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Supervisor: Marlene Wiggill
Examinor: Åsa Thelander

Consumer participation in environmental brand activism on Instagram:

A case study of consumers use of hashtags in relation to Oatly's
Swedish campaign *Ditch Milk*

REBECCA ARFWEDSON

Lund University
The department of Strategic Communication
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Abstract

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Environmental brand activism has become a strategy applied by many brands to engage and take a stand in the issue of climate change. The aim is to spur a debate and spark an interest and collective action among the consumers (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). However, environmental brand activism has not created the same kind of engagement and debate as other forms of brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). This thesis looks at Oatly's Swedish campaign *Ditch Milk* as an extreme case of environmental brand activism that can give insights into how consumers are making meaning of such a campaign. By analysing hashtags as an essential part of the development of online collective actions (Johnson et al., 2019), the aim is to identify how consumers are making meaning of environmental brand activism. In particular, on Instagram, a brand-related hashtag is often used in the same way across different accounts to create a relationship between a text and an image and an event such as an environmental activism campaign as Oatly's (Zappavigna, 2018). The analysis shows how consumers tend to create posts with two different types of images where the hashtags are used to describe the image and connect and build a community outside of the post. Moreover, the analysis shows a type of self-branding style corresponding with earlier research on consumer activism. The consumers tend to favour lifestyle consumer activism making meaning of Oatly's campaign as having values corresponding with their own personal values. The posts become a way to strengthen the self rather than spurring a debate.

Keyword: environmental brand activism, consumer hashtag activism, Instagram, social semiotics, self-branding, networked branding, consumer engagement

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1. Introduction

In September 2019, the Swedish lifestyle brand Oatly launched a campaign that received a lot of publicity in the Swedish media (Törner, 2019). By using the text: *Ditch milk - when you choose Oat Drink instead of cow's milk your climate impact is 75% less* in their marketing campaign the goal was to raise awareness of the Swedish population's consumption patterns, and the impact food choices have on the climate (Spolamjölken, 2021). The message was viewed as controversial since it challenged long-standing traditions regarding the Swedish agriculture system as well as the current Swedish meat and milk norms (Törner, 2019). Thus, Oatly's campaign created a debate and a polarisation of supporters and opposers. These two sides started several online protests by, among other things, using Instagram hashtags related to the event to voice and spur the discussion.

Technology and social media platforms such as Instagram have influenced the way individuals communicate collective discontent and content. They are essential components in the development of collective actions (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016; Johnson, Hall-Philips, Chung & Hyojung Cho, 2019). Moreover, the use of hashtags and their linguistic and pragmatic functions, such as the function to mark that you are a part of a discussion or community, has enabled further possibilities for collective actions (Zappavigna, 2018). Therefore, hashtags are an essential part of the development of online collective actions since they reflect debates in society and have been seen to mobilise and even affect offline activism and engagement (Johnson et al., 2019). On Instagram, in particular, a brand-related hashtag is often used in the same way across different accounts to create a relationship between a text and an image and an event such as an environmental activism campaign as Oatly's (Zappavigna, 2018). Consumers are in that way also utilising possibilities for self-expression through different collections of brands (Carah & Shaul, 2016). As such, hashtags are essential tools for acts of self-expression as well as for a collective act of activism (Illia, 2003; Johnson et al., 2019).

In light of the development of hashtags as a sort of collective and self-expressive act, it is essential to discuss the development of branding and marketing. Here, Oatly is one of many examples of companies adopting a new communication strategy recognised in the literature as brand activism, or corporate socio-political responsibility (Mánfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Koch, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). These companies are challenging and taking a stand in complex social issues by going beyond being socially responsible, thus becoming differentiators by aligning corporate action with a purpose, such as fighting the climate change (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Moreover, Sarkar & Kotler (2018) introduced a framework of brand activism for marketing purposes. According to this framework, companies have to convert from purpose to action, meaning that it is not enough to merely talk and incorporate a purpose aligning with business goals, but also to act on it. Furthermore, brands can benefit from having a real social impact. It can show authenticity and include their consumers on the journey. In other words, they commodify political matters such as environmental and social issues into brand activism. Thus, brand activism is a strategy to create a more definite purpose and by doing so, attract more loyal customers (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) evaluated 45 marketing campaigns to determine whether it corresponded with the framework developed by Sarkar and Kotler (2018). The content analysis showed that a stronger relationship than earlier was drawn between companies and political affairs, as *it aligns individual identity, the management of public assets and corporate action in the political sphere* (p.1). The campaigns were classified under four different categories: politics and regulatory, societal, environmental and economic issues. Whereas for environmental issues, Manfredi-Sánchez did not find the same connections to instrumental values borrowed from social movements as for the other issues, meaning there was no re-use of content from environmental movements' communications. As a consequence, the campaigns falling under the environmental category did not express or become the same differentiator as brands related to, for example, social issues and movements such as feminism. Since environmental issues are recurrent and used by many brands as a way to take a stand, it becomes crucial to evaluate how and when consumers discuss environmental issues commodified by a brand. As such, how it creates a sense of corporate citizenship, or rather, how consumers are using values anchored in a

brand's environmental activism in their meaning-making of a brand (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Which is the focus of this thesis. By applying critical perspectives on contemporary brand culture and brands as networks, the argument becomes even further strengthened. To further explain, activist brands have seemed to aspire to become a part of *the capitalism of consumption and values* (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019), and is, in that sense, an example of contemporary brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Holt, 2002). It is a culture where brands have gotten identities and become equities of symbolic value for consumers. As such, brands are emerging into systems of community building and symbolic expressions (Billard & Moran, 2020). The object of interest is, therefore, no longer from a managerial perspective. It is instead the communication that occurs within networks, and *the complex flows of those communications among network members and the processes of meaning-making that those networks enable* (Billard & Moran, 2020, p. 600). Hence, brands have become a *space* where consumers, as well as actors within a company, co-create the symbolic value of a brand (Billard & Moran, 2020). To conclude, it is relevant to look at the consumers as crucial co-creators and negotiators of a brand identity to outline how the commodification of climate activism can evoke engagement. In other words, it is necessary to analyse the *meaning-making process*, and how/why/when values from an activist environmental brand have the same *function* for the consumers as other categories of activist brands.

To summarise, taking a stand in a socially controversial issue often leads to, which is also the aim, a debate and also forms a particular reflection of the brand (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). However, according to Manfredi-Sánchez (2019), this has not been the case for brand activism that deals with environmental issues. Hence, it becomes relevant to identify how and when consumers' conversations in online social networks can become of significance for brands dealing with environmental activism. Identifying these factors can enable a branding strategy of a higher value as well as create a symbolic expression of the brand—a key ingredient for building a stronger relationship with the consumers (Billard & Moran, 2020).

1.1. Research aim and question.

In this thesis, Oatly's brand activism through the commodification of an environmental issue will be used as an example of environmental brand activism, or more precisely, an example of brand activism dealing with climate change. The example will, therefore, pinpoint the discourse of environmental brand activism. Thus, it will map out how the understanding of branding as customer-centric and activist is affecting consumer's online environmental and political engagement and is further creating a meaning. Hence, the research question is from a consumer's point of view with a focus on trying to map out and identify different communication patterns in the consumers' creation of content that is reflecting environmental brand activism.

The researcher is taking a netnographic social semiotic approach to get an understanding of the meaning potential of hashtags and how they have the potential to create an intertextual relationship between different posts. Instagram hashtags are the object of analysis, because of the relevance of the site in relation to the chosen topic, but also to narrow down and unitise the available content. Posts were identified and further analysed by searching for hashtags related to Oatly's campaign *Ditch Milk*. Therefore, the research question is:

Research question: How are consumers making meaning of Oatly's environmental activism on Instagram through the use of hashtags related to the Swedish campaign *Ditch Milk*?

This thesis aims to explain the functions of hashtags related to brands' environmental campaigns on Instagram and how they become an instance of meaning in the consumers' political consumption. By applying the understanding of branding as reflexive and unpredictable with complex power dynamics happening within a specific sociocultural context, the insights from this research could broaden the knowledge of when and how environmental brand activism can create conversations of strategic significance among consumers. The findings can, in turn, lead to insights on how to manage the relationship with the consumers. That could potentially benefit a campaign or a brand incorporating environmental activism in its branding strategy.

1.2. Relevance to the field of strategic communication.

The understanding of brands as spaces where brand-related communication is broadcasted and shared between different stakeholders, as well as how the understanding has shaped new power dynamics between sender and receiver, has contributed to the perception of social media as a research field of interest for strategic communication practitioners (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). In this research, this space is where a brand's activism is accepted or rejected and how the brand becomes a way for the consumers to self-express, something that could further contribute to the field and how to understand the strategic value of social media and hashtags.

The research will give a further understanding of how Instagram as a social network site is working as a tool to create strategic conversations that can be beneficial for a brand. According to Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft & Werder (2018), a strategic communicator has to be aware of what kind of content is creating conversations of strategic significance, which in this context, is environmental brand activism that is engaging and creating conversations of strategic importance. This thesis will, therefore, contribute with insights on when and how discussions related to a brand's environmental activism becomes of strategic significance - aligning with a company's vision and mission (Zerfass et al., 2018).

1.3. Delimitations.

This thesis is using hashtags on Instagram as the object of analysis, because of how hashtags are applied and used as well as the characteristics of the social media site. There are many other social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, that could give relevant, and possibly additional insights concerning the research problem. However, this thesis will not make any general conclusions or argue for a similar use between the different social network sites.

Moreover, this thesis will analyse a Swedish case of brand activism, which makes the choice of Instagram even more relevant. To explain further, in Internetstiftelsen's annual report *Swedes and*

the Internet (2019) statistics of social media usage in Sweden is presented. Instagram is the second most visited social medium daily, whereas 41% of the Swedish population is opening the medium every day (61% in total are using the medium). Facebook might be the most used, 51% daily and 74% in total, but there is a decrease in numbers of text and picture posting, most people use it to write private messages. Twitter, which is a known site for microblogging and a forum for debate, is only used by 7% daily where the total is 24% of the population. The low user rate on Twitter in comparison to Instagram, as well as how Zappavigna (2018) is describing the function of hashtags on the social media site (see previous chapter) makes Instagram more relevant and interesting to investigate further.

Instagram hashtag research is still in its infancy, but it is a growing research field where many different semiotic resources and relationships can be of interest for research (Zappavigna, 2018). With this said, this thesis is not aiming to give an understanding for more general use of the social media site. It is instead, as stated in the aim, to map how consumer activism is expressed through the symbolism of a brand's environmental activism. To explain further, hashtags and their couplings to images, texts and events are of relevance to answering the research question.

Lastly, the research problem is environmental brand activism and how consumers make meaning out of it, but it is not research examining brand activism as a branding strategy per se. Instead, the aim is to give an understanding of the consumers' experience and their strategy when using the brand's values related to environmental activism for self-expression and meaning-making.

2. Literature review.

This chapter aims to situate the thesis within the body of related literature: brand activism, and more specifically, environmental brand activism, and how it is connected to brand culture, social networks and the use of hashtags on Instagram. Furthermore, the aim is to set the stage for the theory and method generation.

2.1. Environmental brand activism.

Sarkar and Kotler (2018) have introduced a framework for marketing purposes, where they highlight the importance of brand activism. In this research, the focus will be on environmental activism, a type of activism dealing with *conservation, environmental, land-use, air and water pollution laws and policies* (p. 50, Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). In previous research, Patagonia, as well as Ben & Jerry's, have been pointed out as good examples of how brands have come to apply the proposed framework (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Although Koch (2020) is not applying the framework of Sarkar & Kotler (2018), he is referring to Oatly as a paradigmatic case that can explain the sociocultural process of brand activism. Koch (2020) is indifferent from this thesis, looking into Oatly's positioning as an activist brand from a managerial perspective. He is outlining a framework for how a brand may position itself as activist by becoming a symbolic icon for their consumers. Koch is further applying Holt's (2002) theory of contemporary brand culture, proposing the tendencies of a post-postmodern era among brands and their consumers:

...A proposed new branding principle in times of the climate crisis is one characterised as citizen activist (rather than citizen artist) where consumer culture goes beyond the cultivation of self

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and includes the well-being of the planet, by focusing on systemic changes in production and consumption practices (Koch, 2020, p. 11-12).

Koch (2020) is concluding that brands concerned with *citizen activism* may reconsider their marketing strategy and go back to a more modern marketing approach, where the marketing is rather about informing consumers than working with lifestyle and consumer co-creation of the brand.

On the contrary, Manfredi- Sánchez (2019) is drawing another conclusion: *Activist brands aspire to participate in the aesthetics of authenticity in the capitalism of consumption and values* (p. 1) and has a more postmodern view of brand activism. However, he is also stating that environmental brand activism campaigns do not seem to work in the same way as other types of campaigns concerned with brand activism. A relevant difference and finding in research for this thesis, thus the aim is to explain how the consumers are engaging with a brand concerned with environmental brand activism.

2.2. Contemporary brand culture and activism.

Brand activism has a more customer-centric and activist approach to marketing and branding, where consumers are political activists committed to political actions (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). The description serves as an excellent example of contemporary culture in the literature described as a culture organised by the logic of 'branding' (Billard & Moran, 2020). To further explain, the logic of branding is forms of symbolic communication related to the perceptions of value and associations of meaning and how it nowadays is connected to products and services as well as the brands producing and providing them.

Banet-Weiser (2012) describes the targeting strategy of brand activism by explaining how neoliberalism has changed the economy. Politics has become commodified by companies and are used as a strategy to create a more reliable brand through the relationship with consumers. The

commodification of politics by brands has become possible because of ambivalence in society, or rather anxiety for social change and crisis. Something that, in turn, has led to a longing for security and comfort. In this ambivalence, the nostalgia of *authentic* politics becomes desirable. It becomes a way to ease the ambivalence and create security and comfort. Banet-Weiser (2012) is describing it as a political brand culture, where authenticity is purchased and experienced. With this said, Banet-Weiser is stating that brand culture naturally involves a high involvement from the consumers. It is in this process that the consumers validate the brand as authentic or not, and the culture becomes legitimate. An involved push and pull relationship where consumers are rejecting as well as accepting brands' political acts as authentic or not.

As mentioned in the chapter of environmental brand activism, contemporary branding is happening somewhere in between postmodernism and post-postmodernism. According to Holt (2002), the postmodern era has come to an end, something that becomes apparent by the fact that authenticity is becoming extinct. Brands can not hide their commercial motivations any longer, but will be evaluated on how creative their solutions are and how inspiring, provocative and stimulating the cultural branding process is. In other words, the strategy of brand activism lies in building a culture rather than the actual commodification of politics. The brand culture becomes *a space in which individual identities, citizenship and social action are crafted, experienced and made normative* (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 130). The consumers have become prosumers, co-creating the brand's purpose through activism consumption. Moreover, these outcomes and practices of branding have further *evolved into systems of symbolic expression and community building* (Billard & Moran, 2020, p. 1). A development that has enabled new opportunities for individuals and collectives to engage in civic and political acts centred or extended from the brand and its belonging culture.

2.2.1. Online social networks & brand communities.

By synthesising the concepts of contemporary brand culture and brand communities, Billard & Moran (2020) are further extending the idea of consumer political participation and are

connecting it to social networks. The structure of contemporary brand culture is more consumer-focused, where a flat relationship has replaced the previous top-down relationship of brands being the informant to the consumer. In other words, the consumer can have as much power as the communication manager and influence other actors. There is a more active consumer participation in the *development, sustainment and transformation of a brand's meaning and value* (Billard & Moran, 2020, p. 600). With this said, Billard and Moran are proposing a new theory, *networked branding*, to explain political consumer participation. By analysing brands as spaces of *both allied to the brand and oppositional, long-term in their participation and short-term, human and non-human – beyond those that have been already theorised* (p. 600, Billard & Moran, 2020, p. 600). The theory goes beyond the concept of a brand community and it explains how social networks have developed into a new, more complex and dynamic power relationship between consumers and companies, occurring in both a physical and digital environment. Where the brand is a space of communication between different stakeholders (Billard & Moran, 2020),

The development of, more precisely and also the focus in this thesis, *online* social networks have been observed to put new pressure on companies. Different types of cyber actions are triggering a spontaneous individual relationship between many users, and there is not much room for controlling the online communication flow, giving more power to the consumer (Illia, 2003, Chadwick, 2013). The development of online social networks has become the primary source of information for many and an essential part of people's lives as well as it is a network where individuals easily get influenced by each other (Chang, Zhu, Wang, & Li, 2018).

Moreover, online social networks and brand communities are possible to describe as two different social phenomena that can be explored together (Zaglia, 2013). Online social networks are platforms enabling the possibilities for relationship-building, sharing and discussing ideas between individuals (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). To mention a few examples, it has become a way to socialise and share content in different forms such as blogging, posting, sharing geographical spots and participating in polls. Since online social networks can consist of relationships between consumers, it can also be a sort of virtual brand community of

consumption. A community where consumer behaviour becomes influenced by the characteristics of knowledge and companionship (Zagila, 2013). Something that leads us back to Banet-Weiser and Holt's texts of contemporary brand culture and the development of networked brands (Billard & Moran, 2020).

Kozinets (2015) is, instead, outlining and distinguishing between brand communities and *clustered networks* in his research on online networks. According to him, hashtags, that is the focus in this research, are somewhat topical network clusters which *are the shape assumed by a social network when a non- interactive type of conversation occurs about the same topic, conducted by many disconnected participants* (p. 42, Kozinets, 2015). With this definition, he is concluding that participants in brand clusters are broadcasting information regarding a specific topic and are not in a sense described in earlier sections connected as a community. With this said, Kozinets (2015) is still saying that these connections are of significance, and most often, people who use the same hashtag have shared ways to self-express and attach values to it. Kozinets (2015) are further discussing the danger in polarised topics usually attached to the utilisation of hashtags:

If we know each other only through some topic, and that topic is very polarised, a type of us-versus-them arrangement exists where your beliefs determine very quickly whether you will feel comfortable on one side of this issue rather than the other. These connections are both full of mutual interest (Kozinets, 2015, p. 42).

To conclude, it is possible to define hashtags as one shape of many that Billard and Moran (2020) are calling networked brands. However, it is hard to tell how and whether participants are broadcasting information or creating relationships. With this said, the people using hashtags are still influenced somehow by specific characteristics of knowledge and companionship, which makes it possible to research the two concepts of social networks and communities together (Zagila, 2013).

2.3. Hashtags as a tool.

On a more general level a hashtag has been identified as a tool to arrange information and identify trending topics on social media. The more the hashtag is used, the higher are the chances for a topic to trend (Johnson et al., 2019). When a hashtag based on a brand's communication is used in a post by a consumer, it can be interpreted as the third level of consumer involvement. Something that has been described as the highest level of consumer engagement in consumer research (Christodoulides, Dabrowski & Schivinski, 2016).

2.3.1. Hashtag activism and consumerism.

Social media and hashtags have become an essential component for social movements longevity and offline influence because of how a hashtagged word, phrase or sentence can unite a protest (Johnson et al., 2019). Johnson et al. (2019) are, therefore, describing social media as social networks that *have transformed individual voices from a proverbial whisper to a collective shout* (p. 3). Social media sites have, consequently, become essential tools to organise and mobilise online debates and offline support, such as engagement related to brand activism. Moreover, Yang (2016) describes how hashtag activism can be more or less effective and is concluding that the more persuasive hashtags often are the ones containing *complete sentence structures and verbs expressing a strong sense of action and force* (Yang, 2016, p. 14). Johnson et al. (2019) discuss how posts containing a strength of emotions are reposted more often and faster than a neutral more non-affective post. Johnson et al. (2019) is further describing how political consumerism is shaped online and how it serves as a call to action for consumer engagement in *boycotting or buycotting a specific product, brand, or corporation by using hashtags to reflect objections to the consumption of goods, services, or ideas* (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 4). Hence, hashtags related to brand- and consumer activity can be referred to as a sort of hashtag consumer activism. To further demonstrate the influence of a social network Johnson et al. (2019) performed a content analysis on Twitter hashtags. By analysing the hashtags used and created during the National Football League season in the U.S. in 2019 where the player Colin

Kaepernick decided to kneel during the national anthem as a protest against police brutality towards afro-Americans. They are concluding that on the one hand boycotting and buycotting is collective political consumerism, but on the other hand, it is an activity of individualism and lifestyle political consumerism. In other words, no matter the intention behind the act of creating a hashtag, it is non-arguable a part of collective action.

Moreover, Zappavigna (2018) is describing two sides of consumer activism, whereas one of two sides are less favourable. Consumer activism is, on the one hand, often described and anchored to narcissistic behaviours, where the gratification is in social approval rather than to make a difference. However, on the other hand, it can also be a behaviour of political engagement. It becomes crucial to separate and understand the difference between the two in image tagging and self-presentation posts. Further, Zappavigna is lifting the criticism of the concept of hashtag activism as merely a myth and how it cannot create the kind of social movement earlier described. This criticism is relevant to have in mind in the discussion of online social networks and what kind of community and activity a hashtag can contribute with (Zappavigna, 2018).

2.4. Instagram.

Laustadius (2016) describes Instagram as a social medium, as well as the utilisation of hashtags on the social medium. Instagram has been described as a medium that is creating a space for community building and self-presentation. Instagram is promoting visual rather than textual communication, and therefore there is a smaller likeability that the hashtags indicate a text-based conversation as on Twitter (Laustadius, 2016). To understand how hashtags are used on Instagram it is therefore relevant to look at how the site has been defined: *a shared sense of space, practice, and identity* (Carah and Shaul, 2016). In that way hashtags become a *hashtag based community*.

Zappavigna (2015, 2018) is suggesting that hashtags are a part of a significant change in how metadata occupies social life. Hashtags are more than categorising artefacts. It is a way to

coordinate activity and commentary online. By applying the framework of Halliday's metafunctions, Zappavigna (2018) is describing how hashtags have a social meaning and can be understood as social-linguistic functions. Like Laustadius (2016) and Highfield and Leaver (2014), she is describing hashtags on Instagram as tools to describe an image and to create relationships or show how an image is connected to a community. According to Zappavigna (2016), Instagram falls under the category social network site since users can create a personal profile and follow other users which becomes a kind of relationship. Further, all social network sites have several common characteristic attributes: duplication of content, caption and archiving of content, searchability when it comes to finding content and that the content is visible. Zappavigna (2016) is further describing Instagram *as a vehicle for photo distribution* and that it is a kind of *spreadable media, which is shared by audiences for their own purposes within participatory cultures* (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 273). The user can create visual and textual meanings that can be interacted with as well as the user photostream may be explained as a presentation of personal style or identity construction.

2.4.1. Self-branding on Instagram.

Carah and Shaul (2016) describe Instagram as a tool for brands to create value, often without any advertising. Furthermore, they are referring to social media as a tool *to channel and orchestrate usement of real world cultural spaces* (Carah & Shaul, 2016, p. 70), and how it brings together people's private accounts in the use of cultural spaces created by brands. It is a way for consumers to self-present themselves. Thoughts that contribute to Banet-Weiser (2012), among others debate regarding the branded self. Account users are reproducing brands' ideas of representations and making themselves available for the nature of platforms such as Instagram (Carah & Shaul, 2016; Zappavigna, 2016).

Banet-Weiser (2012) are also putting the idea of self-branding in the context of brand activism. There are contradictions, or differences, between consumerism and citizenship, which becomes blurred with brand activism. While a political act within consumerism is often emotional, impulsive and irrational, a political act within citizenship is often an act of rational thinking and

reasonable deliberation (Banet-Weiser, 2012). As a consequence of the blurred line, there is social media research dealing with the matter of slacktivism (also called clicktivism). Here consumers are not seen to engage or put a more significant effort into their political activism, and brand's activism is then merely a way for consumers to express their identity, or something happening without any more prominent reflections or realisations. Banet-Weiser (2012) is further explaining it as the development from earlier consumer movements to those who identify themselves as consumer activists. Here the political act goes from being collective to individualistic; therefore, activist consumerism (i.e. political consumerism) is often defined as two types of behaviours. Lifestyle activist consumerism, which is a type of behaviour motivated by personal values and is, therefore, more orientated towards individuality. Contentious activist consumerism, which is a type of behaviour motivated, or somewhat influenced, by others who share similar consuming ideologies, and could, therefore, be seen as more collective orientated (Micheletti, 2010). To add, since political consumerism is of self-interest but also for the general good it has often been defined as individualised collective actions, in other words, lifestyle and contentious activist consumerism are hard to separate or handle as separate constructs (Gotlieb, 2015, Johnson et al., 2019), which leads us back to Johnson et al. (2019) and Zappavigna's (2018) criticism towards hashtag activism.

2.5. Synthesis.

The understanding of contemporary brand culture can be applied to explain how consumers are making meaning of brands' environmental activism on Instagram through the usage of hashtags. First of all, to understand how brands have become networks, but as well to understand consumers' need for self-expression through brand images. These two understandings highlight the consumer's role and the use of brands as spaces of social connection in which social and cultural meaning is co-created and exchanged. The discourse of networked brands serves as a suitable first departure to outline the relationship between brands and their consumers as well as how the consumer is using the values of a brand's environmental activism in online social networks. It can further explain the framework of brand activism and how the idea of such a

brand can become a space where meaningful and significant conversations related to the brands' environmental activism happen.

Moreover, these networks are described as physical and digital (Billard & Moran, 2020), where digital spaces have been described as highly complex and even as contributors to the physical, offline space (Yang, 2016). There are many different online social network sites, where these networks occur. This thesis is looking into Instagram because of the purpose of hashtag creation on this particular platform. Instagram hashtags compared with hashtags on other mediums are more centred around self-expression and community building (Laustadius, 2016), which is what this research aims to explore. Hashtags have been explained as a type of online social network and brand community (Zappavigna, 2018); alternatively, topical clusters (Kozinets, 2015). From a social semiotic point of view, it can be described as a tool to mark that you are a part of a conversation (Zappavigna, 2018).

To be able to identify consumers' meaning-making process related to Oatly's environmental activism, hashtags will be the object of analysis. To analyse hashtags on Instagram as semiotic modes of communication is quite a new approach in research, but an approach that can open up for a further understanding of the intermodal aspects that comes with hashtags (Zappavigna, 2018). To further explain, the relationship between posts sharing the same hashtag as well as how it relates to an event, such as Oatly's campaign, outside of the social media site.

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter aims to explain the concepts applied in the theoretical framework of analysis by describing an individual's self-presentation as a meaning-making process of a brand. Further, the meaning-making process is proposed as dynamic and explained through a social semiotic perspective.

3.1. Self - presentation through brands.

The thesis is benefiting from a semiotic perspective to be able to discuss the complexity of an individual's self-presentation through a brand. Semioticians discuss brands as signs. The idea of brands as signs opens up for different understandings of how brands can become symbols of value and have much power to influence (Berger, 2011). A relevant discussion for this thesis since the aim is to map out how an environmental activist brand is influencing consumers' to express and act on a brand's activist image. In other words, consumers' self-representations through collections of brands. To be able to theorise and discuss this idea it is of relevance to explain the interpretation of a brand as a sign and how a sign is a part of a semiotic system (Berger, 2011). The idea of a sign exists within different perspectives, but the two most influential come from Charles Peirce's semiotic perspective and Ferdinand Saussure's structural semiotic perspective (Prasad, 2018).

3.1.1. Brands as signs.

Saussure (1915/1966) describes signs by using the terms signifier and the signified, or easier explained sound image and the concept it represents. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is not natural; it is an agreement, which means that the relation is unpredictable - the

signified is a mental construct of the signifier. A brand is a signifier that people, signified, use to define themselves to others. Further Saussure refers to language as a system of signs that expresses ideas *and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of these systems* (Saussure, 1915/1966, p.16).

Pierce (in Zeeman, 1977) describes a sign as something *which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity*" (in Zeeman, 1977, p. 36). With this said, he proposes three elements in the interpretation: the sign itself (object) what the sign means (representment) and the person who interprets the sign (interpretant). The sign itself, called an object by Pierce, is mainly what makes his ideas different from Saussure's ideas of a sign. According to Pierce, the essence of a sign is the sign's object because it determines the dimension of the sign or its order. There are three possible orders or dimensions. The first order of a sign, an icon, is when the sign is partaking in characters of the object. An object becomes an icon when the object possesses resemblances or likeness with the sign's representation or meaning. In other words, the meaning of the sign, the representation, resembles the object and does not have to be learned by the interpreter. An example of an icon can, for example, be a portrait of a person. The second-order of a sign, an index, is when the sign is connected with an individual object in its individual existence. When interpreted as an index, the object does not, in the same sense as when it is interpreted as an icon, have to resemble the meaning. What the sign stands for may have to be learned. Third-order, a sign interpreted as a symbol, is when something by more or less specific approximately is interpreted as designating the object due to a habit. In other words, it is a societal convention, something that we have to be taught to understand (in Zeeman, 1977).

According to Pierce, language is arbitrary, but it relies upon indexes and icons to be of meaning or bound to a specific social context where it is expressed (Gurdin, 1994). A brand can be interpreted as an icon with the functionality of, among other things, symbolism (Berger, 2011), in other words, it is multidimensional. Saussure's structural perspective on how the relationship between the signified and signifier is not natural but based on an agreement limits signs to the construct of the mind. To explain further, brands exist within our minds and through language. In

other words, there must be a convention of codes in place that is shared between the brand and the consumer for the consumer to understand the brand as a symbol in the first place (Rossolatos, 2017). Pierce's idea of a sign and its relation to an object is compared to Saussure, discussing logic and individuality on another level, how an object can be interpreted as a sign without any social codes or conventions (Yakin & Totu, 2014).

3.1.2. Self-presentation through brands.

In the previous chapter, it was explained how a brand could be interpreted as a sign. In this chapter, the author will outline how brands can function as a way to self-express by being a symbol of interpretation (Berger, 2011).

Through time there have been different understandings of how static the self actually is. In other words, how easy it is to influence the self (Berger, 2011). On the one hand, modernists have a more static view of the self and on what level it is possible to influence people. On the other hand, postmodernists are questioning the notion of self as a coherent construction and instead argue that the self can change with little effort; in other words, the self is not static, and harder to manipulate and influence than first suggested by modernists. Today, there are discussions in the literature on whether there is a new way to understand the self, but nothing concrete has been written (Berger, 2011). The new era is called post-postmodernist and opens up for a more collectivistic understanding of the self. Therefore Holt (2002) is arguing that the consumer culture will go beyond the cultivation of the self.

The notion of self and how it has changed through different eras explains well how communication has developed. To explain further, how to understand the consumers and their role in constructing the brand (Berger, 2011). Going back to Saussure theories, the construct of the self is a product of a group process and shared cultural, societal and historical understandings (Saussure, 1915/1966). The self or at least the public identity is a sort of text intertextually constructed by other people's text process (Berger, 2011). The individual is a product of the

group. Therefore, public identity can be interpreted as the collection of many brands, whereas people change their identity according to current trends (Berger, 2011).

If focusing closer on language, the person, using the brand to self-brand, has to be motivated to use the brand as a sign in the first place (Rossolatos, 2017). How individuals are using brands to self-brand by reproducing a brand as a sign can be discussed as static or more dynamic. In this thesis, the researcher will look at the process as more dynamic. Stemming from a social semiotic perspective, people in a stable fixed semiotic system do not only reproduce signs, but semiotic systems are also more complex and dynamic than that (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004). These systems are shapers of social relations and society as a whole. Therefore, social semiotics is a critical perspective on traditional semiotics, highlighting the potential of the individual's own meaning-making of a sign (Haliday & Mathiesson, 2004).

3.2. Social semiotics.

Social semiotics is proposing that sign systems are more complex and dynamic than presented in traditional semiotics (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004). The idea of a sign is, still, borrowed from traditional semiotics. The difference is that the relation between form and meaning is not arbitrary; it is motivated; therefore, in communication, signs are made and remade. In that sense, signs are always newly made, meaning, signs are made not used by the sign-maker. To further explain, a signmaker brings meaning to the sign based on own interests, interests shaped by environments and circumstances of use (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004).

3.2.1. Semiotic resources.

Traditional semiotics interpret the relevant meaning as frozen and fixed in the text itself. A text is in that sense possible to decode and extract by referring to a coding system. A coding system that is impersonal, neutral and universal for users of the code (Hodge & Kress, 1988). Social

semiotics is on the contrary assuming that the coding system is less static and that an author cannot know whether a text is creating the hoped meanings and effects. According to Hodge & Kress (1988), these are the interests of research for social semioticians: the understanding of how a text has an uncertain outcome, the level of social action, and *their effects in the production of meaning* (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p.12). Social semioticians are, therefore, concerned with semiotic resources rather than the semiotic concept of codes. Semiotics resources and semiotic codes both describe how a semiotic system, such as language, is constructed but, in comparison to codes, the understanding of semiotic resources opens up for a less static view on modes of communication (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004).

...Semiotic resources are the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes ...They can be produced both physiologically - to give an example, through the muscles we use to make a facial expression and technologically - to give an example, with a pen or software together with the ways in which these resources can be organised (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 285).

Depending on the meaning instance, a semiotic resource has the potential to become a mode of communication when adapted in the same way as a community (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). As such, semiotic resources have different meaning potentials. It depends on how they have been used in the past, the beneficial aspects of possible usage and how it is accomplished in a concrete social context where the semiotic resource is a subject to some sort of semiotic regime (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Therefore, the understanding of social semiotic resources describes a development between form and meaning (Gurdin, 1994). These connections between form and meaning can be created on every social and cultural level. From this point of view, the process of people as sign-makers come to play. People shape and combine semiotic resources to reflect their interest, which moves away from the more traditional view of people only reproducing existing signs within a more or less fixed system of choices (Gurdin, 1994).

3.2.2. Modes of communication.

As earlier mentioned, semiotic resources have different meaning potentials. Depending on the meaning instance, a semiotic resource has the potential to become a mode of communication when adapted in the same way as a community (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Therefore, social semiotics can be described as an approach to communication, aiming to explain how people communicate by a range of means in specific social settings. There are different understandings of what a mode actually is. Depending on the knowledge of a particular group of resources and their affordances, it will qualify as a mode (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Affordance, or modal affordance, is an essential concept in the social semiotic analysis since it explains different modes potentials and limitations. To explain further the affordance of a mode is constructed through its material use, how it has been continually used to mean and do something, and the social and cultural aspects that will inform about its use in a particular context and how it can change through time (Halliday & Mattheisson, 2004).

One way to determine whether a group of semiotic resources can classify as a mode is to apply Halliday's metafunction test. To understand how people are making meaning with language Halliday (in Halliday and Matthiesson, 2004) developed a theoretical framework for language as semiotic resources and their social functions. When applying Halliday's theory of systemic functional linguistics in the analysis of any instance of linguistic meaning, three functions will be considered, referred to as metafunctions (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). They simultaneously *express something about the world ('ideational metafunction')*, *position people in relation to each other ('interpersonal metafunction')* and *form connections with other signs to produce coherent text ('textual metafunction')* (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004).

3.2.3. Multimodality.

As explained in the previous chapter, a mode can be understood as a semiotic resource that passes the test for Halliday's three metafunctions (Halliday & Mathiesson, 2004). Still, in

different contexts encountered on, for example, Instagram, there are more than one semiotic resource or potential modes of communication. A post has to consist of a picture. This picture can have a caption, whereas text and hashtags can be included. These three units can be interpreted as three or even more semiotic resources. In other words, these are different analyses, or they can be construed together, something called multimodality (Jewitt, 2009). Halliday's metafunction test's limitations are that it only focuses on language and text as semiotic resources (Jewitt, 2009). As stated with an example, sign-making has been discovered to be more complex to analyse than this. People express themselves through not only language but also through, to give one example, images (Jewitt & Henriksen, 2019). Here modes of communication can be explained as operating together. Something called multimodality. An approach developed to explain how collections of different modes shape representations and communication and how they are organised to create a meaning (Jewitt & Henriksen, 2019).

The term semiotic chain is significant in understanding multimodality because it explains the process of sign making and how meaning becomes materialised in a range of different but linked texts (Kress, 2010). In other words, a semiotic chain refers to meaning as something fixed in a collection of interconnected texts over time. Here the term modal affordance comes to use. The term has a sort of currency in multimodality because it tells about different modes' potentials and limitations. This understanding can explain how meaning is made through a mode and further how it creates a sort of logic for how to understand how it is organised into some kind of multimodality. For example, how an image and a text creates meaning together, whereas one of the two can be interpreted as the discourse (Kress, 2010).

Even though multimodality explains how text and image come together, the idea does not explain the relationship between different modes of communication. Modes of communication can both have internal and external relationships (Jewitt, 2009). Stemming from a social semiotic perspective, different modes of communications used together by a sign-maker to compone a meaning have an intersemiotic relationship, meaning, they express something together (Jewitt, 2009).

4. Method

In this chapter, the method, a netnographic content analysis, is presented. Further, the selected case and sample is explained and discussed. Lastly, the framework of analysis is demonstrated, as well as methodological limitations.

4.1. Epistemological reflection.

Zappavigna (2018) is interpreting hashtags on Instagram as potential modes of communication. According to social semioticians, modes of communication are cultural, historical and social shared options that can be applied when communicating (Halliday & Mathisson, 2004). As such, modes of communication are not a fixed set of rules and structures, but rather what they can accomplish in everyday life. The main focus is on how people make signs in the context of interpersonal and institutional power relations, and how it can contribute to their specific aims (Halliday & Mathisson, 2004). In that sense, this research focuses on how people are consuming brand-related hashtags as a way to self-express, but at the same time, how the hashtags become a part of a collective act.

4.2. Research design.

This thesis aims to investigate the phenomenon of environmental brand activism and how consumers make meaning of it through hashtags. It was concluded that qualitative content analysis is the most suitable method to attend the manifest content, i.e. the visible and surface content of a text, as well as the latent content, i.e. the underlying meaning of the text. A practical method to be able to reach beyond the manifest content of the posts but still, be able to draw more global connections and conclusions between the posts (Laustadius, 2016). As well, a

smaller set of data can open up for a more varied in-detail and in-depth analysis of the complex and unstructured way people interact and make meaning of a brand on Instagram (Laustadius, 2016).

The research is reflective, meaning it is built on careful interpretations and reflections (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). To further explain, the results are not a universal truth or a mirroring of the reality or the empirical data. The results are instead based on interpretations coming from theoretical knowledge and pre-understandings of the proposed research problem. With this said, the researcher must be aware of how language, pre-understandings and theoretical assumptions shape an interpretation and somehow interpret the interpretations. In other words, become reflective in a systematic way and be critical towards the personal interpretations and how they will be affected by cognitive, political, cultural, textual, perceptual, linguistic and theoretical conditions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

4.2.1. Case selection and sampling.

The case was selected based on the premises of purposeful sampling and due to the expectations about its information content (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Moreover, the selected case was interpreted as an unusual, extreme case that could give indications and become a first exploration of how consumers are making-meaning of brands' environmental activism.

The case was extreme in the sense that it is a case of environmental brand activism with an interpreted high activity around the brand and its activism campaign. The selection of the case was, therefore, first of all, based on the premises that it corresponded to Sarkar and Kotler's (2018) framework of environmental brand activism: the campaign's manifesto aligns with the definition of environmental brand activism. Oatly's agenda as a whole was further compared with the framework where a brand's activism is described as a *value-driven agenda for companies that care about the future of society and the planet's health* (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). The company's purpose is: *we exist to make it easy for people to eat better and live healthier*

lives without recklessly taxing the planet's resources in the process (Oatly, 2021). Second of all, the case was selected due to the high engagement and the constant debate around the brand (Törner, 2019) as well as the documented high online activity.

4.3. Data collection.

The research had a netnographic approach to the fieldwork focusing on the consumers as social agents and how they use semiotic resources, hashtags, in practice (Vannini, 2007). Netnography is a technique sharing a lot of characteristics with ethnography, but in comparison to ethnography, a netnographic researcher can act as a mere observer without participating in a cultural or social setting. Hence, collect material without participating in the online activity (Kozinets, 2010). The data was, accordingly, collected by a naturalistic observation where the researcher was entering the social medium, Instagram, where the consumers had been using the hashtags related to the environmental activist campaign. A suitable approach for this research, since this type of data collection can give insights to explain a sociocultural phenomenon by exploring naturally occurring behaviours (Kozinets et al., 2014).

4.3.1. Procedure

The research followed Laustadius (2016) recommendations for sampling a smaller set of data from Instagram. The data was, in accordance, selected and obtained by the search on hashtags related to the chosen context and within a specific time frame.

On the 3rd of August 2020, Oatly had close to 262 000 followers on Instagram, and almost 142 000 had used the company's name as a hashtag; #oatly. The hashtag #oatly served as a first departure in the data collection. Oatly's campaign ditch the milk lasted between 10th and 29th of September 2019, and it was, therefore, suitable to look at posts from this period in time. By starting from the hashtag, #oatly several different posts related to the campaign appeared in the

search results. From the search results, the researcher chose to investigate the hashtags #spolamjölken and #spolaoatly (which translates to #ditchmilk and #ditchoatly) since it is hashtags with a direct intertextual relationship to the campaign it served as a useful data corpus together with the hashtag #oatly.

Further, links to posts using #spolamjölken, #spolaoatly and #oatly that had a connection to the campaign were gathered on the 15th of July 2020 yielding 202 posts. The researcher removed all posts that appeared several times or were created by another company, organisation or newspapers were removed from the sample. In other words, all posts that were not created by a consumer. In the end, 76 posts were saved for the analysis. All the hashtags used next to #spolamjölken, #spolaoatly and #oatly were recorded. A written description of the image/video, caption for each post was created.

The final sample is following all the ethical aspects provided by Laustadius in *SAGE handbook of social media research* (2016). Meaning, all the posts included in the final sample are the most current version of the posts; if a post has been edited or has been deleted or made private, it has been excluded. With this said, Instagram posts are often revisited and edited. Laustadius is, therefore, recommending *a one-month window between real-time-data collection and analysis should provide sufficient time for users to reflect on their posted content. At the end of this one-month period, collected data should be revisited* (p. 584, Laustadius, 2016). The data in this sample were, therefore, revisited on two separate occasions. Ten posts were in the end deleted from the sample since they had been deleted or the account owner had changed their account into private. Another aspect related to the studied medium is that Instagram is continuously reviewing posts after their principles and guidelines, which means that some posts related to a hashtag might have been removed.

4.3.2. The objects of analysis.

An Instagram photo consists of several different units: there is a photo, username, user info, comments, likes, text caption and hashtags and it can, therefore, be quite challenging to cover all units or select which units that are of significance (Highfield & Leaver, 2014). A qualitative approach makes it possible to look at the chosen Instagram posts as a unit, meaning the whole post is analysed. To look at both the visual and textual data has by Highfield & Leaver been described as a critical approach to making sense of the data provided on Instagram fully. To explain further, if a caption is removed from its image or the other way around, there will be a significant loss of context.

With the research aim and question in mind, it was concluded that a focus on post creation was suitable for this research since it puts the consumer as the meaning-maker in the limelight. In other words, the image, caption and hashtags for each post were analysed as a unit, but also as having a relationship and common features with other event related posts. Social semiotics and the understanding of mode was a suitable approach to be able to say whether the hashtags were used in the same way by the consumers, or sign-makers, and whether they could be classified as belonging to the same community. As such, the relationships between the post image, caption, hashtag and the campaign and whether there are any patterns in how consumers are creating meaning with these different modes.

4.4. Coding & Analysis.

The analytical template was developed, as earlier described, through a reflexive approach. In the first step, the data corpus was explored to identify the initial categories. Here the researcher identified how image, text and hashtags were related to each other and how the hashtags often had a relationship to the image and caption, which made it tricky since usually a whole group with hashtags with different potential meanings were used in one post. The researcher also identified how hashtags related to the event were used in a similar way between various

accounts. A social semiotic approach was therefore taken to be able to describe how hashtags are coupled to images such as post images on Instagram. At the same time, how they are related to events outside of the post and how these couplings are applied in the same way by many different users creating an instance of meaning (Zappavigna, 2018). In this thesis, how the use of a hashtag is related to Oatly's brand activism and how it becomes an instance of meaning for Oatly's consumers as well as other stakeholders. The categories will be further described in the next four upcoming subchapters.

To further understand the phenomenon, an additional set with subcategories were developed—a relatively common and recommended approach to qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014). These were more descriptive and highlight the motivation, modal currency and actual meaning of the hashtags. After making sure that it covered all essential categories, it was applied to all posts in the sample. Before the final template was developed, an initial analytical template was developed where 20 posts were put in under the constructed categories to see whether the framework fit.

4.4.1. Hashtags as a semiotic mode.

Hashtags have earlier been theorised as a semiotic mode by the social linguist Zappavigna (2018). By applying Halliday's metafunction test, Zappavigna (2018) describes the metafunctions of a hashtag. Its indication of a topic (ideational function), construction of a relationship (interpersonal function) and aggregations and organisation of a discourse (textual function) to a specific context such as the one provided in this thesis. In other words, a hashtag can be interpreted as to its own semiotic mode, and the hashtag can have an ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning at the same time.

4.4.2. An image-verbiage approach to multimodality.

As explained in the previous chapter, a hashtag can be understood as a semiotic resource that passes the test for Halliday's three metafunctions (Halliday & Mathiesson, 2004). However, in different contexts encountered on Instagram, there are more than one semiotic resource or potential modes of communication. A post has to consist of a picture, and this picture can have a caption whereas text and hashtags can be included. These three units can be interpreted as three or even more semiotic resources. In other words, these are different analyses, but they can also be construed together, something called multimodality. Multimodality is an approach focusing on analysing and describing the whole repertoire of semiotic resources that are used in a particular context and how these repertoires are organised to make meaning (Jewitt, 2009). Even though multimodality is explaining how text and image come together, the concept does not explain the relationship between different modes of communication; how an image and a text create meaning together, or as Zappavigna is proposing, how hashtags when coupled with a text or image becomes a discourse to explain how the two together can create a meaning. Zappavigna (2018) is therefore recommending an image-verbiage approach to multimodal research on Instagram. This proposed mutual meaning-making between text and image has come to be called couplings.

4.4.3. Ideational couplings.

The framework first developed by Bin Zhao (2011, in Zappavigna, 2018) is describing several different couplings focused on ideational meaning. These can further be categorised into abstraction (naming, identifying and representing), generalisation (classifying and exemplifying) and specification (circumstantiate). These three categories are discussed by Zappavigna and can give further notions of the ideational meaning of hashtags and their relation to an image. To give an example, a picture of a bowl with veggie soup is tagged with the three hashtags; #soup, #veggies and #eatingfortheclimate. #soup can be interpreted as an abstraction describing what is on the photo. #veggies can be interpreted as a generalisation or classification of the soup. #eatingfortheclimate can be interpreted as a specification of the context.

4.4.4. Intertextual relationships.

Zappavigna is further discussing how it is not enough to look at the coupling as ideational when it comes to an image-verbiage coupling between image and hashtag. There are also interpersonal meanings, meaning the image and verbiage can together express a meaning that has a relationship with an event outside of the photo. Something that comes with further complexity to the research because not only is there a multimodal relationship, it is as well an intermodal relationship. To explain further, hashtags can also have an intertextual relationship with other images using the same hashtag, which means that there can be an intertextual relationship between different posts when the users are using a specific hashtag, something that has to be understood through a context or cultural perspective. Further, this relationship is only intertextual when the semiotic modes within the post are applied in the same way between the different accounts (Zappavigna, 2018).

4.5. Methodological reflections and limitations.

As a researcher, it becomes essential to acknowledge how the things found, and the things not found, shapes the research results (Laustadius, 2016). Research on hashtags has been criticised only to study one hashtag or a few which might not give a full picture of the research problem (Highfield & Leaver, 2014), something that the researcher has taken under consideration in the analysis and discussion of findings. Analysing the hashtag as a symbol of its own and how it is used as a function of systemic linguistics may give new understandings for how to interpret the complex reality of social networks and brand communities and what systems of semiotics they are building. However, it is not entirely generalisable or the whole reality, and it is merely within the functional context of the hashtags #spolamjölken, #spolaoatly and #oatly. The campaign had around 71 created posts on Instagram, which is only based on the search of three hashtags and by looking at one type of Instagram usage. As well as Instagram is only one of many mediums where the consumers participate and create content related to the selected brand's campaign.

Consumer participation in environmental brand activism on Instagram: *A case study of consumers' use of hashtags in relation to Oatly's Swedish campaign Ditch Milk.*

The researcher had her internship at Oatly and worked and observed the campaign serving as a case for this thesis which can be understood as pre-knowledge. As explained earlier, the researcher considered this in the interpretation of the data (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). The case was further selected because of the expectations of the case and the fact that it corresponded with the framework of environmental activism. With this said, it was taken under consideration that might have been chosen under the wrong premises.

5. Empirical analysis

In this chapter, the Instagram posts connected to Oatly's campaign ditch milk are analysed. The aim was to investigate whether there are any potential discourses of self-presentation through Oatly's commodification of environmental activism. Therefore, the focus in the analysis was on how the consumers were coupling hashtags to their uploaded images, and whether there were any common features for how they were making meaning of Oatly's environmental activism campaign. In other words, the consumer's meaning-making of the brand's commodification of an environmental issue was analysed by looking at the campaign-related hashtags: #spolamjölken (which translates to #ditchmilk), #oatly and #spolaoatly (which translates to #ditchoatly), together with other hashtags coupled with the uploaded images.

In the data overview, there were three patterns for how the consumers were uploading images. The first observed pattern is that accounts upload images of dishes containing one or more oat products. These images had a positive sentiment toward the campaign and showcased a vegan lifestyle. The second observed pattern is that accounts upload images of the campaign (merchandise or the advertisement). These posts did not share the same amount of common features as the first observed pattern with image uploads and consists of both positive and negative expressions towards the campaign. The third observed theme was not as evident as the other two. Here accounts were uploading images of farm-life and agriculture and expressed negative sentiments towards the campaign. Three subchapters will cover these observed themes. Additionally, before entering the data, there is a short summary of the campaign and Oatly as a brand, and at last, there is a summary of the interpreted data.

5.1. Short overview of Oatly and the campaign

Oatly is a Swedish lifestyle brand that has established itself on firstly a national market and now also on an international market through their controversial yet entertaining ways to brand themselves towards consumers (Wertheim, 2018). The company's purpose is: *we exist to make it easy for people to eat better and live healthier lives without recklessly taxing the planet's resources in the process* (Oatly, 2021). Of course, the core business is to sell their oat products, but with a strong vision about getting the sustainable food market to grow. In other words, engage consumers in questions about lifestyle and creating new habits among citizens (Oatly, 2021).

On the 11th of September 2019, the brand launched its campaign Ditch Milk on the Swedish market. The whole campaign manifesto was *Spola Mjölken - byt till havredryck så minskar du utsläppen av växthusgaser med 75%* (which translates to Ditch Milk - Switch to oat drink and the climate impact will be 75% less)(Törner 2019; Spolamjölken, 2021).

5.2. Images of dishes.

Images of dishes were most often uploaded with the hashtags #spolamjölken (which translates to #ditchmilk) and #oatly. The captions next to the uploaded images were often including both text and hashtags. The text was, in most cases, the recipe of the presented dish. The hashtags were positioned after the text and were written in a long row. In most cases, there were an amount of 10-20 hashtags. A relatively common approach on Instagram where hashtag usage can be seen as a function classifying and sorting the post with other similar posts (See chapter, 4.4.1).

The accounts uploading these pictures often had a clear connection to veganism in their account bio (the space for biography text in the top of every account page). The account content was often a mix of showcasing a veganism lifestyle as a whole or were more focused on vegan eating. Some accounts were showcasing a more holistic view and talked about sustainability and

climate change. They were still connecting it to veganism and how eating vegan food is an essential aspect of sustainability. There was a pattern where many of the account owners tried to have the appearance of an influencer. To further explain, by the self-branding of their lifestyles, they tried to convey the viewer of adapting the same lifestyle or take inspiration from the account in some smaller aspects (in chapter 2.4.1.).



Image 1. Example of a post with an image of a dish.

5.2.1. Ideational hashtags.

The accounts showed a clear pattern of using hashtags describing what is in the dish, something that can be interpreted as generalisations. To refer to the picture above, examples of these hashtags could be #kikärter, #grönkål and #morötter (which translates to #chickpeas, #kale and #carrots), and in some posts, hashtags with the name of Oatly's products were created such as

#imat and #oatmilk. These hashtags also had a relationship with the written text in the caption. The text was in most cases, the recipe for the dish presented in the image. There were also hashtags with more of an abstractional relationship with the image. For example, #veganmat (which translates to #veganfood) and hashtags with the dish's actual name, to refer to the picture above: #gryta (which translates to #stew). There were as well hashtags with a circumstancing relationship with the image. These hashtags were most often connected to veganism, to give some examples, used hashtags could be #thereisnoplanetb, #välj kärlek bli vegan (which translates to #choose love become vegan) and #crueltyfree. These hashtags had a less clear relationship with the picture since they did not directly tell the viewer how it is connected to the image and caption as the rest of the hashtags. The hashtags classified as circumstances/specifications had a more explicit connection to an outside event. Something that will be covered in the next chapter: 5.2.2. *Interpersonal hashtags.*

5.2.2. *Interpersonal hashtags.*

There were many types of interpersonal hashtags used when posting an image of a dish. First of all, and most importantly, the hashtag #spolamjölken were attached to the image. This attachment can be interpreted as an interpersonal coupling to the image because the hashtag describes an outside event of the image and was used in the same way between the different accounts. To further explain, the hashtag #spolamjölken was coupled with images of vegan dishes and connected the images to Oatly's campaign message. As such, the accounts following this suggested pattern had a common meaning-making pattern. They described an image and created relationships with others by showing how an image is connected to a community (see chapter 2.4). The motivations behind this meaning-making pattern are possible to interpret as self-expression of personal values. To further explain, the choice of eating vegan food is, according to Oatly's campaign message contributing to a lower carbon footprint. In this way, the sign makers are self-branding themselves by making meaning of the campaign's values as their own, which can be interpreted as what Banet-Weiser refers to as lifestyle political consumerism (see chapter 2.2). Nevertheless, it can also be interpreted as a collective action where the

consumer is motivated to couple the hashtag to the image to become a part of a movement. In this case, the act can be interpreted as a collective act of political consumerism.

In the majority of the posts, there were other hashtags attached that can be interpreted to have a similar function as #spolamjölken and #oatly. To refer to the picture above, some examples of these hashtags are #thereisnoplanetb, #savetheplanetgovegan and #gretafortpresident. These hashtags were similarly coupled to the image. It is hard to tell the order, modal affordance, of these hashtags and whether the #spolamjölken (which translates to #ditchmilk) is merely one of many hashtags to demonstrate a stand in the issue of climate change. The hashtags are referring to different events related to the issue of climate change. These hashtags, coupled with the image, become a way for the accounts to express identity by attaching values to climate change. However, it is hard to say whether one of them is deciding the order and the motivation behind the post more than another. No matter the order, these hashtags also indicate Oatly being connected or associated with movements fighting climate change and global warming.

There was as well a second pattern when it came to interpersonal couplings among accounts posting images of dishes together with the hashtags #oatly and #spolamjölken. There were also hashtags having a relation to the issue of animal cruelty—for example, #saveanimalsgovegan, #bekindtoeverykind and #crueltyfree. Here the hashtags, coupled with the image, become a way to express a dislike towards animal keeping, which potentially shows how the consumers attach their own values and meaning to Oatly and their campaign and connect it to other reasons for having a vegan lifestyle. It could also be that the user is highlighting several of benefits to becoming vegan whereas one benefit is to fight the climate change (where Oatly's hashtag is sorted) and another benefit is that it helps to stop animal cruelty.

5.3. Images of the campaign.

Compared with accounts publishing images of dishes, accounts publishing images of the campaign did not have a strong common pattern for how they were coupling the image with hashtags. The accounts did not have the same kind of common interests or expressions. It can be explained by the fact that the motivation behind posting the image together with different hashtags can be interpreted as different from sign-maker to sign-maker.

The images were posted with a long caption or no caption at all where, compared to the images of dishes, the posts did not have as many hashtags. Some posts only had one hashtag and then only used Oatly related hashtags: #oatly, #spolamjölken and #spolaoatly. Other posts were attaching more hashtags, between five and ten, to the post. Posts with a longer caption were often making meaning of Oatly's campaign message more directly than the sign-makers posting images of dishes. Here either a boycott or buycott (2.3.1) towards Oatly's campaign were being expressed. These different expressions were divided into three sub-themes that each by their own represents a pattern for how consumers are making sense of the campaign. The first sub-theme observed was that there were images with a very short caption that emphasised the photography and how it can be interpreted as art. The second sub-theme observed was a group with users coupling hashtags to the image to highlight and showcase personal identity in relation to the image. The third subtheme observed was that there were a group of users coupling hashtags to the image to show a strong opinion towards the campaign. Compared to the other two sub-themes where users only expressed positive sentiments towards the campaign, this sub-theme had positive and negative sentiments towards the campaign.

5.3.1. Ideational hashtags.

There were different motivations for posting images of the campaign, which may explain the lack of common features. As previously mentioned, there were three patterns for how consumers were coupling hashtags to this kind of image. The abstractional hashtags are the ideational

hashtags that differ the most. There were more common patterns when it came to hashtags that can be classified as generalisations and specifications. As for images of dishes, all users were coupling the hashtags #oatly, #spolamjölken or #spolaoatly to give the image a further specification. The meaning-making of these hashtags and images of the campaign will be explained more in-depth for each sub-theme. Furthermore, there were not that many couplings between hashtags and images that can be interpreted as generalisations.

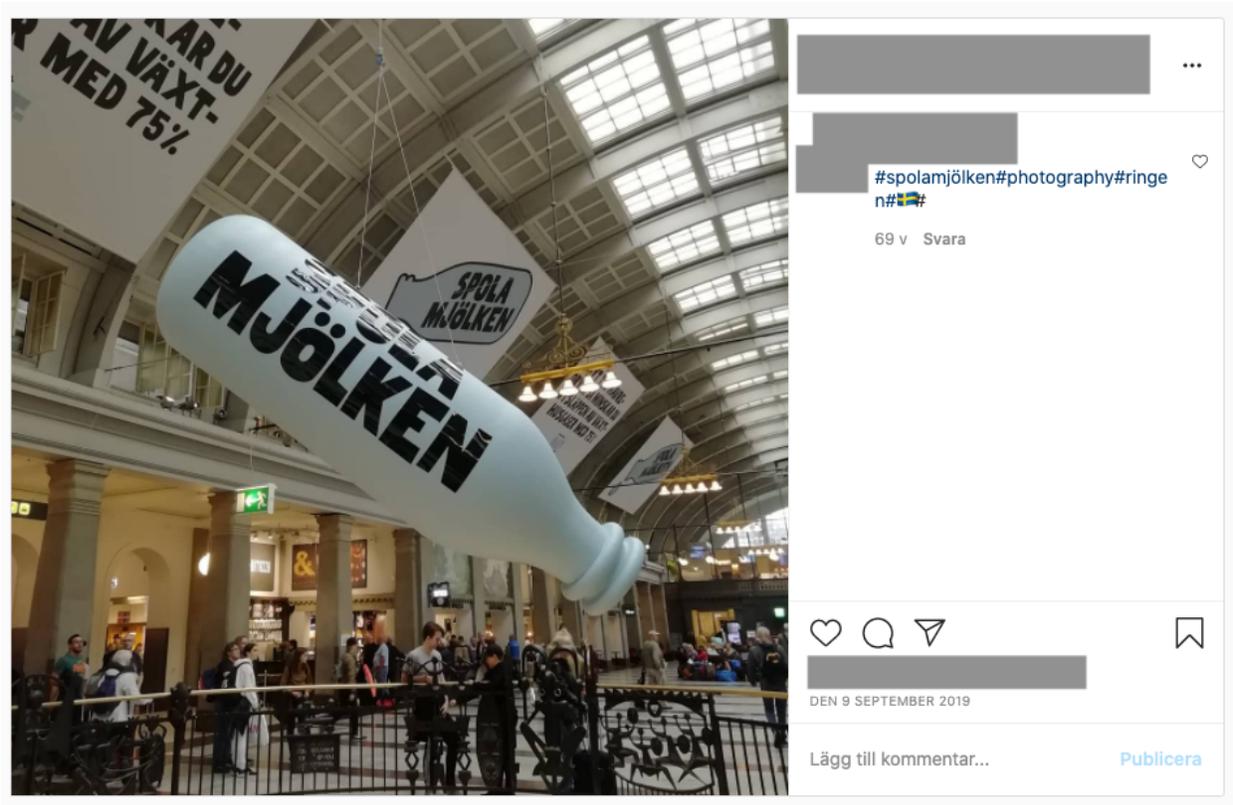


Image 2. Example one of a post with an image of the campaign.

The first subtheme, images with a very short caption that were often putting more emphasis on the photography and how it can be interpreted as art showed a pattern of using hashtags such as #photography, #ad and #campaign. These hashtags can be classified as abstractions. The users most often only had #spolamjölken as a circumstantiating hashtag.

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Image 3. Example two of a post with an image of the campaign.

The second sub-theme accounts highlighting and showcase personal identity related to the image expressed positive sentiment towards the campaign. Most of the accounts used hashtags that can be classified as abstractions to position themselves in relation to the photo. To give some examples, these hashtags could be #minfamilj #familjpåsöder (which translates to #myfamily and #familyonthesouthside) and #veganlife. The usage of this kind of hashtag can be motivated by the fact that there were people in the photos. Sometimes the account owners or someone close to them. When attaching these kinds of hashtags to the photo, the self-branding through the brand can be interpreted as more explicit than for the first sub-theme. These posts also shared similar patterns in how they were coupling hashtags of specification to the image. Here hashtags such as #plantbasedpower #veganinspo, #savetheplanet #climateemergency #gretathunberg and #ditchdairy were used. Hashtags that were also observed in the first theme: images of dishes.

The third sub-theme observed was not as apparent as the other two. Here there were a group of users coupling hashtags to the image to show a strong opinion towards the campaign. The images were not coupled with any hashtags that can be interpreted as abstract. Compared to the other two sub-themes where users only expressed positive sentiments towards the campaign, this sub-theme had both positive and negative sentiments towards the campaign, in the images with a negative sentiment there were often only the hashtag #spolaoatly coupled with the image.

5.3.2. Interpersonal hashtags.

The first observed sub-theme, images with an emphasis on art were, as previously mentioned, coupling the hashtag #spolamjölken to the image. The motivation behind this can be interpreted as a way for the sign-maker to explain the context, and it is hard to tell whether the hashtag is used to express a boycott or a buycott towards the brand. The hashtag is only giving the context.

The second sub-theme, where the sign-makers were attaching personal identity to the image by using hashtags such as #minfamilj, were as well coupling the hashtag #spolamjölken to the image. This coupling between hashtag and image can be interpreted as lifestyle consumerism. The sign-makers are making meaning of Oatly's campaign as a sort of statement or movement they identify themselves with. The posts often had several interpersonal hashtags and showed a similar pattern with the accounts posting pictures of dishes. As for users posting images of dishes, there were both hashtags connected to the issue of climate change but also animal cruelty. The posts where the sign-maker coupled #spolamjölken to the image together with hashtags that somehow have a connection to environmental issues are more clearly making meaning of Oatly as a brand connected to the issue of climate change. Since the image was of the campaign, the expression became stronger. The hashtag #spolamjölken can be interpreted as a more significant mode by having a more explicit coupling to the image.

The third sub-theme, where the sign-makers were expressing more of a strong opinion against or in favour of the campaign were in most cases only using the two hashtags with a direct connection to the campaign. The hashtag was often used next to a long text where the users were expressing their thoughts regarding the campaign. Therefore, the #spolaoatly hashtag can be interpreted as a way to boycott the campaign by changing the campaign manifesto to mean the opposite. In contrast, the #spolamjölken becomes a buycott (see chapter 2.1.).

5.4. Other images.

The rest of the accounts using the hashtag #spolaoatly (which translates into #ditchoatly) were mixtures of farming and agriculture accounts and more unspecified accounts. The more unspecified accounts were often using discriminating hashtags and captions and did not besides these tendencies share any common features. The accounts connected to agriculture and farmer life often had longer captions with negative sentiment towards the campaign. To clarify, these patterns were not as apparent as the patterns described in earlier themes.

5.4.1. Ideational hashtags.

As described in the previous chapter, there was no clear pattern for these accounts or how they used ideational couplings. The only common feature was that the accounts used #spolaoatly as a circumstantiate hashtag in the same way as the accounts posting an image of the campaign and expressing negative sentiments towards the campaign.

5.4.2. Interpersonal hashtags.

Despite their differences, what these accounts had in common was that they made meaning of Oatly's campaign by using the hashtag #spolaoatly. In most of the posts, there were also other

interpersonal hashtags. These hashtags had a connection to the Swedish agriculture system or somehow contained a positive sentiment towards milk.

5.5. Summary of the analysis.

The discourse of self-presentation through Oatly's commodification of environmental activism depends on the uploaded image coupled with the hashtags. There is as well a difference depending on how the hashtag can be understood in relation to other utilised hashtags in the same post. The level of self-presentation through Oatly's campaign message is, therefore, hard to determine. To explain further, the hashtags that can be classified as interpersonal hashtags are often more than one and it is hard to tell the order of them, and if one of them is having a stronger coupling to the image than another. The hashtags connected to Oatly's campaign becomes one of many hashtags explaining an event outside the image. The meaning-making of the campaign can, therefore, in many cases, be understood in relation to the other hashtags together with the image. In other words, the consumers are making-meaning of the brand's environmental activism by attaching other hashtags related to activist topics.

The accounts posting the hashtags #spolamjölken and #oatly together with images of dishes were mostly showcasing a veganism lifestyle. It is clear that the choice of the image together with how the hashtags are used in the accounts meaning-making share similarities and the accounts can through a social semiotic lens be interpreted as a community (see chapter 2.3.). To explain further, the choice of image and how the images are coupled with the hashtags become shared modes of communication. The meaning-making of hashtags that has a direct relationship with the campaign, #oatly and #spolamjölken, are motivated because they highlight how the post is connected to a vegan lifestyle. These common features were only observed in the analysis of these images. The other two observed themes did not share the same kind of features. It is therefore hard to draw any conclusions of certainty out of the other two themes. For the images of the campaign, there are some shared modes of communication, but not in the same way as for images of dishes. It is hard to define a discourse for how the hashtags connected to Oatly's

campaign are used to make meaning of the campaign. There are some vague tendencies of using it as a way to self-express personal values.

The hashtags that were directly connected to the campaign were often in both observed patterns used together with other interpersonal hashtags when there was a positive sentiment towards the campaign. These hashtags were connected to animal cruelty and climate change. This finding is relevant to highlight since it gives an indication of how the brand's environmental activism is understood by the consumers. Here consumers are making meaning of the brand as a vegan brand first, and therefore connect it to different reasons for becoming vegan. In that sense, they are making meaning of the brand by a vegan self-presentation rather than a climate change activist self-presentation. This self-presentation is not a strong expression for or against the campaign, but merely a way to express a lifestyle and personal values.

There were no clear patterns for how the hashtag #spolaoatly were used. It was a vague pattern where the researcher could identify that there were some posts connected to agriculture and farm life.

6. Discussion

In this chapter, the empirical analysis is put in relation to and discussed with previous knowledge. This, by going back to the literature review and the different understandings of hashtags as social networks, how they can be defined as a clustered network as well as a community and becoming a sort of act of environmental activism - individual and collective.

6.1. Social networks

As described in the literature review, social networks and how it is connected to brand-related content created by different actors are a complex system (see chapter 2.2.1). The definition of a social network goes a little bit outside the scope of this analysis. However, it is essential to define and discuss to be able to understand and explain the consumers' meaning-making patterns in the given context (Zappavigna, 2018). It will further contribute to the analysis of the hashtags and how they are interconnected.

6.1.1. Clustered networks.

In the first overview of the collected data, it was clear that the hashtags #spolamjölken (which translates to #ditchmilk) and #spolaoatly (which translates to #ditchoatly) could be described through Koziemba's (2015) theory of clustered networks. The accounts using the hashtag #spolamjölken were almost completely accounts connected to veganism, and the accounts using #spolaoatly were mainly upset farmers. This finding was not surprising and showed a clear relationship between how the media is portraying the campaign and how consumers, as a potential consequence, are mimicking and broadcasting the same content by posting on social media through event-related hashtags (see chapter 2.2.1). To explain further, in Swedish media Oatly has been portrayed as a company challenging long-standing Swedish milk norms (Törner, 2019). Norms that have, in fact, been partly criticised by authority: the Swedish Food Agency

(sv: Livsmedelsverket). According to the Swedish food Agency, overconsumption of dairy products has a negative climate impact due to the methane gas emissions coming from cows. However, at the same time, there is a benefit with grazing animals since they help to produce a *richer agricultural landscape* (Livsmedelsverket, 2019). This clearly highlights the complexity in environmental activism, but also the hashtags of analysis.

Furthermore, Oatly's campaigns and marketing methods have been highly criticised and reported by consumers to the Swedish Food Agency. The accusations are mostly related to the perception of Oatly trash-talking competitors instead of highlighting the good in their own products. During the *Ditch Milk* campaign, especially within the agricultural sector, farmers were raging and believed the company's manifesto was unfair towards the milk and farmer industry (Hagberg, 2019). Something that is apparent in the hashtags and, as well, the distinct, clear characteristics of consumers using the hashtag #spolaoatly. As Kozinets (2015) problematize (see chapter 2.2.1), it becomes an example of a polarised debate; veganism against traditional agriculture life.

6.1.2. Community.

As explained, the hashtags can be analysed as clustered networks. Individuals in these clustered networks share the same characteristics and are showing patterns of using the same rhetorics and strategies to talk for and against the brand Oatly. Here the discussion of what is a community and how it should be conceptualized becomes apparent (see chapter 2.2.1). On the one hand, there is no clear relationship between the participants when it comes to interactions or evidence for them viewing each other's posts, and therefore, it becomes hard to say how much they get influenced by each other. On the other hand, they are using the same hashtag, and as Zappavigna (2016) is arguing, this can be understood as a kind of community building (see chapter 2.3). With this said, Billard and Moran's (2020) theory of networked brands becomes applicable in the analysis since it conceptualises the dynamic and complex power relations between consumers and brands and how these relationships are happening on many different levels and forums (see chapter 2.2).

Instagram has been identified as a social media site where consumers self-express and are looking for ways to self-brand through images (see chapter 2.4). On Instagram, it is difficult to use the hashtag as a tool to search for a discussion since the hashtag will only give an index with pictures rather than an overview of the topic related discussions, which makes the topical clusters described by Kozinetz a little bit more difficult to identify. Here the direct common feature becomes the choice of image (Zappavigna, 2018). Something apparent in this analysis since there were some patterns in how the consumers were creating posts with the same type of images. In other words, the consumers are using a mode of communication in the same way and are in that sense forming a community (see chapter 2.4). With this said, and if adopting more of a social semiotic understanding of community, only the images of dishes coupled with hashtags concerning the campaign can be classified as a community.

6.2. Hashtag activism.

The campaign hashtags, as well as the hashtags connected to animal cruelty and climate change, can be interpreted as hashtag activism since they are used by several different accounts as a way to express an opinion and unite the users around an activist topic (see chapter 2.3.1). As already mentioned, the interesting aspect with the hashtags was not whether they showed a trend or not, it was rather to trace them back to the created posts and look at how the consumers consumed the hashtag in their content creation. There were two clear patterns in the data. The first pattern is corresponding with earlier research on consumer activism, and how it is difficult to treat lifestyle and contentious consumer activism as two different constructs (see chapter 2.4.1). On the one hand, the posts are many times connected to personal values and are in that way a case of lifestyle activism. To exemplify, the observed images of dishes highlights a certain lifestyle that the sign-makers are enhancing by using hashtags connected to activism. In the same way, some of the sign-makers posting images of the campaign coupled with abstractional hashtags about their lives and circumstantiating hashtags connected to activism are expressing lifestyle activism. On the other hand, the posts are using the same hashtags and expressions, and it is possible to interpret it as them being influenced by each other sharing similar features and are in that way

sharing what Micheletti (2010) has classified as a common consuming ideology, which makes it a case of collective activism.

6.2.1. Self-branding through environmental brand activism.

The motivation behind posting the images with the hashtags can further be discussed through the concept of self-branding (see chapter 2.4.1.) and the development from earlier consumer movements to those who identify themselves as consumer activists (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The meaning-making of the brand is as earlier mentioned mostly connected to identity expressions. The issue of climate change seems to be connected to a person's own habits and reflections. Further, the fact that the posts are mostly concerning lifestyle political consumerism might be the reason for why it is not reposted or spread in the same way as other activism hashtags concerning social issues (see chapter 2.3.1.). Presenting food and recipes becomes mainly a source of inspiration. It is for sure creating a community, and space where Oatly is discussed as a brand for someone believing in a vegan lifestyle, however, it is not seen to engage or put a more significant effort into consumers' political activism, and the brand's activism is then merely a way for consumers to express their identity, or something happening without any more prominent reflections or realisations.

6.2.2. Meaning-making of the brand's environmental activism.

There was not a high amount, or a continuing consuming hashtags related to the campaign Ditch Milk, nevertheless it was not something that was encouraged by the brand. The lack of the trend did not affect the research, rather it can be seen as a finding that is contributing to earlier research on environmental brand activism (see chapter 2.3.1), and how the topic does not appeal to consumption and engagement in the same way as other social issues. It is difficult to give an answer to why this is, without researching into other types of brand activism. It is clear that brands can benefit from hashtags that are connected to the same topics or discussions. The

consumers were often using multiple hashtags that were somehow connected to the debate on climate change and animal cruelty. These hashtags were used in the same way, together with the image, to describe an outside event. How the hashtags are used together to create meaning, is highlighting the fact that how the brand is perceived as a whole will affect how the consumers are interpreting the campaign. Even though the campaign is about climate change, the consumers were still connecting the campaign to animal cruelty, which might be related to how the brand has been perceived in the past.

The hashtag #spolamjölken was in most cases coupled with images in a way that can be explained as self-expression or self-branding. This can be interpreted as what Zappavigna (2018) calls a more narcissistic way to self-express and make meaning of hashtag activism (see chapter 2.3.1). The cases of hashtag activism where the consumer went as what Holt (2002) calls beyond self-cultivation, were not that apparent. If the goal is to create awareness and spur a debate a suggestion is to create a campaign where the consumer is making meaning of the message as not merely a way to express lifestyle consumerism, but also spur the debate further. Where the hashtags connected to the campaign are having a higher modal affordance to explain how the different modes of communication come together. The hashtags connected to the campaign were not used by the brand itself in their Instagram posts, nor was it used by influencers sharing Oatly's values.

7. Conclusion

This research aimed to explain the functions of hashtags related to Oatly's environmental campaign on Instagram and how they become an instance of meaning in the consumers' post creation. By analysing the use of hashtags related to the Swedish campaign *Ditch Milk* the researcher was striving for a further understanding of how environmental brand activism is made meaning of by the consumers and how it can create conversations of strategic significance on Instagram.

The analysis showed three themes on different types of images used in posts that were making meaning of Oatly's campaign by using hashtags that had a relation to the campaign. The patterns were more apparent in posts with positive sentiments whereas two conclusions, or findings, are possible to draw. The first finding is that there are many accounts that are showing their own personal values by connecting their posts with hashtags related to Oatly's campaign. Here the notion of self comes to play as an important part of the conclusion. To explain further, if, in the context of environmental brand activism, the branded-self is to be understood as Holt's (2002) definition of postmodern or post-postmodern. A postmodern branded self is understood as striving for being aesthetically authentic. A post-postmodern branded self is more concerned with the wellbeing of the planet rather than the cultivation of the self. The analysis shows a trend towards a postmodern branded self rather than a post-postmodern self. To further explain, when the accounts are mainly using the hashtags as a way to strengthen their own identity by making meaning of the brand's campaign as values that correspond with their own, the post does not get the attributes connected to hashtag activism. In the case of environmental brand activism, it becomes important to identify the target group to determine their motives and how they want to express themselves and how these expressions can become more shareable and connected to a movement.

The second finding is in accordance with Manfredi-Sánchez's (2019), Oatly does not seem to reuse manifests from environmental movements such as Friday's for Futures, but there is a clear pattern of consumers using hashtags related to these movements. It might be beneficial for brands, as Oatly to, a higher extent, join and promote these movements. In this way the brand can take a step away from lifestyle activism and go towards creating spaces where political issues connected to environmental activism are actually discussed.

7.1. Future research.

Future research could benefit from looking into other brands' environmental campaigns, and compare how campaigns benefiting from an already existing debate, will differ from the case with Oatly where the brand is the root or cause to the debate. In this case, it could be valuable to perform a network analysis of such a debate and the existing hashtags around it to identify and get a further understanding for how a brand can help to spur an environmentalist debate, and how the reach and engagement differ. This in line with previous research by Johnson et al. (2019).

Furthermore, to display a range of different brand images (different types of brand activism) as a communication strategy might lead to a vague relation between activism and the brand. Oatly, in comparison to other brand's dealing with brand activism, has only one agenda: environmentalism and the issue of climate change. For example, Ben & Jerry's and Patagonia have been observed to not only build campaigns and engage through environmental activism, but also other types of brand activism (Sarkar & Kotler , 2018). In this way, it could be beneficial to look at different brands' strategies and evaluate if a brand with a more focused purpose, such as Oatly, has an easier time to convey and engage consumers because the symbolism in the brand is clearer and easier for the consumer to make-meaning of. As Rossolatos (2016) proposes, a brand image has to be known and understood in the first place as a certain symbol of expression for consumers to be motivated to use it.

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Lastly, it would be relevant to compare the difference in when a brand themselves are using a hashtag and encouraging consumers to use it with when the consumers themselves chose to create a hashtag connected to a campaign. In the case of Oatly, it was the consumers that were creating the hashtags #spolamjölken and #spolaoatly.

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Links to the Instagram posts used in the sample.

#spolamjolken

1. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2M_J5NoCMj/ 9/9 -19
2. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2O9UL9isvv/> - 10/9 -19
3. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2OePH0CWqW/> 10/ 9 -19
4. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2OT9EyC5Ry/> 10/ 9 -19
5. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2RHM0dCD7g/> - 11/9 - 19
6. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2UvsLSCrw7/> - 12/9 -19
7. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2UvUNfiWO3/> - 12/ 9 -19

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8. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2UHbfkIPEL/> - 12/ 9 - 19
9. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2WUIaYIMUw/> - 13/9 -19
10. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2WMzTLluzc/> - 13/9 - 19
11. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2Zj-6kCFFC/> - 14/9 -19
12. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2cWgeaoMDB/> - 15/9 -19
13. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2cRPBooPmu/> - 15/9 -19
14. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2b1_hKIVGP/ - 15/9 -19
15. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2eyqfLC-vh/> - 16/9 -19
16. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2dxWtqBJY4/> - 16/ 9- 19
17. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2csnm1CGNJ/> - 16/9 -19
18. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2hPO7uJCYI/> - 17/9 -19
19. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2hEUveogIh/> - 17/9 -19
20. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2hDpvfod_6/ - 17/9 -19
21. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2ghoZHCJtM/> - 17/9 - 19
22. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2kD26ACmKI/> - 18/9 -19
23. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2jiu9ZJjUT/> - 18/9 -19
24. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2i8EWYiOBY/> - 18/9 -19
25. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2mI05jnlLZ/> - 19/9 -19
26. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2mG3byDmtL/> - 19/9 -19
27. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2r-qQLiKyF/> - 21/9 -19
28. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2rZuKDCcMU/> - 21/9 -19
29. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2uJn1boVOJ/> 22/9 -19
30. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2tlyQZo-LW/> - 22/19 -19
31. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2vpdT_I1Nd/ - 23/9 -19
32. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2v2bGqI5qi/> - 23/9 - 19
33. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B21zGWcB-IT/> - 25/9 - 19
34. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B26YZOyCNJN/> - 27/9 -19
35. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B28yGQkoxdJ/> - 28/9 -19
36. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B28uFGAi2cX/> - 28/9 - 19

#oatly

1. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2NHsLYoOQ/> - 9/9 -19
2. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2OT9EyC5Ry/> - 10/9 -19
3. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2OePH0CWqW/> - 10/9 -19
4. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2O0FJTCs3_/ - 10/9 -19
5. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2RV1yBipTF/> - 11/9-19
6. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2RfRMUCwVB/> - 11/9-19
7. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2R3uSVIVLD/> - 11/9-19
8. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2R_B0Aizx3/ - 11/9 -19
9. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2TTT8SiWIm/> - 11/9 -19
10. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2TYQL0FdGh/> - 12/9- 19
11. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2T5OzOoKrY/> - 12/9 -19
12. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2UvUNfiWO3/> - 12/9 -19
13. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2VlyzSIOA7/> - 13/9 -19
14. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2WabJ2iCtt/> - 13/9 -2019
15. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2Wc16KIAzk/> 13/9 - 19
16. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2WdIOvjtJD/> 13/9-19
17. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2W0sf8Ilz8/> - 13/9 -19
18. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2XCJobidYo/> - 13/9 -19
19. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2Zd211oNA4/> - 14/9 -19
20. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2Zf9VCiLYf/> - 14/9 -19
21. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2ZoPPPI9b5/> - 14/9 -19
22. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2aNFOioCVb/> - 14/9 -19
23. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2bTA4BoeUD/> - 14/9 -19
24. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2bXGHhlAmA/> - 15/9 - 19
25. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2cIU3tCQWg/> - 15/9-19
26. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2d-9eAH9Fs/> - 16/9 -19
27. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2e0mjzoPCQ/> - 16/9 - 19
28. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2e30IPoITg/> - 16/9 -19
29. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2jZIFEJZ98/> - 18/9 - 19

30. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2rGVREo_zY/ - 21/9 - 19

#spolaoatly

1. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2Uni6vIbbD/> - 12/9 -19
2. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2e3Hc7o6rD/> - 16/9 -19
3. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2hQ6oVIAwo/> 17/9-19
4. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2lyn3boHwj/> - 19/9 - 19
5. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2nQAUXoJI9/> - 20/9-19
6. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2rGVREo_zY/ 21/9 -19
7. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2twtyqI_bW/ - 22/9 -19
8. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B239CUgiVuN/> - 26/9 -19
9. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B23-556BnDr/> - 27/9 -19
10. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B29Uov-i8tb/> - 28/9 - 19