

CHANGING THE WORLD THROUGH CONSUMPTION

*The Contradictions of Political Engagement in
the Case of Oatly*

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Abstract

In 2014, Swedish oat milk producer Oatly was sued by the dairy lobby LRF Mjök for their use of marketing slogans such as “It’s like milk, but made for humans” which the dairy lobby claimed painted cow’s milk negatively. Dubbed the “milk wars”, the dispute sparked an intense debate over the political and environmental impacts of dairy production up until and beyond the court’s decision in November 2015. Although Oatly lost the lawsuit, the company’s sales skyrocketed and a passionate supporter base was revealed. These supporters wrote opinion articles, started Twitter campaigns and created fan pages on social media in defence of Oatly. This widespread reaction illustrates a shifting, unconventional kind of political engagement through commodity activism, facilitated by digital media.

This is an individual political engagement that evolves from the growing global concerns over the environmental impact of food production and consumption, and yet is inextricably linked with commodity culture, raising questions over the validity of this kind of political engagement for both individual and collective action. Recent research has begun to examine commodity activism as a way of doing politics within brand culture, aligning individual purchasing habits with political and social change. These analyses largely focus on the US context and little research has been dedicated to the emerging consumer demand for sustainable food products as a form of political engagement in the Swedish context. Existing research has also tended to focus on consumption as political engagement as an isolated practice, therefore this thesis analyses dynamic, multi-site political engagement across both online and offline spaces.

Through in-depth interviews with both Oatly consumers and employees, this thesis explores political engagement that is located within a corporate environment. It addresses the multiple spaces where this engagement occurs to analyse the complexity of online and offline commodity activism. The findings show that the relationship between Oatly and their consumers is characterised by a push-and-pull tension between corporate interests and individual action. Consumer activity negotiates top-down power from Oatly through a creative and diverse fusion of online and offline engagement, connecting micro individual participation to the macro political community. Consumer labour moves away from binary conceptions of exploiter versus exploited, illustrating the duality of political engagement, where individual participation and emotion operate simultaneously as brand work for Oatly *and* as a way to enhance personal engagement with the vegan, animal rights and environmental causes.

Keywords: commodity activism, political engagement, online activism, political consumption, Oatly, Sweden, vegan movement, environmental movement

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“We’re faced with making real changes every day, our movement is consumption. Changing consumption will save lives.”(Daniel, Oatly consumer)

How much can a carton of oat milk change the world? When Swedish oat milk producer Oatly was sued by the dairy lobby in 2014 for their use of marketing slogans such as “It’s like milk, but made for humans”, an intense public debate erupted across mainstream media and social media. Facebook and Twitter became the front line in a fight between those who supported Oatly for their ethical and sustainable stance over food production, and those who saw Oatly’s marketing slogans as an attack on traditions and primary industry. Oatly supporters were moved to start Twitter campaigns, write opinion articles and create a myriad of fan pages on social media in defence of Oatly. What these activities reveal is the highly politicised nature of consumer products, and the outpouring of support from Oatly consumers showed a new yet contradictory form of political engagement, where changing the world can be achieved across multiple everyday spaces through digital media, supermarkets and homes.

This widespread online and offline reaction of Oatly supporters illustrates a shifting, unconventional kind of political engagement through commodity activism (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012) enhanced by digital media. Commodity activism aligns personal purchasing habits with social and political change, situating change with individual consumer action. Running parallel to this, corporations are constantly adjusting their strategies to foster consumer engagement with their brand based on these very connections to personal politics and lifestyle, as Oatly’s creative director notes, “everything is political.”¹ This is an individual political engagement that is inextricably linked with commodity culture and digital media, blurring the roles of consumers and activists, and raising important questions over the validity of this kind of engagement for both individual and collective action which this thesis seeks to investigate.

Recent research has begun to examine “commodity activism” as a way of doing politics within brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012), as well as “political consumerism” (e.g. Baek,

2010) which aligns individual purchasing habits with political and social change. These analyses largely focus on the US context and little research has been dedicated to the emerging consumer awareness and demand for sustainable food products as a form of political engagement in the Swedish context. Research into commodity activism has also tended to focus on consumption as political engagement as an isolated practice, rather than seeing how it fits into dynamic, multi-site political engagement and the role of digital media.

Situating political engagement like this within a market setting creates a sense of unease, raising issues over the tension between corporate interests and public participation.

Exploring the power dynamics of the relationship between Oatly and their consumers allows for a closer examination of what this kind of political engagement means for individuals, as well as understanding the value of commodity activism for collective social action. Rather than seeing this kind of political engagement in binary terms as either exploitative (e.g. Roff, 2007; Shreck, 2005) or overly celebratory (e.g. Schor, 2007) as previous research has tended to do, this thesis offers a useful case to examine and re-think modes of political engagement and resistance, looking at the multi-layered and often inconsistent patterns of consumer interventions. It posits that individuals within this situated neoliberal context work in many different ways to activate their political selves, operating within capitalist structures, and often critiquing from the inside.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The overall aim of this thesis is to explore political engagement that is located within a corporate environment. It addresses the multiple spaces where this engagement occurs to analyse the complexity of online and offline commodity activism. Through in-depth interviews with both Oatly consumers and employees the thesis looks at how both parties articulate their engagement with one another, in order to examine the power that structures these kinds of corporate/consumer relationships. The way these relationships are understood has implications for how spaces for personal and collective political engagement are conceived, and where these collide with spaces of corporate control. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do consumers navigate their own political values within the commercial setting of Oatly's brand?

2. What does the relationship between Oatly and their consumers reveal about the value of commodity activism for individual and collective political engagement?
3. In what ways can digital media facilitate political engagement through consumption?

1.2 Background: The milk wars and sustainable consumption

In 2014, Swedish oat milk producer Oatly² was sued by the dairy lobby LRF Mjök, a division of Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund (Federation of Swedish Farmers)³ for their use of marketing slogans such as “It’s like milk, but made for humans” and “No milk, no soy, no badness” (Gustafsson, 2015). The dairy lobby claimed these slogans painted cow’s milk negatively, sparking an intense debate in the media over the health benefits of both kinds of milk and the environment impact of dairy production. Dubbed the “milk wars” (Lindahl, 2015; Lööf, 2015), the public dispute over the benefits and negatives of cow’s milk garnered sustained media coverage up until and beyond the court’s decision in November 2015.

Although Oatly lost the lawsuit, the company’s sales skyrocketed and a passionate and dedicated supporter base was revealed (Pierrou, 2014; Lööf, 2015). Oatly consumers took to social media and news media to express their support for Oatly and their opinions about the dairy industry, the environment and the politics of milk. What these milk wars reflect are the global and local shifts in attitude surrounding sustainable food production and consumption, the instability of the position of cow’s milk, and the importance of individual action for political and social change.

During 2014 Oatly re-launched their company as a “lifestyle brand” following the direction of their newly appointed CEO Toni Petersson (Pritchard, 2014). By revamping their product marketing and creating an active social media presence, they positioned themselves as a “value-based” brand, linking their new image with an adoption of a political position based on environmental sustainability. Oatly’s branding as a value-based company reflects the discussion around environmental issues in Swedish society and worldwide, and points to the central role of sustainable production and consumption. The milk wars between LRF Mjök and Oatly can be seen as the culmination of several significant global and national

conversations around changing attitudes to animal agriculture and its effects on the environment.

How to feed the world in an age of natural resource depletion and environmental degradation has become a major societal problem, making the role of food production companies as well as consumer choices all the more critical (Jackson, 2014). This is reflected for example in the United Nation's global sustainable development goals for 2030⁴ which focus on food production as a key site for environmental impact.⁵

The Oatly lawsuit evolved against the backdrop of the global milk crisis, which is linked to these widespread debates on sustainable food, and has seen dairy industries worldwide face increasing strain, with milk prices at their lowest in ten years (Hunt and Tajitsu, 2015; Mikkelsen, 2016). These global environmental issues have led to the rise of "green consumption" and the discourse of "eating for change" (Johnston and Cairns, 2012) from both the commodity producer side as well as the consumer side. This dual evolution of the very real environmental threats as well as the strategies employed by both corporations and individuals in response to this, stresses the importance of understanding evolving forms of political engagement based in consumption.

Sweden is a useful site of analysis to look at commodity activism over sustainable food production and consumption, and particularly as a battleground for the milk wars. Consuming cow's milk is highly normalised in Swedish society, and cow's milk has enjoyed a distinctly positive image for several decades due to widespread consensus on its wholesomeness as human food (Jönsson, 2013). The debate around the milk wars demonstrates the high symbolic value that is attached to dairy consumption in Sweden, and compared to other animal products, milk seems to bear significance in a special way, as dairy farming is often described as "the motor, or navel, of Swedish agriculture" (Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund, 2016b).

This backdrop of the position of cow's milk in Swedish society made for an even more controversial debate during the milk wars, and signals the instability within the public discourse of traditional versus alternative milk. The sharp increase in alternative milk consumption⁶, and the significant reaction of Oatly supporters in the milk wars highlights a

shift in public opinion from the margins into the mainstream. Gaining an insight into the ways individuals are responding to this shift in ideology, and practising their form of political engagement through digital media and consumer products is vital for understanding how commodity activism both reflects and influences social change.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

To understand how the intersecting phenomenon of political engagement through consumption operates it is useful to begin by exploring research on the shifting spaces of political engagement, and the changes noted by researchers on the way individuals “do” politics in personal, everyday contexts. Research into consumption as a form of political engagement will help to map out how this practice operates within the context of this case. Following this, an examination of the power struggles which underpin these forms of political engagement such as debates over free labour will help to reveal what spaces are available for consumer resistance to corporate control.

Research into emerging forms of political engagement shows that more and more, people are moving outside of traditional spheres into creative, everyday spaces facilitated by digital media (e.g. Norris, 2002; Van Zoonen, 2005; Dahlgren, 2009). Rather than seeing these activities as an abandonment of individual interest in politics, it highlights the possibilities and entry points to political engagement that are constantly evolving (Dahlgren, 2009:31). Therefore it is helpful to consider the context and implications of alternative avenues of political engagement, evaluating their validity as a form of accessing politics for individuals.

Among these shifting forms of political engagement is a participation connected to consumption. From new food politics (Schweikhardt and Browne, 2001) and political consumerism (Baek, 2010) to commodity activism (Banet-Weiser, 2012), these works draw together social movement, political engagement and media studies to explore the overall shift in forms of political engagement, and the way each of these components interact. Underpinning this research is the role of power in the form of corporate exploitation and individual empowerment, and how this is negotiated by individuals and producers/corporations through forms of labour and resistance.

2.1 Beyond binaries of “exploiter” versus “exploited”

Not only are the spaces and modes of political engagement shifting, but the strategies employed by corporate interests are both responding and contributing to these shifts. Several scholars interested in these emerging forms of political engagement acknowledge that it is unhelpful to analyse power relations as mere binaries - as one dominant group opposing another submissive group - but instead that relations are highly complex and fluid (Jenkins, 2006; Duffy, 2010; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Johnston and Cairns, 2012). They call for a closer investigation of the interaction of these dynamic and complex power relations, looking specifically at the clash between commercial interests and consumers (Banet-Weiser 2012:13), and the diverse ways individuals engage with politics on a personal level (Bennett, 2012:28).

This “clash” between top-down power interests and grassroots individual action has been underexplored in existing literature on consumption as political engagement. While Dahlgren acknowledges the necessity for communicative public spaces to enable political “talk” between citizens (2009:114), Banet-Weiser equally observes that these “authentic” spaces are now becoming branded spaces (2012:5). Therefore, exploring the contradictory relationship resulting from these dual agendas from both sides, helps to illuminate who is in control of these spaces, who is excluded, and how individuals make meaning within these contexts.

An interdisciplinary approach to political engagement; one which draws together media studies, social movement and political consumption research, would help to see how this power clash operates between Oatly and their consumers, conceptualising the blurred boundaries between consumers and politically engaged citizens. If we are to move beyond binaries of “exploiting” versus “empowering” forms of engagement, we can begin to assess the value of a politics situated within commodity culture and facilitated by digital media. At present, studies of commodity activism and political consumerism have not specifically addressed the hybridity of these spaces of political engagement (e.g. Schweikhardt and Browne, 2001; Yates, 2011). Consumption as political engagement should be explored instead as one aspect of a diverse array of political tools, focusing on how individuals draw on its potential as well as the way digital media can enhance this kind of activism.

2.2 Shifting spaces and nature of political engagement

Research has noted that the way we “do” politics, just like our media consumption, has become highly personalised and its formats have been significantly altered due to neoliberalism and the globalised environment (e.g. Dahlgren, 2009; Corner, 2011; Hands, 2011; Bennett, 2012). These works highlight a “socio-cultural turbulence” (Dahlgren, 2009:26) which points to the impact of individualisation on political engagement (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and the shifting landscape of communication networks in both aiding and influencing political engagement (Castells, 2012). This section will begin by mapping out this changing nature of political engagement, looking firstly at the shifting terrains where people access politics, and then at the highly personalised nature of evolving political engagement.

Traditional notions of what “political engagement” entails have been critiqued for being too narrow, due to a tendency to refer only to engagement with institutionalised politics. Scholars have argued that these traditional definitions of political engagement do not account for the diversity of individuals’ daily lives and engagement with politics that arises from these experiences (e.g. Burns et al., 2001; Walzer, 2004). Similarly, Mouffe’s (1999:754) distinction between “politics” as organised, traditional structures where politics occur, such as electoral political systems, and “the political” which can arise anywhere in the social terrain provides a useful stance from which to explore alternative forms of political engagement.

In describing the potential of Mouffe’s concept of the political, Dahlgren (2009:100-1) sees a connection with everyday spaces for accessing and talking about political issues, rather than limiting this “talk” to formal political institutions. By acknowledging the potential for political engagement to occur in everyday life, and widening traditional definitions, it helps to “remain open to the possibilities of the political emerging.” (Dahlgren 2009:100-1). Following these perspectives, this thesis utilises a broader definition of “political engagement” and “the political” as one that extends into the daily lives of citizens, acknowledging that political engagement can take many forms outside of formal political spheres, such as homes, schools and workplaces.⁷

Political engagement thus takes different shapes in this evolving environment, and politics are encountered and expressed in everyday sites, facilitated by the communicative power of digital media. The rise of a more personalised, individualised (e.g. Bennett, 2012) and dispersed (e.g. Castells, 2012) form of political engagement is a dominant theme throughout this field of research. Scholars see this shift outside of traditional political spheres and its connection to digital media as both positive and negative for political engagement, sparking key debates over the legitimacy of new forms of political engagement.

The evolution of a myriad of digital media forms and Web 2.0 has been well-documented and analysed for its potential to spark cultural and political participation, creativity and enable social movements (see for example, Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Dahlgren, 2013; Castells, 2012; Olsson and Svensson, 2012; Gauntlett, 2013; Gunning and Zvi Baron, 2014). Several authors discuss the way digital media have collapsed several barriers to participation, arguing that it is now much easier and faster to connect with others across space and time (Thompson, 2005; Castells, 2012; Gauntlett, 2014).

The power of the socially networked space has been recognised for its role in uniting individuals around a common cause, and helping to facilitate and expand social movements such as the Tunisian protests of 2011 and 2012 (see for example, Castells, 2012; White and McAllister, 2014; Zayani, 2015; Onook et al., 2015;). Similarly, emerging practices of creating and sharing have been celebrated as inviting participation through their very format, connecting communities of people and helping to distil complex political issues (Hermes, 2005; Gauntlett, 2011; Dahlgren, 2013). However, there is ongoing disagreement within this academic field between those who laud the promise of Web 2.0 and its participatory elements, versus those who see this view as reductive and over-simplified.

Less optimistic analyses remind us to be wary of overstating the positive effects of Web 2.0 for participation (e.g. Morozov 2009 & 2011; Fuchs, 2012). Running parallel to these criticisms of digital media's potential to facilitate political engagement are arguments over the individualistic, shallow nature of these new forms of political participation. Dahlgren (2009 & 2011) offers a similarly optimistic perspective to Gauntlett (2011) and Castells (2012) regarding Web 2.0's participatory potential, but at the same time highlights that there could be something negative about the *ease* of this new online engagement. He notes that it

may be generating a new kind of political culture where people are reluctant to devote time to a cause, and therefore only contribute a minimum, regardless of the implications to the wider cause (Dahlgren, 2009:193).

2.2.1 Personalised political engagement: risks and benefits

The criticism over the shallowness of individual political engagement for these new forms is similarly reflected in the body of research on “slacktivism” or “clicktivism” (e.g. Morozov, 2009; Kristofferson et al, 2014; Štětka and Mazák, 2014; Vie, 2014; Glenn, 2015). These slacktivism debates over the depth of engagement primarily seek to understand whether the overarching social cause is strengthened, and how this fits into traditional notions of political engagement (Christensen, 2012), equating the merits of historical activism such as street rallies, and demonstrations, with this new, easier engagement. Slacktivism is seen as a result of activism via digital media platforms, and connotes negative, shallow engagement for personal praise rather than to enhance a political cause or democratic process (Morozov, 2009).

Here we see another common thread across media and communication and political engagement research, related to the highly personalised nature of evolving political activism. The most notable discussion is one which looks at the shift away from collective politics and towards an individualised mode of political engagement (Maniates, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Scholars connect individualisation in this environment with consumer culture, where politics instead becomes connected to personal lifestyle rather than collective movements (e.g. Bennett, 1998; Cohen, 2003; Lewis et al., 2005; Cherry, 2006; Haenfler et al., 2012; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012).

This consumer/citizen dialectic arises from its location within neoliberalism where individual “freedom” thus emerges through the market rather than the state, influencing relationships and activism which are structured according to this highly individualised mode of being (Harvey, 2005). In this context, individuals become responsible for social and political change through their own actions (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:2), which can equally empower them by allowing them to create a lifestyle “orientated toward authentic identities and social change” (Haenfler et al., 2012). Coupled with this duality of individual

responsibility and empowerment are the opportunities afforded by digital media which enhances personal political action (e.g. Bennett, 2012; Dahlgren, 2013), raising the same debate over individualism as both positive and negative.

Charting the history and development of personalised politics, Bennett (2012) notes that the centrality of the individual today is not necessarily to the detriment of social and political movements. He argues that these debates over individualisation and new communicative technologies are not fruitful and fail to explore the complexities of how individuals themselves combine digital media and political participation (2012:28). Along the same lines, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue for a distinction to be made between the idea of the neoliberal individual operating within the market, and how the concept of individualisation functions for political engagement.

Following these positions, my aim is not to focus in-depth on the two sides of this debate, but rather to use it to contextualise the discussions about emerging forms of activism, and what value these hold for individuals as a form of political engagement. What emerges from these arguments is the need to unpack the complexity of individualism's impact on political engagement for both the wider political cause and also what this means for individuals themselves.

Similarly to Bennett (2012), Gauntlett (2014) makes a case for valuing participation on an individual level, acknowledging the way Web 2.0 technology and the internet help to significantly enhance this personal participation. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) also see this personalisation of political engagement as a good thing, which in fact helps strengthen the communicative outreach of political movements. These bodies of research into the shifting spaces of political engagement show that issues of individualism and weak engagement are important aspects to consider. In the same way, while digital media, particularly social media, can help to facilitate political participation and expression, these scholars remind us that political action is not dependent upon the existence of digital media. Mapping out the central debates within this area is helpful in remembering the implications of evolving modes of political engagement, but also not to overlook how the individual is impacted within specific, nuanced settings.

2.3 Political engagement through consumption

One of these settings for political engagement involves political participation through food consumption which highlights the shifting spaces in which politics is being “done” (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012). Consumption practices as well as food itself have become a significant arena for politics and scholars have given this form of political participation several names, such as “political consumerism” (Keum et al., 2004; Stolle et al., 2005; Baek, 2010), “commodity activism” (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012) “critical consumption” (Yates, 2011) and a “new politics of food” (Schweikhardt and Browne, 2001).

While “commodity activism” looks more broadly at consumption of a variety of consumer goods, not only food consumption, it still operates within the same commercial spaces and raises similar implications and dialectics of situating political engagement within these arenas. Like political consumerism and critical consumption, commodity activism frames individual political engagement within the context of neoliberal commercialism (Banet-Weiser, 2012:18).

Regardless of their labels, these forms of political engagement are all embedded within and reliant upon consumer culture, linking consumption with political change. This body of research into consumption and political engagement raises two main criticisms about this form of political engagement; the effects of individualism and the use of market logics. These debates will be mapped out to assess the value of activism through alternative food, and for seeing how this fits into “doing” politics across multiple, everyday spaces.

Both Dahlgren and Carpentier stress the importance of everyday contexts where individuals can interact with each other and build opinions with those closest to them (2009:114-5; 2011:17-18), thus engaging with politics through everyday consumption can be seen as fruitful for individual participation. This notion is mirrored in Yates’ discussion of critical consumption, and its potential for bringing the political into peoples’ daily lives, where active food purchasing choices show repeated engagement with social movements (2011:194). Similarly, Haenfler et al. (2012:6) describe “lifestyle movements” as being based on making changes to consumption habits through individual action in daily living.

Drawing lifestyle into political engagement they argue, encourages individuals to “integrate movement values into a holistic way of life” (2012:7).

This “new politics of food” seeks to use the power of market against itself, to accomplish political change in the food sector and influence social attitudes (Schweikhardt and Browne 2001:302). In doing so, the activities adopt a neoliberal ideology compared to early food movements which sought to work outside of the food system, for example by creating alternative local food production groups⁸ (Roff, 2007). This kind of political engagement hinges on individual consumption, and consuming with a purpose, such as promoting supermarket boycotts and campaigning for individuals to buy ethical food (Roff, 2007; Haenfler et al., 2012; Johnston and Cairns, 2012).

The centrality of individual consumer power to these political activities is a common thread across literature on consumption as political engagement. The impact of individual consumer choice and action is seen as positive for its potential to impact companies’ production techniques (e.g. Schudson 2006 & 2007), and as a form of resistance (e.g. Lekakis, 2013), but this highly individualised form of activism has also raised concerns for undermining the validity of political movements. Here we see that the notion individualisation is inherently ambivalent, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002:3) note, it facilitates social cohesion and cooperation, but it equally increases a sense of individual responsibility.

2.3.1 Individualisation and market logics in food politics

Critics argue that political engagement through consumption is inherently self-centred and thus preferences individual needs over the needs of the collective cause (e.g. Lewis et al., 2005), and equally its ability to inspire communal mobilisation is seen as trumped by personal expression through consumption (Cohen, 2003). Maniates (2001) also notes a shift towards an individualisation of responsibility within the environmental movement, linking political change with individual action. These highly individualised actions, Maniates argues, primarily serve an individual sense of contribution, and do little to connect to the concrete issues of environmental degradation (2001:33). These arguments are similar to those raised within research into digital media and political engagement as mentioned

earlier, noting that potential downsides to these kinds of political participation are their weaker structures and focus on the individual.

However, in the same way that horizontal networks through digital media are seen to enhance collective action (Castells, 2010 & 2012), Micheletti (2002) has noted that loosely arranged networks for action can also be established through consumption practices. Further, research has shown that political consumers demonstrate an awareness of the need to connect to the collective movement they seek to change (Micheletti and Stolle, 2007; Baek, 2010), by working to “collectivize individual choice” (Holzer, 2006:406) thus refuting the claims made by other scholars over negative individualism. This complex negotiation of the role of the individual is useful for understanding whether commodity activism through the Oatly case involves similar effects on collective and individual political engagement.

Situating political activism within “capitalist brand culture” (Banet-Weiser, 2012:18) raises additional concerns such as the corporate appropriation of politics (and thus consumers), as well as the implications of who is excluded from this form of engagement. Scholars note that a danger of using market logics and tactics to critique food production could lead to a risk of these movements “reproducing the structures they seek to change.” (Roff, 2007:518; see also Shreck, 2005; Szasz, 2007; Guthman, 2008). If social change and access to politics is achieved via individual consumption habits, commodity activism can then become a highly exclusionary form of activism (Roff, 2007:518; Banet-Weiser, 2012:163), raising questions over the validity of this form.

Several scholars argue that this kind of political engagement through consumption does not allow for universal participation and privileges wealthy interests, since political participation and influence are contingent upon having “buying power”, and thus capital (Roff, 2007; Guthman, 2008). Baek’s (2010) findings of US political consumption demographics mimic Yates’ (2011) data on European countries, both indicating that political participation through consumption is premised upon higher levels of education, and raising concerns over the universality of this kind of political engagement.

These issues of exclusion are important to keep in mind in exploring the value of commodity activism through the Oatly case. Equally, scholars interested in this field of research have

looked at the strategies employed by commercial interests who adopt this rhetoric of “change” through consumption (Vogel, 2005; Duffy, 2010; Johnston and Cairns, 2012; Mukherjee, 2012). Since this political engagement is premised on consumption and squarely rooted in capitalist motives, how might this impact the breadth and depth of participation, and who is left out of the conversation? The underlying power dynamics which structure the relationship between consumers and corporations will thus be expanded on in the following sections.

This field of research into new food politics largely arrives at the same conclusion that acknowledges the duality of this kind of activism. Scholars argue that consumer power and food purchasing habits are a positive step within this context and may enhance collective action (e.g. Snow, 2004; Schor, 2007; Haenfler et al., 2012), while also raising warnings of blindly wielding market principles against and within the market (e.g. Roff, 2007) and a wariness over the lasting impact of this kind of political engagement (e.g. Chhetri et al., 2009).

This research mostly focuses on evaluating the merits or criticisms of this engagement as an isolated practice, instead of analysing it as one dynamic part of individual political engagement. Research into new food politics largely omits implications of these power struggles at the micro level, therefore drawing on literature which looks at exploitative labour and consumer resistance to this is useful to explore what this means for individuals participating with commodity activism.

2.4 Exploitative labour versus empowerment

Since a political engagement based on consumption relies on market logic, it opens the door to whether this political engagement can be used as commercial exploitation, and what space remains for individuals to subvert this exploitation. The evolution of digital media and its connection with socio-cultural turbulence has led to re-examinations of productive labour, highlighting the importance of immaterial labour for market growth (e.g. Lazzarato, 1996; Deuze, 2007; Gill and Pratt, 2008). This research has examined productive labour of media use (e.g. Andrejevic, 2008; Bolin; 2012) and consumer culture (e.g. Arvidsson, 2005 &

2006; Zwick et al., 2008), exploring the dynamics involved in the relationship between top-down power interests and grassroots user/consumer power.

What these analyses reveal is a kind of paradox apparent where users are seemingly willingly exploited (Terranova, 2004), highlighting the complicated power dynamics that operate within a political engagement based on consumption. On the one hand, labour is conceptualised as an example of the negative impacts of the market-environment on user participation, both social and political, where users' actions are appropriated by corporate interests (e.g. Zwick et al., 2008). On the other hand, scholars argue that users are not mere automatons or corporate pawns (e.g. Jenkins, 2006), revealing the tension between conceptions of active and passive individuals.

Bauman's (2007) research into the effects of consumer society on individuals reflects a more pessimistic side of the debate, arguing that consumers are now one and the same as commodities. He claims that people are marketing products for free, and commodities have become fused with their very identity. This position mirrors the concerns raised over the free digital labour arising from the Web 2.0 environment, with critics contending that these users undertake a form of free labour in service of the producers (e.g. Dyer-Witford, 1999; Andrejevic, 2008). These arguments portray individual labour as unpaid immaterial labour from which corporations gain capital and cultural value.

Zwick et al. (2008) also conceptualise free labour as commercial exploitation, noting the way marketers seek to paradoxically encourage consumer freedom, but at the same time use this "work" to enhance their own brand in what they term "co-creative labour". Co-creative labour here becomes a tool for marketers to encourage consumer participation as a way of manufacturing "trust, affect and shared meaning" (Zwick et al., 2008:175). Brands have long sought to capitalise on this sense of personal connection between consumers and products, and the role of identity in marketing has been well-documented in consumer research (see for example, Chernev et al., 2011, So et al., 2016).

This sense of "value" to be gained from consumer interactions with brands represents a concern for a political engagement which seeks to operate through consumer culture, highlighting opportunities for corporate appropriation of both personal emotion and political

ideals. The emergence of literature on “lifestyle brands” reflects the trend of marketers striving to incorporate personal and political participation into their brands for capital gain (see for example, Fioroni and Titterton, 2009; Saviolo and Marazza, 2012; Cătălin and Andreea, 2014). These marketing strategies aim to foster and draw on self-expression of political and personal ideals through brand culture, drawing consumers into an “intimate” relationship based on emotion, and impacting the authenticity and value of political engagement which arises out of brand culture.

Across these areas of research, this “labour” means different things to both corporations and users. Companies seek to foster personal relationships through the “affective labour” of consumers (Zwick et al., 2008) creating an emotional economy through the production of personal experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 2011), highlighting the strong interest in affect and passion for commercial benefit. Pine and Gilmore’s (2011) work demonstrates commercial strategies of manufacturing “experiences” for consumers that draw on memories and emotion, which thus generate the highest value returns. Similarly, the intimate relationship crafted through brand culture works to sustain deep connections with individuals, going beyond the mere products into the sphere of personal, affective spaces (Belant, 2008; Banet-Weiser, 2012).

This literature on the economic value created by drawing on personalised, emotional connections between brands and consumers is helpful in analysing the corporate agendas at play when it comes to an encouragement of political engagement. These concepts are useful for unpacking the power that structures individual political engagement via corporate products and brands. At the same time however, the contradiction of “willing exploitation” (Terranova, 2004) within research into labour reinforces the fact that power within these new forms of political engagement is not straightforward, and cannot easily be deemed as either pure corporate domination or individual empowerment. Recent research into political empowerment through brands and advertising (e.g. Duffy, 2010) demonstrates that individuals can and do derive enjoyment from participating through branded spaces, reflecting the complex power dynamics of these evolving forms of political engagement.

2.5 Resistance and small-scale action

Duffy's (2010) study of participant engagement with Dove's advertising campaign looks into this contradiction between exploitative corporate labour and "empowered consumers" through user-generated content. Her study showed that individuals can still find ways of negotiating dominant ideas, while also demonstrating a reflexivity of their role to engage within corporate, branded spaces (Duffy, 2010:40-1). Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser mirror this position, arguing that practices of commodity activism cannot be labelled "profit versus politics", but rather they involve a combination of the two, and they have merit for individuals to find ways of self-expression through "cultural interventions" (2012:3).

Research into the participatory aspects of Web 2.0 (e.g. Burgess and Green, 2009; Olsson, 2010), has similarly looked at the way users reclaim some of this top-down power by actively using content for their own purposes, shifting towards becoming producers, or "prod-users" (Bruns, 2008). Likewise, Jenkins (2006) notes that convergence culture involves shifting power dynamics, impacting the shape resistance takes. He argues that the advertising industry and media industry alike have had to re-think their strategies and their relationships to consumers based on this shift in control, and processes of top-down corporate power and user power can operate simultaneously.

While these scholars show that there is room for consumers/users to resist control and make their own meaning within these spaces, others argue that companies/producers still seek to control this behaviour, shifting their strategies accordingly (Deuze, 2007; Zwick et al., 2008). Similarly, Carpentier notes that although maximalist forms of participation through the media allow for greater access and thus theoretically flatten traditional power structures, hierarchies of participation still exist between the public and the producer (2011:69). What these scholars point out, is that resistance to dominant messages and frames by individuals still largely occurs within the boundaries established by these same powerful actors, structuring resistance and thus the kinds of acceptable participation.

Arvidsson (2006:74) discusses this contradiction of labour within brand culture, where corporations seek to encourage a sense of "free" consumer activity which equates to co-creative labour for the brand, while simultaneously structuring this consumer activity so that it stays within their accepted boundaries. When brands absorb political causes as part of their

marketing campaigns, this false sense of consumer freedom and structuring of behaviour can become problematic for individual political engagement. As Banet-Weiser notes, only specific types of political causes are seen as appropriately “brandable” (2012:147), thus filtering the kinds of engagement allowed as Arvidsson (2006) observes.

This adoption of only “safe politics” by brands, Banet-Weiser argues, means that “nonbranded politics are rendered invisible” (2012:148). What this means for individuals then is a contradictory position, where political engagement is encouraged, but only insofar as it pertains to the brand’s version of political causes. The competitive market environment which structures politics within brand culture means that *types* of political engagement and political causes must also compete, and those who do not meet market standards will be neglected (Banet-Weiser, 2012:18).

A few studies have highlighted instances when consumers become more difficult to control and how this impacts the brand and corporation behind it (e.g. Bhattacharjee et al., 2014; Romani et al., 2015) but little attention has been paid to resistance within commodity activism specifically. Banet-Weiser’s (2012:139) argument that consumer citizens have become individual political labourers working within a market setting is thus a useful entry point to examining the clash between exploitative labour and personal empowerment in this case of commodity activism.

These bodies of literature remind us that boundaries and rules still exist within these realms of media culture and brand culture alike, and my approach seeks to analyse this tension within the commodity activism sphere. These positions show that simply because corporate interests are involved, it should not lead to an automatic reduction of the argument to one of manipulation, and equally, consumer resistance is still within the boundaries established by dominant groups. While consumer/user resistance is characterised as empowering and a way to regain control from dominant groups, Jenkins (2006:248) equally warns of simply analysing resistance as one-directional, since it is a deep and multi-faceted activity, driven by many reasons and motivations. Jenkins’ perspective here is useful to keep in mind in analysing the complex motivations for consumer resistance in my research.

Acknowledging the small yet creative ways that individuals demonstrate resistance and move beyond exploitative labour may be a productive way of analysing the participatory aspects of commodity activism (Gauntlett, 2011 & 2014). Taking a similar approach, Bennett (2012:28) states “communication technologies can activate the “small world” phenomena through which distant people are in remarkably close reach.” Within dispersed consumer movements such as political consumerism and commodity activism, scholars note how significant small, daily activities can be helpful for the broader political cause, and also for a sense of individual integrity by practising personal ethics (e.g. Haenfler et al., 2012:8-9). This connection of micro participation with the macro imagined political community is also described by Carpentier as an ideal form of “maximalist participation” (2011:17).

Paying attention to the little things, and diverse ways people use brands and digital media is extremely useful, and can in fact help us understand the broader picture of participation in specific contexts, answering some of the questions over the fruitfulness of new forms of political engagement. For that reason, research on practices of participation at the amateur level is highly beneficial to understanding the way people express their opinions and interact diversely with broader political issues, as Gauntlett remarks, “small steps into a changed world are better than no steps” (2014:2).

2.6 Conclusion

The key debates which structure literature around alternative modes of political engagement such as commodity activism illustrate both the risks associated with individualism and commercialisation of politics, as well as the potential to enhance individual and collective action. They are important arguments to keep in mind, to understand the nuances of commodity activism that is facilitated by digital media in this research.

Exploring the often contradictory discussions on how labour and resistance operate within these forms of activism allows for a closer analysis of the relationship between individual grassroots action and corporate influence. This body of literature reminds us to move beyond conceptualising this relationship as a binary construction, and instead pay attention to the small, micro contexts and how individuals make meaning for themselves and connect to the macro political community.

Carpentier's discussion of multi-site, maximalist political engagement (2011:17-19) is thus a fruitful position to adopt. Since maximalist participation fuses multiple sites of participation, it thus allows for a deeper engagement with the political, extending beyond institutional politics through diverse micro and macro forms of participation (Carpentier, 2011:17). This is similar to Gauntlett's argument for a synthesis of both on- and offline environments; he notes that digital technologies and the internet are not solely responsible for creative participation, but that they certainly help to facilitate and amplify it, allowing for increased access through visibility (2014:1). In that way, our focus as researchers should not be limited to an "either/or" debate, but instead we should acknowledge that both online and offline spaces have merits, and both kinds of participation should be encouraged (2014:2-3).

This perspective is useful for analysing where the use of digital media by both corporations and consumers aids engagement, yet makes up just one part of a multi-site interaction. On the one hand, we should avoid an overly deterministic approach to the role of digital media in political engagement in arguing that it is the single reason for political action. Yet, we must still acknowledge the centrality of media technology, particularly digital media platforms, and the part they play in emerging activist practices. By exploring political engagement as part of this multi-site approach, and looking at how individual action operates within this situated context will help unpack the value of commodity activism as it fits into emerging forms of political engagement.

CHAPTER 3

Methods and Methodology

This research employed qualitative semi-structured interviews with Oatly consumers and employees in Sweden in order to analyse the power dynamic of the relationship between Oatly and their consumers and thus the value of commodity activism through digital media. Interviews with 18 individuals were conducted in total; 10 with Oatly consumers, and 8 with employees of Oatly. The consumer group of interviews are referred to as “consumers” throughout this research because their political engagement in this case is premised upon their consumption and interaction with Oatly’s products. This chapter details the steps taken to recruit and conduct these interviews, the process of data analysis, as well as a discussion of methodology.

3.1 The case

Using a case example was a productive approach for this research because it allowed for a grounded, contextualised analysis of the wider phenomenon of commodity activism within this setting, as a way to gain “insights into cultural processes” (Gray, 2003:68). This particular case is appropriate for providing cultural insights into alternative forms of political engagement since it demonstrates a diverse fusion of activist practices which operate through the non-traditional political space of brand culture and the media. The surrounding lawsuit between Oatly and LRF Mjöljk further points to the suitability of this particular case, since it sparked such widespread public debate in mainstream and social media, and involved a variety of actors, making it a rich site of analysis.

While the use of cases has been criticised for a lack of generalisability, thus influencing their validity as a research method, Flyvbjerg argues that this underestimates “the power of the good example” (2001:77). He notes that in-depth, qualitative cases can be very effective at generalising, particularly as a supplementary method, while also stating that the notion of generalisability has tended to be “overvalued” (2001:77). Therefore, drawing on a case as well as interviews in this thesis can be seen to provide a useful, contextualised example of how political engagement through consumption operates.

In choosing methods which enhance cases, Gray (2003:70) notes that interviews are highly suited for research which addresses practices. As this thesis aims to explore the practices of political participation carried out by Oatly consumers, the interview method proved useful to explore this case. The qualitative semi-structured interviews, as well interviewing both sides of the case – employees and consumers, helped to gain a detailed understanding of this relationship, narrowing in on the specific “story” as it is told by a diverse network of actors (Flyvbjerg, 2004:400). The qualitative aspect of these interviews focused on nuances of interviewees’ experiences, concerned with their daily lives and taking a form similar to “everyday conversation” (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015:18).

3.2 Recruitment and sampling

Firstly, two pilot interviews were conducted at the start of this project, and they proved vital in evaluating the research questions and refining the topic (Gray, 2003:102), helping to reveal early issues that could be addressed through sampling. Since the aim of the thesis was to explore political engagement, an early problem faced during these pilot interviews was speaking with people who were Oatly consumers based on dietary restrictions, such as lactose intolerance. For these participants, their use of Oatly’s products was not connected to a kind of political engagement, or interaction with the “milk wars” that this project sought to investigate. Thus, the piloting process was beneficial for informing where calls for research participants were posted, and lead to further groundwork to research the specific interest groups who were involved in engaging with the lawsuit and were highly active online.

Following Gobo’s steps for sampling procedure (2004:417), the research questions formed the starting point, identifying the area of exploration as political engagement through consumption. This area was also extended to sample based on incidents, therefore the lawsuit became a central concept around which to look for participants. Age range and gender of participants was left open, since the aim was to understand political engagement on the individual level, regardless of these demographics, however all participants were over the age of 16 to comply with ethical guidelines. The sample was limited to individuals living in Sweden since Oatly are a Swedish brand and due to the situated context of the lawsuit between LRF Mjölke.

Based on early research conducted into mainstream media debates surrounding the lawsuit between Oatly and LRF Mjöl, it became clear that vegan and animal rights actors were the main group engaged in political interactions, and there was a significant amount of debate on social media channels as well as personal blogs.⁹ Significance thus played a key role in where “call for participants” information was posted, leading to an assessment of which areas would likely contain the most relevant people for this case. Consumer interview participants were therefore solicited firstly through a call for research participants posted in the two largest vegan Facebook groups in Skåne and Sweden; “Veganer i Sverige” and “Vegan i Södra Sverige?”¹⁰. Since this research seeks to investigate political engagement of a vegan food alternative, it made sense to post the “call for participants” initially in these two Facebook groups.

Drawing on preliminary research the #BackaOatly Facebook event¹¹ was also discovered, as it was referenced several times in both mainstream and social media as a response to the lawsuit, and included over 2,000 invited guests, therefore posting a call for participants flyer here directly related to the Oatly lawsuit. Individual bloggers in Sweden were also solicited, based on a search of blog posts related to Oatly in between 2014-2015 in line with “detecting cases within extreme situations” of purposive sampling (Gobo, 2004:418). This additional targeted sampling allowed for “saturation” of the area of exploration (political engagement with Oatly) and to “comprehensively explore it and its relationship to other concepts” (the lawsuit) (Rudestam and Newton, 2014:124).

Interviews with Oatly employees were solicited through personal email with one member of staff, then to the remaining 7 participants using snowball sampling (Gobo, 2004:419). The decision to conduct a high amount of interviews with different Oatly employees in various positions across the company was necessary to compare their responses with each other. That way, not just one person’s - for example, the CEO’s - voice matters and comes to represent the whole company. While it is impossible to argue that all of these voices together represent the entire company, it certainly creates a deeper picture of the decisions behind the company, from different perspectives within it, allowing for a more complex understanding of how Oatly as a group of people reflect on their relationship with their consumers.

To reach the final number of participants, the aim was to continue conducting interviews until the point of a feeling of “saturation” (Rudestam and Newton, 2014:125) where themes and answers began to repeat themselves. For the consumer interviews, this saturation point began around the eighth interview, however two more interviews were conducted in order to solidify these initial data patterns, giving a total of 10 consumer participants. During this process of reaching the final number of participants, the transcripts were constantly reviewed after each interview to see that there was enough rich data gathered.

Although Rudestam and Newton (2014:125) caution that full “saturation” can never completely occur, due to the uniqueness of each participant’s viewpoint, they note that “it is important to collect sufficient data to represent the breadth and depth of the phenomenon without becoming overwhelmed.” Gray (2003:101) supports this point of manageability, arguing that small-scale projects should allow for enough participants to provide detailed data, but not so many that this data becomes too difficult to analyse. Following their perspectives, the total number of 18 participants is suitable for the scope and length of this project, and allowed for proper management the quantity of data without impacting the quality of the analysis.

3.3 The interviews

Interviews with consumers ranged between 50-90 minutes, and were conducted both in person and over the phone depending on the participants’ proximity to the Malmö/Lund area. Within these 10 consumer participants, 8 identified as vegans and animal rights activists. Interviews with Oatly employees ranged between 60-90 minutes and were conducted in person with the following positions: CEO, creative director, sustainability manager, social media manager, communications director, two co-founders, and consumer relations specialist.

All of the interviews took the form of semi-structured qualitative interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), and although key topics and questions were prepared, the aim here was to make these flexible, forming a kind of “structured conversation” (Gray, 2003:95). The interviews followed broad topics and questions in a prepared interview guide (see Appendix A) which was deliberately flexible and customised for each participant if necessary, for

example, pertaining to specific job function for the Oatly employees. Although there was an interview guide, each participant was made aware that they could add or amend the questions at any time, and also return to questions at a later time if needed.

The goal was to allow participants the space to elaborate on a specific question in-depth if they felt it required more time, and also feel free to raise additional discussion points at any time during the interview. The semi-structured nature allowed for space to veer off this set list, delving deeper into certain topics raised by participants. In this way, it was more of a two-way conversation which provided added depth to the study as it created a more relaxed environment for a dialogue between the researcher and the subject, rather than an interrogation.

This approach to the collaborative process of interviews means reflecting on the knowledge produced during these interviews. Following Frankenberg (1993) and Gray's (2003) position, interviews are seen as social constructions, rather than providing access to "the truth". Seeing these interactions between myself and the participants as "social encounters" where both researcher and subject participate in the production of experiences and feelings (Rapley, 2004) helps to avoid a kind of one-way exploitation or farming for information from these participants.

This active production of experience can be seen as a limitation, however one way of countering this was to conduct fairly long interviews with these participants so that both of us had the space to continue this production of knowledge. Being aware of the construction of experience by the participants, and often returning to the same themes later in the interviews, made it possible to more fully contrast the different ways they explained the same issue. Although speaking about their own experiences often meant constructing a "version" of the truth, a common critique of research interviews, the opinions of the participants were still useful data of the way they articulated their experiences (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015:287).

3.4 Data analysis

Analysing the data involved a constant process of “checking, questioning, and theorizing the interview findings” (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015:288) throughout each stage. Transcribing each interview from the recordings was highly beneficial to the analysis process, as it allowed for re-examination of the conversations and immersion in the data. After transcribing the interviews, everything was reviewed again in an attempt to become more familiar with the data, listening to recordings as well as re-reading the transcripts. Altheide (1996:43) notes that this repetition is an important component of qualitative data analysis.

Since the interviews conducted were long, the transcripts provided rich data that proved helpful for a qualitative approach. Data analysis was conducted in several phases, and extensive reading of data was carried out throughout the process. It was important not to force pre-existing categories or themes onto the data, by making sure to constantly revise the analytical categories and concepts. The coding process was done after extensive reading and note-taking (Altheide, 1996:43), using different colours and sorting through each transcript to try to find patterns (Berger, 2011:147). Each colour corresponded to a different theme identified in the data, and continuous note-taking occurred during this coding on common threads that appeared. Following this physical colour-coding process, portions were extracted from each transcript and added into the same text file digitally (Appendix B).

This digital process was somewhat helpful to order the categories and themes, however it was more productive to also make hardcopies of these cut-outs to re-arrange specific data more easily, and get an overall picture, seeing where each theme intersected. During this time, it was important to keep returning to the complete transcripts to see the full context of participants’ statements, so that information was not lost or interpreted wrongly. After noting key words and potential concepts within these categories, draft summaries of the categories were written (Altheide, 1996:43) under two broad themes of navigation of corporate appropriation of politics and labour of the lawsuit.

Following Flyvbjerg’s methodological guidelines, I chose to “place power at the core” of my analysis (2001:131) which lead to a central point of the clash between corporate and consumer interests. The power struggle of this relationship thus underpins my analysis as a whole, connecting the “little things” to the wider context of the phenomena (Flyvbjerg,

2001:132-6), which meant the analytical process fit well with the use of a case and interviews.

3.5 Reflecting on ethics and the role of the researcher

In line with my position on the constructed nature of knowledge and experiences during the data collection phase, the role of the researcher must be analysed. During the interviews with consumers a comfortable and open atmosphere was attempted by talking about the researcher's personal experiences and position, thus trying to move away from just "extracting" information from participants. This emphasis on "interview-data-as-topic" versus "interview-data-as-resource" (Rapley, 2004) led to attempts at both creating and acknowledging the interactive, two-way element of these interviews.

Offering information about my own role as a researcher, my ethical framework as a vegan and experience being from a similar cultural context to Sweden was important for the interviews with consumers. As a New Zealander, the experience of living in a cultural and political environment where dairy production is the primary industry and holds a prominent position in society is similar to Sweden. This similarity was discussed, as well as my experience of veganism with many participants during interviews in an attempt to create a mutual dialogue. The reason for this is that this research focuses on individuals involved in the animal rights movement and vegan movements, which are minority movements, therefore it was crucial to make the participants understand that it was a safe environment for them to express their views. In Gray's discussion of Frankenberg's research she similarly notes the way speaking about the researcher's own experiences helped to "give permission" to minority groups when discussing "taboo" subjects (2003:96-7).

Animal activist practices and similarly vegan food consumption are often seen as radical and extreme (Munro, 2005:75-6), thus talking about this topic as it relates to personal political engagement was a potentially sensitive subject for participants. I believe drawing on my own experience as an ethical vegan (and consumer of plant-milk products) helped to remove some of the barriers of discomfort in the hopes of allowing the participants to speak freely about their activist practices without feeling discriminated against. On the other hand, this acknowledgement of my experience and position could be seen as creating a false sense of

trust and friendship with participants, therefore it could be an exploitation of this trust in eliciting more “open” responses from them.

This discussion points to an ethical grey area within loosely-structured “conversation-like” interviews, where the boundary between creating a comfortable environment may in some ways obscure the research component. However, following a constructionist perspective of interviewing, the “non-neutrality” of the interviewer is seen as an important part of the collaborative process of the interaction (Rapley, 2004:19). These perspectives highlight an attempt to remove hierarchies between researcher and “object”, as Rapley notes “this cooperative, engaged relationship – centred on mutual self-disclosure – can encourage ‘deep disclosure’.” (2004:19). These perspectives were kept in mind and supported my mutual disclosures, where offering information on my own position helped reinforce the collaborative aspect of the interviews. As several scholars note, it is almost impossible for researchers to actually “be neutral” since they are always in control of the conversation, they initiated it and essentially structure the interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997; Rapley, 2004).

Another reflection on an ethical issue could be the language barrier between myself and participants. This is an area which could have been strengthened, particularly with phone interviews since it could have made it more difficult for participants to fully express themselves, adding an extra layer of construction. Interviewees may not have felt as comfortable speaking in English compared to if they were speaking Swedish. To compensate for this potential language limitation, each participant was made aware that they could pause at any moment, ask for clarification, or use Swedish words if they felt the need to. A few participants took the opportunity to ask me to re-state a question which illustrated that they felt comfortable with our interaction.

To maintain transparency throughout this research process, all interview participants were given the opportunity to read their transcripts and the quotes used in the final project. Recordings of all interviews were kept in a safe environment and were not shared with anyone but myself. All names of consumer interview subjects have been changed, however names of Oatly employees have not been changed since this information and their job titles are public knowledge.

CHAPTER 4

Exploring the contradictions of political engagement

This chapter analyses the power dynamics of the relationship between Oatly and their consumers, looking at the constant push-and-pull that reveals itself through these interviews. The nuanced perspectives these consumers possess in their negotiation of doing politics within branded spaces is evident, and while broad patterns emerge from these interviews, the diversity of each person's view is important to keep in mind so as not to overlook each experience as unique and grounded in this situated context (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015:102). All consumer interviewees were aware of the lawsuit between Oatly and LRF Mjöl, and although not all of these individuals produced content in relation to the lawsuit, this incident formed a large part of their discussions and testimony during the interviews.

While the individuals who produced content during the lawsuit demonstrated slightly different motivations for participating, there is a critical awareness of their own role as activists and consumers, highlighting the lawsuit as one key area of interaction with Oatly's brand. Outside of the lawsuit, interviewees primarily interacted with Oatly through various products by way of cooking, sharing images and using buying habits to influence others. Across all of the interviews with Oatly employees their opinions of their consumers were very alike, and for all employees the lawsuit was also a major discussion point.

Based on this, the two main themes which presented themselves as sites where the political relationship between Oatly and the consumers played out were; the navigation of Oatly's appropriation of politics, and the labour of fighting the milk wars. The first theme looks at individuals' use of critical consumption and digital media as areas of resistance, and their awareness of Oatly's adoption of political causes. Following this, the clash between exploitative labour and individual political engagement during the lawsuit examines the duality and contradictory nature of these positions.

4.1 “We want to change the world, right?”¹² Navigating corporate appropriation of politics

As a space for political engagement, brand culture proves problematic as it seems to contradict the commitment to political change for the public good, focusing instead on market incentives. For Oatly, 2014 saw the successful re-launch of their company as a “lifestyle brand” following the direction of their newly appointed CEO Toni Petersson. Through product and online marketing they shifted to position themselves as a “value-based” brand, linking their new image with an adoption of a political position based on environmentalism in support of plant-based agriculture.

The paradox of situating political activism within a corporate space is summarised in Oatly’s CEO’s statement “The more we sell, the better we do for the world” (Petersson, 2016). Individuals are then able to access these political values by consuming Oatly products; “changing the world” here becomes inseparable from consumer culture, and specifically through buying Oatly’s brand. There is a strong sense of Oatly drawing on a political position that reflects current ethical consumption trends (Mujerakhee and Banet-Weiser, 2012:10) raising the question so central to commodity activism, of how corporate appropriation of political ideals impacts political engagement for individuals, and for the cause itself.

How then do consumers navigate this apparent commercialisation of political values by Oatly in meaningful and critical ways, and what does this reveal about the value of commodity activism for their own political engagement? What these interviewees show is diverse individual political engagement that speaks to the wider imagined political community, combining micro everyday participation with macro participation (Carpentier, 2011:17) in unique ways. Within this theme, consumers navigate this corporate appropriation firstly through critical consumption choices, secondly, fusing online and offline spaces for activism to suit their own needs, and lastly by finding space for resistance against corporate messages.

4.1.1 Making critical consumption choices

Consumers' engagement with Oatly represents a communicative space for political engagement (Dahlgren, 2009:115); for many interviewees, Oatly's products are seen as one tool for their political advocacy, whether it be veganism, animal rights or environmentalism. Their "critical consumption" (Yates, 2011) of Oatly's products becomes one component of their multi-site participation with vegan issues.

Several interviewees express the importance of Oatly's products and the role of influencing individual food purchasing habits in promoting the vegan cause. Consumption and production of alternative food products is spoken of as closely connected to advocacy for the wider cause, and daily purchasing habits form a significant part of their political action:

I do think if we're going to create a vegan world which is my vision, we need alternatives. Good alternatives. (Erik)

I feel great personally buying Oatly products, since we buy stuff everyday isn't it better if it's vegan stuff? And if you can show people that they can still enjoy it more than non-vegan food then that's good. I think what we buy is one of the most powerful things we can do for the vegan cause. (Daniel)

Accessing political values through a consumer product like Oatly can be seen as one such space for communicative action, connecting the micro everyday sites of food consumption to the macro issues of sustainability, animal rights and veganism. As Dahlgren (2009:115-6) notes, individuals need spaces connected to their everyday life-worlds in which they can talk to others about political issues. Equally, interviewees show that they undertake "critical consumption" (Yates, 2011), basing their behaviour on their political and ethical agendas, which is support for all vegan alternatives, and their potential to enable the growth of the movement by helping others to access veganism practically.

Consumer activity here exemplifies the rhetoric of "eating for change" (Johnston and Cairns: 2012), situated within a "new politics of food" (Schweikhardt and Browne 2001) in which political engagement hinges on individual consumption patterns of alternative milk and meat products. Cherry's (2006:155-6) discussion of the vegan movement reflects these positions, noting that veganism should be seen as a "cultural movement" which unlike other traditional social movements, is centred on "everyday practices in one's lifestyle."

While these everyday food practices can be seen as positive for enhancing a sense of consumer power, interviewees' acknowledgement of the role of consumer products in helping the vegan cause means situating political change firmly within capitalist culture. There is a danger of relying heavily on the logics of the market, which in this case would seem to place control with the corporation, Oatly, if "doing" politics can only be accessed through buying (and thus promoting) Oatly's products. Consumers' individual political advocacy *using* Oatly's products would seem to enhance Oatly's commercial agenda, as the company have sought to draw on political issues like environmentalism through their "lifestyle" branding. As Oatly's creative director John remarks:

So "lifestyle" for me isn't Red Bull. It's about finding a way to become part of peoples' lives [...] when the 16-22 year old girls are walking around flashing off their little oat drink cartons, it's because [...] whatever we're talking about is what they stand for. So we find a way to fit in to their lives.

For Oatly, becoming "part of peoples' lives" is then connected to their re-branding, as a strategy for positioning personal politics with their brand. This reflects the tension between commercial and consumer ideals, where the inclusion of Oatly's products in individuals' "everyday lives" functions both as corporate appropriation of politics, and also as individual political engagement. However, what many consumers demonstrate is a critical awareness of this commercial motivation, extending their engagement beyond the products and the company itself, where their own form of activism can be achieved in this setting.

Several interviewees show a reflexivity over their own use of Oatly's products and brand, as well as a mindfulness of Oatly's position as a commercial entity:

Just because you have a vegetarian alternative you should only go like what? Work for nothing? People have to make their money and pay for their rent and food. You have to be allowed to have a business. How could we otherwise get our oat milk? Otherwise we should only drink water or cow milk. I don't want cow milk. (Olivia)

I don't actually care if [Oatly] mean what they say, but what they're saying is the truth to me. And if it's true to me it doesn't have to be for them. So if they can give me the products that I want, even if they don't use it or believe in it for themselves, anyhow they give me what I want and I'm thankful for that. (Malin)

For consumers, their reflexivity over profit-motives negotiates this corporate appropriation of politics in very pragmatic terms, indicating the ambivalent position of brand cultures today. On the one hand, this individualism is positive since interviewees show they are not

passive consumers by acknowledging market influences on Oatly's political messaging. On the other hand, this focus on "what I get for myself" as an individual in this exchange, seemingly undercuts the value of doing politics through brand culture where engagement is motivated by individual needs rather than collective ones (Maniates, 2001; Baek, 2010:1066).

Here, the core debates of consumption as a form of political engagement are reflected, highlighting the dialectic of individualism as both positive and negative. This kind of individualism sits uneasily within political engagement, since it places the consumer's perspective ahead of the collective movement. However, interviewees reflect on this duality of commodity activism, showing that it is possible for them to occupy *both* positions of consumer and activist, while maintaining some control for themselves through a combination of these roles. Political engagement in this case goes beyond supporting the brand itself, and also beyond individual gain, highlighting the nuances of commodity activism within different contexts:

It's not like when I take a picture I keep Oatly in the background to emphasise the vegan. For me it's beyond that and I want to encourage people to cook vegan food and I don't care really about the products as long as they are vegan. (Katrine)

The interaction between a sense of self, the brand, and the wider political collective is much more complex in this case, with interviewees demonstrating their desire to strengthen the vegan and animal rights movement through their critical consumption. Their own experience as individuals, being vegans, becomes connected to the macro political community, which seeks to inspire communal mobilisation around veganism, a theme which is repeated in interviewees' fluid use of both online and offline spaces for activism.

4.1.2 Connected spaces of political engagement

For many interviewees, Oatly products are used as a talking point through which to raise awareness about alternative eating habits such as veganism and animal rights across both offline and online spheres. Interviewees showed that they act as advocates for the vegan movement in their daily lives, whether it be talking with colleagues in the workplace or posting online, often using products like Oatly as a doorway in this quest to inform others and share their political views on milk:

Many times when I've been drinking Oatly people have been intrigued and asking about stuff. If I'm going out for coffee with some friends and I get oat milk, they're like "I'll try that - oh it actually tastes good!" So I think that's one of the best ways to talk about veganism, because they try it and maybe it'll change their habits. (Daniel)

This notion of showing positive vegan examples through consumerist practices is mirrored in the online sphere, fusing and extending the spaces for political engagement. Lifestyle blogger Elin describes the dual purpose of her blog as centred on education about animal rights as well as highlighting vegan products:

My focus is to start more awareness of the animal industry, and that people can buy more animal-friendly products [...] because people don't know that there are alternatives to what we have in the regular stores to today.

For Elin, being an animal rights activist means helping others improve their own consumption patterns using her blog, Instagram account and offline interactions to do so. Similarly, another interviewee Olivia, describes that her blog profiles many vegan brands, not just Oatly, because she wants to be "a small kind of niched news desk for vegetarian products" with "tips about what to use and why you should not have milk in a sustainable version ... to use vegetarian milk instead." Vegan education becomes linked to sharing of consumer products and practices for both of these interviewees, aided by the tools of digital media and the practice of critical consumption.

For almost all interviewees, they do not distinguish between the value of offline versus online spaces for their own political engagement and for educating others about veganism, speaking fluidly of these spaces as a kind of synthesis of both. In talking about his own way of doing animal rights and vegan activism, Erik sees a benefit in using diverse platforms for action, through a combination of both online and physical outlets:

I don't buy that something is real, and something is not real, because it is real even if it's something online [...] you don't know what will be most effective [...] it's also good to go in different places and you can use the same kind of material to different kind of target groups, different platforms, different media outlets.

This contrasts with Lekakis' (2013:117) findings of consumers participating with Fairtrade coffee activism, who did not view digital technology as a way to enhance their engagement with the cause but instead showed preference for physical spaces for activism. In this case however, interviewees see digital technology as directly enabling their own political engagement for its ability to "find others that think the same" (Malin), "reach so many more

people” (Daniel), and be “open 24 hours a day” (Patrik). Their own use of the digitally-networked environment to enhance their political engagement with issues like veganism reflects the positive potential of digital media described by many researchers as facilitating political participation and ease of access (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Gauntlett, 2014).

Here, digital media is not the only mode of political engagement for these individuals, but rather the offline act of critical consumption is “given a substantial boost by the opportunity to connect, organise, share ideas and inspire each other.” (Gauntlett, 2014). This connected space where political activism occurs for these individuals comes to represent “maximalist participation” (Carpentier, 2011:17), combining micro participation in everyday spaces of work and home life with macro participation in the broader online political community. For individual political engagement, this can be seen as a positive example of a diverse and personal use of platforms to connect to other politically-minded people and share their views through positive examples.

When I share stuff I use the hashtag vegan, to share vegan stuff [...] I have non-vegan followers that I want to show "ah this could be vegan as well!" - for me part of the vegan activist thing. (Katrine)

These online and offline activities of vegan and animal rights advocates also create significant brand value and exposure for Oatly, however these same consumers also represent an obstacle to Oatly’s brand image, signalling the twofold outcome of creating a “political” brand identity, and highlighting the struggle for control over expression between Oatly and their consumers. What implications does this raise for a politics expressed through the realm of private enterprises, and what space does it leave for individual resistance to these dominant structures?

4.1.3 Transgressing brand legitimacy: Militant vegans

Undesirable types of consumer engagement that arise in this case illustrate the contestation over power in this corporate/consumer relationship, demonstrating the unpredictability that comes with shaping a brand culture around political ideals (Banet-Weiser, 2012:218). The consumers that fall outside of the bounds of Oatly’s control and brand image are characterised by Oatly as “militant” (John, Björn) “radical” (Toni) and “hardcore” (Sara) vegans whom Oatly seek to distance themselves from.

Oatly's characterisation of militant vegan consumers has implications for the validity of commodity activism as a whole, since it highlights the priority of market imperatives over participatory inclusion. Brands like Oatly can then acceptably 'adopt' political ideals such as veganism or sustainability, but their reaction to this "extreme" group of consumers shows that this is a limited kind of politics, and one that does not accommodate any or all kinds of engagement. This corporate appropriation and mediation of "acceptable" political engagement ultimately places Oatly in control of who can and cannot participate. As Banet-Weiser notes "Within these dynamics, the brand is the legitimating factor, no matter what the specific political ideology or practice in question." (2012:18)

Oatly had originally included a statement (Appendix C) claiming they were a "vegan company" on their packaging (*Image 1*). However as Oatly's creative director John describes, they felt the need to remove the statement because of the unwanted reactions from vegan consumers who would ask questions over the extent of Oatly employees' veganism. They instead pivoted to frame their political stance towards environmentalism:

The expectation level was so high [...] and the militant vegans will go in and they'll look at the fertiliser that you use on the fields actually comes from animals [...] it became quite; 'let's just not encourage that.'



Image 1: Vegan statement on Oatly's packaging (Image: lilinghaangel.com)

The decision by Oatly to initially communicate their apparent vegan stance and then remove it can be seen as their appropriation of the vegan cause for marketing purposes rather than

political ones. This has implications for vegan consumers who felt drawn to Oatly because of their vegan statement and the connection to their ethical worldview. Some interviewees expressed their disappointment at Oatly's change of heart over being an overtly vegan company, demonstrating an awareness of the implications of what co-opting veganism might mean for the movement:

I feel like [Oatly are] speaking for vegans in a way that is harmful for vegans, and they get more money from it [...] That's really harmful I think [...] Because when I read it I thought 'oh here's a company being proud of the vegan', and then you read all of the other slogans in that light, of the vegan thing. And now it feels like yeah well how do you feel about vegans? (Katrine)

Framing their communication of plant-based foods from an environmental perspective rather than a vegan perspective demonstrates Oatly's priority to the brand, rather than the politics. Banet-Weiser discusses the conditions that political issues must meet in order for them to qualify for being incorporated into a brand. She argues that brands "attach to politics that are legible in brand vocabulary" and thus represent "safe politics" (2012:148). Animal rights and veganism are seen by Oatly as too unpredictable for their brand image, and thus "militant" vegan consumers must be discouraged from engaging with Oatly:

So here's the thing with vegans, that's their problem [...] if you start to talk about the animals first then you will get like an opposite - their reaction will be like opposite to yours. And that's unfortunately the way vegans today communicate, which is a problem to get mainstream in here. But if they talk about health and the environment, the process will be shorter. So that's why we don't communicate about animal welfare. (Toni, CEO of Oatly)

Here we see the preconditions that exist for individual political engagement; some forms of political issues are positive for Oatly to encourage and align with their image, but only if it conforms to their version of what is "brandable." Since militant and radical vegans represent an obstacle to Oatly becoming "mainstream" and thus threatening their profit growth, they cannot be included in "doing" their politics through Oatly. As Arvidsson (2005:244) notes, current brand management is premised upon the seemingly "free" empowerment of consumers, but equally on making sure this freedom of engagement is structured within very specific boundaries.

As we have seen however, consumers make their own meaning through their engagement with Oatly, and stand to gain something for themselves. Thus, regardless of Oatly's re-framing of their image to omit the animal rights perspective, consumers can still imbue this

meaning into the brand. For many interviewees, the product and brand still symbolise veganism and are inherently connected to animal rights activism. One vegan blogger describes why she feels an affinity towards Oatly, and why she is drawn to them: “from what I see and what I hear, I think [Oatly] stand for the animal rights perspective ... from the beginning I think it's animal rights perspective. I hope so!” (Elin). Her hopes here are bound up with Oatly “being” this vegan company and taking a stand for animal rights; for her she finds meaning in this particular connection.

As a platform for political engagement then, these consumers’ subversion of Oatly’s control by continuing to connect the products with an animal rights perspective shows that individuals can still operate within dominant frameworks to “do” politics their own way. A number of interviewees demonstrated an awareness of the different levels of veganism as both empowerment and appropriation, where the authenticity of Oatly’s vegan stance was negotiated in terms of what it provided to them as individuals:

Even if [Oatly] aren’t honest about veganism, their products tick all the boxes that I need to, so it wouldn't really matter. I think if you can have a product that's sustainable and better for the environment and for animals, then how you get there isn't really as important as the end result. (Daniel)

To me it doesn't matter if [Toni] is vegan or not. What matters to me is that he seems to care [...] And he's found a way to explain the product that talks directly to vegans. So I don't care if he's vegan. (Malin)

Interviewees show that they can transform Oatly’s version of veganism to meet their own needs, so that Oatly’s attempts at re-framing to exclude veganism hold less influence; there is still space that exists within this context for resistance and negotiation of the dominant meaning. The characterisation of “militant” vegans highlights the tension of situating politics alongside market imperatives, and therefore is a significant ramification of political engagement that is guided by consumer culture. If market imperatives shape political expression in this way, influencing the kind of communication Oatly produce, anyone, including “radical vegans” can be excluded, and their views can become marginalised.

These connected modes of political engagement by vegans and environmentalists demonstrate the duality of participation in this case. Their political engagement negotiates corporate appropriation of political values but can also be seen as exploitative consumer

labour, working to promote Oatly's brand image, and equally, if accessing political values is achieved through consumer practices, who is excluded from participating?

4.2 The labour of fighting the milk wars

“Our consumers have been fighting for us, they've been running this war for us”
(Toni, CEO of Oatly)

Toni's statement encapsulates the duality of individual political engagement of consumers “fighting” in the milk wars. Consumers' activities during the lawsuit between Oatly and LRF Mjölkk illustrate a constant tension between exploitative/appropriative labour and individual empowerment, and the ongoing push-and-pull of control between corporate and consumer interests. At the same time that individuals engage with the politics of ethical food consumption and veganism through the lawsuit, this participation doubly operates as co-creative labour (Zwick et al., 2008), aiding in making Oatly's brand synonymous with a sense of “truth” and the politics of milk.

Although the court ruled against Oatly, they characterise this as a “win” since the brand gained a high amount of public exposure, as co-founder Björn notes, “it's the best thing that ever happened to the company, hands down [...] all the big newspapers and editorial pages...” This “win” was largely built on the labour of Oatly supporters, who created online content such as blog posts, wrote opinion articles and took to social media to express their support of Oatly, as social media manager Sara describes “When we put the lawsuit on the net and told the story I think people did kind of the job for us to some point.”

While this labour serves to bolster Oatly's positive political associations, creating significant brand value for the company, what interviewees reveal is not a straightforward case of exploitation, or one-dimensional adoration on the part of consumers. Rather, many interviewees demonstrate a desire to enhance their own political agendas as opposed to the brand through an awareness of collective action, and reflexivity of their own political engagement. There is again a back and forth negotiation of control within this relationship, underscoring the ambivalence of brand culture and the highly individualised climate of neoliberalism, where consumer participation is often contingent upon them getting something for themselves from this interaction. Within this theme, this ambivalence presents

itself firstly in the manufacturing of brand value through “truth”, secondly in the duality of emotion, and lastly subverting labour through personalised political engagement.

4.2.1 Manufacturing brand value through truth

A common thread across both consumer and employee interviews was a sense of ideological and political “truth” related to Oatly’s position during the lawsuit. Through the online and offline interaction with the lawsuit, consumer activity and opinion can be seen to manufacture brand value for Oatly through these discussions of the truth. Consumers’ communication about their views of the truth over the political issue of ethical milk work simultaneously as individual political engagement, but also make this “truth” inseparable from the brand.

We see this creation of truth operating through the online engagement with the #BackaOatly hashtag campaign, meaning “support Oatly” (*Image 2*). The court’s decision to ban Oatly’s marketing slogans such as “It’s like milk, but made for humans” and “No milk, no soy, no badness” sparked widespread political engagement online, with Oatly supporters rallying to keep these phrases alive on social media with initiatives like this.



Image 2: Image created for #BackaOatly Facebook event page and Twitter (#BackaOatly)

The hashtag #BackaOatly quickly became popular across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and called for individuals to join together by following four simple steps: taking photos of their plant-based food, adding the hashtag “support Oatly” and “Swedish Milk”, along with one of the banned slogans, and then sharing their images with their online networks:

The aim is to go to social media to spread the phrases and messages that were banned in the judgment. Let this be used as an advantage and to show the absurdity of the judgement! We as individuals are not prohibited from using phrases and therefore we are taking over. - #BackaOatly

For most interviewees, sharing these illegal marketing phrases is used by them as a way of promoting the truth about dairy production, and to engage others in conversations about ethical food consumption. Speaking about her use of the #BackaOatly hashtag with Oatly's banned marketing slogans, one interviewee notes:

I thought [Oatly] are standing for just telling the truth about milk, because it's *not* for humans! [...] and the milk industry is a big evil company and I wanted people to see how wrong it is for Oatly to lose in court for actually speaking the truth, so I put the hashtag and tweeted so much to try and open their eyes. (Mathilda)

Individual political engagement like this which draws Oatly's own marketing slogans into political discussions over veganism, animal rights and ethical food manufactures value for Oatly, doubling as a form of free labour. As Zwick et al. note, "Value within this model is the result of *social* communication...as consumers accept the marketer's value proposition and complement and elaborate on its meaning, effectiveness, and functionality, their activities are transformed into acts of production." (2008:175, original emphasis).

This communication of an ideological "truth" of ethical milk by consumers dually works to align this "truth" directly with Oatly's brand, transforming their political engagement into brand work. By sharing Oatly's marketing slogans, consumer activity is rendered an act of spreading "the forbidden truth", making Oatly's slogans and thus their brand position, synonymous with these ideals. "Backa" as a hashtag has a history in Sweden of being used to show support for individuals who were associated with political causes. In these cases, the social media hashtags became not only a way of supporting certain celebrities for taking a political stance on various issues, but also as a kind of activism to demonstrate one's affinity for the cause itself. For example, #BackaAdam became popular on social media in July 2015 when Swedish rapper Adam Tensta walked off during a television broadcast on TV4 in protest of normalised racism on the channel.¹³

By using "backa" as a hashtag to support Oatly, the brand itself is made into a political cause to be defended, and Oatly are aligned with these previous "champions" of causes. Consumers thus "work" to create this sense of truth for Oatly, and the political issues

become attached to the brand, providing immense value for Oatly through these positive associations as championing the truth about dairy production. In describing her motivation for posting about Oatly after the lawsuit on her blog and her Instagram account, one interviewee notes a desire to simultaneously expose the truth of the milk industry, while crediting Oatly for standing up for this truth:

I was angry that they lost and I was angry that people don't realise how the milk industry works [...] I want the courts and I want the system to take this seriously that Oatly shouldn't be punished for telling the truth. (Elin)

Similarly, this convergence of brand and political associations are shown by respondent Malin's political engagement after the lawsuit. For her, the banned marketing slogans are connected with her own feelings of the truth about cow's milk, and her desire to take a stand for the vegan cause, leading her to post a video (Appendix D)¹⁴ on her Facebook page (Image 3).



Image 3: Facebook post of Motherpearl's video "Wow no cow"

While talking about the need to spread the truth about milk, Malin's political engagement simultaneously works to maintain public attention for Oatly, solidifying their association with all that the vegan cause embodies:

[Oatly's slogans are] true for me, because for me milk is for the baby cows. So I think it's very strange how it could be illegal to say something like that because milk isn't for humans, from the beginning. How could you ever make it illegal to say the truth? So I think it's very, very strange how you can make it illegal for them to say it.

The way interviewees amalgamate their desire to express the truth about milk production with Oatly's loss in the lawsuit exemplifies the paradox of this voluntary yet exploitative labour that is given freely and enjoyed (Terranova, 2004). While the consumer support for Oatly after the lawsuit is a form of free labour, what we see is a much more nuanced relationship between exploitation and empowerment, where apparent labour is also part of enhancing the broader environmental and vegan cause, thus subverting some of the corporate control and appropriation.

Several interviewees describe their own engagement with the lawsuit as linked to the broader principles of the "cause", which was the environment, animal rights and moving away from animal production. In describing her Facebook post that included Oatly's banned slogans (*Image 3*), Malin links this engagement not with a sense of loyalty to the brand itself, but as part of her commitment to animal rights activism, and promoting the vegan cause:

I think it's a kind of activism because it's a cause that matters to me [...] I made the choice to spread the word and to try to open peoples' eyes [...] This cause was not just because of the brand, it was because of the right to say the truth about milk. And I think that's something else [...] even though I like the brand, I like the brand because of the cause.

There is a sense from many of these interviewees that although their online engagement began with the Oatly lawsuit, it moved beyond the brand itself into political engagement that sought to expose the realities of milk-drinking, based in their own regard for the cause. One interviewee describes her motivation for writing an opinion article about the Oatly lawsuit as part of her own ethical position, and not to promote Oatly's brand:

I'm writing this [opinion article] because I care about the environment, that's all [...] you actually can do something just because you care about something. And that's why I've written this. I'm not paid by anyone. It's my free, spare time. (Olivia)

While the degree to which consumers felt motivated to participate with the political issue of milk-drinking because of the lawsuit differs between individuals, it is apparent that this labour is not clear-cut. Jenkins discusses the dual power dynamic of convergence culture, where consumers and corporations simultaneously maintain control (2006:18). On the one hand Oatly benefit from the association with truth manufactured through consumers' online activities, and yet for consumers these combined activities represent political engagement that seeks to raise awareness of causes they feel strongly about. This contradictory nature of

corporate gain *and* individual empowerment is a theme which runs throughout this political engagement with the lawsuit.

4.2.2 The duality of emotion as political catalyst and appropriation

This dialectic between corporate value and individual political engagement presents itself again in the way emotion operates in engagement with the lawsuit. Emotion can be seen to hold a dual and contradictory position here, embodying different potential for both the consumers and for Oatly. Labour practices such as writing blog posts about the Oatly lawsuit and sending Tweets are motivated by different reasons by interviewees, one of which was an initial sense of personal outrage and shock following the court's decision. Most interviewees cited their own feelings of bemusement and anger when they heard that Oatly had lost the court case as a reason for their online engagement, as one blogger recalls:

I wrote a blog post about it because I was quite upset because [the court's ruling] was like a joke! It was so insane I thought. Because if there is anyone that is having false advertising it is definitely the milk industry [...] I just wanted to highlight the irony of the ones that have been lobbying for something so bad and have made us think that we need something we don't need - and they think that Oatly said something bad about them. But they haven't! And that's what's so insane. (Olivia)

This kind of emotional spark was a common feeling among interviewees, feeding into their own political engagement with the debate over cow's milk versus plant milk on social media, mainstream media and blogs. In one way, this form of emotional "work" via online content creation and social media participation demonstrates the economic value of emotions, where emotional labour comes to serve in creating public promotion for Oatly. But in another way, the role of individual passion and affect is a central component in inspiring political engagement (Dahlgren, 2009:83).

The concept of an emotional economy has become a prominent marketing trend, highlighting the interest in fostering personal and affective connections with consumers for commercial benefit (e.g. Pine and Gilmore, 2011). Zwick et al. argue that co-creative labour is premised upon brands attaining economic value from the "affective labour" of consumers (2008:166). Thus, the feelings of anger and shock which motivated interviewees to produce content about Oatly's loss serve as advertising for their brand across a myriad of platforms,

symbolising valuable organic promotion desired by brand cultures, built on “authentic participation of consumers” (Banet-Weiser, 2012:46).

Since consumers themselves produced this content on their own blogs, websites and social media accounts, their emotional engagement is turned into the economically-valuable word-of-mouth marketing for Oatly (Kozinets et al., 2010). For Oatly, this kind of organic content production based in the manifested emotions of consumers can be translated directly into economic and symbolic brand value in the same way that political engagement with the “truth” dually worked to bolster Oatly’s brand image.

However, the emotional reactions experienced by these individuals as a result of the court’s decision can also be seen as an affective catalyst for both individual and collective political action. A common emotion described by interviewees was a strong sense of shock and confusion over the verdict:

Never ever, I could never think that they could lose! So I don't believe it's true actually, it's very strange. I can't understand why they lost, I can't understand it! (Malin)

The final outcome I was surprised about, because I think that that was like really stuck in the back for the rights of saying things in Sweden. It's like this is Russia, twenty years ago, suddenly. It's like how could this happen? This is not right. (Patrik)

Both of these interviewees participated multiple times online by posting about the lawsuit on their own Facebook pages, in community Facebook pages and also creating crowd funding cases. Castells highlights the significance of individual emotion in igniting political action, stating “[a]t the individual level, social movements are emotional movements...the big bang of a social movement starts with the transformation of emotion into action.” (2012:13). Here we see individual emotion playing a key role in prompting these people to engage with the lawsuit, but also with the wider community through their online activities, attempting to highlight the injustice of the legal system and the milk industry, supporting Dahlgren’s statement that “Passion not only motivates, it links people together.” (2009:86).

Castells echoes this position, highlighting the importance of “communication processes” to boost these initial individual feelings and connect them to the wider movement made up of other individuals with shared outrage (2012:15). As one interviewee Olivia notes, fuelled by anger at the decision, she wrote two opinion articles about the politics of milk-drinking in

national newspapers, as well as engaging with social media, saying “I tweeted like a maniac!” With Olivia’s engagement the existence of the emotional drivers, facilitated by connected, interactive communication platforms allowed her to share her feelings with others over the negatives of cow’s milk, while also contributing to the political community.

Instead of seeing this as a pure commercial appropriation of emotion for its connection to a private company, this engagement through commodity culture can be seen to “form communities of consumers who are bound together by affect and emotion” (Banet-Weiser, 2012:218). This shared sense of emotion created through Oatly’s lawsuit worked to bring people together and facilitate political discussions about milk-drinking. Interviewees described the way they were able to relate to others because of a similar emotional reaction of disbelief about the lawsuit, producing a kind of “shared history” (Banet-Weiser, 2012:219) within this brand culture and equally through political engagement:

[the lawsuit] was a big deal and people were talking about it everywhere, at my work, at parties [...] because we all thought it was unbelievable that it happened, we were shocked. (Mathilda)

The lawsuit then serves as a catalyst for propelling the politics of milk-drinking to the next level, and allowing individuals to share their own feelings of anger with others and connect to the wider vegan movement through the networked space of the internet. While this political engagement also serves as labour in constructing the brand identity of Oatly through an appropriation of these feelings for commercial gain, interviewees show that their emotion extends to promoting the wider political issues of milk consumption and freedom of expression. On these grounds, it would seem that commodity activism in this context is not a shallow form of political engagement, but rather has potential in inciting individual political action that enhances the broader social movement through emotion.

4.2.3 Subverting labour through personalised political engagement

There is a strong sense from interviewees that their sharing practices and content creation during the lawsuit were contingent upon how it related to *their own* needs, as well as how Oatly’s position in this lawsuit aligned with *their* political stance on milk-drinking. Consumers’ desire to share their politics and feelings with others shows a subversion of exploitative labour, where Oatly as a *concept* is used as a customisable toolbox by

consumers, and as an opening for participating and sharing their political views in unique ways.

During the lawsuit, supporters of Oatly started an online initiative to collect money to pay for Oatly’s legal fees using a crowd funding website. This website “Real Opinion”, was created by Patrik as a platform for social action, and is a web platform where individuals can create their own “cases” based on social or political causes, to spread awareness and raise money to help their issue. As well as creating the overall website, Patrik also decided to create a “case” on the website to raise money for Oatly (*Image 4*), which he then publicised by sharing links in vegan Facebook groups and through other social media channels such as Twitter.



Image 4: Fundraising case for Oatly on Real Opinion (realopinion-se.loopiasecure.com)

Patrik’s creation of a case to raise money for Oatly, and the individuals who engaged with it by donating money can be seen as an operation of “co-creative labour” (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Zwick et al., 2008) drawing the skilled labour of consumers into the value production of the brand. Oatly’s social media manager Sara recalls this activity, and the feeling of the company employees being both impressed and overwhelmed: “Some people actually started initiative where they wanted to raise money for us [...] we couldn't take it of course, but either way it was really cool to see [...] it's crazy to see.”

However, the concept of supporter labour here moves from simple repetition and sharing of Oatly’s content as free advertising, into the sphere of personal gain, and that of a toolbox to

suit different individual needs. Gauntlett notes that this kind of amateur participation is carried out by individuals “because they have a message or meaning that they wish to share with others, and a desire to make their mark on the world in some way.” (2014:7) Patrik described the way he created a fundraising case for Oatly as a way of promoting Real Opinion and capitalising on the exposure surrounding the lawsuit:

I was like, no, this is a Real Opinion thing. I’m just using your brand and your commercial and everything to make a bit of fuss about Real Opinion. And also because I think that what happened to you is not okay.

Patrik demonstrates an awareness of his own labour in creating this fundraising case, prioritising his own personal gains and political engagement over blindly defending Oatly. His desire to “fight for” Oatly is not based in the strong bond he feels for the brand, and indignation over their trial becomes a mere afterthought. His appropriation of Oatly’s lawsuit and capitalising on the public momentum of the trial highlights an individualistic mode of political engagement, but one that is equally based in a desire to contribute to social change, and encourage others to participate:

I would say that this was the biggest case in real opinion's history [fundraising for Oatly], of the amount of people caring and really voting and giving money. Still it was not that much, but it was interesting to see that this was engaging people, this was something that made them take the step and start sharing.

His creation of the Real Opinion website and also the Oatly case on this site for him is a way of sharing political ideas and helping to promote engagement with others, reflecting small, connected action that cannot be categorised as mere labour (Gauntlett, 2014:7):

It's a crowd funding site for everyone who wants to make small difference [...] I started to build this tool on the internet where people can start up what they want to change and how they will change it, and then start to share it [...] it's like a direct democracy to make small changes, not later but now. (Patrik)

For individual political engagement, this can be seen as a positive example of the kind of diverse and personal use of platforms to connect to other politically-minded people. We see this same personalised individual engagement with the #BackaOatly hashtag use, fusing both a sense of individual expression with motivations to share political opinions. #BackaOatly allows for numerous openings for personal expression and creativity, through the call to photograph and share individual food pictures, while the inclusion of the hashtags links to the overall campaign.

One of the things that makes this form of political content sharing so effective to the overall movement according to Bennett and Segerberg, are these “personal action frames” (2012:743-5), where political content can be easily customised by individuals when sharing. In this sense, personal micro engagement becomes connected to the macro political cause of ethical food production and veganism. One interviewee discusses the way sharing images and participating with #BackaOatly helps her demonstrate what she personally “stands for”, and what she can do as an individual to connect to the political:

I've been thinking a lot about how I can live my life to support the things that I stand for [...] maybe that's one of the parts of putting this hashtag #BackaOatly - to do something small from the beginning, and then maybe make something bigger out of it. (Elin)

Although interviewees recognise that these personalised actions are small, they still hold meaning for both their own individual political engagement and the wider causes, reflecting Gauntlett’s assertion that “small steps into a changed world are better than no steps.” (2014:2). Enhanced by communication technologies, Elin’s participation with #BackaOatly on her blog and Instagram account help to close the gap between micro, individual action and the imagined political community (Bennett, 2012:28).

Similar to “political consumerism” these are active political participants, and they are interested in a variety of intersecting political issues (Baek, 2010:1079). While demonstrating the connective action of supporters’ political engagement (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), individuals participating with #BackaOatly show that they engage with multiple causes at once, underscoring the diversity of their maximalist political engagement (Carpentier, 2011). The hashtag use serves to combine and connect this cause to other political causes, for example #BackaOatly is frequently used in conjunction with #Vegan (Image 5), creating an “intertextual chain” (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015:5).



Image 5: Use of “intertextual chains” through multiple hashtags (Instagram.com)

With the intertextual chain of hashtags like these, the sense of collective action for the vegetarian/vegan movement is enhanced. In the same way that these interviewees see their individual food purchasing habits as part of a collective vegan effort, online individual activity can also be seen as a way of engaging with the movement beyond the immediate, personal space. Maurer (2002) notes that for many vegetarians, they feel connected to the overall movement through their own food habits and the knowledge that others are also participating in the same way, leading to a sense of collective activity.

Thus, the criticism of commodity activism for being single-issue (e.g. Littler, 2009) and too focused on the individual (e.g. Maniates, 2001) is untrue for this case, where individuals show that they are active participants, creating connections with intersecting political causes. These diverse, personal and connected forms of political engagement show that “labour” is reconceptualised as a win-win in this case. Labour is both appropriated by Oatly to gain brand exposure and value, but equally, individuals’ awareness of participating with branded spaces and the many unique ways they engage *through* and *beyond* the brand resists a top-down domination and control.

In Duffy’s study of commodity activism she notes a similar consumer awareness, highlighting the fact that power in this corporate/consumer relationship is not straightforward, and that “the traditional *either* empowerment *or* exploitation framework might not be the most productive” (2010:40, original emphasis). Many interviewees demonstrate their primary motivation is to enhance the political cause for the environment and for animal rights, refuting claims of the negative individualism of commodity activism. The nuanced perspectives these individuals possess over the motivations for their online activity signals real potential for this form of political engagement.

CHAPTER 5

Concluding reflections

The relationship between Oatly and their consumers is characterised by a push-and-pull tension, and a struggle for control over expression and power, illustrating that consumer labour here moves away from binary conceptions of exploiter versus exploited. Within each theme, the duality of political engagement becomes apparent, where individual participation and emotion operates simultaneously as “brand work” for Oatly *and* as a personal way to enhance the vegan and animal rights cause.

The unique interconnected ways that interviewees draw on Oatly’s brand forms a dynamic kind of activism, situated within consumer culture and yet critiquing it; one that is multi-site and maximalist (Carpentier, 2011). Strongly aided by digital media platforms, commodity activism can be seen here as a customisable toolbox, where individuals use Oatly to suit individual needs and absorb the nuances and levels of engagement. These individuals move between offline and online spaces fluidly, using both as tools for their own form of political engagement and activism.

For many interviewees, Oatly is a symbol to be used in vegan outreach, and a talking point for critiquing the milk industry and highlighting the availability of alternatives. In these ways, commodity activism can be viewed positively, helping to facilitate micro individual engagement that connects to the macro global vegan and environmental movement online. However, what this analysis also reveals is the added danger of political engagement that is inextricably linked to consumer culture, and thus reliant on market logic to legitimise the kinds of interactions that can take place.

5.1 Risks of commodity activism: Exclusion and impact

Oatly’s exclusion of unwanted militant vegans is one example of the downside to political engagement through consumption, showing that if undesirable groups do not fit the image of the brand, and thus the company’s profitability, this severely limits who can and cannot participate through commodity activism.

Since the vegan movement (and the animal rights movement by extension) hinges on changing consumption and food production practices, it must necessarily intersect with commodity culture, and thus its ability to politically engage others relies on private food companies like Oatly to maintain and assist the movement. As Cherry notes, veganism is inherently a cultural movement which is “based on everyday practices in one’s lifestyle” (2006:155-6). It means the power to allow participation sits firmly with the dominant group - the market and the company - raising implications for both individual political engagement as well as the types of political causes that are branded as “safe politics” (Banet-Weiser, 2012:148).

Similarly, the fact that this activism relies on consumption, where political engagement is premised on purchasing power, individuals who cannot afford to participate with niche consumption are automatically excluded. As studies of the US and Europe have shown, there are strong disparities within political consumption, for example, political engagement with food purchasing is more likely to involve people with higher education (Yates, 2011) and be connected with higher class status (Baek, 2010). This is a potential problem for commodity activism in the broader sense, as Carpentier notes, participation is a way of balancing power between elite groups and citizens, thus allowing all citizens an equal voice (2011:23).

The nature of this project to investigate political engagement was contingent upon interviewing people who were already consumers of Oatly products, thus the respondents were those who had the means to be regular purchasers of these products. While this can be seen as a limitation of the study, it also would seem to correspond to the global trend of political consumption as a privileged practice. Further research into the correlation between economic status and social background and this kind of political engagement would be extremely useful in evaluating the universality of commodity activist practices in Sweden.

Commodity activism’s confluence of individual consumption with responsible political engagement is therefore at risk of maintaining inequalities by placing power with corporations and income level. If political action is only permitted to those who can afford to participate, those who do not threaten the brand image, engaging with politics through food consumption proves problematic. Access is thus a key issue to keep in mind when it comes to the ability to participate through consumption in the same way as access to online

technology is not universal. As Fuchs reminds us, only 34.3% of the world's population use the internet (2012:776), therefore it should not be presumed that the grounds for political participation through these evolving modes of engagement are equal for everyone.

This digital divide is also present in Sweden, where one in four people have been shown to have very low computer literacy, and although national access to the internet is high, this is unevenly distributed across age brackets (Internetstiftelsen i Sverige, 2015). People over the age of 65 generally have less access to the internet than younger age groups, they feel less confident using the internet, and particularly social media (ibid). Since this kind of commodity activism is so intertwined with digital media, the views of those without the required digital competencies and internet access will become marginalised. These issues of access are a problem for both offline commodity activism and online political engagement as they could sediment elite class power.

Further, for both online and offline participation of this kind, the issues over sustainability of these political activities as well as long-term impacts must be raised (Dahlgren, 2009:194). It is easy to dismiss the small-scale actions of these interviewees, such as writing blog posts about the lawsuit and joining Twitter campaigns to raise awareness about unethical milk production, as overly fragmented and without lasting political impact. As is often the criticism of the fleeting nature of digital media activities for contributing to political change, a combination of these with commodity activism can be seen as a lesser form of political engagement, and one that is too individualistic.

What this case shows is that small-scale political actions *do* hold meaning, not just for the individuals involved but also for the wider political cause. All consumers interviewed connected their activities to a broader politics, outside of their immediate consumption, advocacy and personal social media actions. Whether this was animal rights, environmentalism, veganism, feminism or a combination, these interviewees demonstrated a mindfulness of politics beyond their individual engagement and meaning-making.

Therefore, in responding to criticisms of commodity activism's prioritisation of the individual over the collective movement and its transience (e.g. Schudson, 2006), this case shows the potential of this kind of engagement. Interviewees here illustrate that their

engagement through commodity activism makes up one part of their diverse, connected political activity. The relationship with consumption habits for many of these individuals is not seen as negative, but rather part of their conscious, ongoing engagement with their ethical principles. As both Cherry (2006) and Haenfler et al. (2012) identify, the dependence on everyday lifestyle of seemingly fragmented social movements like veganism results in an ongoing and integrated participation with politics, through these daily consumption practices.

5.2 Expanding political engagement: An everyday entry point

This kind of commodity activism through a brand like Oatly does not replace other forms of political engagement, such as caring about multiple causes and acting through more than one digital platform. Rather, it brings the political into the everyday sphere as well as continuing to encourage political engagement with a broader set of ideals, and interviewees show that this is one added component of their activism. A recurring thread in the analysis of the interview data was consumers' sense of reflexivity over their own role as activists, and also about the strategies of the animal rights and vegan movements. Many interviewees discussed the need to "do what you can" for the movement, whether that was using the Oatly lawsuit or products as a talking point about the ethics of cow's milk, or sharing content online.

Their thoughts reflect Baek's findings (2012:1079-80) that consumerism as political engagement offers one tool or entry point to politics among other forms of engagement, and does not supplant other forms of political activity. Interviewees see their interaction through Oatly as small-scale and personal, but as an important contribution to the animal rights movement. This kind of maximalist participation (Carpentier, 2011) shows the shifting spaces for political engagement, and that for many of the interviewees, "doing" political activism is not limited by traditional notions of political engagement, or by dominant groups such as corporations.

These activities and individual awareness highlight the value in political engagement with brands, since in this case Oatly's lawsuit acted as a catalyst for deeper, widespread political engagement. Rather than restricting political participation because of its connection to profit and seeing it as a commercialisation of political ideals, consumer activism negotiates top-

down power from Oatly through a creative and diverse fusion of online and offline engagement, using the product as a talking point. Gauntlett's assertion that "real change begins in homes, and workplaces, in the terrain of everyday life" (2014:11) is reflected by these individuals' activities and discussions.

Through the customisable use of both online tools and the products themselves they attempt to create change within their own lives, building their political agenda into their personal environments and attempting to reach out to others. Brands like Oatly can thus help to lower barriers to political participation through the daily use of accessible alternative products, and functioning as a conversation-starter online, and through this ease of use, allowing individuals to develop their own form of activism. As one interviewee remarked:

The reason I'm doing my blog and a lot of social media about my opinions is because I want to practise to become better at participating in discussions overall... This is mostly how I choose to do my activism. (Josefine)

Jenkins' discussion of accessing politics through non-traditional avenues like popular culture can be extended here, as he states "these forms... also have political effect, representing hybrid spaces where we can lower the political stakes (and change the language of politics) enough so that we can master skills we need to be participants in the democratic process." (Jenkins, 2006:209) For individuals like Josefine, she stands to benefit from a broadening of the notion of political engagement into spheres like brand culture and new media, allowing her avenues to "master skills" of political participation.

This idea of a gateway, and a means of opening a wider political dialogue is also reflected in the way Oatly's lawsuit resulted in widespread public engagement with the politics of milk, including national and local newspapers, across social media and radio. Regardless of its affiliation with commercial motives, this lawsuit sparked extensive debate and discussion which moved beyond the brand and enabled a variety of voices to be heard, especially people who might not otherwise have participated or been aware of this issue.

5.3 A shared battleground?

While there are tensions and disagreements between Oatly and many of the vegan community, in speaking at length with both parties, it seems that their ultimate goals are the

same – to encourage a shift to sustainable and ethical plant-based foods, while eliminating the need for animal agriculture. Both seek political change through food activism, acknowledging the central role of consumption patterns and thus food companies in this struggle. Consumerism here becomes a shared battleground, even though there are different layers to each party’s motivations for encouraging change.

There is optimism in the way *both* Oatly and the consumers speak of a need for an evolving, positive form of vegan and environmental engagement, suggesting that the strategies employed by these movements are already in flux, and an activism that draws on market logic as one dynamic element holds potential. Oatly’s need to distance themselves from “radical” vegan communication, for them comes from wanting to reach a “mainstream” group without adopting tactics that they view as alienating. Several vegan consumers also seem to agree with the need for a revised vegan activism, one that is based in positive examples and encourages active, conscious consumption, signalling a common agenda:

I think we should talk about it like "oh look at my new bag" or have these blogs or Instagram accounts. But by being too harsh, then I think you lose. So I think I would lose if I would be *that* kind of activist. (Elin)

The diverse political engagement demonstrated by these consumers, fusing commodity activism with the power of the networked space signals a shift towards an adaptable, fluid form of political engagement. The role of private enterprises like Oatly in this engagement is still up for debate, but it would seem that harnessing some of the power of commodity culture holds benefits for both individual participation and to enhance existing political movements. While it is in Oatly’s economic benefit to increase plant-milk consumption, employees overwhelmingly spoke about the need to make broader changes to the food system, as well as questioning the prominent position of cow’s milk in Swedish society:

But old tradition, the animal perspective, the animal organisation part is much stronger [...] It's slowly changing but it's also up to us and the consumer demand to make vegetable products more worth. (Carina, sustainability manager of Oatly)

Consumers similarly reflect on the need for changes to come from private companies, since veganism is rooted in consumption, raising questions over whether “the battle” against tradition and animal agriculture will be fought *with* the help of companies rather than against them.

Consumption is the biggest part of veganism. Well it's certainly the biggest battle we have, because with 60 billion lives being taken each year, the effectiveness of the consumption being changed is undeniable. (Daniel)

Answering the call from scholars addressing alternative forms of political engagement to investigate the interaction of these complex power relations, rather than look at the binary positions of exploitation versus engagement (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2012; Bennett, 2012; Johnston and Cairns, 2012), this research highlights the nuanced, complex way in which individuals engage with commodity activism. It has looked specifically at where the motivations of corporations like Oatly clash with individual and collective political engagement, revealing the hierarchies of power that appear throughout this relationship.

This is an intriguing and developing area of study that would benefit from further research into aspects such as the impact of class and education on participation, and additional case examples which would deepen our understanding of how commodity activism operates within the situated Swedish context. Faced with the combination of a rapidly changing climate and the constant expansion of private enterprises, individual and collective action for political and social change may well be fought through these branded battlegrounds.

While this case has illustrated several risks of political engagement through consumption, and these issues of exclusion are important to keep in mind, what it also shows is a diverse, dynamic political engagement where individuals create meaning for themselves and connect with their political agendas. The future and lasting impact of these kinds of activities are still uncertain, but aided by an array of digital technology, commodity activism can be seen here as one instrument of individual political engagement; contradictory and customisable, simultaneously critiquing consumer culture and yet operating within it.

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Endnotes

¹ Interview, John Schoolcraft, 2016

² Oatly was founded in the late 1990's after the development of oat milk at Lund University (www.oatly.se). The company is now the largest producer of plant-milk in Sweden, experiencing rapid growth in the past year of 45% revenue increase, earning around 340 million kronor in revenue for 2015 (Gustafsson, 2015).

³ Lantbrukarnas Riksförbund (Federation of Swedish Farmers), "LRF", is a member organisation for the agricultural industry. As a division of this Federation, the Swedish dairy lobby LRF Mjök work to promote cow's milk consumption through public communication and policy change (www.lrf.se)

⁴ www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals

⁵ Connected to this sustainability shift is the increasing consumer demand for alternative plant-based products. This is based in an acknowledgement of the way food production systems rely on an intensive global animal economy (Wolch and Emel, 1998) which not only affects global concerns for sustainable food production such as issues for the climate and inequality concerns, but also an increasing investment in human health.

⁶ The worldwide market for non-dairy milk grew from over \$6bn in 2009 to a projected \$10bn for 2016. Non-dairy milk makes up 24% of all new milk product sales in Europe (Bloomberg, 2015).

⁷ Dahlgren also distinguishes between political engagement and political participation arguing that "engagement" is a "prerequisite for participation", and "participation" is thus associated with practices, and goes beyond being "a feeling" (2009:80-81). For my case, both political engagement and political participation are referred to when it comes to discussing the value of commodity activism for individuals. However, following Dahlgren's stance, political engagement is used more frequently in this research as it pertains to a more general interaction with political issues, and not necessarily political activities that follow on from this. The instances where participation is used are thus in reference to specific actions carried out by individuals.

⁸ For example, the counter-food movement during the 1960's in the US aimed to work outside of corporate food systems in a number of ways such as distributing surplus food, and creating community farms and gardens (Roff, 2007:519).

⁹ For example: <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article19747030.ab>, <http://omni.se/veganattack-mot-arla-och-svensk-mjolk-pa-facebook/a/67cb7001-4d53-4ccb-a495-3019a68bddaf>

¹⁰ "Veganer i Sverige" Facebook group (10,029 members):

www.facebook.com/groups/243322562345574/ and "Vegan i Södra Sverige?" Facebook group (857 members): www.facebook.com/groups/125995460783841/

¹¹ www.facebook.com/events/124789427885596/

¹² Interview, Toni Petersson, 2016

¹³ #BackaZara was another prominent social media hashtag which developed in 2015 to support Swedish artist Zara Larsson's statements about feminism, where she criticising a festival for only having male acts (Thomsen and Elmervik, 2015).

¹⁴ This was a music video created by Swedish band "Motherpearl" (<https://youtu.be/Kro39DRjmkc>) and was the winning entry in Oatly's competition for tickets to the Way Out West Festival in Gothenburg. As a result of the court's verdict in November 2015, all mentions of the banned phrases such as "It's like milk, but made for humans" had to be removed from Oatly's official social media channels or they would incur a fine. Since this video's lyrics include this banned phrase, it had to be removed (Interview, Sara Hansson, Oatly social media manager, 2016).

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview guides

Interview Guide: “Consumers”

Themes:

- Your experiences and interactions with Oatly
- The lawsuit with LRF
- Oatly’s marketing strategies and values
- Your social media habits around political discussions
- Your political activism/activities

Questions:

- Do you remember when you first heard about Oatly? What happened then?
- Would you say you’re a supporter of Oatly?
- Do you buy their products frequently?
 - o Do you follow Oatly on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram?
 - o What makes you want to support Oatly?
- Have you contacted Oatly directly in some way? (social media etc.)
- What do you like about Oatly? What don’t you like about Oatly?
- What did you think about the lawsuit between Oatly and LRF Mjölks?
 - o Did you join any discussion about the lawsuit?
 - o If so, how did you participate with this debate?
 - o Why did you feel moved to join the discussion?
- What do you think of Oatly’s marketing?
 - o Do you perceive these messages as genuine?
 - o Do you believe that they “stand for” something? What is that?
- What do you think of Oatly’s agenda and “values”?
- Discuss milk drinking. What does it mean to you?
- Do you normally participate in political discussions? Have you been involved with any kind of activism before?
- What are some of your social media habits? (Do you use it often, and in what way?)

Interview Guide: Employees

Themes:

- Oatly’s consumers/community
- The lawsuit with LRF
- Oatly’s marketing strategies and values
- “Lifestyle branding”
- Plant milk context and political values

Questions:

- What is your role and what do your daily activities include?
- Can you please talk about your current marketing and communication strategy?

- (social media outreach, marketing and the re-branding)?
- Were there any issues/problems encountered when you launched this new brand image? If you compare the situation now to before you first started, what are the main differences and similarities? Different ways of working with consumers and suppliers now and before?
- Can you please talk about Oatly's consumers/supporters – what is your impression of them?
 - How would you describe your followers (on social media)?
 - What values do you think they share? (Are those the same as the ones Oatly wants to associate with?)
- What does “lifestyle brand” mean to you?
 - What do you think these shared “values” are?
 - What is your interaction with the vegan/animal rights communities? How important is it for you to connect with communities like these?
- Can you talk briefly about the lawsuit; your experiences, the consumers' response to this etc.?
 - Can you expand on your approach to Oatly's consumers
 - What was the public reaction like, and why do you think it was like this?
 - Why do think all these supporters feel moved to reach out to you?
 - What do you perceive the role of food companies like Oatly is in these debates?
- What is your view on milk as a political and a media issue in Sweden?

Appendix C: Vegan statement on oat milk packaging by Oatly

“Yes, we are vegan. So?

Sometimes it feels so unfair. Being a minority, different, an alternative, the irritating small guy poking the big giant with a pointy stick and whispering:

Hey big baller, wake up. Times are changing.

What that has to do with us being vegan, we have no idea. But since we are back on the subject, we should probably add that us being one is something we are very proud of.

There’s nothing in any of our products that has anything to do with the animal kingdom. Yet we are perfectly nutritious and full of goodness. Amazing yet completely logical.” (Oatly, 2014)

Appendix D: Facebook post by consumer

Text written by interviewee Malin in her Facebook post following the court's ruling against Oatly.

Original (Swedish):

“De förbjudna orden ska fortsätta sjungas!

Oatly tystades ner av mjölklobbyn genom Marknadsdomstolen (och en mjölkdrickande domare). Oatly får inte längre skriva eller säga "It's like milk, but made for humans". Det anses fel att antyda att mjölken är till för kalven.

Tack och lov har det gjorts covers, på sången som Oatly själva inte längre får sprida. Jag gillar den här versionen av Motherpearl!

Sprid, eller gör din egen cover!

Låt inte mjölklobbyn få sista ordet!

Dela de förbjudna orden! Dela den förbjudna sången!

Dela glädjen över att Oatly ändå har rätt och att mjölklobbyn inte kan tysta folket.”

Translation:

“The forbidden words will continue to be sung!

Oatly was hushed up by the milk lobby by the Market Court (and milk-drinking judges).

Oatly may no longer write or say, "It's like milk, but made for humans". It is wrong to imply that the milk is for calves.

Thankfully, there have been cover songs, the song that Oatly themselves can no longer spread. I like this version by Motherpearl!

Spread, or make your own cover!

Do not let the milk lobby get the last word!”

Share the banned words! Share the forbidden song!

Share the joy of Oatly still have the right and the dairy lobby cannot silence the people.