



SELLING THE GREEN DREAM TO WOMEN

Socio-environmental degradation and the paradox of feminism and sustainability in fashion marketing.

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Abstract:

This thesis identifies a trend of fashion brands engaging in feminist and environmental issues through their business strategy in order to sell products to women. More specifically, it explores the relationship between gender and environmentalism in marketing campaigns within the fashion industry.

Through case study research, analysis of fashion advertisement videos and semi-structured interviews with female identifying consumers, the findings show that despite scepticism from consumers, fashion brands are successful in delivering messages about sustainability and environmentalism to their consumers, partly through embodying a progressive and empowering brand image.

This success is problematised through contextualising fashion marketing within a world-system analysis, which reveals that the environmentalist and feminist claims made by fashion brands do not correspond to the material reality of the socio-environmental degradation caused by the fashion industry in the global South.

With the help of feminist theory as well as theories from human ecology and political economy, I argue that consumerism as it looks now is not compatible with environmental sustainability. Therefore, individualist consumption oriented solutions proposed by fashion brands serve as a distraction from the need for collective action and structural change, while simultaneously enabling the status quo of over-production and over-consumption to prevail.

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1. Introduction

In an interview, the marketing director of American Apparel, Sabina Weber, said:

Using real girls, showing diversity, fighting for immigration and standing for LGBTQs was being done by American Apparel long before anyone else figured out that there was a commercial value there (Weber quoted in Conlon 2018).

This statement illuminates the unapologetic manner in which corporations intentionally capitalise on social movements and justice issues through turning them into marketing strategies and campaigns. In the last two decades, fashion brands have increasingly received criticism for not being diverse enough in their representation. They have been criticised for only showing very thin, often white and heteronormative models in their campaigns and for objectifying women. This critique has necessitated a change in fashion marketing where in order to remain relevant and seen as progressive, brands need to show more diversity in their advertisements.

Sustainability marketing has also been around for a couple of decades, and in the past few years it has become increasingly popular in the fashion world, along with ideas of feminism and female empowerment (Smith 2010). But exactly how and why did environmentalism become a marketing strategy for clothing brands?

In the wake of dozens of exposures of poor working conditions, bad environmental effects and higher scrutiny of factories and supply chain transparency, the fast fashion industry has been facing an enormous PR problem for quite some time (Hoskins 2014). In the 1990s, scandals about the use of sweatshops in the fashion industry began to spread globally, with brands like Nike receiving huge amounts of criticism for the use of sweatshops. Since then, awareness of poor labour conditions of producers has grown, with perhaps the biggest modern scandal of the fashion industry being the Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh 5 years ago, where 1134 people were killed (White 2018). Awareness over the environmentally detrimental impacts of the fashion industry has also grown significantly in the last few years, with investigative reports and documentaries like *River Blue* (2016) exposing that fast fashion¹ is one of the most polluting and resource intensive industries in the world (Siegle 2016).

¹The Collins English Dictionary defines fast fashion as “the reproduction of highly fashionable clothes at high speed and low cost”. Fast fashion usually refers to large corporations that have a short fashion cycle and cheap prices, such as H&M, Zara, and Primark.

This necessitated damage control in order for companies to retain or regain the trust of consumers, and one of the ways in which that has played out is through transforming environmentalism into a marketing strategy. The question is then how fashion brands are able to claim being environmentally friendly in the wake of all the information that is being exposed about the negative effects of the industry? I believe that part of the answer may be found in gender and how gender is used in marketing, which is why both the environment and gender are lenses through which this thesis will present its analyses. Could it be that fashion companies are able to overcome scepticism about greenwashing through incorporating elements of female empowerment into their business strategies?

Although many people are sceptical about green communication and marketing in general, few have written about the connection between sustainability advertisement and the perpetuation of environmental degradation by fashion companies (Lyon and Montgomery 2015). Furthermore, academic publications on the subject of greenwashing did not surpass that of news and media until about 2013 (Lyon and Montgomery 2015). There is an abundance of academic research concerning sustainability marketing in the fields of consumer behaviour, consumer choice and choice psychology, business strategy, sustainability strategy, management, retail management, business ethics and marketing. These disciplines are all committed to a free market liberalist worldview and often scholars in those fields research consumer behaviour and psychology with the purpose of providing recommendations to companies and marketers on how to better understand their customers so that they can increase their sales and foster economic growth. These studies often lack a critical perspective and are not particularly concerned with the fact that companies market themselves as green and sustainable whilst continuing to degrade the environment, most often in the global South².

Despite the fact that capitalism is guided by profits rather than morals, as illustrated in the quote by Sabina Weber, more and more we see companies actually claiming morality. With the spreading of awareness and the increase of criticism from society and NGOs, it has become a necessity for the corporate world to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental sustainability. Through claiming morality, corporations are able to convince people that capitalism is indeed compatible with social and environmental justice, meaning consumers can continue to support those companies and their activities.

My broad hypothesis is thus that fashion brands have begun a new trend of combining sustainability, environmentalism, feminism and elements of female empowerment in their corporate image and their advertising, in order to sell products (predominantly to women), so that we can feel empowered whilst also “saving the world”. Furthermore, I argue that fashion companies exploit the essentialist notion

²The global South does not refer strictly to a geographical area of the globe.

that women are inherently more caring and nurturing and therefore care more about the environment, by pushing greenwashed campaigns at female customers. I argue that while there is extensive research on the relationship between feminism and ecology, this relationship is understudied in the context of media and advertising. Likewise, while many feminist scholars have analysed and theorised media and advertising from a feminist perspective, and many environmental scholars have analysed greenwashing and green communications in media and advertising, analyses of the interaction between the two are scarce. I seek to make a contribution to the filling of this gap in research.

In this thesis I will analyse fashion sustainability advertisings by H&M, Gina Tricot and Monki, and consumers' reactions to them, in an endeavour to understand the (what I hypothesise to be) paradoxical relationship between the material realities of the fashion industry (socio-environmental degradation) and the sustainable, feminist image companies construct and embody. The three advertisements I analyse in this thesis are sustainability advertisements. The feminist messages embedded in them are considerably implicit compared with other ads or videos by the same companies that are specifically and explicitly about female empowerment³.

The aim of this study is therefore to examine fashion brand advertisings in order to gain a better understanding of the textile industry and the complexities it faces when it comes to sustainability and the environment.⁴ Furthermore, this thesis is concerned with understanding the intersections between gender, the environment, and consumerism through the lens of corporations within the fashion industry.

1.1. Structure

Below I state the purpose (1.2) of the study, and pose the research questions (1.3). Then, I have provided a background and context section (2) which situates my thesis within the broader structure of the textile industry and sustainability advertising. It also includes results from case studies on viscose production I researched for the EJAtlas⁵ (2.1). Section 3 discusses the theoretical concepts and frameworks that I have taken inspiration from in this thesis; they are ecologically unequal exchange (3.1), environmental privilege (3.2), consumerism (3.3), The feminisation of green consumerism (3.4), and feminism (3.5). Section 4 describes my methodology and methods starting with my epistemological stance (4.1.1) and my three-dimensional framework (4.1.2), then going through my case studies (4.2.1), discourse analysis (4.2.2), and semi-structured interviews (4.2.3). Section 5 goes through the video findings and analysis

³ Examples of explicit campaigns about female empowerment are H&M's 2016 Autumn campaign [video](#), Gina Tricot's [campaign](#) for their "Onebracelet" that they sold on International Women's Day in 2017 and Monki's 2016 "[#monkifesto](#)" campaign which includes 10 videos about female empowerment.

⁴ It is not the aim of my thesis to prove any particular wrongdoing of a company, rather the aim is to explore the paradox that arises when capitalist structures seek to embody social justice concerns such as feminism and environmentalism.

⁵ The Environmental Justice Atlas is an online tool which maps out environmental conflicts around the world.

coded by themes, and section 6 goes through the interview findings and analysis, also coded through themes. In the discussion (7) I present more in-depth analyses of my findings with the use of the theoretical concepts and frameworks presented in section 3. Finally, in the conclusion (8), I discuss the contributions of my study (8.1), answer the research questions (8.2), and discuss the limitations of my research and possibilities for future research (8.3).

This has been a topic that I have been very interested in for some time now, and as such some of the work and background research was done previously by me, mostly in 2017 for a shorter unpublished paper.

1.2. Purpose:

The purpose of this research is to situate fast fashion sustainability advertisements within the global capitalist context in which fashion companies operate and profit. More specifically, the purpose is to investigate how three different fast fashion sustainability marketing campaigns communicate environmental issues with their consumers, and in some cases how they combine environmentalism with feminism and the breaking of heteronormativity in order to appeal to a young and progressive audience. With this thesis I seek to examine and understand the underlying logic and practices upon which fast fashion labels are built, keeping in mind the colonial historical context that informs today's free trade agreements and ecologically unequal exchange, both significant determining factors in making today's Western hyper-consumerist society possible and affordable for the middle class in the global North (Stillwell 2002). Such an analysis may be valuable in problematising greenwashing in fashion advertising.

My hypothesis is that using greenwashing and female empowerment as tools gives consumers a false sense of empowerment, and the corporations themselves an image of ecological sustainability and gender equality, when in reality, over-production and over-consumption perpetuate the exploitative nature (both socially and ecologically) of the fashion industry. As such, this research will endeavour to unpack the dimensions of fashion sustainability advertising, the messages conveyed by them and what effects this might have on feminist and environmental action/activism. This thesis is thus concerned with uncovering whether there is a paradox between the material impacts of buying fast fashion, and the feelings of empowerment and goodwill that is afforded to the consumer. Could it be that consumer empowerment often equals producer disempowerment? And how are we as consumers complicit in the accumulation of capital by fashion corporations?

1.3. Research questions

In order to address this purpose, four research questions have been articulated as follows:

1. How do fashion brand advertisement videos seek to engage people (the viewer/consumer) with sustainability issues?
 - a. What are the meanings and attitudes behind the positive messages and images they attempt to create?
2. What are the implications of fashion brands placing the onus on the individual consumer to act more sustainably or eco-friendly?
3. How do fashion brands seek to create a progressive identity and sense of empowerment and how does this shape consumer perceptions of company action and individual action?
 - a. What are the meanings and attitudes behind the positive messages and images they attempt to create?
4. How do the sustainability advertisements match up to the material reality and sustainability of the fashion industry?

2. Background and context

The fast fashion industry has been under a lot of scrutiny since the 90s, initially mainly due to sweatshop scandals and labour rights abuses in the supply chains of corporations, and more recently due to the negative environmental impacts of every aspect of production of apparel as well as the huge issue of overconsumption and garments that end up in landfills (Changing Markets 2017, Hoskins 2014, Regeringen 2018, Siegle 2017, The True Cost 2015). Many big fashion brands have received criticism from NGOs and the public and consequently they have developed corporate social responsibility reporting, and sustainability goals and strategies (Lyon and Montgomery 2015, Pulver 2012). As part of their new sustainability strategies, many of these brands also produce marketing campaigns where the environment is in focus. These marketing campaigns tend to either be generic, portraying the brand as environmentally friendly, or more specific to advertising a new line of clothing that is meant to be sustainable. Other types of marketing campaigns include those depicting partnerships with NGOs or charities, or as in the case of the Monki Cares campaign, advertisements that give advice to the consumer on how to act more environmentally.

Another big trend in fashion marketing is the use of female empowerment in advertising campaigns, this is sometimes referred to as “femvertising”. As both sustainability and feminism (third and fourth wave) have become popular social movements in later years, not least within youth culture, fashion brands have started to incorporate these into their advertising and products (Gill 2008, McRobbie

2008). For instance, Dior has printed “We should all be feminists” (which is also the title of Nigerian feminist and author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s famous essay from 2014) on a white T-shirt and is selling it for 490 British pounds (approximately US\$665). That works out to be about 10 months of a garment worker’s wage in Bangladesh⁶, majority of whom are women (Luebker 2014). Many other fast fashion retailers have tapped into the popularity of female empowerment by selling slogan T-shirts with statements like “The future is female”, “Girls run the world”, “Real girls fight back”, and “Feminism: the radical notion that women are people”. In doing so, they are creating an image that they want women around the world to feel empowered, while also giving consumers the feeling that they can help fight gender inequality and climate change and create a more fair and sustainable world (through buying their products). Consumers and corporations might then be interpreted as being partners that work together in order to achieve sustainability goals such as the UN’s Sustainability Development Goals (SDG) (Nelson 2017). On the other hand, one could also argue that both empowerment and sustainability have merely become things you can buy, if you are privileged enough (Tolentino 2016).

The idea that fast fashion brands are a) sustainable and b) feminist are both laden with ironies. Firstly, the fast fashion industry is inherently unsustainable because of the sheer number of products it pushes out daily- what used to be an annual fashion cycle is now monthly or sometimes even weekly (Changing Markets 2017, Hoskins 2014, Schor 2010, Siegle 2017, The True Cost 2015). Secondly, the textile industry is one of the world’s most polluting and resource intensive industries (Hoskins 2014, Regeringen 2018, The True Cost 2015). 2.6% of global water is consumed in cotton production, about 3.4 litres of water is needed for each cotton bud, or 2000 litres for one T-shirt. (Esteve-Turrillas and de la Guardia 2017, Hoskins 2014). About 11% of global pesticides can be attributed to cotton cultivation, and for each kilogram of textiles produced, about 10kg of chemicals are used in the production (Esteve-Turrillas and de la Guardia 2017, Hoskins 2014). The average North American buys 4 pairs of jeans per year and in the UK alone there is over 1.4 million tonnes of textiles that end up in landfills each year (Hoskins 2014, Webber 2018). Textile treatment and leather tanning are extremely polluting, not to mention cotton dyeing, which involves large amounts of “energy, water, steam, and assorted chemicals like bleaching agents, dyes, wetting agents, soap, softener, and salts, in order to obtain the required colour” (Esteve-Turrillas and de la Guardia 2017, p.107). The wastewater that seeps out of cotton dyeing facilities is consequently highly polluted and often contaminated with dangerous levels of heavy metals (Changing Markets 2017, Esteve-Turrillas and de la Guardia 2017, Webber 2018).

⁶ The minimum wage for garment workers in Bangladesh was set to Tk 5,300 or about US\$68 in 2013 and is yet to be increased (Luebker 2014).

The small efforts that fashion companies are putting in as part of their sustainability strategies are not enough to mitigate the environmental damage that is caused by them (The True Cost 2015). Due to the globalisation of industries and trade liberalisation, the majority of manufacturing of garments has shifted to the global South (where environmental regulations are lax and labour is cheap) through the process of environmental load displacement and ecologically unequal exchange (Hornborg 2011, Roberts and Parks 2007, Stilwell 2002). From cotton farming, to leather tanning, to viscose production, to garment dyeing, the fashion industry exploits and severely harms the water, air and land in the global South (Changing Markets 2017, Hoskins 2014, Regeringen 2018, The True Cost 2015).

The effects of the fashion industry on people is two-pronged: 1) the garment workers who often work under unsafe and exploitative conditions, and 2) the people who live near fashion industry factories that suffer from severe water and air pollution and live under risk of disease (Changing Markets 2017, The True Cost 2015). The reason why I would like to pay particular attention to gender in this thesis is also two-pronged: firstly, it is estimated that about 85% of garment workers globally are women; and secondly, fast fashion retailers' biggest target market is also women (The True Cost 2015). Keeping this in mind, in this thesis, I seek to investigate when fashion brands claim that they are feminist and for female empowerment, whether this is genuine, or if these corporations are only interested in female empowerment and feminism on the consumer side of the equation, in which case one could hypothesise that feminism as a concept is being co-opted by fashion brands in order to make more profits.

2.1 A closer look at viscose production

In order to establish the ecologically unequal exchange in fast fashion and the social and ecological degradation associated with this sector, I present here a more detailed case of viscose production. Below is a summary of what viscose fibre is and how it is produced.

Viscose (or rayon) has often been marketed as a more ecologically sustainable alternative to polyester because unlike polyester which is made from petrochemicals, viscose is made from cellulose. It is also praised by some fashion brands because it requires less water to produce compared with cotton. Viscose is found in a huge variety of clothes and is used by almost every major fashion brand to some extent. Although not inherently unsustainable, it is the production process of viscose that presents a very problematic story. Basically, wood pulp is extracted from wood, then turned into viscose staple fibre (VSF) and filament yarn through a highly chemical process using carbon disulphide. Viscose production faces a three-pronged issue: the risk of deforestation of ancient forests, occupational hazards of factory workers who are exposed to

highly dangerous toxins that have been linked to neurological damage, and heavy contamination that results from poor waste management of viscose factories, not only polluting nearby waters and air, but causing widespread illnesses to villagers in the vicinity of factories (Takedomi Karlsson 2017a).

The purpose of including this work is firstly to situate the context within which fast fashion brands create their sustainability campaigns, and secondly to illustrate more concretely what types of environmental and human impacts the fashion industry has on the environment and people in the global South. As will be explained in the methods section of this thesis, I conducted the research on viscose production and uploaded 9 case studies about viscose factories in China, India and Indonesia onto the EJAtlas as part of the work for this thesis. Below I will present the findings of those case studies. The viscose factories in the case studies were all found to supply viscose to major global fashion retailers such as H&M, Mark and Spencer and Zara. These case studies show that a lot of fast fashion production is still extremely damaging to the environments of the producing loci, which stands at odds with the sustainable and eco-friendly image that many fashion brands are now adopting.

The following viscose plants and factories were researched for this case study:

- 1) PT Indo Bharat Rayon viscose plant, Indonesia
- 2) Sanyou Chemical Fibre viscose factories. Hebei, China
- 3) PT South Pacific Viscose (SPV) plant, Indonesia
- 4) Sateri (Jiangxi) Chemical Fibre Co., Ltd. viscose plant, China
- 5) Shandong CHTC Helon Co., Ltd., Viscose Factory, China
- 6) Jiujiang Jinyuan Chemical Fiber Co. Ltd. Viscose Plant, China
- 7) Sateri (Jiujiang) Fiber Co., Ltd., Viscose plant, Jiangxi, China
- 8) Grasim Industries (Aditya Birla Group) Viscose Plant, Nagda in Madhya Pradesh, India
- 9) Shandong Silver Hawk Chemical Fiber Co., Ltd., Viscose Plant, China

2.1.1. Health impacts

There are a few reasons why viscose production may pose serious health risks for factory workers and other people who come in contact with untreated viscose or any related by-products. To produce viscose on an industrial scale, carbon disulphide and sodium hydroxide is needed, and hydrogen sulphide is generated as a by-product. Carbon disulphide is a highly toxic chemical compound, exposure to which can cause severe neurological damage (Blanc 2016). Extensive research on the relationship between carbon disulphide exposure and neurological disease was conducted and published in 1863 by French physician Auguste Delpech, and in the following decades as viscose

became hugely popular in Europe as a cheap substitute for silk, many workers in factories across Europe fell fatally ill from carbon disulphide exposure (Blanc 2016). In his book, 'Fake silk: the lethal history of viscose rayon', Paul Blanc (2016) argues that as viscose production shifted away from Europe and towards the global South, the production processes did not necessarily improve, rather it became an issue removed from people's conscience in the Western world as it was an issue that could now be more easily ignored. The following excerpt is from the PT South Pacific Viscose case study in Indonesia.

In November 2016, 42 residents in Ciroyom Village complained about being poisoned, and it was later believed that this had been caused by a sulfuric acid leak coming from PT South Pacific Viscose. These local residents and factory workers had experienced dizziness, nausea and vomiting. A representative of PT South Pacific Viscose apologised for the sulfur poisoning and claimed the company was providing medical care for the sufferers. He also admitted that poisoning had happened in 2012 and that the company was dealing with this by installing better filters and facilities for collecting the gas (Takedomi Karlsson 2017a).

Through researching the case studies on viscose it became evident that both workers and people who lived nearby viscose factories suffered from health issues. Pollution and leaks coming from viscose factories cause a terrible stench and is also thought to cause illnesses. Changing Market Foundation investigators found bags full of viscose fibres in Indonesian villages that were close to the viscose factories (Changing Markets 2017).

It is believed that the villagers are employed as "intermediaries" by the viscose companies to wash the viscose in the river (which was seen being done sans protective gear), which poses potentially serious health hazards to the villagers and pollutes the river. Today there seems to be no fishing activity in the Citarum river around these villages as it has become uneconomical, furthermore villagers told investigators that nobody swims in the river anymore either (Takedomi Karlsson 2017b).

One example of viscose production being an occupational hazard and safety issue is the case study from the Grasim Industries plant in Nagda, India, where several deaths have allegedly occurred in the factory (Changing Markets 2017). According to villagers that the Changing Markets investigators visited, Grasim Industries cover up employee death cases by sending the employees to the company owned hospital and recording the deaths as being due to natural causes (Changing Markets 2017).

2.1.2. Environmental Impacts

The environmental impacts of viscose production are also severe. In every case study, heavy pollution was witnessed in nearby villages. Air and water pollution from the viscose plants, as well as irresponsible chemical dumping into nearby bodies of water (viscose plants are always located near rivers or lakes) can cause extreme damage to farming, animal life, as well as human life. In some of these case studies, local residents stated they could not leave their windows open due to the bad smell in the air or that they were too afraid to drink the water (Changing Markets 2017). Below is an excerpt from the Sanyou viscose plant in China, illustrating some of the environmental impacts of viscose production.

According to a Chinese newspaper, villagers complained about Sanyou discharging alkaline chemical sewage straight into Bohai Bay, causing many fish to die. The company however denied those allegations and released a document stating the accusations were untrue. In a town adjacent to the industrial complex where the viscose plants are located, villagers told news reporters that pollution has damaged the nearby river and ponds so much that it has heavily affected their livelihoods of fishing. On Weibo, a Chinese social media site, internet users have posted about Sanyou discharging black, foul smelling wastewater straight into rivers at night. In 2015, a city monitoring report revealed that discharge coming from the factories had a very high level of sulphides (higher than the permitted level). In 2016, local residents complained about air pollution and effluent discharge coming allegedly from Sanyou plants, however the Nanbao Environmental Protection Bureau argued that the company was compliant with environmental regulations (Takedomi Karlsson 2017c).

2.2. Conclusion:

These case studies, apart from serving as examples of the socio-environmental impacts of the fashion industry, may also help us in answering RQ4. Although viscose production is only one part of the fashion industry, it is a significant part as almost all major fashion retailers from cheap to luxury use viscose as a silk alternative (Blanc 2016, Changing Markets 2017). Thus, an argument could be made that the positive, responsible, environmentally friendly and sustainable image that is projected out to consumers by companies like H&M, Monki and Gina Tricot do not in fact match up to the material reality of the fashion industry. The fact that Gina Tricot is trying to use organic cotton for their jeans, or that H&M encourages consumers to recycle their clothes by handing them into H&M stores, or that Monki urges consumers to wash their clothes at lower temperatures, does not change the damage felt by locals living near viscose factories let alone the workers who work amongst the toxic fumes involved in viscose manufacturing. Although they are seemingly separate issues, they are still all part of the same textiles industry.

3. Theoretical Frameworks and Concepts

In this section I elaborate on the theoretical frameworks that have guided this research. I explain the analytical concepts and perspectives through which I have investigated the socio-ecological relations embedded within the fast fashion industry as a whole as well as specific fashion advertisements. As this thesis is concerned with the intersections between gender, society, the environment and capitalism, it takes inspiration from different disciplines like political ecology, consumption studies, political economy and feminist media studies. The interdisciplinarity of the analytical perspectives reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the socio-ecological issues the fashion industry faces.

3.1. Ecologically Unequal Exchange

A world-system approach, according to which there is a core and a periphery in the world, argues that “the accumulation of money and technology in core areas of the world system occurs at the expense of the natural resources, environment, and health of their peripheries” (Hornborg 2011, p.15). Such an inequality can also be explained as ecologically unequal exchange, whereby:

The economic, technological, and environmental polarizations of global society can be understood in terms of asymmetric transfers of resources that are made invisible by the dominant ways of representing development, economic growth, and technological progress (Hornborg 2011, p.102).

The globalisation of markets is not a new phenomenon. What is rather novel however, is “an acceleration of market expansion prescribed by neo-classical economic policy since the 1980s.” (Bahramitash 2005, p.1) Neoliberalisation is thus a more recent concept, and one which has been widely celebrated by the North, and harshly imposed on to the South, through institutions like the World Bank and the IMF (Bahramitash 2005, Hornborg 2011, Stilwell 2002). Since the Washington Consensus in 1989, more and more countries in the global South were forced to open their borders for free trade, and this led to many of those economies not only becoming highly reliant on their export sectors, but extremely vulnerable to sudden changes in price on the global market (Bahramitash 2005, Coote 1996, Roberts and Parks 2007). This is especially true for countries that export a limited variety of commodities. Some countries in Asia that quickly moved to a more manufacture and service oriented economy and subsequently experienced fast economic growth, most notably Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore, are often chalked up as success stories of neoliberal policies (Bahramitash 2005). Roksana Bahramitash (2005) debunks this argument, using empirical findings to show that many of those “successes” were in fact due to government intervention and the guarantee of cheap female labour. According to her, “the use of certain kinds of empirical evidence to prove the legitimacy of neo-liberalism is highly problematic” (Bahramitash 2005, p.177). It is important here to mention ecologically unequal exchange; the price of the products that countries in the global South

export for the markets in the global North do not include the cost of the social and environmental damage that is embedded in their extraction or production (Roberts and Parks 2007). Thus trade liberalisation perpetuates an unequal world system where countries in the global South are not only receiving very low rewards for the fruits of their labour but their natural environment is being exploited. Measuring growth in strictly monetary terms is thus highly questionable. The neoliberal agenda celebrates countries that shift from agricultural exports to manufacturing, although manufacturing is even more carbon intensive- this further illustrates the problem with capitalist economic growth and its necessary subsequent ecologically unequal exchange.

With the liberalisation of markets developing countries have suffered from bad debt relief, investments and foreign aid, and still do to this day to a large extent (Roberts and Parks 2007, Stilwell 2002). The neoliberal economic policies of the Washington consensus and anyone who advocates for them would argue that letting the free market self-regulate would naturally lead to development and healthy economies, and if this is not what developing countries have experienced, then it must be due to distortions in the market or unnecessary government interventions (Roberts and Parks 2007). More specific to the textiles industry, restrictions on global trade of textiles and clothes started being removed in 1995, after which the trade has opened completely (Mair, Druckman and Jackson 2016).

The offshoring of production has not only displaced pollution to the global South but has also dramatically lowered prices of commodities, particularly clothes (Blanc 2016, Hoskins 2014, Schor 2010). According to Juliet Schor (2010), there are a few contributing factors to why clothing has become so cheap, so disposable and essentially valueless. Firstly, prices of fashion have been driven down through outsourcing of production to countries with a high labour surplus, meaning wages could be kept extremely low, primarily China at first, and now also in India, Bangladesh, Cambodia and many other countries (Blanc 2016, Schor 2010). Apart from the global surplus of labour, a combined effect of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, low prices of international transport and “fierce competition among suppliers” meant that workers’ wages could be squeezed even further (Schor 2010, p.31).

Improvements in technology are often cited as the path to a more sustainable world and what will halt climate change, not the least in the fashion industry. However, thus far improvements in technology have in many cases widened the gap between the global North and global South (Hornborg 2011, Roberts and Parks 2007). Commodity chain or life-cycle analysis may illuminate “how incremental but revolutionary improvements in communications and transportation have allowed the global sourcing and offshoring of polluting portions of the productive chain” (Roberts and Parks 2007, p.289). So while there may be new innovative fabrics that are claimed to be more eco-friendly, or efficiency improvements within companies, in the case of the fashion industry, the heavily polluting

parts of the production have not ceased to occur and they continue to occur on the production side of the value chain, which is most often still in the global South (Roberts and Parks 2007, Schor 2010).

3.1.1. Structure vs. agency

As illustrated above, ecologically unequal exchange is very much concerned with the structure of the world system (Hornborg 2011). As a contrast, the neoliberal response to the sustainability crisis of the fashion industry has a larger focus on individual responsibility and behaviour, such as raising the awareness of consumers so they can choose to buy more sustainable products (Hoskins 2014, Webber 2018). Neoclassical economic theory and its disciplines such as marketing are also built upon the idea that individual agency is the key to solving sustainability issues, and thus they ignore the larger structure (Stilwell 2002). Even a documentary like *River Blue*, which heavily criticises the environmental impacts of the fast fashion industry, suggests that the combination of technological advancements and consumer education is the solution to the problem (Webber 2018). But after over two decades of the same recommendations, not much has changed (Hoskins 2014). This may be thought of as a reflection of the fact that neoliberal thought is so deeply entrenched in capitalist societies that it becomes extremely difficult to see the possibility of change in the structure rather than within the realms of capitalism (Klein 2014).

3.2. Environmental Privilege

Ecologically unequal exchange produces environmental injustices in the world-system. And where there is injustice, there must also be privilege somewhere in the equation to make that injustice possible. The concept of environmental privilege was developed by Park and Pellow (2011), and is described as resulting from “the exercise of economic, political, and cultural power that some groups enjoy, which enables them exclusive access to coveted environmental amenities” (Park and Pellow 2011, p.15).

Environmental privilege is embodied in the fact that some groups can access spaces and resources, which are protected from the kinds of ecological harm that other groups are forced to contend with every day (Park and Pellow 2011, p.15).

In their book, ‘The slums of Aspen: immigrants vs. the environment in America’s Eden’, Aspen as a locus is used to illustrate environmental privilege at work. It is a paradise like area for wealthy Norht Americans to enjoy skiing and holidaying, and it fosters a culture in which it is believed that capitalism and environmentalism can coexist in perfect harmony (Park and Pellow 2011). This culture is referred to as “The Aspen Logic” by which green consumers can “maintain their high-status lifestyle while supporting environmental causes” (Park and Pellow 2011, p.37).

This thesis does not focus on a particular geographical area in its examination of environmental privilege, but rather an industry. I argue that it is possible and important to examine industries where the production 1) causes socio-environmental degradation and 2) occurs overwhelmingly in the global South, from the perspective of environmental privilege. It is important because it is the continued consumption and encouragement to consume fast fashion in the global North that perpetuates the environmental injustice caused by the fashion industry. As argued by Park and Pellow (2011) as well as Norgaard (2012), I believe it is important to examine environmental privilege because it is an understudied concept without which we cannot fully understand environmental injustice in a nuanced way. Privilege and injustice are two sides of the same coin and one cannot exist without the other. Another reason for the importance of examining environmental privilege is because consumers of fast fashion have become so alienated from the production that it is hard to imagine the embodied environmental injustice of the products that people purchase. Park and Pellow (2011, p.16) argue that environmental privilege is “rarely questioned because of the social distance between those who receive them and those who suffer the consequences”.

3.3. Consumerism

American society has long been characterised by individualism and exceptionalism. Capitalism and modernity have spread these ideas through consumerism to the point where they are deeply engrained into Western society (Stilwell 2002, Weintrobe 2013). The imperative of self-fashioning through consumption is what shapes a world where the 10 biggest corporations have bigger shares of the global economy than most countries in the world combined (Inman 2016). Consumerism is an interesting concept as it is both grounded in culture and the economy, and a better understanding of it may help us situate the problems that this thesis is concerned with.

The hyper-consumption that Western society is used to today began right after WWII when Americans were encouraged to consume at an accelerating rate in order to support the exponentially growing US economy (Schor 1999). Thus, symbolic consumption, or shifting the focus away from function and towards fashion and personal satisfaction was in fact an explicitly prescribed recommendation by the US government (The story of stuff 2007). This logic is what has led to a situation where wealthy countries, and especially the US, consume natural resources and consumer goods on an enormously disproportionate scale compared to the rest of the world.

Capitalist cultures encourage over-consumption and constant refashioning, and over-consumption stimulates over-production (and vice-versa). It is the over-consumption and over-production of clothes which has led to today’s extreme ecological deterioration caused by the global fashion

industry (Hoskins 2014, Schor 2010). Consumerism is thus not only a cultural phenomenon, but also an economic mechanism, and together they accelerate consumption. This acceleration is dangerous because it is linear and never-ending, despite the many physical limits of our planet. The linear model of the material economy, starting with extraction and ending with disposal, has left the earth in a state of crisis (The story of stuff 2007).

Julie Schor (2010) developed the concept “the materiality paradox” by which the physical and material impacts of consumer goods on the earth intensify as their social value increase and functional value decrease. Schor (2010) rejects the argument made by many consumer scholars that a rise in symbolic consumption leads to dematerialisation, and instead claims that the more symbolic our consumption becomes, the more we follow fashion trends and novelty, i.e. the more frequently we need to update our wardrobes and re-fashion our style, and consequently the more we need to consume. A representation of the material paradox is fashion brands like H&M and Gina Tricot (and almost all fast fashion chains) which have a much shorter fashion cycle now compared to a few decades ago, and this fuels and accelerates over-consumption at an alarming rate, consequently putting extreme pressure on natural resources and production (Schor 2010). The focus on fashion and trend has also meant that anything that is slightly old becomes unfashionable. This built in obsolescence, i.e. making “frequent style changes to products to render earlier lines unfashionable or redundant”, is key to how corporations expand their “power and profits through consciously violating ecological sustainability” (Stilwell 2002, p.315). According to Stilwell (2002, p.315), this has two notable negative impacts on the environment, namely “the greater use of natural resources to produce larger outputs” and “the disposal of the discarded products”. It is evident that the very blueprint of the fast fashion industry is at odds with ecological sustainability. Therefore, advertisements by fast fashion brands that continue to encourage consumers to buy more products that they do not need in order to help save the planet, factory workers or cotton farmers in India, is paradoxical.

As explained above, consumerism became a cornerstone of American society after WWII.

“Sustainable” consumption, however is a rather new trend. Naomi Klein (2014, p.212) points out that the notion of sustainable consumption began to gain traction around 2006, where people were “called upon to exercise their consumer power—not by shopping less but by discovering new and exciting ways to consume more.” Turning risks into opportunities is a cornerstone of business strategy, and the way fast fashion brands use their discursive power of shaping public opinion through greenwashing is a direct reflection of that. The risk: climate change, becomes an opportunity: leading to greater profits.

3.4. The feminisation of green consumerism

The term “greenwashing” was coined in 1986 by Jay Westerveld (Watson 2016). Attempts by corporations to present themselves as environmentally friendly, while simultaneously making exorbitant profits from engaging in very environmentally unfriendly activities, has been around since just before climate change and global warming started becoming widely acknowledged concerns. Today, greenwashing is widespread across many different industries. It appears not only in the form of advertisement, but also through means such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting, affiliations with environmental groups or through generous donations to charities (Pulver 2012). Moving beyond greenwashing as a general concept, this thesis is concerned with the fact that some industries push greenwashing and green consumerism specifically onto women.

There are many ways in which women have become a major target market for environment related commodities. While one strand of eco-feminism embraced the idea that women are inherently nurturing and closer to nature, many other eco-feminist theorists have since rejected this view (Smith 2010). In this thesis I argue that the notion of women as inherently more nurturing is both essentialist and sexist, and furthermore that corporations use this notion in order to sell products to women (even if it might not be done with any malicious intent). Another way in which green consumerism has been pushed onto women is through eco-friendly household products. As women traditionally have carried out most of the household shopping, eco-friendly products from toilet cleaner to washing detergent to babies’ nappies have been marketed towards women, and particularly mothers, often with messages packed with morality on how to best care for one’s family without the use of harsh chemicals (Smith 2010, Sandilands 1993).

Catriona Sandilands (1993) has written extensively about the intersection between feminism and the environment, most relevant for this thesis is her work on green consumerism and women. One of her main arguments is that green consumerism depoliticises environmental issues through privatising them and making them a household issue (Sandilands 1993).

It becomes a private matter, something that people feel they are helping in their daily lives, even though their daily lives have changed little, and even though social and economic relations destructive to the environment remain fundamentally intact (Sandilands 1993, p.46).

On a political level, she argues that environmental privatisation is problematic both for feminist and environmental politics, as they are both movements that require collective action. Finally, she deems green consumerism to be paradoxical as it might in fact exacerbate rather than solve the underlying issues of over-production and over-consumption (Sandilands 1993).

In the early 1990s when Sandilands was writing about green consumerism, it was rather limited to the marketing of household products. I argue in this thesis that we are now seeing similar trends but in the fashion world, which is coincidentally now one of the most polluting industries in the world (Hoskins 2014, Regeringen 2018).

3.5. Feminism, media and advertisement

McRobbie (2008) argues that although advertising that targets women has existed for a very long time, it has grown drastically in recent years. Rosalind Gill (2008) who has written extensively about feminism in media argues that a new trend began in the 90s and grew even more in the 2000s where marketers started focusing on female sexual agency as a way of selling products rather than just objectifying them, although the former did not completely replace the latter. This is what Goldman coined as ‘commodity feminism’ in 1992 (Gill 2008).

Seemingly supplanting feminism per se, and appearing to adopt the interests of girls and young women, commercial culture finds a licence to speak on their behalf. Companies draw on the language of ‘Girl Power’ as though to bestow on their products a sense of dynamism, modernity and innovation (McRobbie 2008, p.533).

As the focus began to move away from motherhood as a woman’s most important role and towards women as independent wage-earners, they became a perfect group to push consumption onto. This led to female pleasure becoming a major trope of media and advertisement (such as the shoe-shopping obsessed Carrie in *Sex and the City*) and was embraced by many women including feminist scholars (Maclaran 2012, McRobbie 2008, Thwaites 2017). This celebratory version of feminism in its turn became the basis for third wave feminism whereby any act may be seen as feminist and empowering as long as a woman is choosing to engage in it (Maclaran 2012, Thwaites 2017). Both Maclaran (2012) and McRobbie (2008) criticise the “reconciliation of feminism and consumption, a reconciliation that links empowerment to sexual expressiveness and purchasing power” (Maclaran 2012, p.466). McRobbie (2008) argues that the consequence of not critically examining the power structures that enables and encourages a seemingly feminist celebration is that those same power structures remain invisible. Nina Power (2009, p.69) sees this kind of feminism as problematic because when we celebrate “individual identity above all else” we ignore the overarching structure and our feminism becomes “one-dimensional”. Indeed, the focus on individual choice as a source of empowerment “becomes a part of maintaining the neoliberal status quo” (Thwaites 2017, p.57).

Tolentino (2016) discusses the notion of empowerment and how it has somewhat lost its original meaning and purpose and instead been transformed into a commodity for women to buy. The concept

of empowerment originates in Latin America and was later adopted in the USA in the 70s with the purpose of rejecting paternalism, then was yet again re-appropriated in the 80s where it took on a much more individualistic mask (Tolentino 2016). As Tolentino (2016) puts it, “Sneakily, empowerment had turned into a theory that applied to the needy while describing a process more realistically applicable to the rich”. Empowerment became a trendy buzzword that companies started using in order to sell more products to women in the name of feminism.

Aerie, the lingerie brand of American Eagle, increased its sales by 26 percent in the last quarter of 2015 primarily on the strength of its “#AerieReal” campaign, which eschews Photoshop and employs models of a slightly larger size — and is described as “empowering” as if by legal mandate. Dove, the Patient Zero of empowerment marketing, has lifted its sales to the tune of \$1.5 billion with its “#RealBeauty” campaign, cooked up by executives who noticed that few women like to call themselves beautiful and saw in that tragic modesty a great opportunity to raise the profile of the Dove brand (Tolentino 2016).

Gina Tricot, H&M and Monki are all examples of companies that sell empowerment to women. Although brands like H&M and Monki have managed to in fact make their message seem more authentically progressive, for instance by representing queer and racially diverse models, they are still using this technique of turning female empowerment into a commodity.

Johnston and Taylor (2008) argue the importance of moving beyond a mere rejection of feminist consumerism and instead examine its nuances and contradictions. Similar to the scholars discussed above, they criticise the lack of structure in feminist consumerism which encourages “individual difference but does not emphasize structural hierarchies or collective strategies for social change” (Johnston and Taylor 2008, p.959). By using the Dove Real Beauty campaign as an example, they show how emotions like anger and pain are avoided in these types of advertising campaigns because brands prefer to convey positive images that might be “converted to brand loyalty” (Johnston and Taylor 2008, p.958). It is true for the advertisements analysed in this thesis that they all portray positive and happy images rather than those of anger or despair about the state of the environment.

Whether it be through corporations as discussed above or policy, there is something deeply problematic about the way capitalism attempts to include a gender perspective. As Nalini Nayak (2009, p.109) points out, “the new wisdom is that women’s labour should be marketed and marketable no matter what it consists in”. She continues:

In this ‘inclusionary’ effort, there are major gains for the modern capitalist patriarchal system of production. For instance, employment of women brings down the general price of labour, since

thanks to the sex/gender ideology that devalues women, their labour is cheaper than men's (Nayak 2009, p.109).

Gigi Francisco and Peggy Antrobus (2009) argue that this inclusionary attempt of “engendering” policies began around the 90s, largely by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). They reasoned that this would lead to “interventions that make poor women more efficient contributors to – and women in politics more effective policymakers for – the systematic expansion and deepening of trade liberalisation reforms” (Francisco and Antrobus 2009, p.158). This co-optation of feminism allows neoliberal advocates to argue that their policies and practices are beneficial not only for the economy but for women as well. It is this same logic that allows fast fashion brands to claim that their sustainable lines of clothing will help poor female cotton farmers or factory workers in the global South, by educating them and “empowering” them.

4. Methodology and Methods

In this section I describe the epistemological position of the thesis as well as the specific methods I have employed in my research. While the case studies researched for the EJAtlas provide some robustness in terms of illustrating the material effects of the fashion industry in the global South, combining my own analysis of the advertisements with reflections from interviewees has proven to give other valuable insights.

4.1. Methodology

4.1.1. Epistemology: a realist social constructivism

Constructionism and realism are often thought of as being in direct opposition to each other, sometimes to the point where constructionists are criticised for claiming that everything is constructed and therefore no claims of reality can be made (Bryman 2012, Elder-Vass 2012). However, I am of the belief that there can be a more moderate version of constructionism, one that is more compatible with critical realism. In accordance with Elder-Vass's argument, I believe that more can be gained from social constructivism when in synthesis with critical realism (2012). This thesis is committed to a material reality, especially when it comes to the environmental effects that the fashion industry's production processes have. The thesis is equally concerned with the idea that discourses are formed by, and also in its turn shape material reality to some extent. Or as Elder-Vass puts it, “a realist social constructionism... would see language, discourse and culture as products of interacting causal powers and also, potentially, as causal forces themselves” (2012, p.12). I acknowledge that a large amount of knowledge that is produced and reproduced is socially constructed, and this is one of the reasons why using discourse analysis makes sense when analysing some of my data. On the other hand, the thesis

is also very much concerned with the concepts of structure and agency, a problem that is dealt with more by critical realism (Elder-Vass 2012).

This epistemological position, although perhaps seemingly vague, is in my belief the most appropriate for this study, because in order to make critical ethical claims about the material reality of the fashion industry, one cannot claim that everything is constructed. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that what we know about material reality is often “influenced by our knowledge, beliefs and dispositions, which alter according to our experience” (Elder-Vass 2012, p.18). Thus, elements of critical realism and social constructionism can and should coexist.

4.1.2. Three-dimensional framework

For this thesis I have decided to create a three-dimensional methodological framework, which encompasses three levels of methods and analysis. This is to illustrate the main issues dealt with in the thesis from three different angles and scales of analysis. The first and outermost layer is a group of case studies from the Environmental Justice Atlas or ‘EJAtlas’⁷. These case studies serve two purposes: firstly, as a concrete example to show what kind of environmental and societal impacts the textile industry can have in the production part of its value-chain, and secondly as a means to contextualise the data that I have collected in the global market of fashion, and draw links between fashion sustainability advertising and the wider context of the global textiles industry. I see it as the outermost layer because it is on the biggest scale within which the other data sets and methods fit. The second or middle layer is three fashion sustainability advertisements that I have chosen to analyse—those videos represent how fashion companies are marketing themselves as sustainable and eco-friendly companies. This level of analysis offers an exploration of how companies communicate sustainability issues with their customers, and whether there are underlying meanings and structures behind the images they create that could be criticised. The third layer comprises of semi-structured interviews that I conducted with 17 female identifying consumers in Australia and Sweden. The interview responses offer an insight into how real consumers interpret and perceive sustainability advertisements. The three dimensions offer different elements to the thesis while also feeding into each other in a complementary manner in order to connect the evidence gathered from three different methods to a broader structural analysis.

⁷ The EJAtlas is an educational online platform that maps environmental conflicts around the world. It was developed by a research project named EnvJustice, which is based at the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in Spain. In 2017 as an intern at the project I researched nine case studies of viscose production which I published on the EJ Atlas.

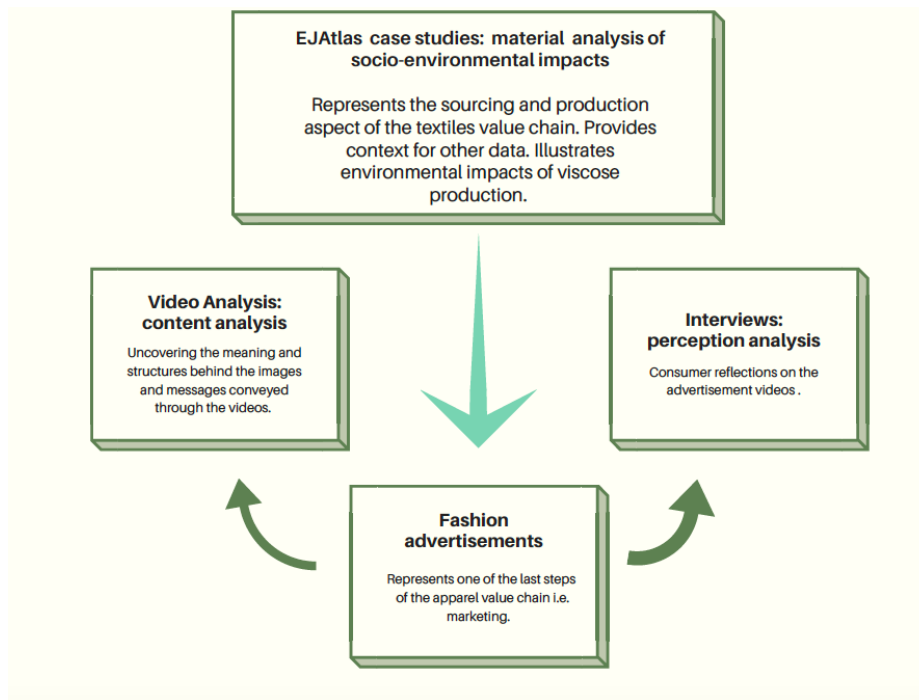


Figure 1: flowchart of three-dimensional framework connecting three different methods.

4.2. Methods

4.2.1. Case Study: EJ Atlas

In 2017 I researched and uploaded 9 cases studies onto the EJAtlas that all concerned viscose factories in China, India and Indonesia, the main producers of viscose (Changing Markets 2017). These case studies are largely built on secondary data from an investigation conducted by the Changing Markets Foundation (2017) who visited the factories in question and interviewed factory workers as well as nearby villagers about the environmental and health impacts they are exposed to. Although the thesis does not have a specific focus on viscose let alone any one specific material or fibre, these case studies are illustrative of the environmental damage caused by the fashion industry and show the material realities of fashion as opposed to the narratives portrayed in the marketing videos.

Sampling:

The case studies were initially taken from a report published by the Changing Markets Foundation. They had visited nine different viscose factories that all produce viscose for some of the largest global fashion retailers including H&M, and since there was no opportunity for me to conduct my own fieldwork and visits to factories, these ones that had already been reported on were the most suitable choice.

4.2.2. Discourse Analysis:

I have chosen to analyse three different videos that are fashion sustainability advertisements from three different Swedish fashion brands: H&M, Monki and Gina Tricot. In my own analysis of the videos, inspiration has been taken from the discipline of discourse analysis. For the purpose of this study, rather than using a strict discourse analysis method I chose to combine elements from James Paul Gee's (2014) tools of how to do discourse analysis, as well as Fairclough's three dimensions of critical discourse analysis as described by Hilary Janks (1997). The advertisements that will be analysed are all relatively recent (Monki ad from 25 Apr 2017, H&M ad from 2 Sep 2015 and Gina Tricot ad from 9 March 2017). Although all three companies are Swedish, the advertisements are online, meaning the geographical location is not restricted to Sweden only, furthermore the language used in all three videos is English. One may assume however, that people living in countries where these brands have stores are more likely to have seen the advertisements.

There is a general consensus that discourse analysis as theory and method is connected and committed to a largely constructivist worldview (Bryman 2012, Gee 2011, Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). However, it is also argued that critical discourse analysis, or CDA, is closer to a Critical Realist perspective of knowledge (Bryman 2012, Gee 2011, Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). The thesis as a whole is more committed to a critical realist epistemology than a constructivist one. However, when concerning visual and video material such as in the selected advertisements, I found discourse analysis is the most helpful in uncovering meaning and subliminal messages, but more importantly what kinds of social images and power relations the videos create, recreate and perpetuate. This is in line with Jørgensen and Phillips' argument that discourse is productive in that it simultaneously creates and represents reality (2002). As I am not using a strict CDA approach I am choosing to use discourse analysis with a critical perspective. Indeed, some scholars argue that all discourse analysis must be critical even if it does not adhere to the specifics of CDA (Gee 2014). The close link between discourse and materiality makes discourse analysis suitable for research that is committed to a critical realist epistemology.

The choice of discourse analysis stemmed from a desire to formalise and theorise the exploration of the power dynamics that are at play in the chosen visual texts. By paying particular attention to the meaning that is produced in and recreated by the texts, it will be possible to investigate how textual and visual language is used to wield power in one way or another. This Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis whereby language is always connected to power dynamics in society is the critical nature or perspective that I am interested in exercising (Bryman 2012). The basic elements of each frame that will be analysed reflect Fairclough's three dimensions: the text, the processing (interpretation of the text) and the social analysis of the text and its interpretations (Janks 1997). For each text it is important to analyse both the conditions of production as well as the conditions of

reception, as my specific social context will surely affect the ways in which I receive the texts (Janks 1997). In using discourse analysis, I am hoping to uncover some dynamics that might have otherwise remained too subtle to be recognisable or too taken-for-granted (Gee 2014, Jørgensen & Phillips 2002). According to Janks, this is when ideology is most powerful, because the discourses in question are so deeply ingrained into society and it has become so naturalised that it is effectively invisible (Janks 1997).

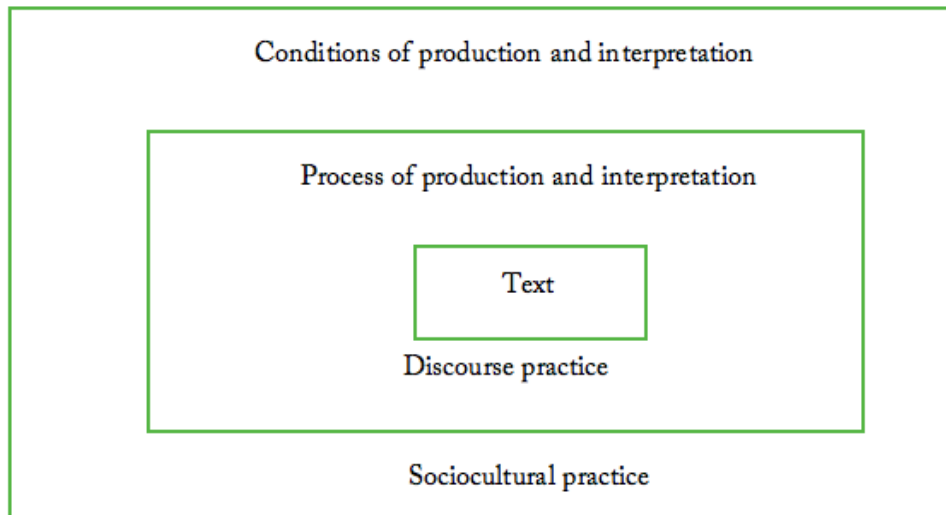


Figure 2: Fairclough's three dimensions (Janks 1997).

Sampling:

I am using a directed sampling approach meaning that I have selected a number of frames (screenshots) from each video to be analysed using discourse analysis tools. The first reason for the directed sampling is that each chosen frame will speak directly to the topics that I feel are most relevant to explore for this paper, the second is that it would simply take up too much space to analyse each video from frame to frame, and as this is only one part of the three-dimensional analysis it would be beyond the scope of the thesis to analyse the entirety of each video.

4.2.3. Semi-structured in person interviews

This is the third layer of methods and analysis in this paper. The same three videos that I conducted a discourse analysis for were shown to 17 female identifying people in Australia and Sweden in order to better understand how consumers perceive and react to fashion sustainability advertisements. In the planning phase of my interviews I turned to chapter 20 of Alan Bryman's book on social research methods (2012). The reason why I chose semi-structured interviews over structured interviews or even surveys (which would have been less time consuming) is because I believed it was important to get as nuanced responses as possible, with freedom for the interviewees to go off track if they so wished and

talk more about their emotional responses to the videos. I did create an interview guide with specific questions, however I let each of my interviewee know that the questions were very open and that they could choose to mention what they thought was important or interesting even if it did not relate to any of my specific questions. The aim with this approach was that I wanted to remain open to the possibility of my interviewees bringing to attention topics or points that I may not have thought about myself, and on top of that I was interested in seeing if the conversations I have with my interviewees could take my thinking process to unfamiliar territories. In this sense I have used a feminist approach of conducting interviews (Bryman 2012). I made it a high priority to use sensitivity in the interviews, free of judgement, so that my interviewees would feel comfortable with sharing their opinions and emotions with me.

Sampling:

I sampled my interviewees firstly based on gender identification and age since I am particularly interested in how companies market their products to young women, who are arguably the largest target market for fast fashion. Thus I chose to interview people between the age of 20 and 30 who identify as female. I interviewed women in Sydney, Australia, Lund, Sweden and Stockholm, Sweden. While I did not interview enough people to make any definite statements comparing respondents from a Swedish background compared to an Australian background, I still thought it was interesting and valuable to have a slightly more diverse sample. All the interviewees were people that I know quite well, and I asked them personally if they would be willing to be interviewed. I believe it would have been equally interesting to interview women that I did not previously know; however, I do not think that it was a disadvantage for me to know the interviewees personally; if anything it certainly felt during the interviews like they felt comfortable to say what their true opinions were.

4.2.4. Research considerations

Positionality and ethics:

An important aspect of feminist interviewing techniques is being very aware of the power dynamics at play between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bryman 2012). I made a conscious effort in each interview to make sure that there was no hierarchical relationship between myself and the interviewee. As most of the interviewees are people I know well, we already had a high level of rapport which helped in building trust and breaking down hierarchical boundaries. A risk that I was acutely aware of though, was the fact that the interviewees might have felt a sense of wanting to give me the “right” answers, as they wanted to be helpful to my university work. In an attempt to combat this, I briefed each interviewee before we began and let them know that there were no right or wrong answers, and that I was more interested in seeing how consumers react instinctively to the

advertisements I showed them. When I summarised what my research entailed before the interviews, I did my best to describe the topic without sharing my hypotheses and own opinions as I did not want that to potentially colour how they would view the videos.

Limitations:

The interview results are not generalisable as there were not enough of them and the sampling was not random. I chose to interview people I knew due to trust and ease of access, but it may also have been interesting to interview a group of people that I did not know previously. Another limitation was the risk of my interviewees wanting to say the “right” things or please me with their answers. However, I believe there was enough trust already established between myself and all the interviewees for them to feel comfortable with giving honest answers. With less limitation of time and resources I would have expanded the age of my sample as well as conducted many more interviews, as I believe it would be interesting to compare responses from one age group to another. One of my interviewees said the following:

Hayley:

If I was sixteen and I saw that I'd be like wow that's so cool and look what they're doing for the environment and that's so much better and all brands should be like that, I definitely would've swallowed that message.

This statement brought my attention to the fact that it would have been valuable to interview a large number of younger women, perhaps aged 13-18 and compared their responses to those of women aged 20-30.

5. Green and feminist discourses in fashion advertisement videos

The video advertisements that I have selected and analysed for this thesis are ‘The Way’ by Gina Tricot, ‘Close the Loop’ by H&M, and ‘Monki Cares 1-800-Lazy-Eco’ by Monki. ‘The Way’ by Gina Tricot is a music video styled advertisement which is about how Gina Tricot supports organic cotton farming in India and that their jeans are made organically. The H&M ad is promoting their recycling program, although this does not become clear until the very end of the ad where the narration “There is only one rule in fashion. Recycle your clothes” is recited. The rest of the ad is more about individual expression and breaking societal norms through fashion. Monki’s ad depicts various young women calling a hotline where Monki employees answer and give the customers tips on how to care for their clothes in a more eco-friendly manner. This video is also promoting a recycling program whereby you can turn in your old unwanted clothes to any Monki store. ‘The Way’ by Gina Tricot

stars Cecilia Forss, or Cissi Forss as the main character. Cissi Forss is a Swedish actress who is most known for her breakthrough role in the film ‘I rymden finns inga stjärnor’ and as Cindy in Ica supermarkets advertisements. She is not primarily a musical artist, although she sings in this Gina Tricot ad which is produced like a music video.

Clark (2016) argues that green communication is paradoxical in the way that media technology in itself is a large contributor to climate change and environmental degradation. This paradox certainly holds true in the Gina Tricot music video and the H&M video which would have had huge budgets including international air travel. Both of these videos thus would have had a large negative impact on the climate, whilst championing sustainability.

After watching and re-watching the ads many times, I began analysing them according to themes that emerged and the below section will be organised according to those themes. The frames were chosen based on the elements I felt were important to analyse and what best helps in answering the research questions through a purposive sampling method. Both visual language as well as linguistics (where appropriate, such as the first video which has lyrics) were analysed. I will intertwine some theoretical concepts to the analysis I make here, while more in depth theoretical considerations in relation to the videos is available in the discussion section of the thesis. At the end of this section I have created a table which summarises my video analyses by company and image.

5.1. Female empowerment and feminism





Image 1: screenshots from 'The Way' music video
Source: Gina Tricot 2017

In this image we see a woman wearing a pair of blue denim overalls with a belt and a pair of studded high heels. She is standing in an assertive pose with her arms crossed and leaning on one leg. In fact, this is Anna Appelqvist, Gina Tricot's director of Purchase and Design. The pants are reminiscent of manual labour work clothes, and they are also reminiscent of the outfit worn by Rosie the Riveter in the 1940s "We can do it!" poster, although Rosie is only depicted from the waist up (Winson 2014). Rosie the Riveter is an iconic character from a US WWII poster where she is depicted holding one arm up in a bicep-curl and standing next to the words "We can do it!". The blue overalls and the use of a warehouse as the setting in the video creates a working class image and perhaps even alludes to the unionist struggles against a capitalist system. While the Rosie the Riveter poster was created as war propaganda when the US state needed more women to enter the workforce in order to fill the gap left by men in combat, the image has inadvertently come to be associated with feminism and women's rights (Winson 2014). Studs are one of the biggest fashion decorations of the punk movement, which is associated strongly with rebellion and non-conformity. The red colour on the sole of the shoes reminds us of Christian Louboutin, a luxury women's shoe brand whose red sole is its biggest tell-tale sign and signature attribute. These aspects combined emit an image of a liberated, confident, rebellious and perhaps powerful woman. It alludes to the fact that the video may showcase elements of feminism or female empowerment, or at least that Gina Tricot as a company wants to be associated with the concept of Girl Power.



Image 2: screenshot from 'H&M Close the Loop' video
Source: H&M 2015

This scene portrays a blonde woman sitting barefoot on a kitchen bench wearing a fitted crop top with long tassels and white shorts. The accompanying narration is “be liberated”. The woman in this frame is Karley Sciortino, author of *Slutever.com*, a blog about sexuality and relationships, and sex/relationship columnist for *Vogue*. In 2017 she also appeared in season 2 of the Netflix series ‘Easy’, playing the character of an author and escort (Sciortino 2017). Sciortino is known for being a sex-positive person and writes a lot about sex positivity in her blog. Therefore, including her in this ad positions H&M as a sex-positive company that supports women’s free expression of their sexuality. Of course, for a viewer who is unaware of who Sciortino is, the interpretation of this image may not go as far as this analysis, however given the target market of this video, it is not unlikely that viewers are also consumers of *Vogue* and Netflix where Sciortino is prominent. This is thus one of the ways in which H&M is seeking to create a progressive image of empowerment and freedom of expression.

There is a point to be made about the choice of environment for this frame. Sciortino is sitting on a kitchen bench in a sexy manner, juxtaposing the traditional “woman’s place”, the kitchen, where women traditionally spent and in many cases still spend hours daily cleaning and cooking. The word “liberated” has connotations to the women’s rights or women’s liberation movement. We could interpret this as H&M positioning themselves alongside the feminist movement and for women’s emancipation.

5.2. Cultural Appropriation



Image 3: screenshot from 'The Way' music video
Source: Gina Tricot 2017



Image 4: screenshot from 'The Way' music video
Source: Gina Tricot 2017

The song in this music video is sung in a pseudo-rap manner. Pseudo because it has some elements of rap, like rhyming and many lines said in quick succession, however it does not sound like a real hip hop song written by a rapper by any means. It is quite obvious that it is a commercial song written for an advert, using elements of rap in an attempt to create a “cool” image. Cissi Forss sings “we struggle to do better in our bad ass crew” (just before image 3) and later on “so homies in our fashion industry”. The use of words such as “bad ass crew” and “homies” creates a certain identity for the brand. As per Gee’s (2011) third building block of language, identity, language here is used to create an identity. The use of the word “homies” is one way for Gina Tricot to appeal to a young audience. However, the use of the word seems rather misplaced in this given context. The word “homie” is a

shortening of “homeboy” which is an American slang dating back to the late 1800s and refers to a person who comes from the same city or place as oneself according to Dictionary.com (2018). For a Swedish fashion brand to appropriate this term to refer to people working in the fashion industry (“so homies in our fashion industry”) may be interpreted as cultural appropriation to some extent. It could therefore be interpreted that, behind the attempted cool and edgy image lies a lack of self-awareness and cultural sensitivity. Another verbal queue which leads me to deem this “rap” style as inauthentic is the use of rhymes. For example, “underwear” is rhymed with “fear”, “there” with “despair” and “industry” with “sympathy”. The not quite right use of rhymes in this song is another sign that the songwriter is most likely not a rapper themselves.

Visually, the use of the hooded denim shirt in image 3 is another allusion to hip hop culture (Berlinger 2018). The line “we struggle to do better in our bad ass crew” suggests that the five women standing behind Cissi Forss in image 3 are the said bad ass crew. The women are standing with their arms either crossed or with one hand on the hip, all leaning on one leg, showing that they have “attitude”. Visual and verbal queues as described above again show that Gina Tricot is attempting to embody the image of a “cool” company for which “bad ass” powerful and independent women work and shop. However, using lines such as “bad-ass crew” again shows that behind the image they try to create, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of how such language should be used.

The line “so homies in our fashion industry” is preceded with “let’s make cotton production with sympathy”. Thus there is a juxtaposition between the consumer and the producer, between Sweden and India, and between those who work for Gina Tricot in Sweden, and those who indirectly work for Gina Tricot in the global South. The use of language in “let’s make cotton production with sympathy” is interesting as the video is speaking to consumers and consumers are in no way involved in the production or farming process of cotton. It is subtly suggesting that consumers determine the practices of the industry. The women working for Gina Tricot in Sweden are described as “bad ass” while the farmers and workers in India are portrayed as needing sympathy and as we see later, as needing to be taught the importance of sending their children to school and using chemicals “wisely”. Using words like sympathy, although well intended, reveals a paternalistic view on women in the global South that denies them agency. Through an analysis of the visual and verbal discourse in this music video, a white saviour complex as discussed in detail by William Easterly (2006) in ‘The White Man’s Burden’ becomes increasingly apparent as underlining a lot of the imagery created in the video. The appropriation of parts of hip hop culture is an appropriation of black American culture. As Johnson (2003, p.5) puts it:

Whites construct linguistic representations of blacks that are grounded in racist stereotypes to maintain the status quo only to then reappropriate these stereotypes to affect a fetishistic

“escape” into the Other to transcend the rigidity of their own whiteness, as well as to feed the capitalist gains of commodified blackness.

The last point to make about this line “we struggle to do better in our bad ass crew, but our success is depending on you” is how the onus is placed on the consumer, assuming that “you” is the viewer of the video and potential customer of Gina Tricot. Through such a statement, Gina Tricot is claiming that they are already doing enough on their part for creating sustainability in the fashion world, and their success in doing so is depending on individual consumers buying their products. The word choice of ‘struggle’ is also intriguing as it suggests that Gina Tricot is part of some kind of resistance, rather than part of a global problem.

The above analysis has shown that although Gina Tricot is seeking to engage consumers with sustainability issues through showing their benevolence and the strength of their employees, they reveal paternalistic and culturally insensitive attitudes.

5.3. Othering and Exotification



Image 5: screenshot from 'The Way' music video
Source: Gina Tricot 2017

Cissi Forss is the centre of attention in this scene, as is true for majority of the music video. At first glance, this is quite a happy scene; it is colourful and the dancing creates a celebratory feeling; it may be interpreted that Gina Tricot is creating this happy image to create a positive image and make consumers believe they are doing good work in India as a company. What is strange however, is that there is no explanation as to why the Indian women in the scene are wearing festive outfits that would

most likely not be the type of everyday clothing that factory workers or farmers would wear. The fact that Cissi Forss is wearing a turban is another sign of cultural appropriation, and shows a lack of understanding of Indian culture as women in India do not wear turbans. The turban may thus also be interpreted as a symbol of masculine power. As this segment is about sustainable farming practices, it seems misguided to depict the supposed farmers celebrating in a village wearing festive clothing. The dancing in costume is reminiscent of Bollywood movies and choosing to use this in a video about sustainability shows that Gina Tricot is exoticizing Indian culture by reducing it to song and dance. This out of context use of costume makes the dancing women look more like props to the video rather than characters with meaning and a story to tell. Another interesting theme which is apparent both in this scene as well as in the rest of the video is the fact that only Cissi Forss and the other presumably Swedish women in the video are wearing denim. The video is about the sustainable production of denim, yet only the Swedish women in the video are ever seen wearing them; the other actors in the video are either shown in these festive Indian garments, or the farming clothes. Although perhaps not intentional, this signals to the viewer that the jeans are for the wealthy women in the global North, and not for the farmers in India. The way that a Western corporation has constructed an image of Indian culture here, romanticising their dress and movements, may be interpreted as yet another instance of cultural othering (Said 1978). Behind what at first glance seems to be a joyful and positive image, lies elements of cultural exoticification and othering.

5.3.1. White saviour complex



Image 6: screenshot from 'The Way' music video
Source: Gina Tricot 2017



Image 7: screenshot from 'The Way' music video
Source: Gina Tricot 2017

In above scenes, Cissi Forss is depicted interacting with farmers in India. Here, Gina Tricot is showing that they care about the workers' health and quality of life, through the lyrics "By educating farmers to take their kids to school" and "Using chemicals wisely is more cool". However, a deeper analysis of the imagery and lyrics above will reveal hidden structures and meaning. In image 6, Cissi Forss is sitting in the light, with sun shining directly onto her face. By contrast, the worker is sitting further back in the frame, making him look smaller and less significant than Cissi Forss. To further exacerbate this feeling, he is sitting under the shade of a tree so that he is less visible, and to exacerbate this fact even further, he is wearing both a facemask and a cap, rendering almost his entire face hidden and invisible.

The lyrics "using chemicals wisely is more cool" trivialises the issue of chemical use in the textile production process. It also suggests that workers in the textiles industry are unaware of the dangers and harm (both to human health and the environment) caused by hazardous chemicals, and need to be taught to use them more wisely because it is more "cool". This is a gross misunderstanding of the reality of textile production. Production of fast fashion has continuously been shifted to countries with laxer environmental regulations and labour laws meaning clothes can be sourced and manufactured at the cheapest prices possible. To insinuate that chemicals are being used unwisely due to ignorance on the worker's part in the current system of global clothes manufacturing is both erroneous and neo-colonial. Like much of this video, it is unlikely that Gina Tricot intentionally embodied this

paternalistic tone while claiming to help farmers in India. Janks (1997, p.341) describes this phenomenon as follows:

Ideology is at its most powerful when it is invisible, when discourses have been naturalised and become part of our everyday common sense. This is what results in writers using a discourse of paternalism unconsciously, because it is available.

In image 7, again, Cissi Forss is at the forefront and in focus; the farmer is in the background and out of focus. By placing him in the background, he looks small, a recurring theme it seems for this video. The fact that he is out of focus blurs his facial features and it is not possible to distinguish anything specific of his face. Thus in both frames, the farmer and worker become essentially anonymous.

In both these images, an image of the white saviour complex is painfully apparent, and more specifically these images may be interpreted as an embodiment of the white woman's burden, which according to Bandyopadhyay and Patil (2017) is a significant issue in the world of volunteer tourism. Although this advert is not about volunteering or tourism, the same problematic image of the white woman travelling to the global South to help or save the "locals" is being presented. This type of representation may perpetuate the image that poor people in countries like India need white women to save them from themselves (like they do not already wish to send their children to school if they could or to not work with harmful chemicals). Earlier this year, a Swedish woman in her 20s posted a picture of herself hugging a child in Nairobi, Kenya, on Instagram, with a long letter written to said child as the caption (Gharib 2018). The letter is a horrifically tone-deaf portrayal of the white saviour complex with statements such as "One of the most happiest moment in your life was probably when you met me and my friends" and:

In two years you are going to meet a grown up man that you have never met before, you two are going to have a child, and then if you are lucky he's gonna stay with you, but he will probably leave you alone with your child in your small home made of mud and tree's (Instagram user quoted in Gharib 2018).

The Gina Tricot advert is by no means comparable to this extremely offensive portrayal of the assumed helplessness and lack of autonomy of women in the global South. However, the neo-colonial discourse and images about the global South that are constructed and perpetuated by the Gina Tricot advertisement have real material consequences, one of it being contributing to the social context in which people like this Instagram user believes meeting her is the happiest moment in an otherwise miserable life for a young girl in Kenya. This is precisely why it is important to consider how

discourse is shaped and in its turn shapes or perpetuates certain ideas in our society, because without analysing and criticising those processes, it is difficult to break such a pattern.

People Are Outraged Over This Woman's Offensive Caption About A Girl In Kenya



Screenshot from Instagram.com

5.4. Social Justice and Activism

5.4.1. #Hashtag activism



Image 8: screenshot from 'H&M Close the Loop' video
Source: H&M 2015

In this image we see a man wearing a button down shirt half tucked into a black knee-length skirt. The accompanying narration to the scene is “wear a short skirt if you’re a man”, encouraging the viewer and potential customer to break gender-normative boundaries through the way they dress. He is holding up an A4 sheet of paper with the hashtag “#EteğiniGiyTaksimGel” which is in Turkish and a reference to the protests that spread after Ozcegan Aslan, a 20-year-old woman was gang raped and murdered in Turkey in early 2015 (Netto 2015). This case was seen as emblematic of the growing violence against women in Turkey and as a public response many people came out in protest, including a movement where men wore skirts in protest and solidarity with Aslan (Netto 2015). This text thus has a two-pronged effect. Visually, by depicting a man wearing a skirt, H&M is showing that they support non-conformity and perhaps gender fluidity. A man wearing a skirt shows acceptance of different forms of expressing your identity and gender, and positions H&M as a progressive company. Secondly, the hashtag links the image to a political stance that is critical to violence against women, and also encourages political activism from individuals. This use of intertextuality adds depth to the advertisement but it can also be seen as an instance of corporations co-opting a social justice movement. This is not uncommon in recent brand campaigns, although it is a technique that is criticised by many (Natividad 2018). In 2017 reality TV-star and fashion model Kendall Jenner starred in a Pepsi ad campaign where she was portrayed neutralising a protest by offering a police officer with a Pepsi cola—she was heavily criticised for engaging in the capitalisation of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, especially seeing as the ad was released on the same day as the 49th death anniversary of Martin Luther King (Törner 2017). In February of this year, high fashion empire Gucci made an ad campaign recreating the student protests of 1968 in Paris, which were ironically a sharply anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist movement (Natividad 2018).

The hashtag on a piece of paper speaks to the time in which this type of image would make sense for an audience. The hashtag was invented back in 2007 by Chris Messina for Twitter and has since become a hugely important way of sorting and categorising information on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, but also a way for individuals to create collective political and social justice movements over the internet (Messina 2015). This image of a man holding up a sign with a hashtag, although the image itself is quite plain, would only make sense in this contemporary context post 2007. The image itself could not have existed before that time and if it did, it would not be understood or interpreted in the way that it is today. More specifically, this particular hashtag would only make sense after the murder of Aslan in 2015 as it was created as a show of solidarity for her.

Each frame in this video only lasts for a short moment, most of them between 1-3 seconds. Since this hashtag has a rather long text, and it is written in Turkish letters, it is unlikely that the majority of viewers would have the time to see what it says or that they would understand it if they did see it.

Only Turkish speaking individuals would be able to read the hashtag in such a short scene. This may lead us to conclude that it is not the specific hashtag that carries the importance of this scene, but rather the connotations that a person holding up a hashtag on a piece of paper has in contemporary society. A person in modern society who uses smartphone and/or who is familiar with the concept of hashtags and has seen some or many political and activist movements harnessing the hashtag as a tool of spreading their message might quite easily interpret this image as being connected to some kind of political movement, even if they do not exactly which one. The visual aid of the man wearing a skirt could furthermore lead the viewer to assume that the hashtag is referring to something progressive or something in relation to feminism or women's rights, or gender issues in general.

An example of this use of hashtags is the 'Bring our girls back' campaign that started in 2014 after more than 300 Nigerian girls were abducted from their school by terrorist group Boko Haram (McVeigh 2014). This movement was backed by many high profile people including Michelle Obama, as seen in the image below (McVeigh 2014).



Source: The

On the other hand, a viewer who is not so familiar with social media and the use of hashtags may either not understand the meaning of image 7 at all, or assume that it is about something much more frivolous. The inclusion of this image thus shows that H&M wants to appeal to progressive people who consider themselves to either be activists themselves or at least to care about social justice issues.

5.4.2. Climate and youth activism



Image 9: screenshot from 'H&M Close the Loop' video
Source: H&M 2015

This scene portrays a group of children and young people standing close together, all looking into the camera. The accompanying narration is “take a stand”. The camera starts zoomed in so only a few of the people are visible, and then zooms out on the shot which expands the width of the viewer’s vision and creates a sense of plurality, emphasising that there is a large number of people in the shot standing in unity. Most of the people in the frame are wearing white slogan T-shirts with slogans in black print such as “RECYCLE”, “ACT NOW”, “STAND UP”, “RE-USE” and “CARE FOR WATER”, thereby conforming to the current trend of fashion brands attempting to combine activism with fashion by creating political t shirts (Hartman 2017). The fact that there are no middle aged or old people in the frame coupled with the fact that they are wearing T-shirts with political and climate related slogans is interesting and could be alluding to youth culture, encouraging young people to take political action, and H&M pointing out that young people are our future. The theme of these slogans reflect that of the main message of the ad: recycling and saving water.

Out of all the scenes in this video, this is the only one which directly relates to the environment. In contrast to most of the other scenes, it also uses nature as a backdrop, which is the most common technique used in green advertising (the other two being nature as the product and nature as the outcome) according to Cox (2013).

By using slogans on T-shirts, H&M is making a statement, namely that it is a company that stands for the environment and sustainability, and wants its customers to care about sustainability issues. While in most other scenes, it is the visual performance which has made the statement (such as a man

wearing a skirt or the inclusion of trans models) but in this scene, the messages are stated in words on the T-shirts, making it more literal and leaving less to the interpretation of the viewer. It shall be noted that out of all the messages communicated in the ad, this is perhaps the least revolutionary, therefore putting it in writing has a low chance of offending a conservative audience. Thus, H&M has created a safe space for itself where it is difficult to be harshly criticised.

5.5. Gender and Sexuality



Image 10: screenshot from 'H&M Close the Loop' video
Source: H&M 2015

This frame depicts a transwoman looking at herself in a mirror, pulling her hair behind her ear, showing a decorative gold earring and smiling. She is wearing light eye makeup, red lipstick and has wavy brunette hair. The narration accompanying the scene is “be a princess”. The use of a transwoman who is middle aged positions H&M as a brand that is inclusive of models of different ages and gender identities. Again, this is an effective way for H&M to present itself as inclusive and non-conforming.

5.6. Pop culture and Identity



Image 11: screenshot from 'Monki Cares 1-800-LAZY-ECO' video
Source: Monki 2017

This frame depicts a woman wearing blue pants sitting on a blue chair in front of a blue wall, only part of the legs and one hand is visible in this particular shot. Her fingernails are painted blue and she is holding a piece of paper that repeats the line “1-800-LAZY-ECO” which is also the name of the video and the catchphrase of the advertisement. The use of monochrome and the ‘1-800’ phrase is reminiscent of Drake’s 2015 music video ‘Hotline Bling’, as per images below.



Drake Hotline Bling single cover
source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hotline_Bling



Screenshot from 'Hotline Bling' official video
Source: Drake 2015

Hotline Bling has 1.3 billion views on YouTube, hit #2 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 2016 in the US and later won two Grammy awards in 2017. Whether or not this similarity between the Monki ad and the Hotline Bling music video was intentional in the art direction of the video, it certainly speaks to a certain aesthetic of monochrome that has been popular in the last few years, and alludes to pop culture icons such as Drake. The video for Hotline Bling in its turn has been linked to the aesthetic of James Turrell's artworks, although Turrell denies any collaboration with Drake and the director of the Hotline Bling video denies any conscious influence from Turrell's work (Minsker 2015). The connotations to Drake in this Monki video might appeal to a young audience, majority of whom would have seen the Hotline Bling video considering its widespread popularity.

This video is selling an idea and an identity more so than a product. It is selling the image of cool, style conscious young women who have a certain aesthetic. Moreover, it is selling the identity of a young woman who is not only cool and stylish, but who is also eco-conscious. In the video, a fictitious telephone hotline is a metaphor for Monki as a company, and they give tips to consumers on how to become more eco-friendly even if you are lazy.



Image 12: screenshot from 'Monki Cares 1-800-LAZY-ECO' video
Source: Monki 2017

In this frame one of the women on the lazy eco hotline is portrayed picking up the phone and stating "we're here to make you more eco-friendly". The use of the call centre and the use of the pink wall with pink lighting is again reminiscent of the video for Hotline Bling, as seen in the images below.



Screenshot from 'Hotline Bling' official video
Source: Drake 2015



Screenshot from 'Hotline Bling' official video
Source: Drake 2015

The choice of using a telephone hotline to communicate tips on how to be more eco-friendly is clever because it sheds a positive light on Monki as a company, and depicts them as a friendly company that cares about the environment and its customers, and wants to help consumers to become more eco conscious. Thus using this hotline, Monki manages to simultaneously present themselves as caring and friendly, while also placing the responsibility of sustainability and eco-friendliness onto the consumer.

As stated earlier, this Monki ad is not selling a specific product (although the women in the video are all wearing outfits comprising of garments from Monki) but rather an idea or an identity. For a sustainability ad this is a clever technique as it may lower consumer scepticism, because after all they are not trying to sell anything overtly, they're just giving tips on how to be more eco-friendly! Of course the purpose of the ad is to sell products in order to increase profits, but this purpose is implicit and more through association in the communication of the advertisement, while the eco-friendly tips are explicitly stated.

5.7. Summary table

Company	Image	Concept/ representation	Critique/analysis
Gina Tricot	1: woman standing at the front of a warehouse in blue overalls and studded black high heels, arms crossed and leaning on one leg.	Female empowerment/ feminism	The clothes and setting are reminiscent of a working class image, but the woman is representing a corporation, and in fact she is a prominent executive in Gina Tricot.
H&M	2: Karley Sciortino sitting on a kitchen bench.	Female empowerment/ feminism	H&M is a company that still relies heavily on underpaid female garment workers.
Gina Tricot	3: Cissi Forss standing in front of a group of women wearing a denim hooded shirt.	In the video, they are attempting to be cool, relevant and edgy.	Cultural appropriation: the wearing of the hood up is reminiscent of hip hop culture.
Gina Tricot	4: Cissi Forss looking into the camera, wearing an orange turban.	In the video, this could be seen as her making an attempt to show solidarity with, or understanding of other cultures.	She says the words "so homies in our fashion industry" appropriating the word homie from latino and black culture and taking it out of context. Furthermore, Forss is wearing a turban, which is something that only men in India would wear.

Gina Tricot	5: Cissi Forss in India, surrounded by dancing women	This could be an attempt to showcase a joyful celebration with Forss as the representative of Gina Tricot- leading this celebration – so local people are happy about her (Gina Tricot) presence there.	The women dancing around Cissi Forss are meant to either be farmers or factory workers, however they are anonymous and reduced to their festive attire and dance movements. The portrayal of the locals in this scene is exotifying.
Gina Tricot	6 & 7: Cissi Forss depicted in farms in India with a worker handling chemicals and a farmer in a cotton field.	In this video, the depiction is of Forss in direct contact with the farmers suggesting direct trade and an intimate relationship across the value chain. ⁸	The workers are anonymous and placed behind Cissi Forss to appear small and insignificant. A white saviour complex is apparent with Forss (Gina Tricot) helping the farmers.
H&M	8: Man wearing a skirt, holding up a hashtag on a paper.	Hashtag activism	The image is referring to a protest against sexual violence in Turkey, H&M is appropriating a movement that it had no engagement or relation to.
H&M	9: A group of young people standing together wearing slogan T-shirts	Climate justice and youth activism	Through the use of political slogan T-shirts, H&M claims to be for activism and for climate justice.
H&M	10: A transwoman smiling into a mirror	Gender and sexuality	H&M is inclusive of genders and sexualities in this video, but this is not reflected in the rest of their business such as their gendered sections both in store and online.
Monki	11: a hand holding a sign that repeats	Laziness	This ad suggests that you can save the world even if you are lazy, suggesting that lazy and small

⁸ Gina Tricot is a member of the BCI (Better Cotton Initiative) however as a company they do not have any direct relationships with cotton farmers in India.

	“1-800-LAZY-ECO”		lifestyle changes are enough to offset the environmental damage caused by the fashion industry.
Monki	12: A hotline employee holding a phone and saying “we’re here to make you more eco-friendly”	Individual responsibility	Monki positions themselves as a benevolent character, and the hotline suggests that while the company is very helpful, it is up to individual consumers to act eco consciously.

Table 1: Summary of analysis for each image

5.8. Conclusion

In this section I have explored the different themes that emerged through the three advertisements that were analysed. In the Gina Tricot ad, there is a strong intention of showing female empowerment and showcasing women as taking action in sustainability issues and being leaders in the industry. While from a neoliberal standpoint this may be seen as a positive way of including a gender perspective, I argue that it is an instance of a corporation adopting an essentialist view of women and their nurturing nature, and turning this into a tool for marketing so called sustainable products. Furthermore, the repeated cultural insensitivity that is embodied in the depictions of a white woman helping farmers in India (when in fact Gina Tricot as a company has no known direct relationship with any cotton farmers in India) reveals the underlying neo-colonial attitudes that this advertisement is built upon.

In different ways the Gina Tricot ad and Monki ad tap into the essentialist view of women as being inherently caring and nurturing. The Gina Tricot ad does so more explicitly, by showing a white woman singing about helping farmers and workers in India. The Monki ad is called “Monki Cares: 1-8-00-Lazy-eco” and as such they present themselves as being a caring company that cares for their customers, and therefore customers should care for their clothes in an eco-friendly manner. In both cases the clothes are marketed to women, so one could assume that the advertisements are intending to evoke feelings of caring in the customers to behave in a certain manner.

The H&M ad does a better job at seeming genuinely inclusive with its use of diverse models in terms of race, body shape, age, sexuality, and gender. However, through creating a positive and progressive company image, they are creating a distraction from the fact that their business model of extreme over-production is inherently unsustainable, no matter how much individuals try to recycle their old garments. What everyone might not know is that the H&M group owns many other brands including Monki (they also own Cheap Monday, Other Stories, Weekday, COS, and Arket). As such, they are

able to create a different image for each brand in order to target as many audiences as possible. So for instance, when watching the Monki ad, it may seem progressive and cool, and one might not think about the fact that their profits feed into the profits of the H&M group.

6. Consumer reflections on fast fashion videos

In this section I will present findings and analysis from the 17 semi-structured interviews I conducted with women in Sydney, Australia, Lund, Sweden, and Stockholm, Sweden. I showed all three advertisements videos to each person and then asked them questions to understand how they perceived and reacted to the advertisements. Upon transcribing and reading through all interviews, some recurring themes emerged. This may be seen as emic coding, where I let the themes emerge from the data, rather than imposing themes or theory onto the data. The overarching themes that will be discussed are: guilt (6.1), scepticism (6.2), distraction (6.3) responsibility (6.4), and identity (6.5). Under each overarching theme, there were both common and contrasting sentiments amongst the interviewees. I will here forth present excerpts and quotes from interviews that correspond to subsections of the recurring themes as well as present my analysis of the material. All the names of my interviewees have been changed in order to keep them anonymous.

6.1. Guilt

Some interviewees felt a sense of guilt when watching the advertisements, and it made them reflect on the things they do or don't do in terms of sustainability. Mostly the sense of guilt was seen as a potentially positive motivator for changing behaviour.

Clara:

it made me feel incredibly guilty about every piece of clothing that I own...People are way more inclined to help change in active ways if they're feeling guilty about something.

Sophia:

...I'm not extremely mindful of where my clothing is coming from or what the processes are to produce it and I feel like I should probably look more into that.

Some people such as authors Hesz and Neophytou (2010) argue that, in contemporary times, the notion of guilt has replaced the notion of fear as the main feeling that corporations tap into through their green advertisements, and that we as consumers buy into corporate environmental claims by literally buying their products and thereby removing our guilt. In their book *Guilt Trip*, Hesz and Neophytou (2010, p.235) continue to argue that

As a rule, if companies operate within the limits of the law, we don't hate them for doing so. If we disapprove, we either stop buying their products or services, or we get the law changed. Historically and logically, that's how it works.

The underlying assumption is that people do not care enough about the environment and if they did, they would affect change through making different consumption choices. This is a neoliberal idea that goes hand in hand with "voting with your dollar". Although there may be some truth in such a statement, I would like to problematise this idea by arguing that the situation is more nuanced. The interviews I have conducted lead me to believe that it is more likely that consumers do not blindly trust corporations, but ambivalently trust them when they make claims about the environment because the information they present is often confusing and blurry, making it difficult for the consumer to discern the validity of that information. This confusion will be discussed in further detail in the next subsection.

6.2. Scepticism

According to Lyon and Montgomery (2015), consumers have over time become increasingly sceptical towards green communication from corporations. Despite this fact, green marketing and communication has persisted and spread in Western society. In my interviews it became evident that many of the interviewees felt sceptical towards the advertisements I showed them, particularly towards the Gina Tricot ad and slightly less so the H&M ad and even less so the Monki ad. In the case of the Gina Tricot ad, several of my interviewees felt sceptical because the company's cultural appropriation made them feel uncomfortable.

6.2.1. Companies create a sense of confusion through providing selective information

In all of the ads, companies encourage the consumer to act in a certain way, for the sake of being eco-friendly or sustainable. However, none of the companies ever explain *why* consumers should behave in those ways. Gina Tricot tells the customer to buy jeans made from organic cotton, H&M stresses that all fashion rules can be broken as long as you recycle, and Monki gives handy tips on how to become more eco-friendly. My interviews reveal that by not explaining why something is important, the companies are creating a sense of confusion within the viewer. It seems to me then, that this confusion may lead to an increase in scepticism.

Camille:

Now I've watched two ads about being able to recycle your clothes at stores and I still don't know what it's being recycled into or what difference it actually makes.

Cecilia:

They say that things are good to do but you don't really know why, why they're good.

Moa:

I'm not sure what they are implying by recycling, what they are doing with the old clothes.

Chloe:

I think it promotes a positive message and a progressive message but it's confusing because H&M is like, to me is like the antithesis of sustainable fashion. So I'm confused.

On the other hand, despite scepticism, some consumers seem to have an underlying sense of trust, albeit ambiguous, that corporations try to do the right thing by the environment. Furthermore, this sense of trust seems to lead in some cases to evaluating companies that at least have sustainability or environmental advertisements to be the lesser evil, because the dominant belief in society is that doing something small is better than doing nothing at all.

Ginger:

I do to some extent expect companies or places that provide me with these things... to do it in ways that I trust. Because it's true that I probably won't be making my own clothes ever.

Chloe:

I'm like 50/50 because I find the whole campaign a bit cringe worthy because there are other smaller brands that would do the same thing but not have some glam and glitzy advertising campaign like that, but then at the same token I want to support sustainable eco-friendly fashion so I'm on the fence.

Chloe was one of the many interviewees who did not like the Gina Tricot ad. She thought it was "cringe worthy" and took particular issue with the whitewashing and cultural appropriation in the video. Despite all this, she was undecided when asked if she would be less or more likely to buy from this brand after watching the advertisement. This is one of the signs which point to the fact that even conscious and critical consumers want to believe that companies care about the environment, and therefore vaguely give them the benefit of the doubt even though they feel sceptical towards the intentions of the company.

6.2.2. Consumption is missing from the equation

The H&M advertisement and the Monki advertisement both have a big focus on recycling as they are promoting their service where customers can recycle their old unwanted clothes in any H&M or Monki store. The Gina Tricot advertisement focuses on organic cotton and sustainable jeans production. All three ads communicate to the viewer that you should buy from them because it is the better, more sustainable or more eco-friendly choice. However, none of the brands address the thing that perpetuates environmental degradation in the fashion industry: excessive consumption. In fact, not once in any of the ads is there a mention of consumption or an encouragement to consume less. Some of the interviewees saw this as an issue.

Amelia:

It's not addressing the amount of consumption that happens. It's not saying that we should change our consumption patterns of buying less as well as buying sustainable it's just saying buy.

Ginger:

Recycle is used much more than the reduce and reuse so... we get stuck on recycling like we still get plastic because we think we can recycle it but maybe that's not always the best and it's better to reduce or completely eliminate...

This may in part help to answer how fashion brands seek to engage consumers with sustainability issues (RQ1) and how those advertisements match up to the material reality of the fashion industry (RQ4). Omitting the issue of consumption is certainly one way in which these fashion companies seek to engage with the customer through their advertisements. By not talking about consumption, they are able to focus on other things such as recycling, something that is much easier to communicate because 1) it does not hurt the company's bottom line and 2) it doesn't alienate or make the customer feel uncomfortable because encouraging someone to recycle does not require that person to re-evaluate their choices or behaviours. If over-consumption of clothes is one of the biggest problems causing environmental degradation in the fashion world, then suggesting that buying jeans made from organic cotton or recycling old clothes is a sound way to help save the earth does not hold up as a valid argument. Concepts like recycling only addresses the final stages of a commodity's lifecycle, and does not address the critical middle section of consumption, which is what drives production. One could then argue that these advertisements and the claims they make do not match up to the material reality of the fashion industry.

6.3. Distraction

These companies use different green marketing techniques in order to distract their consumers from more serious issues. In the Gina Tricot advertisements, buzzwords like “organic” is repeated throughout the video, but what this means is never explained. The focus on organic cotton also means that the advertisement is ignoring many other aspects of their production.

Ellen:

You can use the word organic, that means it's just sourced organically but doesn't really mean anything after that- they can talk about how the way that it's sourced is the label that it gets but then nothing about how that little puff of white turns into denim.

Ginger:

If everyone uses organic cotton you're still exploiting land using it. It's sure better maybe than conventional but that doesn't mean it's... Fixes the problem.

Ellen:

You're sourcing this cotton but you're like making a massive amount of units and then how are you transporting that? You're using cars, using boats and then what do they run on? If you are really gonna be thinking about an ethical sustainable thing you'd be thinking about things that didn't take a lot of transport cause that use petrol...

Moa:

I don't see how they are sustainable in a lot of other ways just like having organic material isn't like enough.

Similarly, H&M uses the catch phrase “close the loop” as the title for their advertising campaign. They never really explain what they mean by this, and out of the 17 women I interviewed, 8 had heard this phrase before and knew what it was referring to.

Companies with past scandals and problems use green marketing to distract the consumer from arguably more crucial issues that companies need to deal with. For example, H&M has faced sharp criticism in regards to labour rights in their supply chain, racism in marketing and issues with pollution and toxicity in their production chain (Changing Markets 2017, Siegle 2016, West 2018). Creating sustainability advertisements and collections like the ‘conscious collection’ may then be interpreted as both a distraction and a way for H&M to do some damage control, which is another common technique in green marketing (Cox 2013).

Rosanna:

They point out that recycling makes you feel like you have a lot of power... again they're a big company, there's a lot of darker issues.

Lucy:

It is a good thing that they're doing, taking clothing back that they, that people don't want, yes, but it's not solving the whole picture in terms of ethically sourced clothing, I think.

Some consumers feel positively about special ethical or sustainable collections like H&M's 'conscious collection'.

Clara on H&M conscious collection:

Yeah if I see that on a tag and it's something that I like I'm more inclined to buy if it has that, than I would be if it didn't. Tipping Point.

Many brands have this type of line that is marketed as sustainable. This shows that those collections are a critical factor for some consumers where they will feel encouraged to buy from that line even though the rest of the corporation may not be sustainable or eco-friendly as a whole. Sustainability collections such as H&M's 'Conscious Collection' is usually only a small fraction of the products sold, while the sustainability of the practices used for the bulk of all other products sold is unclear. This is one of the ways in which companies manage to distract the consumer so that they can continue to operate in unsustainable ways without needing to address all the problems in their production and actually change their entire business model. Since the sales of the sustainable collections will still go to the same company, it can inadvertently perpetuate unsustainable business practices through cross-subsidisation.

6.4. Responsibility (who's is it?)

The question of individual responsibility versus collective responsibility is an important one to discuss when speaking about sustainability in the corporate world, as most capitalist corporations promote consumer action as the answer to sustainability. The logic is that if individuals demand sustainable products over unsustainable ones, the market will adapt accordingly to meet those demands. This logic of the invisible hand of the market is one of the cornerstones of neoclassical economic theory. Most of the women I interviewed challenged this view, arguing that individual action and responsibility is not enough, while some resonated more with the idea of being able to

affect change through small individual actions. These varying responses raised some interesting perspectives on structure and agency.

6.4.1. Ambivalence about the impact of individual action for sustainability

Camille:

Voting with your dollar going “I’m going to buy sustainable fabrics or organic cotton because I know that I like those practices” ... I’m a bit sceptical of that kind of sort of environmentalism because I feel like change like that needs to be implemented at a higher level for it to be truly effective across you know to make an actual difference because the individual can only do so much if it’s not in legislation...

Amelia:

I don’t think it will do as much just like an entire industry shift but it can’t hurt of course doing things on an individual level.

Moa:

Of course you can do a lot...it's better to do something than nothing but I feel that it needs some more change in the structure...

Rosanna:

They’re all like good things that an individual can do. But again it's like moving the responsibility of some big issues from the company to the individual. I guess.

As presented in above findings, although most interviewees agree that there are good things individuals can do, not one interviewee was convinced that individual action would have wide enough impacts on society as a whole. One of my interviewees believes individual action may have positive impacts on society in the way that it can make people feel better about themselves and that could raise the morale of the general population, but that this is the extent of that impact.

Sara (translated from Swedish):

I believe it is political decisions that need to ensure that there is a change but I think that if you are eco-friendly and do eco-friendly things it can make you feel good and that could be good for society.

6.4.2. Companies are promoting simple individual solutions to complex industry wide issues

Some of the women I interviewed felt somewhat encouraged by the individualistic discourse that all three companies engage in because it gives them a sense of agency in being able to contribute to a more sustainable or eco-friendly world through small and achievable lifestyle changes. On the other hand, other interviewees were uncomfortable with this discourse because they felt either that the companies were distracting the consumer from more serious issues, or that they were oversimplifying complex situations.

Chloe:

It's basically saying like you can fix the problem yourself if you just buy sustainable fashion. But I think it's a wider issue than just what you buy. So I think it's oversimplifying quite a big problem.

Ellen (on why H&M has such a big focus on recycling):

Well, it's a good way for them not to have to address how their products are being made and in what conditions they're being made.

Camille:

I can wash all my clothing at cold temperatures and I do that but... unless every single human being in the world starts doing that, then what's going to happen... Band-Aid on a bullet hole type stuff.

One way to look at the way companies are promoting individual action based solutions to complex sustainability issues is that they are deflecting their responsibility by oversimplifying complex issues and shifting the responsibility onto the individual. Perhaps companies have to present sustainability issues in simple ways, present them as isolated issues because otherwise it is not logical to promote simple solutions; this reductionist approach is exemplary of the simplified models of neoclassical economics. If companies presented the true complexity of the environmental and social issues that the fashion industry faces and causes, they would not be able to justify simple consumer oriented solutions.

This helps in understanding the implications of fashion brands placing the onus on the individual consumer to act more sustainably or eco-friendly (RQ2). Perhaps the most important implication of placing this responsibility on the consumer is that it removes responsibility from the corporation. Through the guise of giving consumers agency to act individually, companies are upholding the status quo by not problematising excessive consumption. This way consumers can continue to buy from big companies, and still feel like they are having a positive impact through their actions on the household

level of caring for the environment or recycling the things they have already purchased. Again this relates to Adam Smith's concept of the invisible hand of the market, and the assumption that individual consumption in self-interest has beneficiary effects on all of society, a concept that has been widely criticised within political economy (Stilwell 2002).

6.4.3. Laziness is used as a tool in green marketing

The notion of laziness is omnipresent in the Monki advertisement, most notably in the title '1-800-Lazy-Eco'. The entire advertisement is built upon the idea that being lazy need not stop you from being eco-friendly, on the contrary, laziness can in fact make you *more* eco-friendly. Some of the women I interviewed thought it was smart to use the "lazy eco" phrase, because it made the information presented more accessible and relatable, which gives agency to the consumer. The notion of laziness also allows people to maintain the status quo and not have to change their lifestyles too much while still feeling like they are making a difference, which also speaks to their environmental privilege (Park and Pellow 2011, Sandilands 1993).

Emily:

I also connect to the idea of trying to be eco in a lazy way like that's totally I think a smart and quite funny kind of way to talk about everyone, including myself wanting to do this stuff but it's hard, so finding a way that feels accessible...

Clara:

They reiterated the message nicely but also short and succinct and each message had a really clear like "I'll do this!" "And you can do this!" "And you can do this" and then you've made a difference and you haven't done anything.

Lucy:

Those little lazy tricks... I can see how they can work... it just brought up a lot of like what can I do at home to reduce my footprint, so yeah I guess it did make an impact

It shall be noted here that some context may be lost when reading only short quotes extracted from my interviews. For instance, the above interviewees were not necessarily convinced that these lazy tricks were *their* desired solution to sustainability issues, but simply that they thought it was a message that they resonated with positively. Other interviewees took issue with the use of laziness as a marketing tool because they believed it trivialised a serious issue, and also because they did not want to be associated with being lazy when it comes to the environment.

Rosanna:

It's reduced to being like environmentally responsible as a laziness thing... Just be lazy and do the simple things that we're telling you to do...

Chloe:

I don't think the word lazy helps the cause.

Amelia:

The lazy part was a bit weird. Maybe that will reach a wider audience because some people don't want to work too hard to be environmentally friendly... I don't like the idea of being lazy, I feel like we need to be active about it.

6.5. Identity

6.5.1. Whitewashing and cultural insensitivity

Almost every person I interviewed felt uncomfortable watching the Gina Tricot advertisement because they felt that it was engaging in cultural appropriation.

Chloe:

It's just like nice skinny white women dancing in jeans and then it's contrasted with the poor villagers who are actually picking the cotton and using the chemicals and producing the jeans and it's actually quite a contrast... it's trying to make a connection with something that's so disconnected but in a very jovial and white washed way, it just doesn't sit right with me.

Cecilia:

As long as you have a white western woman in that environment then that becomes a "positive" environment.

Amelia:

This western woman dancing in the middle of all of these people watching her... I kind of think it glorified her a bit.

Lucy:

Their pop music video approach to the issue was positioning those who are vulnerable involved in manufacturing garments in a white washed context that is communicated as the “right way”.

It is clear in the Gina Tricot advertisement ‘The Way’ that they as a company are trying to position themselves as not only eco-conscious but also as feminist or at least for female empowerment. As a company they have other campaigns that focus more explicitly on female empowerment, the most recent one being in March 2018 when they were selling bracelets with the proceeds going to UN Women in the name of female empowerment. ‘The Way’ portrays the women in Sweden working for Gina Tricot as being “bad-ass” and shows Cissi Forss traveling to India where she dances around in cotton fields and is depicted in scenes with farmers and workers, acting as a metaphor for the company supposedly teaching farmers the importance of education and using chemicals safely.

6.5.2. Individuality and breaking societal norms

H&M spends majority of the advertising time encouraging consumers to rebel against fashion norms and societal norms, to be themselves whatever they choose to be, and to embrace their individuality as long as they adhere to one simple rule: recycling their clothes. This is ironic given that H&M has established itself to be mainstream and available to everyone, meaning you can shop where everyone else shops and still be a rebel and an individual, which seems like an oxymoron. The reactions to this kind of marketing was mixed- some felt that it was inspiring and empowering, others saw it as a cheap marketing ploy; some found it inspiring while simultaneously recognising that this type of messaging is designed to make consumers feel inspired and positive.

Ellen:

I think that if it didn't have the thing at the end I would have talked about that ad with my friends and been like “oh my god did you see that it was so different, everybody’s like progressive”, like progressive as such because the bar is so low that you don't really need to be doing that much to seem woke and/or progressive- so it’s definitely a marketing tool... They don’t even need to back it up with data or statistics or information about how much of it gets recycled, in what way are they recycling.

They’ve used enough representation so that any one minority wouldn't be upset about the casting so they’re only going associate positive things with the brand.

Ellen is arguing that H&M is using progressivity and “wokeness”⁹ as a marketing tool to create a positive image for themselves in order to win over progressive consumers. She continues to share her opinion on what it means for a company like H&M to focus their campaign on recycling and how that adds to the progressive image that this particular advertisement is creating.

Ellen:

It’s a good way for them not to have to address how their products are being made and in what conditions they’re being made. But it's also how I said before about feminism being a choice word right now, people associate recycling with people that are conscious about environment.

Camille:

The first half of the message is just like “doesn’t it feel great looking at all this representation, and all these people that are just like you or different than you, we love all of you, all of you come in to our stores and recycle your clothing, recycle your clothing even though none of our clothing can be recycled because it’s all cheap”

Creating a brand outside their clothing, creating an idea or an attitude that you associate H&M with, which is, you know, freedom of identity and dressing however the hell you want even though they still have a male and female section so like “dress like a boy”- “buy from the men’s section because that’s how gender works” it’s a nice message, it’s feel good but it isn’t really reflected elsewhere in their business.

Camille is problematising the idea that H&M is as ground-breaking as their advertisement suggests. Their video is encouraging people to break heteronormative patterns by wearing whatever you want to wear, and they do this by representing trans people and queer people in the advertisement. But as Camille points out, H&M still has a very distinct male and female section in their store with gendered mannequins wearing gendered clothing, so is their supposed anti-heteronormative image actually upheld in their business model?

⁹ Dictionary.com defines ‘woke’ as the past tense of ‘wake’, as in someone who has woken up, and more specifically as an adjective used to describe someone or something that is “actively aware of systemic injustices and prejudices especially those related to civil and human rights” (Dictionary.com 2018).

6.5.3. Aesthetic based identity as a means to engage consumers with sustainability

Monki is creating a specific identity as a brand, and it is doing so to resonate with customers who either identify with this aesthetic or perhaps those that aspire to the aesthetic of the bored yet conscious and cool young woman who dresses according to cool trends. Some people had a more positive image of Monki than H&M after watching both advertisements, and some of these interviewees surprised to learn that the H&M group owns Monki.

Lara:

I thought it was empowering just because I feel um that it's like, if you said to people "don't wash your clothes" they'd be like "ew" but they made it cool, so I think it's like, you know, I don't know if that's empowering but it's kind of like a nice message.

I feel like dressing cool and buying something from Monki.

Camille:

It made the line between "are you selling your brand" or "are you selling this service you now have which is recycling your fashion" way blurrier, than in the H&M one. The H&M one was riding on this making you feel great, making you feel like "oh I'm empowered to make this decision" whereas Monki was like "are you a Monki girl? Are you a lazy girl? Do you like cute aesthetic? Do you wear hairclips? Well then you should do this".

According to Sandilands (1993), selling a lifestyle rather than a product is a common trait of green consumerist advertisement. This holds true in the Monki ad which is more concerned with appealing to a certain type of person with its specific aesthetic, rather than advertising any specific products.

6.6. Conclusion

With the case studies of viscose production in the background section, the video analysis in section 5 and the findings from the interviews above, three elements of the fashion industry have been presented. These three elements tell different parts of the same story, which is why I felt it was valuable to include them all. The differing responses from the interviews show that different levels of knowledge about the fashion industry shapes ideas about brands and the sustainability work they do. Allowing the EJAtlas case studies to represent the context of the world-system within which textile production causes detrimental effects on people and their environments in the global South has allowed a deeper analysis of the meaning behind the fashion videos analysed. In this way, I hope to have showed that not only do the three methods tell different parts of the story, but they also

complement each other in creating an understanding of the bigger picture of the fashion industry and connecting production and material sourcing to marketing and consumption.

7. Discussion

Here forth I will delve deeper into some of the discussion points from the analysis section, applying the theoretical concepts presented in section 3. Understanding what corporate image the companies have sought to create through their videos is not difficult, nor is seeing how they try to positively engage with their audience.. However, the application of theories and analytical concepts from different disciplines enables the uncovering of the structures and meanings that lie behind those positive images.

7.1. Cultural appropriation

As discussed by Johnston and Taylor (2008), companies tend to prefer communicating happy and positive images in their advertising as opposed to feeling of anger or despair, because positive associations can more easily be converted into brand loyalty. This idea is prevalent in the Gina Tricot ad. The video depicts smiling and happy Indian women dancing in colourful festive attire. This not only trivialises the seriousness of the state of the ready-made garment industry but also reduces the Indian women in the video to costumes and dance.

The band Coldplay and artist Beyoncé were criticised only one year earlier, in 2016, for a music video which also exoticised Indian culture in a similar fashion (Kumar 2016); clearly Gina Tricot did not take this as a lesson as they presented a similar exoticised and stereotyped image of India in their 2017 video. Cultural appropriation in both these cases are extremely problematic as they perpetuate and image of an exotic and idealised India which “obscures the realities of a complex nation in favor of reductive tropes originally intended to preserve western hegemony” (Kumar 2016).

There are more instances of cultural appropriation in the Gina Tricot video, which highlights the white privilege of Gina Tricot as a company and the consumers they target. For instance, Cissi Forss wears a denim hooded shirt while singing about Gina Tricot employees being a “bad ass crew”. It is the privilege held by her as a white woman that allows her to look “bad ass” per se, when there is a long history of young African American men facing police discrimination and violence for wearing hoodies with the hood up (ACLU Colorado 2017).

7.2. Alienation as brought on by ecologically unequal exchange and hyper-consumerism.

The unequal exchange and offshoring of labour and production in the ready-made garment industry alienates the consumer from the production. The distance between the consumer and the producer

creates a disconnect so strong that the workers become anonymous in the consumers' eyes. In the Gina Tricot ad, an Indian cotton worker is depicted squatting under a tree with almost his entire face hidden by a cap and a facemask. He is thus rendered invisible and anonymous, which ironically is exactly what the industry does in reality.

One of the consequences of ecologically unequal exchange is that consumers are completely alienated from the production (Hornborg 2011, Nixon 2011). Such an abstraction of labour creates a distance between us and our possessions, reflecting the physical distance between markets and production loci. This distance prevents us from exercising our moral judgement proper, because the distance can be reconfigured into individuality. The disassociation with mode of production means the product becomes part of us in a different way: shaped by the moment of purchase (choosing it because "it is so me") as opposed to the moment of production or indeed the person(s) involved behind the production. This very disassociation between consumers and production is what makes the kind of marketing analysed in this thesis possible. Ecologically unequal exchange then becomes a precondition for the existence and success of greenwashed advertising campaigns. While it is not out of evil that we are blinded to the labour that goes into our consumption habits, if we do not use this knowledge in order to shed light on the direct link between over-consumption in the North and socio-ecological destruction in the South, an act of ignorance effectively becomes an act of violence (Rees and Westra 2003).

7.3. The evolving nature of feminism in advertisement

Writing this thesis has brought my attention to the different and evolving ways in which corporations have tried to push consumerism onto women throughout history. Although feminised advertising today looks very different to what it did decades ago or even just two decades ago, it is still emblematic of a culture that tries to find new subtle ways of selling commodities to women.

A lot of advertising targeted at women in the late 90s and 2000s were inspired by choice feminism exemplary of third wave feminism, where the idea that anything a woman does or buys out of pleasure can be seen as an act of feminism (Maclaran 2012, Thwaites 2017). The extremely popular TV series 'Sex and the City' explicitly celebrated women's sexual freedom, and was in turn celebrated by viewers and critics alike. However, the show also celebrated superfluous consumption and capitalism- not the least through its main character Carrie who is most known for her ever changing fashion style and her love for buying shoes. This version of consumerist female empowerment became a trend also in advertising in the 2000s (Gill 2008). However, the advertising world while still very gendered, has evolved into much more sophisticated ways of selling products to women rather than just sending out the message that consumption will make us happy. As society

becomes more aware, and feminism becomes increasingly popular outside academia, advertising and marketing also tries to mirror that awareness- this is why it is becoming more and more difficult to instantly see the faults with advertisements that seem positive without delving into a much deeper analysis and examining the companies' business structures. This is also why it remains imperative that we continue to criticise the way feminism is usurped in advertising, because otherwise we face the danger of allowing feminism to become depoliticised. In 2018, companies have “woke” advertisements, they are starting to be much more inclusive in terms of gender, race and sexuality when it comes to model representation, and through their feminist messages both implicit and explicit (such as on slogan T-shirts), they are claiming to be part of the camp resisting the patriarchy. While it is good to be more inclusive, it is also dangerous because it pleases a progressive audience and saves companies from criticism, and as McRobbie (2008) would argue, when we don't criticise, the underlying structures become invisible. It is dangerous because, we start to be manipulated into thinking that perhaps consumerism can be compatible with feminism and female empowerment. I hope to have showed in this thesis that consumerism the way it looks today, is not and cannot be compatible with feminism and environmentalism.

7.4. Greenwashing

There are many different ways in which companies engage in greenwashing, and they all have different effects. For instance, through what is called the ‘Halo effect’, it becomes difficult for consumers to differentiate between the overall impression of a company and individual attributes (Lyon and Montgomery 2015). An example using the Gina Tricot ad would be that, because Gina Tricot claims to make jeans with sustainable organic cotton, consumers assume that all their products are also sourced and produced ethically. Another technique is selective disclosure whereby companies choose to disclose positive information whilst withholding negative information (Lyon and Montgomery 2015). This may also be applied to the advertisements discussed in this thesis—for example H&M champions their recycling program through their Close the Loop ad, while in 2017 it was revealed that H&M sources viscose from factories in China and Indonesia that are causing heavy pollution and toxic contamination of waters (Changing Markets 2017). The point to be made here is that through green communication or greenwashing, companies can mislead consumers in many ways in order for them to only associate the companies with positive things. Such greenwashing can also confuse consumers in many ways. The interviews I have conducted show that in some cases consumers are left so confused by certain messages or advertisements that they do not know whether the company in question is environmentally friendly or sustainable or not. Confusion can lead to consumers not knowing what to do, and therefore many end up upholding the status quo because there are too many corporations making different green claims and it's too difficult and time consuming to investigate each one as to their validity.

In capitalist and consumerist societies, the assumption is that consumer demand can change the way the market looks. But in fact what we see instead of a shift in the market is that corporations of all sizes (with larger corporations like H&M having a disproportionate amount of power) usurp the ideals that consumers are demanding, and claim to be sustainable/eco-friendly/feminist, because this way consumers can continue buying from those companies and thereby uphold the status quo, and in essence what is left is a market where some small brands are genuinely trying to be sustainable, producing locally under fair conditions and not overproducing, while other companies make minor changes in their business model or marketing in order to tap into the demand for more socially and environmentally conscious products, without changing their business practices much at all.

It shall be noted that if corporations in the fast fashion industry truly believed in sustainability, they would have to reinvent their entire business structure. The fact that most brands merely engage in some green advertising or release one line of “sustainable” products, is emblematic of a broader trend within corporations, namely that sustainability rhetoric almost always outpaces any real action on climate change (Pulver 2012).

7.5. Environmental privilege as a factor in the construction of denial

In normalizing the status quo, the construction of denial and innocence work to silence the needs and voices of women and people of color in the Global South, and thus reproduce global inequality along the lines of gender, race and class (Norgaard 2012, p.18).

Kari Norgaard’s fieldwork in Norway found that it is not in fact true that people are unconcerned with the reality of climate change, rather their awareness and concern makes them so uncomfortable that they end up pushing it away and dealing with more manageable everyday life issues instead (Norgaard 2011). This could be true for how some consumers feel as well, although my research cannot explicitly confirm this. It could be true that consumers feel concerned with the state of the fashion industry and the pollution it causes, but it’s an uncomfortable fact to deal with, so it’s easier to purchase something that is said to be good for the environment, or be more eco-friendly with the clothes you own, as these tasks are all manageable within the realms of everyday life. Companies push us into this direction so that we continue to uphold the status quo whilst feeling like “at least we are trying”. It may be true that just as in Norgaard’s field work, cognitive dissonance plays a role in how consumers act on sustainability issues. Consumers get uncomfortable when they have two inconsistent or contrasting thoughts such as 1) “the fast fashion industry is unsustainable” and 2) “H&M’s recycling initiative makes the fashion world more sustainable”. According to Leon

Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, in order to resolve this inconsistency, one of the cognitions needs to be changed (Norgaard 2012). Norgaard (2011, 2012) argues that if people feel a sense of guilt or responsibility they use avoidance and denial as a strategy to escape from that cognitive dissonance.

This is why it's important to study polluting industries from the angle of the environmentally privileged as well. Because people who primarily consume and live in countries that disproportionately consume fast fashion and do not produce it, are disconnected from the production. They do not have to see how their clothes are produced, nor do they need to feel the environmental effects of pollution or toxic production practices, and as a result they are able to avoid uncomfortable feelings by concentrating on small manageable lifestyle changes rather than really examining the structural issues that cause the issues in the first place.

7.6. The problem with individuality (structure vs. agency)

All the advertisements that we have discussed in this thesis encourage individual action as a means to achieve sustainability or help the environment. Gina Tricot calls on the consumer to buy their organic cotton jeans, H&M commands the consumer to recycle their clothes at any H&M store, and Monki gives us tips on how we can apply easy and lazy tricks with our clothes to become more eco-friendly. On the one hand, such an individualistic approach gives people some agency to feel they have control in shaping a better world. On the other hand, however, it neglects the importance of mobilising and organising collective, rather than individualistic, efforts to effect change on a wider social scale. The logic is, perhaps, that it is better for individuals to affect some sort of small change than do nothing at all. It is this individualistic discourse that is mobilised by corporations in order to sell products: purchasing allows the consumer to feel as though they are helping the environment. Capitalism needs high levels of consumption in order to guarantee continuous and accelerated growth, and high levels of consumption necessitate environmental degradation. To encourage people to consume different, slightly more "eco-friendly" products are thus redundant, and further distracts us from the hard truth, which is that we are simply consuming too much. Stilwell (2002, p.316) illustrates this problem in the following quote:

Consumerist ideology thereby becomes central to the process of environmental decay, while the related ideology of *individualism* has the concurrent effect of eschewing concern with collective responsibility for finding solutions (emphasis in original).

Sally Weintrobe (2013, p.42) argues that humans are always in a psychological struggle between their narcissistic side and their compassionate side, where our narcissistic side "dreads giving up our sense

of entitlement to have whatever we want and entitlement to apply our magical ‘quick fixes’ to the problems of reality”. And quick fixes are exactly what corporate greenwashing provides. She continues that because Western consumerist society encourages us to express our individuality through our material possessions, we are afraid that without those possessions we will lose our sense of identity... “advertisers play to this attitude and foster it to sell us things, and society rewards those who embody it.” (Weintrobe 2013, p.43)

Free-market environmentalism is thus very compatible with the needs of this kind of human narcissism because “like neoclassical theory in general, the case for ‘environmental fine-tuning’ through adjustments to the market mechanism assumes ease of substitution in the patterns of production and consumption.” (Stilwell 2002, p.313). This illuminates why it is so problematic to use neoclassical economic logic to solve environmental or climate related issues. When something as all-encompassing as the environment is seen as an externality, and it is internalised by giving it a monetary value, very important social and ecological issues of the world-system get left out of the equation and subsequently ignored.

8. Conclusion

As I hope to have shown through not only the three videos I have chosen to analyse in depth, but also mentioning other similar examples in advertising and media on cultural appropriation, the co-optation of feminism, and selling empowerment to women, this thesis brings about an important contribution to human ecology as it examines an issue that is widespread yet considerably understudied.

Furthermore, this thesis has paid particular attention to the intersection between ecology and gender through advertisement, which is another perspective I believe to be both important, and still rather understudied.

8.1. Contribution of study

The critiques of sustainability advertisements and green consumerism presented in this thesis deviate significantly from the dominant discourse and understanding of the role of green communication and advertising. The dominant opinion reflects the position of capitalist societies, whereby there is faith in the capacity of technological advancements to achieve global sustainability, and issues of environmental injustice and political power imbalances in the world system are not prioritised (and often not acknowledged). Furthermore, the dominant view as prescribed by neoclassical economic theory is that consumption through a free global market is an adequate and preferred way of achieving desired outcomes when it comes to sustainability. I also mentioned that when it comes to sustainability advertising and green consumerism, most of the literature appears in mainstream

economic journals, such as journals of consumer studies, marketing communication and business strategy, and less so in journals with critical or radical perspectives on the economy. For instance, in the Journal of fashion marketing and management, Hill and Lee (2012, p.480) state that “An understanding of how young Generation Y consumers distinguish sustainability from environmental concerns in the apparel industry could enable retailers to create marketing campaign that will better target consumers...”. The purpose for such research, for these authors is to understand consumers better so that companies can even more effectively sell them products.

What seems even more perverse then is when scholars research ways to figure out how companies can better target female consumers, although of course in the business world targeting different consumer segments is smart, not perverse. D’Souza and Taghian (2017, p.353) argue in the International journal of consumer studies that “if women have more faith in governments and businesses it would make them more eco-savvy to act as agents of change for transforming the environmental sustainability landscape”. Furthermore, they argue that because women carry out majority of household purchases, it is important to understand them better because “it helps us to consider how a women’s role as a household purchasing agent is an important nexus to environmental sustainability” (D’Souza and Taghian 2017, p.353). Essentially they are ensuing that women can and should be used by corporations to continue assuming the role of the environmentally responsible household agent. This proves that it is not solely corporations that use sexist notions of gender to sell products to women, but academics who write in peer reviewed journals see no issue with it. This is why it is vital to critically examine the phenomenon of green consumerism and how it is pushed onto women, because society is infiltrated with the idea that we should use women as a vehicle for advancing sustainability through consumption. This thesis has thus sought to make a valuable contribution to the resistance of the dominant view on gender, the role of women and the role of sustainability marketing. Furthermore, this study has been an endeavour to expand the field of Human Ecology and the concept of ecologically unequal exchange into contemporary processes such as sustainability marketing, which is prominent in the business and sustainability world.

8.2. Back to the research questions

In answer to the first research question, this thesis has through analysis of the advertisements and interviews with consumers showed that fashion brands seek to engage people with sustainability issues through various means. Those include the use of guilt as a tool, encouraging individual action from consumers, creating a positive image for the company and also distracting the consumer with some positive pieces of information. However, my analysis of the videos with the use of theories has also shown that behind the messages and images that fashion brands intentionally create, there are many hidden meanings and structures, such as paternalistic and neo-colonial attitudes. My findings

have shown that the implication of fashion brands placing the onus on the individual consumer to act more sustainably or eco-friendly can be that consumers end up upholding the status quo rather than engaging in collective action in order to demand more structural changes in an industry. Another implication is that some consumers, based on interview findings, feel they had some agency in making a positive change for the environment, through their lifestyle level decisions. As for research question three, my research has shown that fashion brands like H&M and Monki have very successfully created a progressive identity and sense of empowerment through representing diverse models in their advertising and through embodying an on trend, cool aesthetic that speaks to youth culture. Many consumers liked the way that this was done through advertising, however, some of them still felt sceptical towards the intentions of a company like H&M, based on opinions they had already formed of the company.

As a concluding remark addressing my last research question, I have argued in this thesis, using case studies on viscose production as concrete examples, that the sustainability and environmentalism claimed in fashion advertising does not match up to the material reality of the fashion industry. Fashion companies produce a very hopeful image of the industry, assuring consumers that they can keep buying as many clothes as they want as long as they are made from organic material or they recycle their clothes, or simply don't wash them too often in order to save water. The biggest and most obvious issue with this is that no fast fashion company analysed in this thesis have stated over-consumption or over-production as a problem for the environment, when arguably those are the *most* pressing issues for an exponentially growing resource intensive industry on a finite earth that is already being pushed beyond its limits.

8.3. Future research and limitations:

Had this thesis been a much larger project, I believe it would have been very interesting to increase the sample size both in terms of the advertisements analysed and the people interviewed. Such a quantifiably robust project could have significant impact on how the public views sustainability advertisements and corporate uses of feminism. Interviewing a large number of people in different age groups would also be a very interesting exercise as results between age groups could be compared in order to better understand how people are affected by advertisement.

Consumers these days are saturated with advertisement like never before. While we used to see ads mostly on TV and perhaps in the paper, today we see them on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, as pop ups on basically all mobile apps and websites; in other words, ads are almost inescapable. What is even worse is that today our personal data is stored by giant companies such as Facebook and used specifically in order to target relevant advertisements at us. In a world where we are so saturated with

corporate messages, it is easy to get used to it; easy to stop resisting against it- especially when companies claim to be on your side. This is why now, more than ever, it is important to continue scrutinising advertising, especially when it is in relation to social justice or environmental justice issues, because without such scrutiny and critique, feminism and environmentalism run the risk of becoming depoliticised. Even critical investigative documentaries such as River Blue which has uncovered the huge damage the fashion industry does to the earth's waters suggests consumer education and technological innovation are the solution to the problem of the fashion world. These solutions have been suggested for decades and yet not much has changed. As such, I have argued that neoliberal and individualistic solutions will not solve the sustainability issues the fashion world faces.

With this thesis I hope to have contributed to an alternative narrative. The narrative where consumerism and neoclassical economic thought needs to be examined and rethought. The current capitalist system is dependent on constant growth in production and consumption for its survival, and it is this very over-production and over-consumption that is causing social and environmental degradation in the global South. In this thesis I have problematised the ways in which fast fashion corporations use environmentalism, sustainability and elements of feminism and female empowerment in their communication and advertisement in order to gain the support of a female market, increase their profits and continue to grow their business with no intention of slowing down their production dramatically.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Basic information

First name?

Age?

Preferred pronoun?

Where are you from?

Do you consent to the interview being recorded?

Video questions:

Did you like this advertisement?

Why/why not? What made you like or dislike it?

What, according to you, is the main message of this ad?

Do you think it was communicated effectively?
Who were the company speaking to in the ad? Who would you say is their target market?
Did you feel represented (see yourself reflected) or included in the ad? Explain.
Do you buy from this brand?
Would you feel more or less inclined to buy from this brand after watching this ad?
Did the ad evoke any emotions/feelings/thoughts?
Have you heard of the expression “close the loop” before? Are you familiar with the terms “circle economy” or “closed loop systems”?
Did you know that Monki is owned by H&M?
Does that change your opinion in any way on the Monki ad?
Did watching this ad make you feel responsible about your own actions?
Did you connect this video with sustainability?
What impacts do you think the suggestion(s) in the video would have to environmental or social issues more broadly?
After watching this video, do you feel like there are things you can do as an individual to make a difference? If so what?