approach*

Doing CDA that aims to reveal more than just linguistic arrangements in texts requires one to examine the ways discourse manifests itself in society as well. Thus, an important aspect of discourse analysis and CDA is to view language (and text) as a social act that is also embedded in social context. To this end, Fairclough's three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis will serve as a methodological foundation for the analysis of the text. The three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice, can be said to represent the interconnected layers of discourse and how they manifest in society. When conducting a critical discourse analysis each dimension requires attention, since they represent how discursive processes take place at different levels. In other words, it is an attempt to link discursive properties of text (text can in this case be both spoken or written) to social processes and relations (Fairclough 1995:97, 1992:72). It is both a way of conceptualizing

discourse and a way of approaching it analytically. In what follows is a brief description of the analytical dimensions and how they are relevant to my analysis.

Basically, the textual dimension deals with how one can approach and analyze a body of text with some form of discursive quality. What one strives to find above all else in a textual analysis are linguistic forms and meaning, or signs. Or to put it in another way, one tries to address “*words or longer stretches of text which consist of a meaning combined with a form, or a 'signified' combined with a 'signifier'*” (Fairclough 1992:74). This is because of the notion within CDA that signs are socially motivated, that how a thing (a concept or a meaning – the signified) is combined with the signifier is not an arbitrary act but a socially motivated one (Ibid:74-75). Fairclough exemplifies this in how the words 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' contrasts in the way signified and signifier is combined (Ibid:75). They are two different ways of describing the same thing that calls forth completely different meanings and associations.

Fairclough suggests several analytical categories within textual analysis that ascend in order of scale: 'vocabulary', 'grammar', 'cohesion', and 'text structure'. Three more categories can be identified that are used in the analysis of discursive practice but that nonetheless involves textual form. These additional categories are: the 'force of utterances', the 'coherence' of texts, and 'intertextuality' (Ibid).

What follows is a brief description of these categories: 'Vocabulary' focuses on words and how the usage and rejection of particular words and metaphors may be rooted in political and ideological motives. In the following analysis, how Ikea uses metaphors and certain words such as sustainability and consumption will be investigated. 'Grammar' focuses on how words are combined into sentences and clauses. 'Cohesion' looks at how clauses and sentences are linked together and how these in turn make up larger units of text, and 'text structure' deals with the overall organizational 'architecture' of a text (Ibid:75-77).

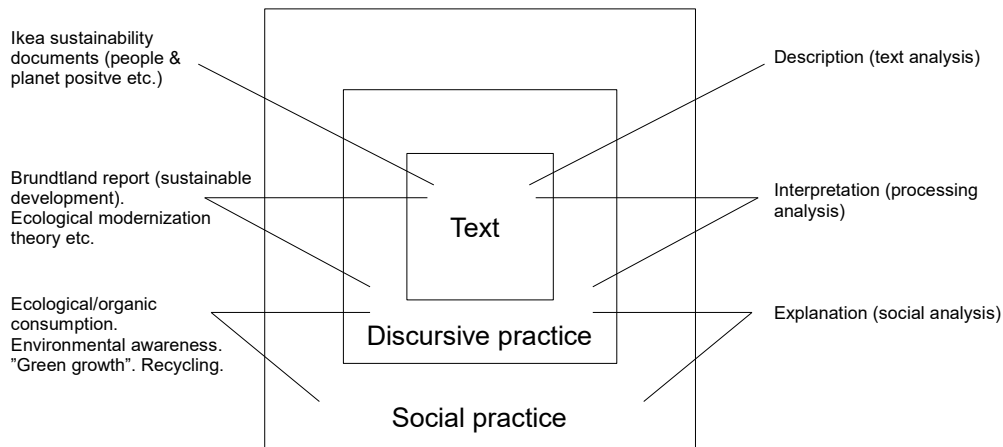
Of the additional categories, the 'force of utterances' of texts analyses 'speech acts', that is any kind of promise, threat, request et cetera embedded in a text. 'Coherence' considers the way a body of text makes itself coherent to a reader (Ibid:82-83). The point is that for a reader to make sense of a particular text, the author of that text often relies on that certain preconceptions (such as discourses) will 'fill in the blanks' and connect the parts of a text

into a whole. 'Intertextuality' refers to the way texts feature and make use of other texts. These other texts can both be explicitly stated, or more subtly assimilated in the text in question. An analysis of intertextuality is particularly interesting as it can bring to light the historicity of texts; the way one text creates links to prior texts, and thereby establishing a sort of textual legacy (Ibid:84). In addition, one could contend that in some instances the inclusion of other texts may add a certain degree of credibility and authority. Furthermore, it can hint at what discourse the text is representing. Intertextuality is related to interdiscursivity, a concept discussed below (Ibid:85).

Summing up, the categories provides a helpful tool in establishing the context, intentions, social and political motives, and intertextual characteristics of a text. In my analysis I will utilize these categories as I see fit and in an intermingling manner.

Turning now to the dimension of discursive practice. Discursive practice pertains to the discursive contexts of a text, such as the nature of its consumption, production and distribution (Ibid:78). In addition to the categories already mentioned, an analysis of interdiscursivity tries to identify the discourses that a text draw upon and how such discourses are expressed. An example in political rhetoric is when racist arguments are put forth when addressing unemployment (Wodak 2001b:66). In the context of this thesis, instances when Ikea formulate notions of sustainability or sustainable growth can be interdiscursively linked to the discourse of eco-modernism.

Finally, the dimension of social practice looks at the wider social setting in which the text (and discourse) is a part. It considers the overall social context which consists of both discursive and non-discursive practices (Fairclough 1992:71). In order to study this dimension, other relevant social theories can be applied. For the purpose of this thesis, my theoretical framework will be used to shed light in this matter.



*Dimensions of discourse analysis. Elaborated by the author. Based on Fairclough's (1995:98) three-dimensional model for CDA.*

The model above is based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model in which I have added (on the left side) certain manifestations of discourses and how they position themselves within the discursive dimensions. The model also illustrates three analytical traditions that are essential to CDA and that combines micro, meso and macro-level interpretations; textual or linguistic analysis, where various features (e.g. rhetorics) of the text is studied. Analysis of discursive practices looks at the wider, discursive context of the text. That is, its aspects of production, distribution and consumption (Fairclough 1992:72). This can be achieved in part by establishing the intertextual and interdiscursive properties of it. The dimension of social practice takes into consideration the broad social setting in which the text is part of (ibid). As previously mentioned, other social theories can be applied to explain various social conditions, such as social structures and currents, that may or may not contain discursive elements. I have exemplified this dimension with how dominant environmental discourses may be reproduced in the wider, social context.

### 3.2 Presentation of empirical material

The empirical material that will be analyzed consists of three PDF documents published by Ikea and available at the Swedish official website of Ikea. While all three textual documents will be studied and discussed to some extent, it is one document in particular which I shall focus on. This report is entitled “People & planet positive – Ikea group sustainability strategy for 2020”. The twenty-one pages in the report are aimed at the general public and, as the title implies, documents the work Ikea is undertaking in the name of sustainable development. It also highlights past accomplishments, ethical standpoints and future sustainable goals Ikea has set for itself.

The second document, “Ikea group sustainability report FY15” is a lengthy (94 pages) report that chronicles the environmental achievements Ikea claims it has made in the fiscal year of 2015. This document is also public-oriented and is filled with colorful images, various statements about Ikea, and info-graphics. I will only analyze certain sections of this document that I find relevant for the research questions.

The third document is called “Ikea group position on climate and energy” and consists of only one page and has the characteristics of a poster or a flyer. The subject of the document is climate change, and the standpoint taken by Ikea on the issue. Info-graphics make up most of the document. All the documents are written in English.

### 3.3 Reflections on CDA

Two of the most important challenges I have experienced when conducting my critical discourse analysis are questions of scale and subjectivity. Firstly, it can be difficult to ascertain how much empirical material could be considered enough; to my knowledge, there is no benchmark when it comes to this. Secondly, when doing CDA one is always at risk of finding meaning where there might not be one. Therefore one must be aware of any subjective “baggage” that one brings along during analysis. However, critics of CDA as scientific method point this out as an inherent problem of bias; it is sometimes claimed that research with CDA is overly colored by ideology and prior judgments, and that empirical



material is bound to be selected on the basis that it will support the researcher's ideological motivations (Meyer 2001:17). Subsequently, the whole notion of CDA as an analytical tool has been questioned by its critics. Advocates of CDA however, counters this criticism by stating that critical discourse analysts are often outspoken as to their position and commitment in their work. An equally important counter-argument lies in the notion that there is no scientific method that allows for pure objective insight completely free from any subjective thought or action (Ibid).

As to the issue of scale, there is no avoiding the necessity of being selective when it comes to analyzing this empirical material, especially in the case of the lengthy “Ikea group sustainability report FY15”. I willfully acknowledge that the analysis is not all-encompassing, and that some information may have been overlooked. But just as other methods of research, doing CDA is much like any form of craftsmanship; one gets better at it with more and more practice.

## 4. Analysis

As stated earlier, this critical discourse analysis follows the principles of the three-dimensional model mentioned above. The document that the analysis focuses on is “People & planet positive”. The other documents; “Ikea group sustainability report FY15” and “Ikea group position on climate and energy” will not be the subject of such deep analysis. Nevertheless, certain portions of text in these documents will be highlighted and analyzed in accordance with the methodological model. Instances in these texts which contain especially noteworthy 'signs' or statements or anything that can in one way or other add to the analysis will be sought out. That being said, the document that is being referred to in the following analysis is “People & planet positive”, when not stated otherwise.

In the analysis of the texts, certain words and images have particular bearing for the discursive structure I am investigating. They are the words and images that constitutes those central concepts in eco-modernism, and that I consider important in answering the research questions. These key words will be investigated in turn throughout the analysis. As for the aforementioned dimensions of discursive and social practice, these will be considered in tandem with the following text analysis and in the conclusion.

### Sustainability and ecology

The front page of “People & planet positive” is illustrated with an image of a small picture frame in which a photo of the Earth seen from space rests. By the reflection in the glass one can glimpse the furnishings of a living room or a bedroom. This image can be interpreted as a metaphor for the frailty of Earth and of Ikea's environmental commitments. The symbolism of the “pale blue dot” is again summoned in the next page, where a section of a rendition of the planet accompanies the table of contents. The image of the solitary Earth surrounded by space has since the early 1970's been a prominent motif in environmental conferences and reports, including the Brundtland Report “Our Common Future” – which launched the prevailing concept of sustainable development (Hajer 1995:8-9).

The introduction to the document is headlined with the statement “*THERE IS A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD AROUND US*” (Ikea 2014a:3). This 'simple sentence', or clause, lacks any social agent: no indication as to who or what causes this rapid change is given. The first paragraph of the document summarizes the history of the human/environment interaction in five lines and highlights that the twentieth century experienced a boom in social and economic prosperity. But this development was ultimately due to unsustainable practices. The next three paragraphs details a dire present and the possibility of an equally dire future, pointing to overpopulation, resource scarcity and especially climate change as major threats. The second paragraph deals mostly with climate change and its impact on environment and people. The text is obviously anthropocentric in nature; the environment is framed as “our”, and in one instance in this paragraph, the word “people” is written in bold type.

In the fourth paragraph this statement is made: “*Even if concerns about sustainability or climate change are put to one side, being careful with resources, managing costs for the future, controlling energy use and looking after your people is good for business*” (Ibid). The weight and focus of this sentence is on the word 'business'; climate change and sustainability are seemingly given lower priorities than business. However, the sentence resonates well with the principles of ecological modernization; it declares that any sound business strategy is perfectly reconcilable with environmental policy planning, echoing the positive-sum direction taken by eco-modernist advocates previously mentioned in this study. Furthermore, one could question the obvious conjecture in this sentence that climate change can indeed be 'put to one side'.

Around the fifth paragraph a noticeable shift from the dire tone to a more optimistic and visionary mood takes place. In this paragraph, the words “sustainable world” – written in bold – is a combination of signifier and signified where the signified in this case is a conveyed mental concept of a perfect world. That the sentence the words are part of claims that this world is possible can be understood as a statement that the world as of now is not sustainable. The signifier, the wording itself, can be problematized for several reasons; firstly, what is meant by sustainable? Sustainability can mean very different things for different

people. Secondly, the wording implies that the world itself is unsustainable, rather than the economic system (and by extension the consumer society). In this sense, the document again avoids presenting any social agent behind the current state of the world. The world is simply seen as unsustainable. Thirdly, as Ikea and other corporations and institutions conceptualize the environmental crisis in this manner, they in effect shift the focus away from the actual locus of this crisis, and in so doing any public perception of it is disarmed.

Although it relates to issues of consumption and economy, which I will treat more extensively later, a sentence in “People & planet positive” stands out in relation to sustainability. It reads: “*Our business idea, to combine good form, function and quality with built-in sustainability, at prices so low that as many people as possible can afford them [...]*” (Ikea 2014a:5). Nowhere in the document is “built-in sustainability” described. My hypothesis is that the concept of sustainability has attained a kind of self-explanatory status, partly thanks to its interdiscursive recurrences in politics, social institutions and media. The definition of sustainability seems to be more or less consistent throughout these usages, perhaps due to the fact that it is quite clearly formulated in the Brundtland Report (however, this does not imply that the concept can't be used in an ambiguous way).

Thus sustainability as it is presented here, as something that can be “built-in”, encapsulates some of the characteristics of a 'story-line' (not to be confused with the usage of the word in chapter 1.2). A story-line can be understood as a rhetorical, or narrative, common ground that actors from different fields of society may partake in. Or in Hajers words: “[...] *a story-line provides the narrative that allows the scientist, environmentalist, politician, or whoever, to illustrate where his or her work fits into the jigsaw.*” (Hajer 1995:63). A story-line condenses the complexities of an issue into a metaphorical “package” and makes discursive closure possible (Ibid:62-63). Furthermore, as more and more actors makes use of it, the practicing of the story-line may acquire characteristics akin to rituals; concepts like sustainability and in some cases ecology become tropes or figures of speech, gaining authoritative power in part due to the simple fact that they 'sound right' and are uttered by a trusted institution for example (Ibid:63). I would contend therefore, that conceptualizing sustainability in a context where it can be “built-in” in a commodity captures a part of the

essence of what Ikea's environmental master plan is all about. I will delve deeper into this issue in the end of this chapter and in the “conclusions and discussion” chapter. There are also several mentions of “more sustainable products” throughout the reports, a somewhat fuzzy concept I will take a closer look at in that chapter as well.

## Consumption and economy

---

During my analysis of the documents, I have looked for certain key signifiers. Above all, any treatment or even mentioning of environmental impacts of consumption have been prioritized. Initially, this amounted to very little insight, since the documents only treats this issue in a peripheral manner, and only in a few instances. Nonetheless, this makes analysis of these instances all the more important, because I am interested in how Ikea conceptualizes environmental problems and solutions and avoids certain words and meanings.

The 94 pages of “Ikea group sustainability report FY15” contains 31 instances of the word 'consumption'. In all but two instances is the word consumption used in a context of energy or material usage in Ikea's operations. The words 'innovation' and 'transform' (including inflections) occur not as often; 29 and 19 times respectively. However, they are invariably used as a positive indicator of Ikea's business. The one time the word consumption is used in terms of human consumption is also the only time it is problematized. Interestingly, this is courtesy of an included short commentary by a vice president of the US office of WWF wherein he encourages Ikea to: “*start a conversation with consumers about the impacts of consumption*” (Ikea 2015:24). Page 19 of the same document is devoted to how Ikea relates to consumerism and throw-away mentality, although those concepts aren't formulated in those exact words. Elsewhere in the document, one is referred to this page if one wants to find out more about “sustainable consumption”. Here, Ikea Group chief sustainability officer and the president of World Business Council for Sustainable Development give their thoughts on Ikea, consumption, and the environment. The Ikea representative's message is characterized by commitments, promises and corporate beliefs. The business idea of providing the world with good, sustainable but inexpensive

products is one of the steps Ikea claims it is taking for the environment. He emphasizes that Ikea, with its billions of visitors every year, has a great opportunity to “*encourage and inspire customers to live a more sustainable life at home*” (Ibid:19). The immense size of Ikea and its significant role in matters of global environmental issues is in fact portrayed as a positive thing. For example on page 24 of “Ikea Group Sustainability Report FY15”, a sustainability manager for Ikea states that: “*the size of our business means we use a lot of resources to make products that improve our customers' everyday lives*” (Ibid:24). The first part of this sentence acknowledges the extensive resource demand of Ikea, however the second part quickly expresses a justification for this in the idea that Ikea brings improvement to customers' everyday lives. To be more critical, the first part states facts while the second expresses assumptions.

In a rare moment of self-criticism, in “People and planet positive”, Ikea reflects on the potential downside of growth – it is stated that by 2020 the use of wood will almost double and so will carbon emissions – and how this necessitates “transformational” change, in this sentence: “*We need to **transform our business**. To be able to fulfil future customer needs, promote equality and secure sustainable access to resources, while driving down emissions and maintaining our low prices, we need to do things differently*” (Ikea 2014a:4, emphasis in original). The concepts of innovation and transformation appears regularly in the two longer documents, always with optimistic, visionary connotations. This is demonstrated in a sentence that in fact simultaneously hollows out the sustainability concept even more: “*Through our sustainability strategy, “People and planet positive”, we use sustainability to drive innovation, transform our business, steer our investments and unleash new business opportunities*” (Ibid:7). Thus, sustainability is here further abstracted, something that can be attributed to the strong and forceful verbs: 'drive', 'transform', 'steer', and 'unleash'.

The words efficient and efficiency are also concepts that make up the core of eco-modernism principles. There are no less than 24 instances of the words in “People and planet positive”.

Recycling and up-cycling play important roles in Ikea's environmental strategy. According to the sustainability report, Ikea is striving for a circular business model in which used

products can be reinvested in various ways (Ikea 2015:19). Indeed, Ikea is a member of the international platform Circular Economy 100, part of a charity foundation promoting this type of business model.

Climate change and economy is the topic of the document “Ikea group position on climate and energy”, where anthropocentric and in this case “econocentric” overtones are obvious. For example, the document highlights the fact that climate change actually damages the economy. Ikea exemplifies this by stating that hurricane Sandy in 2012 resulted in the closure of nine Ikea stores and nine million dollars in lost revenue (Ikea 2014b). Furthermore, it is stated that if the global temperature were to rise by four degrees celsius by the end of the century, it would pose threats to “*growth, prosperity and global stability*” (Ibid). The “force of utterance” of this statement speaks to people's supposed fears of climate change's impact on economy and institutional stability. It could therefore be interdiscursively linked to modern discourses of global danger and insecurity.

In “Ikea Group sustainability report FY15”, part of Ikea's philanthropic narrative shines through in this statement “ [...] *no matter how well our products perform, our customers want to buy from us with confidence that we have done the right thing on their behalf*” (Ikea 2015:6). This statement is preceded by a description of Ikea as a means to make people live in a more sustainable manner. This, coupled with the promise on Ikea's behalf that sustainable living should be easy and affordable (Ibid), may suggest an intent to lift the burden consumers may have concerning the environment, and in effect bypass questions of overconsumption, more so thanks to the aforementioned promises of “built-in sustainability”.

#### 4.1 Conclusion of analysis

Overall, the documents deliver a message characterized by optimism and vision, innovation and efficiency, and of goals and success stories. But the principal message is that Ikea's sustainability strategy is the way forward. That it works. This bold statement is however wholly reliant on the concept and legitimacy of sustainability for its usefulness.

Considering the salience and importance of the concept in “People & planet positive, it is interesting that there is no clear definition of what Ikea means by sustainable or sustainability, other than subtle referrals to the Brundtland report's definition of it. As to sustainable products, one is in the document's “dictionary” referred to the “Ikea Sustainability Product Scorecard”, which is not included in the document (though it is described in “Ikea Group sustainability report FY15”). The only instance where Ikea almost approaches the issue of overconsumption in “People & planet positive” is on page 14. Here Ikea stresses that the “throw-away” mentality is not part of the company's values. Therefore, Ikea promises that the products are to be made with “durability fit for purpose” (Ikea 2014a:14). What is meant by this term is not explained anywhere in the document. Elsewhere in the document, Ikea highlights that “built-in sustainability” (and low prices) are a part of its business idea (Ibid:5). This term is not explained anywhere either. An interesting conclusion of all this is that Ikea's concept of sustainable products has little to do with an item's longevity, and more with energy and material flows, working conditions and recycling. A truly sustainable product, one could contend, is one that follows the aforementioned principles, but is also constructed with material longevity in mind so that coming generations could make use of it.

The particular framing of the “the big issues”, that is, conceptualizing the environmental crisis as something that we as a global population both are responsible for and will be equally affected by, is worthy of discussion and criticism. Obviously, clumping together all the people in the world as a “global us” parries the fact that the main engines of climate change are found in wealthy nations in the North. Similarly ignored is the fact that the effects of climate change will not be equally distributed across the world.

The issue of whether or not Ikea is part of a “throw-away” society touches upon my research question of overconsumption, insofar that Ikea in its external communications distances itself from the notion but at the same time encourages it in its internal communications.



## 5. Conclusion and discussion

Summing up, the purpose of this thesis was to shed light on Ikea's environmental discourse as it is expressed in their sustainability documents. My argument has been that these documents makes it clear that Ikea supports and promotes the discourse of ecological modernization.

The empirical material which consisted of three online documents published by Ikea, were analyzed using critical discourse analysis and Fairclough's three-dimensional model. This chapter starts off with a presentation of how the results relate to the research questions, followed by a discussion and a section with ideas for further research topics.

### 5.1 Results

The first research question sought to investigate the ideology within Ikea's sustainability documents – *which words, actions and ideas are accentuated and favored, and which are downplayed and/or ignored? In what manner are they articulated or glossed over?*

Words like 'sustainable', 'innovation', 'transform' and 'efficient' are especially salient in the documents, and are always used in positive, optimistic contexts, usually to describe the particular strategy Ikea claims it is taking regarding the environment.

A prevalent feature of two of the documents is the promise of engaging customers to live more sustainable lives at home. Exactly how Ikea plans to do this is not apparent to me, though it is clear that this demonstrates Ikea's normative efforts. One could argue that the normative influence of Ikea is something it can capitalize on, as it is also stated elsewhere that the company wants a fourfold increase in sales of products that inspire and enable customers to live more sustainable lives (Ikea 2014a:9). Just as these products boils down to principles of energy efficiency, recycling – and to some extent sustainable supply chains – so too are the ideas and actions promoted by Ikea in its environmental policies rooted in eco-modernist notions. In contrast, any discussion of overconsumption is hard to come by in the documents, and the actual question of overconsumption seems to be diluted, or steered away, by responses asserting Ikea's narrative of “business transformation”, that is promoting

its edge in renewable energy, recycling and low energy appliances as their solutions to the environmental crisis. Similarly ignored are ideas pertaining to reducing consumption so as to mitigate environmental problems.

This leads us directly to the second research question. I have already alluded to the findings of this research question above. However, the second part of the question: *what rhetoric does Ikea in the guise of an ecological modernization advocate use to conceptualize environmental problems and solutions?*, requires further treatment. First off, I would argue that Ikea employs in its sustainability reports a rhetoric that downplays or ignores certain critical issues, such as overconsumption, that contributes to the environmental crisis. My analysis has shown that these issues are never fully treated. Instead, the environmental crisis is briefly summarized in a few paragraphs in “People and planet positive”, where the source of this crisis is omitted and the world is simply seen as either sustainable or unsustainable. The concept of sustainability as it is utilized in the documents appears as a 'story-line', a concept discussed earlier in this thesis. The documents makes use of this story-line in tandem with a rhetoric that emphasizes Ikea's visions, promises and accomplishments. With its undertakings in renewable energy and “sustainable” products, Ikea claims it can be a part of the solution to the environmental crisis. And we are told that the answers to the problem is exactly that transforming business ethic that focuses on innovations and techno-fixes.

The third and last research question sought to answer what contradictions exist in Ikea's discourse, with a focus on environmental issues. Besides the questionable statements concerning sustainability, the environmental discourse in the documents seem to rely much on the merits and efficacy of recycling and up-cycling. In and of itself recycling is of course better than putting things in a landfill. However, due to entropy, materials can never be 100% recycled (Daly & Farley 2011:31). A fact often overlooked in public discourse, as well as in the Ikea documents.

I argue that the systemic fault in ecological modernization, alluded to in the introduction, is based on the traditional paradigm within conventional economics to envision the ecosystem as a subsystem to the economy, rather than the other way around. This view supports and encourages endless growth because as the economy is seen as the whole, its

expansion encounters no limits that technology can't work around (Ibid:22). This economical abstraction, which has been called the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”, does not take into account the physical throughput of resources into waste, a process that strictly adheres to the laws of thermodynamics (Ibid:30). In a nutshell then, the issue is that even though Ikea invests heavily in renewable energy and the like, it's central focus is on selling more stuff to more people. Due to entropy, this will inevitably lead to more waste even if much of it is recycled.

## 5.2 Discussion

Ikea is in a way acting and portraying itself as a kind of panacea for the consciously overburdened consumer. Peoples anxiety over the environment and consumption are meant to be lifted as buying from Ikea is supposedly environmentally friendly. By relegating issues of overconsumption to a non-question, consumers are led to believe that their shopping habits are of no direct concern for the environment. Furthermore, by exerting their discursive power Ikea portrays consumption as something that can in fact be good for the environment, as well as for people in under-developed countries.

Following this line of thought, the company can be seen as taking on the environmental responsibility people may feel that they as consumers collectively and individually bear. In a sense, the discourse makes compartmentalization (to borrow a term from psychoanalysis) of values, emotions et cetera, possible. In very brief terms, compartmentalization is an intellectual defense mechanism that allows a person to hold conflicting ideas, beliefs and attitudes without recognizing or actually being conscious of the contradictions these conditions create (McWilliams 2011:135-136). This may help in negating the cognitive dissonance people may experience as consumers.

The philanthropic narrative of Ikea – its self-declared mission of 'doing the right thing', can and should be called into question, and the contradictions apparent in the sustainability documents suggests that Ikea's environmental program lacks in ambition and scope. The issue here is not whether the company's investments in clean energy or sustainable forestry

accomplishes the sustainable objective, but rather that the sustainable development paradigm itself does not address the problem of economic growth and overconsumption. Indeed, the sustainable development paradigm instead encourages it.

### 5.3 Suggestions for future research topics

A larger undertaking of the discursive practices of Ikea with a multi-method strategy would shed further light on how the company shapes our understanding of the environment. A consumer-experience based analysis would allow the researcher to estimate the impact of Ikea's discourse on peoples perceptions of environmental issues and ultimately on their shopping behavior. A phenomenological approach could be useful here.

A great example of ecological modernization in action are the products made for the sole purpose of recycling. These are the various waste sorting containers available for sale at Ikea. It would be interesting to see how the environmental benefits stacks up against the environmental consequences of for example the “Humlare”, a waste sorting bag designed as a backpack. Of course, such a study would require a life-cycle assessment of the product in question, as well as a standardized estimation of the utility of the product. But if it can be proved that the environmental benefits of products geared towards recycling are overshadowed by the environmental cost of production and import et cetera, that they are in fact counterproductive, a solid case for the inconsistency and fallacy of ecological modernization can be presented.

That Ikea's business operations stretches all over the globe, with some sites of production located in what could be termed peripheral regions, and that the company is a large consumer of for example wood, calls for a study of ecological unequal exchange and how it could be applied to Ikea's activities around the world. For example, 25,5 percent of the wood Ikea sourced in the fiscal year of 2015 came from Poland, but only 6,3 percent came from Sweden (Ikea 2015:25) – a fact that I consider noteworthy. Similarly, a study in political ecology that investigates how the enterprise externalize various costs and how this

affects ecosystems and people in different parts of the world would effectively call into question Ikea's statements of equality and sustainability.

## References

- Daley, H., Farley, J. (2012). *Ecological Economics – Principles and Applications*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: the critical study of language*. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). “Critical discourse analysis as a method in social scientific research” in Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (eds.) *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Falkengren, J. (2005). *Djurens skepnader*. Lund: Human Ecology Division, Lund University.
- Fricker, A. (2006). “Measuring up to sustainability” in Haenn, N. and Wilk, R. (eds.) *The environment in anthropology*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hajer, M. (1995). *The politics of environmental discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heyman, J. (2005) “The political ecology of consumption: beyond greed and guilt” in Paulson, S. and Gezon, L. (eds.) *Political ecology across spaces, scales, and social groups*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Hornborg, A. (2010). *Myten om maskinen*. Göteborg: Daidalos.
- Ikea (2015). *Ikea group sustainability report FY15*. (n.p.) Ikea. Available at: [http://www.ikea.com/se/sv/pdf/yearly\\_summary/IKEA\\_Sustainability\\_report\\_2015.pdf](http://www.ikea.com/se/sv/pdf/yearly_summary/IKEA_Sustainability_report_2015.pdf) (Accessed 19 January 2016)
- Ikea (2014a). *People & planet positive – Ikea group sustainability strategy for 2020*. (n.p.) Ikea. Available at: [http://www.ikea.com/ms/sv\\_SE/pdf/reports-downloads/sustainability-strategy-people-and-planet-positive.pdf](http://www.ikea.com/ms/sv_SE/pdf/reports-downloads/sustainability-strategy-people-and-planet-positive.pdf) (Accessed 30 December 2015)

- Ikea (2014b). *IKEA group position on climate and energy*. (n.p.) Ikea. Available at:  
[http://www.ikea.com/ms/sv\\_SE/pdf/reports-downloads/IKEA\\_Group\\_position\\_on\\_climate\\_and\\_energy.pdf](http://www.ikea.com/ms/sv_SE/pdf/reports-downloads/IKEA_Group_position_on_climate_and_energy.pdf) (Accessed 2 January 2016)
- Kristoffersson, S. (2014). *Design by IKEA: a cultural history*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- McWilliams, N. (2011). *Psychoanalytic diagnosis: understanding personality structure in the clinical process*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Meyer, M. (2001). "Between theory, method, and politics: positioning of the approaches to CDA" in Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (eds.) *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Mills, S. (2004). *Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Rose, G. (2012). *Visual methodologies*. London: Sage Publications.
- Wilk, R. (2006). "The ecology of global consumer culture" in Haenn, N. and Wilk, R. (eds.) *The environment in anthropology*. New York: New York University Press.
- Wodak, R. (2001a). "What CDA is about – a summary of its history, important concepts and its developments" in Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (eds.) *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Wodak, R. (2001b). "The discourse–historical approach" in Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (eds.) *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- WWF (2014). *Living Planet Report 2014: species and spaces, people and places*. McLellan, R., Iyengar, L., Jeffries, B. and Oerlemans, N. (eds.) WWF, Gland, Switzerland. Available at:  
[http://assets.worldwildlife.org/publications/723/files/original/WWF-LPR2014-low\\_res.pdf?1413912230&\\_ga=1.71755605.752263954.1451060231](http://assets.worldwildlife.org/publications/723/files/original/WWF-LPR2014-low_res.pdf?1413912230&_ga=1.71755605.752263954.1451060231)  
(Accessed 28 December 2015)

Öckerman, A., Friman, E. (2003). "Inledning" in Öckerman, A. and Friman, E. (eds.) *Hela världen: samhällliga och kulturella perspektiv på miljökrisen*. Studentlitteratur: Lund.