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MANAGEMENT

Shaping Vegan and Sustainable Consumption

A Case Study on Maria Nila

by

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Abstract

Title: Constructing Vegan and Sustainable Consumption

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Key Words: Vegan Consumption, Sustainable Consumption, Ideologies, Myths, Consumer Responsibilization, Cultural Branding

Thesis Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to explore how marketplace ideologies and myths shape vegan and sustainable consumption.

Theoretical Perspective: Ideologies and Myths, Consumer Responsibilization and Cultural Branding.

Methodology: A qualitative case study with an abductive approach.

Empirical Data: The empirical data consists of in-depth interviews with a Marketing Director and consumers, supported by ‘context of context’ – a historical and cultural understanding of veganism and sustainability.

Findings and Conclusion: The findings showed that the Swedish environmentalist ideology shapes sustainable and ethical consumption, and the myth of the ethical, caring consumer, primarily through consumer responsibilization. Consumers take responsibility for environmental issues through consumption practises, where brands function as a vessel for ideological meanings and beliefs.

Practical Implication: The findings from our research demonstrate how ideologies and myths shape vegan and sustainable consumption and how a brand may authorize these values to be successful and stay relevant on the cultural marketplace.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Vegan and sustainable consumption has risen over the last years, becoming an important element in more and more product categories, including beauty. In this chapter, the phenomenon of vegan and sustainable consumption is introduced, as well as an overview of the theory of ideologies and myths, including its theoretical lenses consumer responsibilization and cultural branding. It is followed by a problematization of existing research, explaining the contribution of this study. This leads to the research purpose and question, the context and the chosen case company and finally an outline of the thesis.

1.1.1 The Rise of Sustainable and Vegan Consumption

Environmental issues have for many years been an important societal topic. Because of the large negative environmental impact meat and animal protein have on the planet, many consumers have chosen to adapt towards a vegetarian and vegan lifestyle (Beverland, 2014). In addition, over the last years, attention has been brought to animal cruelty, which can be seen through the number of documentaries on the matter (e.g. *Earthlings*, *Cowspiracy*, *The Game Changers*) and consumer petitions on animal testing (e.g. The Body Shop's *Forever Against Animal Testing* campaign). As a result, many consumers have due to ethical reasons chosen to fully or to some extent live a vegan lifestyle or choose vegan products. The rationale behind consuming vegan products may be because of ethical, environmental but also health reasons, or a combination of these (Ruby, 2012).

The majority of research on veganism is connected to animal and environmental studies as well as ecocriticism, which is strongly linked to ethics and animal cruelty (Quinn & Westwood, 2018). Research on vegetarianism and veganism outside these areas have mostly been connected to diet (Beverland 2014; Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Groslik, 2017), where research has been widely conducted. For example, Beverland (2014) looks at the shift to plant-based diets in developed economies, since it in these economies is mostly connected to a choice and not a necessity. He also points out the fact that food choices are connected to culture, traditions and identity. Research further looks into the consumption experience of

‘green products’, where research by Tezer and Bodur (2020) shows that consuming ‘green products’ positively enhances the consumption experience.

Over the last years, demand has increased in vegan products on other markets than those connected to food (Ridder, 2020a). For example, vegan beauty products have had an exponential growth in the last few years (Ridder, 2020a). According to a global study made by Ridder (2020a) in 2019, the most important claims consumers look for when shopping beauty products is for it to be ammonia-free (49% actively looking for it), cruelty-free (44%), silicone-free (43%), sulphate-free (42%) and vegan (40%). In another study, Ridder (2020b) states that the projected market value of vegan cosmetics worldwide is expected to grow rapidly – from 13.56 billion dollars in 2018 to 20.8 in 2025. This demonstrates that consumers today have a preference for natural, cruelty-free and vegan beauty. Many brands have answered the need for green products by including labels and logos on their products to show their legitimacy, for example through environmental labels (such as Fairtrade) as well as cruelty free or vegan ones (such as the bunny label verified by PETA). This can today even be seen on haircare products, which is interesting considering they originally belong to a somewhat mundane product category because of their everyday function. There is therefore an interest to see how these initially mundane products have transformed into becoming socially significant and important (Ulver, 2019). The growing demand and acceptance of vegan and sustainable products on the marketplace can be comprehended with ideologies, myths, consumer responsibilization and cultural branding which will be discussed in the following sections.

1.1.2 Ideologies and Myths in Consumption

Consumption and brands today have the potential to be embedded with societal ideological values and myths (Holt, 2004, 2006; McCracken 1986). Holt (2002) argues that consumer culture is “the ideological infrastructure that undergirds what and how people consume and sets the ground rules for marketers’ branding activities” (p.80). Understanding the ideological infrastructure of vegan and sustainable consumption is therefore of great interest to research in order to understand why it has become such a vivid phenomenon in today’s society. This in turn helps us understand the world that we live in, while it also is a key interest for managers and other decision makers.

Ideologies are part of the culture, and go back to the late 18th century and the French philosopher Antoine Destutt, describing it as “science of ideas” (Jost, Nosek & Gosling, 2008, p.127). Ideologies exist and matter still until this day, and research suggests that brands today even take on an ideological role (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020). In this

way, they represent important ideals and values that consumers strongly identify with and believe are important (Holt, 2004). It is therefore of importance to see brands as cultural forms (Cayla & Arnould, 2008), because “they encapsulate ideas about the way people should live, look and think” (p.86). Hence, brands are not only associated with their physical products, but are embedded with symbolic value (Elliot & Wattanasawan, 1998). The fact that products, through their symbolic value, may be used as a way to construct identity, was researched by Belk (1988). He argues that possessions act as a reflection of our identity, saying that “the feeling of identity invested in material objects can be extraordinarily high” (p.144). Myths, stories, also play a crucial role in society because they “reinforce cultures by reciting stories that teach, exemplify, and reinforce their shared values, beliefs and practices” (Heller, 2016, p.359). Myths are used as a way to organize and express perceptions of reality and human concerns, which means that they are also of great relevance within consumption and brands since they are connected to consumers’ daily life (Levy, 1981). In this way, myths act as symbols for individuals and are connected to “fundamental collective truths”. Using myths is a way for brands to market themselves and to be relevant to consumers, while they at the same time assist consumers in structuring consumption.

Holt (2004) addresses and applies ideologies and myths in the theory of cultural branding, which is a useful theory when it comes to understanding the ideological role of brands and their use of myths, and the cultural context these brands are part of. It “links the symbolic value of consumption with its social and ideological dimensions” (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020, p.2). In addition, cultural branding is in particular useful for lifestyle products that consumers use as a way to express their identity, such as clothing, home decor, beauty and entertainment; that is, products with a high-value involvement (Holt, 2004). Further, he argues that consumers are experiencing anxieties and desires in a nation, and brands that succeed to solve and smooth these through their tangible products may become cultural icons. This is because the brands are “performing identity myths”; stories that are embedded in the products that consumers use to resolve the contradictions they are experiencing (Holt 2003, p.44). In addition to this, Caruana and Crane (2008) explain that consumers naturally have concerns about societal issues, such as climate change, and these issues influence our consumption practices. Brands may therefore be used as a way for consumers to “fulfill unmet desires and needs” (Cayla & Arnould, 2008, p.86). In relation to this, the concept of consumer responsibilization presents a critical perspective on how the responsibility for societal and ecological problems has shifted from being the responsibility of government, companies and institutions, into being issues for the individual consumer to solve by consuming in a specific way (Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Thompson, 2003). This implies that brands play an important part in consumers’ lives as a way to solve issues and to be responsible.

As mentioned, beauty products are one example of lifestyle products that are important to consumers' identity, according to Holt (2004). In contemporary Western societies, women are reported to engage in self-adornment, purchasing and using various cosmetic products in their daily beauty routine (Jones & Kramer, 2016). It is a product category that in some cases has social motivations rather than hygiene motivations (Paasschen et al., 2014). Research has found that self-grooming is an outlet to improve one's physical appearance and social perception towards others, and has also shown a positive impact on one's self-image (Paasschen et al., 2014). There are numerous reasons for using cosmetics, ranging from "anxiety about facial appearance, conformity to social norms, and public self-consciousness, through to appearing more sociable and assertive to others" (Jones & Kramer, 2016, p.2). The findings of Paasschen et al. (2014) and Jones & Kramer (2016) indicate that beauty products help consumers solve anxieties and attain personal goals. This is aligned with the principles of cultural branding where Holt (2003, 2004) argues that products and brands may assist individuals in solving personal issues and attain goals.

1.2 Problematization

Research within consumer culture has examined ethical and sustainable consumption and its connection to identity creation (Cherrier, 2006; Connolly & Prothero, 2008) as well as on its existence within different class backgrounds (Johnston, Szabo & Rodney 2011; Carfagna et al., 2014). For instance, Cherrier (2006) investigated consumers as active agents and the motivations behind consumption using the case of reusable green shopping bags. Connolly and Prothero (2008) looked at green consumers and how they engage with environmental issues in their everyday life and their experienced societal responsibility. Although these studies provide us with a general understanding of ethical and sustainable consumption, research on vegan consumer cultures, particularly in the beauty market, remains unexplored. Research on vegan-adjacent consumer culture consumption in particular is concentrated on diet and food choices, such as the slow food movement (Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Sassatelli & Davolio, 2010; Bommel & Spicer, 2011), organic (Grosglik, 2017; Guthman, 2003; Ulver, 2019) and natural health (Thompson & Troester, 2002; Thompson, 2003, 2004). Within these research areas, ideologies behind the consumption are addressed. For example, Thompson and Kumar (2018) look at ideological movements and its connection to food and eating, with a neoliberal political perspective. Similar to this, Sassatelli and Davolio (2010) look at how slow food "articulates the refinement of taste as a political stance and negotiates with its varied organizational base" (p.203). Both studies bring up the point that slow food recently has been seen as a rather elitist movement for the wealthy middle-class. Research on natural health, on the other hand, has a strong connection to medicine, 'holistic' living and well-being

(Thompson, 2003). This idea of an ethical practice of self-care is of interest to the phenomenon of vegan beauty. However, a perspective on vegan beauty has not been addressed within consumer culture literature. We also wish to address what has been widely criticised with regards to consumer culture research, which is that these studies tend to overemphasize micro-phenomenological consumer-lived accounts, paving the way to conceptualize a more macro-account that explores underlying ideologies and myths (Fitchett, Patsiaouras & Davies, 2014).

Furthermore, research within consumer culture has also looked into green and ethical consumption (Connolly & Prothero, 2008; Johnston, 2007). Johnston (2007) emphasizes that studies of ethical consumption to a great extent are focused on specific sectors such as fair-trade products and organic food, but not very much on the ethical consumption as a “broader phenomena” (p.232). Fuentes investigated how marketing is used to construct a mass market for vegan substitutes (2017) as well as the concept of green marketing (2015). He contributes with a socio-cultural perspective on green products and also argues that research within green marketing is missing “the social, cultural and material complexity involved in both the marketing and consumption of green products” (2017, p.106). Although, as mentioned, there are studies on sustainable and ethical consumption explaining the symbolic value and motivation behind, there is limited research on veganism and the socio-cultural role it plays in consumers lives, in particular with a focus on the underlying ideologies and myths that shape it. There is a great amount of research on food choices within consumer culture, but not as much on other vegan products. We wish in this study to shift the focus from food and diet within vegan consumption, and contribute with the socio-cultural perspective, on a yet unexplored area: vegan and sustainable beauty.

There is also research looking into vegan consumption and its values outside consumer culture theory. Vegan dietary choices, for instance, have been examined in areas such as marketing (Beverland, 2014), organization studies (Bommel & Spicer, 2011) and food, culture and society (Chrzan, 2004; Donati, 2005; Gaytán, 2004; Labelle, 2004). In addition, the mentioned research areas have looked into consumers’ perception of meat substitutes (Hoek et al., 2011; Elzerman, Boekel & Luning, 2013; Schösler, Boer, & Boersema, 2012) and consumer attitudes (Hume 2009; Frewer, Kole, Van de Kroon & De Lauwere, 2005; Krystallis et al., 2012). For instance, Krystallis et al. (2012) looked at the connection between consumers’ sustainability attitudes and how it relates to their attitude on pig production systems. The mentioned studies give us an overview on consumers’ general attitude and behavior on sustainability and meat production. Research on green consumption mainly looks at understanding consumers and their food choices (Ditlevsen, Sandøe & Lassen, 2019; Darby, Batte, Ernst & Roe 2008; Grunert et al., 2004; Hjelmar 2011). For example, Ditlevsen, Sandøe and Lassen (2019) looked into ‘healthy food choices’ by Danish consumers with the

aim to understand how health is understood by consumers of organic food products and the motives behind consuming organically. Motives included health concerns, environmental concerns, animal welfare and taste. However, the study has a focus on health and is not examining any of the other motives in detail. In addition, there is research aiming to understand the consumer experience of green products (Tezer & Bodur 2020; Hartmann, Apaolaza & D'Souza, 2018) as well as its connection to identity (Greenebaum, 2012).

Another research stream is the one on the social environment of vegan and sustainable consumption (Beverland 2014; Brom, Visak & Meijboom, 2007; Fox & Ward 2008). The study of Beverland (2014) is in particular interesting since it emphasizes the socio-cultural value in mainstreaming plant-based diets, arguing that “[a]lthough researchers in health studies have identified the need to mainstream plant-based diets, they downplay the socio-cultural meanings associated with meat and vegetable consumption” (p.369). This further argues that there is a gap in studies of socio-cultural meanings with regards to vegan consumption. Since consumer researchers have rarely studied vegan consumption, this study will do so while examining its underlying ideologies and myths. Therefore, an exploration of the research within ideologies and myths will now be provided.

There are different usages and definitions of ideology in current literature, which will be further developed in the theoretical background (Thompson, 1984; Hirschman, 1993; Eagleton, 1991; Žižek, 1989). This study pertains mainly to marketplace ideologies, such as the ones used by Thompson and Holt. Thompson conceptualizes ideology as a system of beliefs and values that are sustained and developed by the dominant group in a society (1984). Holt, who in a similar way has conducted studies with regards to ideologies and myths, explains that an ideology “by its nature, presents challenging moral imperatives; it lays out the vision to which a community aspires. But, inevitably, many people live at a considerable remove from that vision (...). The topic of conversation is the national ideology” (Holt 2003, p.44). Taking our departure from these understandings of ideologies, we can attempt to comprehend how ideology shapes sustainable and vegan consumption practices, since it allows us to understand how ideology structures ideals of society and how the ideological meanings and beliefs play a role in shaping sustainable and vegan consumption practices.

Within consumer culture, there are a number of studies exploring and applying ideologies and myths in different ways. Holt has done extensive studies within his model cultural branding on large, iconic global brands, where ideologies and myths are the backbone (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2012). Similar to this, there is research looking into the ideological role of the brand (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020; Testa, Cova & Cantone, 2017; Heller, 2016), as well as ideologies and myths' connection to identity work (Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2009). Pineda, Sanz-Marcos and Gordillo-Rodríguez (2020) look into

the role of brands as vessels of ideology in Spain. Testa, Cova and Cantone (2017) investigated the process of de-iconisation of an iconic brand and examined the ideological role of a brand. Finally, Heller (2016) looked at the development of the General Post Office as an iconic brand in the UK, and how they addressed different myths of national identity.

Further, there is research examining consumer groups and movements. For instance, Shepherd, Chartrand and Fitzsimons (2015) investigate American's dominant ideology and consumers that are endorsing this ideology, and what implications this has for brands. Similar to this, Crockett and Wallendorf (2004) explore African-American consumers and its connection to normative political ideology. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) examine consumer movements that seek ideological and cultural change. In addition, Visconti, Sherry, Borghini and Anderson (2010) look at the four main ideologies of public space consumption of urban dwellers and street artists. In Kozinets (2008), ideology is seen in a new light, by looking at how technology ideologies influence consumers' technology narratives. In studies adjacent to ideologies and myths, Aaker and Williams (1998) examine the influence of emotional appeals across cultures, comparing the collectivist versus individualist culture.

Altogether, the majority of research on ideologies is addressing either large consumer groups connected to race and politics, or on major brands and organizations. Similar to what Kozinets (2008) did on technology ideologies, we wish to understand underlying societal values and conditions that form into ideologies and myths that in turn influence and shape alternative consumption. In this case vegan and sustainable consumption, and its connection to consumer responsibilization. We wish to understand how this consumption ideology has affected not only vegan consumers but consumers overall. In addition, we do not only include consumers' narratives, but wish to add on the managerial perspective of a brand and a 'context of context'. By understanding the underlying ideologies and myths, we can advance our understanding on how a society and its ideals and culture is able to form consumption values which in turn has an effect on the marketplace and its brands.

To further understand how ideologies shape values and beliefs of the society, myths are of relevance since it is closely related to ideology (Hirschman, 1993). Mythic narratives can be argued to be drawn from dominant ideological meanings and ideals (Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler, 2010). Myths have been widely researched within consumer culture theory (Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler 2010; Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez 2020; Coskuner-Balli, 2013; Thompson, 2004). Coskuner-Balli (2013) defines myth as “(...) a popular belief embodying the ideals and institution of a society or segment of society” (p.197) and is argued by Thompson (2004) to be important for individual and national identities since myths are based on culture.

There is research on the different function of myths in societies (Thompson, 2004; Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020; Luedicke, Giesler & Thompson, 2010; Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016), as well as ethical and moral consumption as a mythical narrative (Luedicke, Giesler & Thompson, 2010; Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Thompson, 2004; Holt, 1997). For example, consumer research has investigated how morality and ethics promote different actions and consumption practices (Luedicke, Giesler & Thompson, 2010; Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Thompson, 2004; Holt, 1997).

Myths are actively used by consumers to smooth over experienced anxieties and tensions that have arisen from the mismatch between ideology and reality (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020; Luedicke, Giesler & Thompson, 2010). One example is the consumption of natural health products, which partly is argued to be driven by an experienced concern and guilt when it comes to societal and ecological problems (Thompson, 2003). Another example is discussed by Thompson and Kumar (2018) who refers to consumers as ethical agents via their dietary choices of slow food. Both studies connect to the concept of consumer responsibilization, which is explained as an experienced individual responsibility to solve global social issues, through purchasing products with an ethical aura (Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps & Hill, 2015; Thompson, 2003; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Furthermore, research within consumer responsibilization claims that consumer responsibilization is created by large companies, governments and institutions (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps & Hill, 2015). In addition to this, there is research on consumer responsibilization in relation to green consumption (Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps & Hill, 2015; Giesler & Versiu, 2014; Eckhart & Dobscha, 2018). For example, Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps and Hill (2015) claim that consumers are expected to behave responsibly and adapt to a sustainable lifestyle. Similar to this, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) gives an example of a responsible consumer, ‘the green consumer’, where global warming is put in the hands of the individual consumer to solve.

As we can see, ideologies, myths and the concept of consumer responsibilization are closely linked, where myths and consumer responsibilization can be argued to be reliant on ideology. More specifically, ideology can be seen as an underlying factor for consumer responsibilization, which in turn is embodied by myths on the marketplace. In our thesis we will therefore explore consumer responsibilization, since it can showcase the rationale behind sustainable and vegan consumption.

As there is research on consumer responsibilities in relation to food and natural health products (Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Thompson, 2003), as well as green consumption (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps & Hill, 2015), we want to contribute by expanding the knowledge in this research stream by investigating the relationship between

consumer responsibilization and sustainable and vegan consumption. Furthermore, the consumer responsibilization perspective will allow us to get an in-depth understanding of the tensions and issues in society and the motivations behind moral, sustainable and vegan consumption practises.

Finally, brands can be interpreted as a vessel of ideology since they often incorporate popular beliefs and ideas and myths that function as solving instruments to consumers' anxiety (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020; Holt, 2004). As a way to understand the underlying ideologies and myths within vegan consumption, we will use the models of consumer responsibilization and cultural branding as theoretical lenses. In this way, we fill the research need from a socio-cultural perspective. Here, we provide with the vegan brand perspective, in this case a brand that is very much niched: it is sustainable, local and still quite small. It is because of its vegan and sustainable character that consumer responsibilization is a suitable theoretical lens. Seeing the brand as a cultural resource is central to this study. In that way, we may understand how a vegan brand is able to "break out of their category and into the culture" and provide importance for consumers within a socio-cultural context (Batey, 2016, p.175). To conclude, we argue that research on vegan consumption has until this point remained within limited domains. Consumer culture research is mainly focusing on diet and food movements, whereas areas outside of consumer research are looking at consumers' attitudes and values towards veganism and green consumption but missing a socio-cultural perspective. Altogether, we seek to investigate vegan and sustainable consumption and understand how ideologies and myths shape consumption practices in the marketplace.

1.3 Research Purpose

As previously stated, there is a clear indication of an increased openness and demand towards vegan beauty products among consumers (Ridder, 2020b). Although research is giving us an understanding on why consumers choose to adopt a vegan lifestyle, it is mostly connected to plant-based diets and sustainable food choices and not for other commodities such as beauty products (Beverland 2014; Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Groslik, 2017). In addition, the socio-cultural perspective on vegan consumption is somewhat limited.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the phenomenon of vegan and sustainable beauty consumption in contemporary society. In particular, we want to understand the ideologies and myths that shape vegan and sustainable consumption by looking at how a vegan and sustainable beauty brand engages consumers around these values. Through our thesis we aim to contribute to research by adding on to the field of consumer culture theory with regards to

the following research streams: vegan and sustainable consumption (Kumar, 2018; Cherrier, 2006; Fuentes 2015, 2017), cultural branding (Holt 1997, 2003, 2004), marketplace ideologies and myths (Hirschman, 1993; Žižek, 2004; Thompson, 2004; Arnould & Thompson, 2005), and consumer responsibilization (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps & Hill, 2015; Thompson & Kumar, 2018). We do so by also providing a ‘context of context’, which aids us in understanding Sweden’s ideologies and myths. We add the perspective of a vegan and sustainable brand that at the same time is small and niched, which differs from previous studies.

In our study we have also chosen to highlight consumer responsibilization (Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps & Hill, 2015; Thompson, 2003) since it further allows us to demonstrate the different underlying factors behind consumption choices as well as a critical perspective to vegan consumption in our research.

1.4 Research Question

How do marketplace ideologies and myths shape vegan and sustainable consumption?

1.5 Context

To study the research question, we have selected the Swedish vegan beauty market. Since there is an interest in finding out the underlying ideologies and myths that shape vegan and sustainable consumption, Sweden was chosen as an appropriate market. This is because Sweden is seen as a global pioneer within sustainability (Sarasini, 2009), and over the last years there has been an exponential growth in vegan beauty brands in Sweden. Swedish brands such as Maria Nila, REF, Olaplex, Ida Warg Beauty and Indy Beauty are positioning themselves as 100% vegan and cruelty free, where the majority were founded during the last 5-10 years. This may indicate that there is a growing demand from Swedish consumers on vegan and sustainable products and a growing acceptance from brands to position their products as vegan and sustainable. The vegan beauty category is interesting because it has not been studied before, as the research on vegan consumption is somewhat limited to other categories such as food choices. We want to truly understand why the marketplace now also is demanding vegan and sustainable beauty products, and how it relates to cultural values and societal tensions.

Maria Nila was chosen because the brand emphasizes both its environmental and cruelty-free profile in its communication and could therefore be used as a case to understand how a brand may engage consumers around ideologies and myths. In that way, we demonstrate how a vegan and sustainable beauty brand is conveying ideologies and myths. Another reason for choosing the brand Maria Nila instead of the other Swedish options stated above (REF, Olaplex, Ida Warg Beauty and Indy Beauty), was because Maria Nila did a large rebranding journey in 2012 where they underwent transformative changes. For example, they made significant changes to their products by making them fully vegan and made environmental and sustainable values a major part of the brand essence. It is after this brand change that the company has had great success on the Swedish market. Finally, although many of the main products that they produce, such as shampoo and conditioner, are everyday, mundane products, they have managed to ideologically charge them.

1.6 The Case of Maria Nila

Swedish hair care company Maria Nila was founded in 1999 in Helsingborg in Sweden by Ann and Ulf Wikström. They believed that beauty products should be nice to the hair, and respect animals and nature. Therefore, they created their own brand Maria Nila (Norman, 2018). Over the last years, the company has had great success and has recently expanded to a global market.

In 2012, when the founders' son Marcus Wikström took over, the business was going poorly. He realized that change was needed, in particular within the product portfolio. They needed to find their own niche and in this case they changed to be a completely vegan company, which they were not prior to 2012. They invested time in finding the right vegan ingredients and in product development, and they did it just at the right time as popularity now arose for vegan products. They also changed the design of the products and used social media as their main marketing tool for the restart – “[w]e saw that bloggers and other actors have a lot to say when it comes to what products people choose”, Markus Wikström said in 2012 in an interview (Kolmodin, 2019, own translation). Since then, demand has grown rapidly. Between 2017 to 2019, the production capacity had increased by almost 100 per cent, leading to an extension of the production factory (Capuder, 2019). In 2019, the company launched their products in the United States, and it quickly became the greatest market of all. The turnover that year for the US market alone was 100 million SEK and profit 5-10 million SEK (Wallnor, 2020). Today the products are sold through hairstyle salons as well as online beauty distributors.

1.7 Outline of the Thesis

Here, an outline is provided of the thesis in order to guide the reader on the structure.

The thesis begins by providing the theoretical frameworks that are of relevance to this study: marketplace ideologies and myths, consumer responsibilization and cultural branding. The theory presented in the theoretical background is also what later helps us answer the research questions. This is followed by the third part of the thesis, the methodology, which thoroughly explains the chosen research approach and design as well as data collection and analysis.

The fourth part of the thesis is the findings and analysis, where we present findings on the research and analyze its meaning from the theoretical frameworks. This leads to the discussion and conclusion of the research.

2 Theoretical Background

In order to fully understand the ideologies and myths that shape vegan and sustainable consumption in contemporary society and the role a vegan brand plays to consumers, a theoretical background will be provided on the relevant literature. Firstly, we present a review on ideologies and myths and its connection to consumption. Secondly, the consumer responsibilization perspective which helps us understand the motivation behind vegan consumption as well as a critical perspective on consumption practises. Finally, cultural branding which brings a branding perspective upon consumption while being connected to ideologies and myths.

2.1 Ideologies and Myths

The cultural marketplace, ideologies and myths in connection to consumption have been widely researched (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 1997; Thompson, 2004). Consumer culture theory may function as a way to encapsulate the forces and dynamics of consumption practises, marketplace ideologies and myths and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson,

2005). More specifically, consumer culture “explores heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader socio-historic frame of globalization and market capitalism” (p.869) and can be understood as “the fabric of experience, meanings and action” (p.869). Holt (1997) shares a similar interpretation of consumer culture, describing it as “the subjective dimension of culture as taken-for granted, intersubjectively shared interpretive frameworks” (p.332) which serves to “represent the world, create and sustain cultural entities and orient one to do certain things, and evoke certain feelings” (p.332).

Ideologies are part of culture which makes it an important aspect to explore. There are many different definitions of ideology as will now be discovered. Because this study addresses marketplace cultures, Thompson and Holt’s understandings of ideology are best suited for this research, as well as those that are adjacent. According to Thompson (1984) in Hirschman’s article from (1993), ideology is a central concept used to understand different social groups and classes’ conception of the world and can be referred to as “[...] the worldview of value-and-belief system of a particular group or class of people” (p.538). Ideology can also be viewed as “[...] a system of beliefs and values that emanate from and promulgate the worldview of the dominant group in a society” (p.537). Since cultural branding is one of the theoretical lenses in this thesis, Holt’s understanding of ideology is relevant, who understands it as the national vision of a community and the ideals that are promoted to citizens (2004).

Hirschman (1993) states that the dominant group sustain, promulgate and legitimize their ideology through promoting their beliefs and values by making them appear obvious and unavoidable and at the same time suppressing contradicting external beliefs and ideas outside the dominant group (Hirschman, 1993). Altogether, this means that the dominant group in the society are able to gain power over the social reality by promoting their values and beliefs and persuading other groups in the society. This is aligned with what Eagleton (1991) claims, which is that ideology can be used to perform social control over non-dominant groups in society. In this manner, the usage of ideology can be seen as a way to understand the worldview of a particular group of people. Closely related to how Hirschman (1993) conceptualizes ideology, Žižek (2004) view ideology as “[...] a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our “reality” itself: an illusion which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel” (p.722). From this perspective, the function of ideology is that it offers individuals a social reality that is actually a made-up construct and an escape from the ‘real kernel’ (Žižek, 2004). Žižek’s theoretical lens of ideology pertains to a “radicalized Lacanian psychoanalysis” (Ulver, 2021, p.1), and hence, is not entailing the most appropriate definition for a ideological study on marketplace cultures, however, since this study also offers a critical perspective, his perspective includes some helpful insights.

Moreover, Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) discusses market-embedded morality as an ideology. Consumers face the pressure to consume ethically where the responsibility to ‘save the world’ has become personalized. Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) discusses the concept of the ethical consumption attitude-behavior gap, explaining it as an ideological function that sustains the global capitalism that the ethical consumer and the proponents want to support. The gap is referred to as a continuous opportunity to address self-recreation through consumption and that it can be understood as “[...] an essential component of an ethics that legitimizes destructive and unethical capitalism while offering a futile sense of hope” (p.32). Furthermore, the ethical gap is described as a fetish; it allows individuals to cope with the harsh reality by believing in the fantasy that we can save the world by consuming ethically. Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) concludes that the ethical consumption gap can never be bridged, new ethical problems will be created by the market for the consumers to solve. Thus, Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) find that “[...] the interpellative call of ethical marketing and consumerism produces a subject of ideology that further sustains, rather than negating, the destructive machinery of global capitalism” (p.32).

In relation to this, Holt (2012) argues that there is no confirmed relationship between environmental concerns and environmental behaviors and that ethical consumerism can not exist since it relies on consumption. Holt states that “[c]onsumers are assumed to be philosophically consistent actors who hold overarching ideologies and continually connect the dots between these abstract values and a wide variety of specific consumption behaviors” (p.239). Moreover, he presents the concept of ideological lock-in, which is explained as how consumption ideology unintentionally reproduces unsustainable consumption. In this manner, consumerism values lead to unsustainable consumption. Holt states that “ideological lock-in becomes institutionally ‘sticky’, through three mechanisms: the naturalization of the market ideology in the cultural discourse, the habituation of everyday consumption practices that embody the ideology, and the materialization of the ideology in backstage market institutions that structure the market according to ideological assumptions” (p.253). Here, Holt gives the example of bottled water, which NGOs and other organisations are campaigning against. Holt (2012) states that “[a]s long as these cultural mechanics are in place, the public’s perceptions of tap water are not going to change” (p.251).

In relation to this, Shepherd, Chartrand and Fitzsimons (2015) emphasize that brands can reflect societal beliefs and thoughts and state that brands that are aligned with ideological values are more desirable for consumers. Moreover, they argue that “brands may reflect different aspects of one’s society and its dominant ideology, and in so doing, they may reflect what consumers like or dislike about their society and what it represents” (p.77).

In addition, Coskuner-Balli (2013) states that the dominant ideals and institutions of a society may be embodied by myths. Holt (2006) further explains myths as “[...] imaginative stories and images that selectively draw on history as source material, which function to continually re-imagine and revitalize the nation’s ideology” (p.359). Similarly, Luedicke, Giesler and Thompson (2010) claims that myths provide an “[...] archetypical cultural template that societies can use to represent and understand complex cultural occurrences and sociopolitical crises” (p.1018). Moreover, myths are used by brand managers to create powerful brands and to create compelling stories that are useful for consumers to ascribe meanings to their experiences (Thompson, 2004; Holt, 2004; Coskuner-Balli, 2013). The cultural myths include archetypes and narratives that have the purpose to attract consumers to a consumption activity or brand (Arsel & Thompson, 2010) and often echoes political ideology (Zhao & Belk, 2008). According to Pineda, Sanz-Marcos and Gordillo-Rodríguez (2020) brand myths “[...] rely on ‘populist worlds’ that is, social groups that express a distinctive ideology through their activities” (p.3). In this sense, by adapting a brand to the contemporary cultural climate and an emerging myth on the market, brands can function as ‘cultural vanguards’, without changing the brand's ideological meanings (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020).

These marketplace myths are based on consumers' anxieties and concerns and are renewed and modified to fit contemporary conditions and are often based on historical cultural meanings, ideals and conditions (Thompson, 2004). The experienced anxieties are being smoothed over by these myths that are argued to arise from the mismatch between ideological orthodoxy and reality (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020). Consumer activities on the marketplace and their identity investments are to an extent motivated by these myths that create purpose in consumers' lives and enhance their personal and collectively shared identity projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Moral beliefs can be understood as a mythic narrative that engages and captivates individuals in their everyday lives (Luedicke, Giesler & Thompson, 2010). For example, the myth of the moral protagonist can help people to cope with anxieties and worries when exposed to moral ambiguities. The moral protagonist represents a person of moral order, who understands and solves moral conflicts by following normative ideas in society. Consumers can adapt to the myth and thereby avoid worries and anxieties by linking their consumption practices and personal identities to a collectively shared normative order. The morality myth allows consumers to obtain a sense of drama which can give existential significance in their lives, and also validate their personal ideological beliefs and values practiced when consuming goods (Luedicke, Giesler & Thompson, 2010). This is aligned with Thompson and Kumar (2018), who state that “[...] the commercial marketplace has become a primary social field for engaging in ethical identity work” (p.16).

Moreover, Luedicke, Giesler and Thompson (2010) suggest that the moral protagonist myth can be connected to activism. Moral activism can provide consumers with a sense of moral superiority and can “entail a more proactive, moralistic form of identity work”, both collectively and personally (p.1029). Finally, the interplay between myths, ideological meanings and consumer identity work are prominent in consumer culture, where “[...] different mythic structures are animated by a diversity of ideological meanings” (p.1028) and brands and objects on the marketplace are used to “articulate ideological meanings in context specific ways” (p.1028).

Arnould and Thompson (2005) further emphasize that the consumption of products and services and desire-creating marketing practises are central to today’s consumer culture and the marketplace ideology it presents. Identities, meanings and practices are embodied and mediated by consumers to make sense of their lives. Furthermore, they state that consumer culture is framing “[...] consumers’ horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behavior and sense-making interpretations more likely than others” (p.869). For example, advertisement, social media and movies can be comprehended as tools to instruct people how to look and act and which lifestyle they should aspire, according to current market place ideologies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

In sum, consumption choices are impacted by cultural and ideological meanings and myths, and are motivated by different factors, for example enhancing individual and collectively shared identity projects and anxiety-avoidance (Arnould & Thompson 2005). There are many definitions of ideology and myths, and this study pertains mainly to the ones addressing the marketplace. Consumption practices can further be explained by the concept of consumer responsibilization, where consumers are held accountable to solve global problems (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). This will be explored in the next section.

2.3 Consumer Responsibilization

Consumers today have an increased awareness of the impact of consumption and feel morally and ethically responsible for ensuring societal wellbeing (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Here, we need a theoretical lens which provides us a framework of how and why consumers take on responsibility through their consumption as a complement to ideologies, myths and cultural branding. Therefore, the consumer responsibilization framework is included which enlightens a critical perspective on the governance of consumers, where individuals are made into the solving agent to address social issues by consuming in a certain way (Eckhart & Dobscha, 2018). The responsibility is argued to be created by for example companies and institutions,

which may suggest that responsibility can be of importance to identify consumer segments and a resourceful tool to use in communication when addressing sustainable initiatives (Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps & Hill, 2015).

The market for vegan and sustainable products can be compared to the market of natural health products, since the products provided on these markets are both associated with green consumption and well-being. Consumption of these products has become a lifestyle choice where critics of natural health products argue that societal and ecological problems have turned into matters of individual responsibility (Thompson, 2003). Natural health discourses have created the belief that the root of the world's ills is due to individual bad choices and habits of the mind and body, where the responsibility for societal and ecological problems are being put on the individual to solve. The natural health products also diversify the marketplace, ascribing individuals with identity enhancing material, in terms of cultural resources and social networks (Thompson, 2003).

Thompson and Kumar (2018) discuss consumer responsibilization in connection to slow food, where they refer to slow food enthusiasts as to ethical agents. The ethical agents continuously share their passion and help others to "gain autonomy from the corporate, controlled, industrialized food system" (p.1). Thompson and Kumar (2018) illustrate that consumers become responsible for social problems via their dietary choices where the consumers act as risk managers of social issues. From this critical perspective, they argue that consumption is directed to political consumerism defined as "consumers' use of the market as an arena for politics in order to change institutional or market practices found to be ethically, environmentally, or politically objectionable" (p.2). Further, they claim that political consumerism encourages consumers to engage in for example green and sustainable consumption, presenting it as sufficient and the correct way to solve environmental issues and socio-economic problems. This is criticised, where they argue that it is misleading consumers to believe that purchasing goods with an ethical aura replaces the need to be involved in social causes. In sum, consumer responsibilization is produced by the commercial marketplace, where consumers engage in ethical identity work (Thompson & Kumar, 2018).

Giesler and Veresiu (2014) further discuss the concept of the responsible consumer, claiming it to be a process created by the government. The authors present the model "Consumer Responsibilization as a Governmental Process", which demonstrates the impact of moralistic governance regimes of the responsible consumer. The authors claim that contemporary political economy decides on which social problem in society they want to address and then portray the consumer as the dominant part of the solution. The responsibilization of the consumer consists of four different steps: personalization, authorization, capabilization and transformation. Following these steps, the responsible consumer is established, where the

consumers solve social issues by changing their consumption patterns, adapting new habits and perceptions (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

An example of the responsible consumer subjects presented by Giesler and Veresiu (2014) is ‘The Green Consumer’. Climate experts raised the effects on global warming in 2003 which led to political policies regulating the environmental effect of companies. In consequence, companies claimed that the regulations threatened the freedom of the market and responsibilization was moved from large companies to the individual to take action to solve the climate crisis. Personalization was done by making climate change everybody’s business and linking the end of global warming to the availability of sustainable consumer options. Authorization was done by framing the environmental issue not as a political issue, but a moral one and by “[...] linking the individual C0₂ emission reduction to full global environmental recovery” (p.849). Capabilization is done through supporting the consumers to reduce their environmental impact on the marketplace. Transformation is described as the concrete behavioral change (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps and Hill (2015) outline an understanding of corporate-consumer responsibility dynamics in understanding sustainable consumption and investigates “[...] how and in what forms consumer responsibility manifests in consumers’ lives” (p.1456). They present four dominant perspectives on responsibilization: (1) responsibility as cognition, where consumption decisions are goal-based and rational; (2) responsibility as emotion, consumption decisions are based on emotions such as guilt and pride; (3) responsibility as moral imperative, consumption decision are based on morality and are “difficult to justify in terms of personal utility maximisation” (p.1456) and; (4) responsibility as socioculturally shaped, consumption decisions are influenced by global institutions, governments and NGOs. These perspectives demonstrate that consumers are expected to behave and consume responsibly and conscientiously, where the responsibility has shifted from being an issue that regards the government and global institutions, to becoming an individual responsibility (Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps & Hill, 2015).

Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps and Hill (2015) conclude that consumers are more likely to engage in sustainable consumption when having a sense of personal responsibility and a positive attitude towards sustainability. However, they also emphasize that responsibilization made by, for example, global institutions, the government and managers are more likely to affect behaviours rather than attitudes.

In sum, consumer responsibilization is produced together with emerging social issues where the consumers are framed as active agents to solve socio-economic problems, instead of the government and global institutions. For example, the green consumer is given the individual

responsibility instead of applying it to large companies to solve the climate crisis. Consumption responsibility is claimed to consist of four perspectives: (1) responsibility as cognition (2) responsibility as emotion (3) responsibility as moral imperative and (4) responsibility as socioculturally shaped (Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps & Hill, 2015). This demonstrates the different underlying factors behind consumers' consumption choices and motivators of responsibilization. Brands are aware of the experienced responsibility and anxiety in societies, and incorporate solutions to these anxieties, in addition to providing consumers with identity enhancing elements (Holt 2002, 2004). This will be further discussed in the next section.

2.3 Cultural Branding

According to Holt (2004) there are four different disciplines within the study of brands. The first one is economics, where brands are reputation signals, followed by the second one; sociology, where brands act like trust mechanisms. The third one is psychology where brands function as heuristic frames and finally the fourth which is cultural disciplines meaning that brands act as symbols. The latter is the domain this study pertains to and will now be explored further. Because of the model's strong connection to ideology and myths, it will as mentioned be used as a theoretical lens in this study in order to discover the underlying ideologies and myths of vegan and sustainable consumption. Holt provides thorough explanations of what it means for a brand to target a myth market, as well as examinations of different national ideologies. It is also a helpful model when researching lifestyle brands such as beauty. Altogether, the model is of much guidance to this study.

In Holt (2002) a historical background is provided of the societal context that eventually led to brands' role as a cultural resource. In 1960s, the postmodern culture was born, which emphasized that "to be socially valued, cultural content must pass through branded goods" and that "postmodern consumer culture only insists that meanings – any, take your choice – must be channeled through brands to have value" (p.82). As postmodern consumerism was becoming dominant, interpretive consumer research was rising, where research on the symbolic value of brands and identity was constructed (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994). Further, Holt (2002) explains how we now have come to a 'post-postmodern condition' where brands act as 'citizen-artists'. The focus is on the brand's contribution as a cultural resource: "[c]onsumers will look for brands to contribute directly to their identity projects by providing original and relevant cultural materials" and "brands will become another form of expressive culture, no different in

principle from films or television programs or rock bands" (p.87). Therefore, this chapter begins with an explanation of how brands act as cultural symbols.

2.3.1 Brands as Cultural Symbols

Cayla and Arnould (2008) link the symbolic dimension of branding with the concept of "cultural forms". They argue the brands can be seen as cultural forms that are embedded with stories that fulfill consumers' desires and needs. In addition, Holt (2004) argues that consumers enjoy certain brands because of their 'identity value' where the most successful ones become iconic brands. The view of branding as a symbolic form and its identity value is essential within the model of cultural branding.

Consumers' social identity was originally concentrated around what different societal groups they belonged to: social class, religion, ethnicity, gender, political view and so on. With consumption and manufacturing increasing following WWII, societies became more "liquid" (Saviolo & Marazza, 2012, p.8), and the importance and power of these different groups diminished. Instead, the value of products started to go beyond the tangible factors and were embedded with symbolic and social value through which consumers could express themselves. Consumption has become an activity and system where we as consumers can "project our own personal values and objectives" (p.9). Products are being used as a tool for expressing self-recognition and identity as well as belonging to groups. This means that products are not only used based on their functional aspects, but also based on the symbolic value they propose (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Elliot & Wattanasuwan argue that the symbolic value can be divided into two directions: social-symbolism (the outward direction in constructing the social world) and self-symbolism (inward in constructing our self-identity). Further, they explain that "consumption plays a central role in supplying meanings and values for the creation and maintenance of the consumer's personal and social world" (p.132).

In addition, Arnould and Thompson (2018) argue that the self can be seen as a symbolic project where "people strategically construct their identities across time and space in a constant state of becoming" (2018, p.21). The marketplace can be said to offer products embedded in symbolic value that "offer support to identity performance" and that consumers are "social actors who (re)configure ideas, images, symbols, and commercial products into meaningful identity projects" (p.21); hence, consumers consume to be able to perform their identities. It is commonly said that 'you are what you consume'.

The cultural aspect of brands' symbolism is also researched by Cova (1997) who explores how brands with their cultural meanings are used by consumers as symbolic resources for constructing identities. Furthermore, he introduced the concept of 'linking value' of a product

or a service, and emphasized that the social link of a product or service may be more important than the product itself, since it can function as a way to tie people together. In other words, besides the functional value, the value of a product can also be symbolic, social, emotional and aesthetical and play a societal role in groups and communities.

2.3.2 Iconic Brand

Cultural icons are all around us and are dominating our world and range from influential people such as Steve Jobs and Oprah Winfrey, to brands as Disney and Nike. A cultural icon can be defined as “a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, especially of a culture or a movement” (Holt, 2004). Holt (2003) argues that the national ideology of a country may promote certain ideals. He gives the example of the American family with two parents, a reality that is far away in broken families. This creates a contradiction between ideology and the individual, which produces desires and anxieties and the need for myths. In this case, the myth is a story that “consumers use to address identity desires and anxieties” (Holt, 2004, p.2). Brands compete on the so-called ‘myth markets’ which can be described as “an implicit national conversation in which a variety of cultural products compete to provide the most compelling myth” (p.44). Through the physical products, brands are able to deliver tangible myths. When consumers consume the product, and hence the myth, they might resolve the experienced tensions.

The brands that become winners on these myths markets are said to be cultural icons or iconic brands. Holt argues that some brands are “acting as vessels of self-expression, [and] the brands are imbued with stories that consumers find valuable in constructing their identities” (p.3). As a consequence, consumers desire brands that impose attractive ideals and values and in that way help them to express themselves. By becoming an iconic brand, a brand has a higher success of loyal customers as well as a profitable premium price. Iconic brands are said to follow the principles of cultural branding (Holt, 2004), which will be elaborated below.

2.3.3 The Principles of Cultural Branding

Based on Holt’s research, he found that the studied brands follow a set of principles that form the model of cultural branding. The first is that iconic brands address acute contradictions in society. Holt argues that there are collective anxieties and desires in a nation experienced by the citizens. They have appeared because of tensions between “their [citizens] own lives and society’s prevailing ideology” (2003, p.44). Since the citizens of a nation are facing and responding to the same historical changes, their anxieties and desires are found to be similar

and shared. When brands are addressing these anxieties and desires, they are able to provide consumers with extraordinary identity value. These anxieties and desires might shift in society, which means that brands need to adapt accordingly in order to stay relevant to consumers (Holt, 2004). Here, Holt gives the example of Budweiser. The brand addressed the contradiction of working men in the 1980s who were left feeling emasculated because of the country's economic and political meltdown due to the lack of demand for manual labor, combined with women's growing independence. By targeting the ideals of manhood through the beer, they managed to attract these consumers and aid them in solving their contradiction.

Further, iconic brands perform identity myths that address desires and anxieties. Identity myths are described as stories embodied with ideals that are of value to consumers and that help them express who they wish to be. The myth depends on what society needs at a given historical moment (Holt, 2004). Holt argues that brands become iconic when "they perform identity myths: simple fictions that address cultural anxieties from afar, from imaginary worlds rather than from the worlds that consumers regularly encounter in their everyday lives" (p.8). The identity myths smooth over the tensions that consumers are experiencing, provide them with identity-value and solve the anxieties inside them, and in that way give them purpose. They "stitch back otherwise damaging tears in the cultural fabric of the nation" (p.8).

Third, identity myths reside in the brand, which consumers experience and share via ritual action. Consumers experience the myth by consuming the product, which becomes a tangible symbol of the myth. Everytime they consume the product, they get to experience the myth and form a relationship with the brand, and this creates a ritual action. Those myths that are connected to identities enable a strong emotional connection between the brand and consumer (Holt 2003, 2004).

Fourth, identity myths are set in populist worlds. Populist worlds are "places separated not only from everyday life but also from the realms of commerce and elite control" and they "exist at the margins of society" (Holt, 2004, p.9). Iconic brands use these populist worlds as a way to authenticate the myth, and to show that "it is grounded in the lives of real people whose lives are guided by these beliefs". Here, an example is the Corona beer, which relied on the Mexican beach as a populist world in its myth-making.

In addition, iconic brands perform as activists, leading culture. Iconic brands do not only emphasize their benefits or emotions, but rather encourage consumers to think differently while addressing cultural change. This is possible because of the myth's connection to "society's incipient identity desires" (Holt, 2004, p.9).

Iconic brands rely on breakthrough performances, rather than consistent communications. Since most consumers forget about advertisements they have seen, these are rather used as “filler, as incremental extensions of previous ideas” (Holt, 2004, p.10). Instead, what makes brands iconic is that they have breakthrough performances that address the myth and stick in consumers’ minds for years. In this way, they “develop an authentic populist voice” (p.10).

Finally, iconic brands enjoy a cultural halo effect. By performing a powerful myth that speaks to consumers' wished identities, other factors of the brand are impacted in a positive way and enhance for example “the brand’s quality reputation, distinctive benefits, and status value” (Holt, 2004, p.10).

To be able to understand how vegan and sustainable consumption may be shaped by ideologies and myths, the cultural branding perspective serves as a way to understand brands as vessels of ideology. Brands stay relevant in the marketplace by shaping their values and beliefs in accordance with the ideals of consumers and by smoothing out tensions and experienced anxieties (Holt, 2003). In this case study, the concept of cultural branding guides us in understanding what function Maria Nila has on the Swedish marketplace and what distinctive ideology and myth they express through their activities.

2.4 Chapter Summary

In this study, we investigate how ideologies and myths shape vegan and sustainable consumption. Therefore, we started the theoretical background by providing a perspective on the role ideologies and myths play in society. Thereafter, since we are addressing an ethical consumption phenomena, we use consumer responsibilization as a way to further demonstrate the underlying factors and motivators of vegan consumption. Finally, we introduced the concept of cultural branding to showcase how brands adapt to current ideologies and myths in order to stay relevant.

3 Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology used for conducting research. It begins by explaining the study's research philosophy, followed by the research approach, data collection and analysis and finally an exploration of its quality of research.

3.1 Research Philosophy

According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019, p.17), research philosophy “enables us to examine our underlying assumptions about reality”. Understanding the different philosophical issues when conducting business research is of great importance and has a number of benefits. It helps the researchers to “have a clear sense of his/her reflexive role in research methods”, which is crucial in order to enable a “creative contribution” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.46). Further, it helps in deciding the appropriate research design for the study and how to collect and interpret answers to the research question. This in addition helps to “recognize which designs will work and which will not” and “help researchers to identify, and even create, designs that may be outside their past experience” (p.46). Ontology and epistemology are the main philosophical considerations and below is a description of how this study relates to them.

3.1.1 Ontological Position

Ontology is the “central core” of research and is the starting point since it relates to the nature of reality (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The most important question, according to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019), might be “whether the social phenomena that we study should be understood as existing objectively, external to observers (an objectivist ontology), or whether they are ‘made real’ by the activities of humans and the meanings which observers attach to them (a constructionist ontology)” (p.26). Having a clear understanding of what ontological position our research obtains was crucial since it aids in understanding the most effective way in conducting research for the specific reality we wished to understand.

Within social sciences, there are different views of ontology, in particular internal realism, relativism and nominalism (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This study pertains to a relativist position since it argues that there is no single reality: it depends on the background of who you are asking, which leads to many different perspectives to be discovered. We were investigating the views of different informants; consumers as well as an employee, where the aim was to unfold the different perspectives each one of them had on the matter.

3.1.2 Epistemological Position

Epistemology is “the study of the nature of knowledge and ways of enquiring into the physical and social worlds” and how “we know what we know” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.51). Positivism and social constructionism are two contrasting views within social science research. Our study pertains to the view of social constructionism. This perspective argues that “many aspects of ‘societal reality’ are determined by people rather than by objective and external factors” (p.52). Through our interviews, we aimed to form an understanding based on what the informants were telling us. This further means to appreciate different meanings that are based on consumers’ different experiences. Focus is on “what people, individually and collectively, are thinking and feeling” (p.52). By interviewing a somewhat small sample of people, we were able to go in-depth on consumers’ and an employee’s feelings and ideas about our research subject. Finally, we also included the ‘context of context’ as a part of our data collection and analysis, to further understand the reality consumers are part of and the many aspects it involves. Altogether, this helped us get an in-depth understanding of our research question and the subject overall.

3.2 Qualitative Research Approach

The philosophical assumptions of the study in turn decides the appropriate research approach. Since we aimed to understand specific processes, meanings and qualities of a social phenomenon, with the help of written and spoken words, our study pertains to a qualitative research method. Our study is exploratory in its nature, considering the fact that it aimed to investigate and understand a consumer phenomena. In addition, qualitative research has an emphasis on naturalism, meaning that “people attribute meaning to behaviour and are active creators of their social world, rather than passive subjects” (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p. 356). This speaks well to our aim which was to understand how a vegan beauty brand is able to engage consumers around ideologies and myths, which we did by conducting interviews

with a company representative as well as consumers. In this way, we were able to understand the underlying values of vegan beauty products and how this connects to a consumer demand.

The relationship between theory and research can be connected to either a deductive, inductive or abductive approach. Qualitative research more often than not pertains to an inductive view, which is referred to the relationship between theory and research (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The deductive approach starts from theory, which forms the hypotheses from which observations and findings are conducted. The inductive approach follows the opposite direction, where the observations and findings form the theory. However, many times deduction also includes elements of induction and vice versa. This can be demonstrated in our study: it is deductive in the way that our starting point was on theory on ideologies and myths, using cultural branding and consumer responsibilization as theoretical lenses. Further, it is also inductive in the way that we were trying to link our findings from the interviews with theory, where we have taken on an iterative approach once we started the interviews, that is, “weaving back and forth between data and theory” (p.23).

However, our goal was not to generate theory, but rather use it as a tool to answer our research question and to explore the area of vegan beauty consumption. The abductive approach can be said to be a way to “overcoming the limitations associated with deductive and inductive positions” and starts with “a puzzle or surprise and then seeks to explain it” and puzzles that “may arise when researchers encounter empirical phenomena which existing theory cannot account there” (p.24). Since we aimed to explain a specific arising phenomena – vegan beauty from a socio-cultural perspective – which is still limited in research, the abductive approach speaks very much to our research. This also means that our study is interpretative; we as authors were the ones to interpret what the consumers and employees had to say about a certain topic. Interpretive research is said to be “involving a dialogical process between theory and the empirical phenomenon; this results in the production of ‘reflexive narratives, not explanatory models or theoretical propositions’” (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p.24). Our theoretical frameworks were used as a way to understand and interpret the responses from interviewees rather than to be tested. Altogether, we wished in this way to form an understanding of the vegan consumption phenomena within beauty.

3.3 Research Design

Our thesis used the case of Maria Nila as an instrument to demonstrate the marketplace ideologies and myths that shape vegan consumption, as it allowed us to do a detailed exploration of how a vegan and sustainable brand embraces these values. Case studies have

the goal of finding and revealing in depth information and features of a specific subject (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Vegan and sustainable hair care products is a growing category on the Swedish market, and in order to investigate the myths and ideologies behind, we needed to look into a well established, successful and vegan and sustainable brand that provides rich material to analyze. Maria Nila fits the description. The hair care brand Maria Nila is modern and youthful, animal-friendly and commonly used by professional hairdressers which made it an interesting company to investigate, since it has many associations and values attached to the brand. For example, Maria Nila uses highly influential people to market their products, such as Zara Larsson, Elsa Hosk and Matilda Djerf and also participated in one of Sweden's largest festivals, Way out West, in 2019.

To strengthen our case study research design, we followed suggestions provided by Yin (cited in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.89-90). One is that researchers should "have clear designs produced before any data is collected, and these designs should cover: the main questions or propositions, the unit of analysis, links between data and propositions, and procedures for interpretation of data". These aspects have been considered in the study by being transparent on the research design. Therefore, the unit of analysis and procedures of how the data was analyzed is explained in detail in *3.4 Data Collection Method* and *3.5 Data Analysis*.

3.4 Data Collection Method

The data collection is divided into three parts: context of context, interview with the Marketing Director and interviews with consumers. It is important to keep in mind that this study was limited with regards to time and resources. Because of the limited time, the number of in-depth interviews with consumers was restricted, and could have been expanded should the study have more time. We aimed to collect in-depth data through our interviews, rather than aiming to get the highest number of interviews possible. However, within these constraints, we aimed to still contain high quality research, which will be described in detail later.

In sum, the data collection is summarized in the table below.

Table 1: Data Collection Summary

Data Collection	Purpose
Context of Context: Historical and cultural understanding of veganism and sustainability	Cultural contradictions to be met by Maria Nila
Interview with Marketing Director of the company who has been part of the rebranding	To understand what ideology and myth Maria Nila's communication and marketing content are addressing and responding to
Interviews with 12 Maria Nila consumers in Sweden	Understand consumers' narratives behind vegan and sustainable consumption

3.4.1 Context of Context

Since this study aimed to understand the ideologies and myths that shape vegan consumption, it was essential to understand the socio-historical and cultural-political context surrounding vegan and sustainable consumption in Sweden. Therefore, the first part of the data collection regards an understanding of what has happened in Sweden in the last centuries with regards to sustainability and vegan consumption. As mentioned earlier in the study, consumer culture research has been met with some criticism regarding the fact that it tends to overemphasize micro-phenomenological consumer-lived accounts (Fitchett, Patsiaouras & Davies, 2014). Askegaard and Linnet (2011) argues that consumer culture should aim for "a more contextually oriented consumption practices" (p.389), by paying attention to the context of context, that is, "societal class divisions, historical and global processes, cultural values and norms" (p.396). Further, they argue that the task of contextualization is to "explain consumers' choices by referring both to the structuring force of such large-scale contexts, and the meaningful projects that arise in everyday sociality" (p.396). We aimed to do so by providing a context of the societal and historical background on vegan and sustainable consumption in Sweden, as a complement to the interviews conducted. This included collecting data on reports and books, in particular from authorities, which provided an understanding on how Sweden embraces these issues through different policies as well as

their suggestions to citizens. We also explored how citizens have responded to these issues. In this way, we could form an understanding on the different drivers to vegan and sustainable consumption and its connection to cultural, societal, political conditions and so on, and the norms that have arisen in society in the last century. This guided us in comprehending the underlying ideologies and myths of vegan consumption. In this way, we paid attention to the social and cultural context in this study's analytical findings as a complement to the interviews.

3.4.2 Interview With Marketing Director

In order to understand the marketplace ideologies and myths around vegan and sustainable consumption and how Maria Nila engages consumers around vegan and sustainable values, an interview was conducted with the Marketing Director at the company. Interviews are helpful since they “provide opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation” (Tracy 2013, cited in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.134).

Questions were constructed that allowed us to in-depth explore what values and associations Maria Nila wants to communicate and how they communicate them. Moreover, we wanted to understand how they live out their vegan and sustainable values in their ecosystem and if they have any future strategies to become more sustainable.

According to King (2004) the main aim of a qualitative interview is to “gain an understanding from the respondent’s perspective, which includes not only what their viewpoint is but also why they hold this particular viewpoint” (cited in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.135). For this to happen the researcher needs to “be sensitive enough and skilled enough to understand the other person’s view, but also, at times, to assist individuals to explore their own beliefs” (p.135). To reach this, the interviews were semi-structured. They included some pre-decided questions with certain topics to explore but were flexible in nature and open to go into other areas. In this way, we enabled the opportunity to reveal interesting information that might not have been originally in the mind of us, the researchers, prior to the interviews. This also allowed us to develop secondary questions throughout the interview, which created more personal answers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.140).

3.4.2.1 Selection of Employee, Maria Nila

Since we wanted to understand the identity values of the brand, as well as how they are reaching consumers and why, it was of interest to conduct an interview with a representative from the marketing department. The interview enabled us to ask questions about the brand’s journey, in particular what has happened from 2012 and onwards. The interview also provided additional information about the company’s communication and content. The employee of

interest for the interview was the Marketing Director of the Nordic region, since this person has been part of the journey the company has done since their rebranding. In addition, the person has good knowledge of the company's values, changes that have been done throughout the years and how they have responded to changes in consumer needs. All these things are of importance since they may demonstrate a company response to societal ideologies and myths.

3.4.3 Interviews With Consumers

In order to fully understand the myth and ideologies that shape vegan consumption, and how that may be demonstrated through consumption of Maria Nila products, interviews were conducted with consumers who are using or have used their products. Through in-depth interviews, we aimed to understand the motivations behind consuming vegan beauty, and what perception consumers have of Maria Nila as a brand, how they got in touch with it, and the reasons and motives behind the purchase of the products. These interviews followed the same nature as the ones with the Maria Nila employee: they were semi-structured, and had certain topics to investigate and understand from a consumer perspective. We had some pre-decided questions that were used as a basis, but based on the information revealed from the consumer, new questions were in some cases formed during the interview. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) it is also important that interview questions "avoid abstract theoretical concepts, jargon and scholarly talk" (p.140). Therefore, questions were very much about consumers' opinions and experiences rather than theoretical concepts, in order to produce meaningful reflections. The questions were open-ended and we tried to make sure they were not leading in any way. All together, our goal was to gain "rich, detailed answers" (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p.435).

3.4.3.1 Selection of Consumers

A requirement for selecting consumers was for them to either be a current or previous consumer of Maria Nila's products. We also wanted a variety in consumers: vegans and non-vegans, since there is a possibility that these two groups give different insights with regards to motivations behind vegan beauty consumption but also in their perception of Maria Nila as a vegan beauty brand. The selection approached a somewhat ad-hoc sampling strategy, which is "based on availability and ease of access" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.138). We published a public post on our social media accounts, as well as on a Facebook group called "Veganska skönhetsprodukter" (in English: Vegan Beauty Products), which is a group used for consumers to discuss and recommend vegan beauty products. This gave us a chance to be in touch with not only our acquaintances but also other consumers engaging in vegan consumption.

The majority of respondents were in the same age gap, in their twenties, and all respondents but one were female. The main and largest customer segment for Maria Nila is females aged 20-30, meaning that our participant pool demonstrates the values of their largest customer group. All respondents were Swedish, since we are studying the Swedish market, and in order to get answers of depth and quality, all interviews were made in Swedish since this was the native language of everyone. Since our research aimed for an in-depth, interpretative perspective, the guidelines of the *Journal of Consumer Research* was followed, which recommends that the number of informants is between 3 and 20 (Thompson, 1997).

Table 2: Profiles of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Vegan/vegetarian?
Sara	24	Marketing student	No
Julia	25	Elderly care	Vegan
Alice	23	Teacher student	Vegan
My	24	Nurse student	No
Nellie	25	Administrator	Flexitarian, does not eat meat
Louise	30	Business Controller	No
Marie	59	Teacher	No
Ellinor	25	Business and Political Science student	Flexitarian, does not eat meat
Isabelle	28	Physiotherapist	No
Anna	24	Business student	Vegan
Felicia	25	Lawyer	No
Eric	28	Police student	Flexitarian, does not eat pork or fish

3.4.4 Interview Guide

Interview guides intend to guide researchers when conducting interviews to give structure to the interview. Our interview guide can be found in Appendix A and B. As mentioned before, we conducted semi-structured interviews as described by Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019), with consumers and the Marketing Director at Maria Nila. This allowed us to encourage the interviewees to answer freely on our questions and choose the direction topic themselves (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). It also gave us the opportunity to ask follow-up questions during interviews. One question to consider before conducting an interview is: "What do I need to know in order to answer each of the research questions I am interested in?" (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p.440). Therefore, we aimed to discuss and cover the different topics that were of importance to the thesis during the interview, but from the interviewee's perspective, so that the interview also covered what was significant to the interviewee.

We conducted interviews with 12 individuals who are current or previous customers of Maria Nila. The interviews were conducted in April 2021, about a month after the thesis project started. In this way, we were able to have our purpose and theoretical background somewhat in place, while exploring the research topic early on from a managerial and consumer perspective, which helped us in finding common and recurring themes of importance for the thesis. We allowed the interviewees to access the topic of the interview in order to instill them with confidence and allowance to reflect upon the subject beforehand (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The interviews with consumers lasted approximately thirty minutes and were separated into two parts. We began each interview with some small talk to make the respondent feel comfortable, in particular since it was audio recorded. Thereafter, we started the first part where we asked questions regarding their personal views and feelings regarding vegan and sustainable consumption. Secondly, we asked the respondents questions based on the motivations behind purchasing Maria Nila products. When needed, we added follow-up questions to further elaborate on the topic and to get advanced answers with richer descriptions. Each interview took place on Zoom, because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

After having interviews with consumers, we moved on to the interview with the Marketing Director. The responses we got from the previous interviews with consumers shaped to some extent the questions that we asked this person. The questions were sent beforehand to strengthen the dependability of the research and for preparation purposes (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The interview questions were based on previous and current marketing activities, values and meanings of the brand and future commitments and challenges. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

No respondent received any financial compensation for participating.

3.4.5 Recording and Transcribing

The interviews started with an oral explanation of their participation and consent, which can be found in Appendix C. They were told about the subject of the thesis that their information would be used for, and that their participation is voluntary, anonymous and that they had the possibility to refuse to participate and withdraw at any time. All interviews were recorded and transcribed after the respondent had given an oral permission. We also notified the informants that the recording was only to be used for the purpose of our research. Moreover, recording the interviews allowed us to focus on the responses of the interviewees and ask follow-up questions (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). It also enabled us to go through the collected data several times in order to analyze and obtain a detailed understanding of the responses, but also the possibility of a follow-up session with questions if any clarification was needed (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

3.5 Data Analysis

Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) suggest that before starting the analysis, authors should try to sort the material. This meant for this study in particular that we noted down elements that “keeps returning” (p.72) and that were relevant from an ideologies and myth perspective, as well as our theoretical lenses cultural branding and the consumer responsibilization. Here, Rennstam and Wästerfors mention the ‘whats and hows’, that is: what is being said during the interviews? Are there any particular themes that seem to be mentioned more than once? This means that there could be a “basis for a thematic sorting process” (p.75), which we in turn connected to the study’s theoretical frameworks.

The analytical work of interviews is performed during as well as after the interviews, but primarily after. With regards to the afterwork, the main steps are argued to be distilling, categorizing and interpreting. Distilling refers to the process of reducing the interview transcripts into “shorter meanings or themes” (Kvale 1983, 1997, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.30). In this study, it meant that when consumers and the manager described their different experiences within vegan consumption and Maria Nila as a brand, we later on distilled this information into themes that were connected to the different words expressed by the interviewees. Categorization, in turn, refers to some work that is done before

the interviews, such as going through previous literature, which in turn provides different categories for the interview. Here, some of the pre-discovered categories included ‘ethical consumption’, ‘sense of contributing’ and ‘caring’. Finally, interpretation, is different in the way that distilling and categorizing are more connected to clarifying and structuring the information received during the interviews, whereas interpretation tries to “reach beyond what is directly said to work out structures and relations of meanings not immediately apparent in text” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015, p.235, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.31). This is seen in our study through the fact that the amount of text from the interviews is limited in comparison to the analysis of the quotes where we discuss what was said by the interviewees and what it really means.

The concept of themes and categories can be connected to Charmaz’ suggestions (2000, 2006, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Although she advocates grounded theory, she offers a number of suggestions that are of value for this study as well. For example, that material should be coded, which means “putting words on what we read or see in our material” (p.35). By using theoretical frameworks as a way to analyze the coded material – in this study, ideologies and myths, and cultural branding and consumer responsibilization as theoretical lenses – Charmaz argues that it “allows us to understand them in more abstract terms” (p.37). She suggests that researchers “collect examples from his or her material to then lift up these to more abstract, conceptual levels” (p.37-38). This is what this study aimed to do through the themes and categories that were found through the interviews. Charmaz further argues that the initial coding “should be as open as possible” in order to not miss new information that could be of value (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Going back to the “hows” of the interviews regards how the interviewees are talking and presenting themselves. What words do they use? For this study, it could indicate ideals and values that are of importance when understanding the ideologies and myths that form vegan and sustainable consumption. Here, Rennstam and Wästerfors argue that the “analytical work consists of identifying such pieces of the interview material and putting them in different piles. Together, they may represent the category (...)” (p.80). Altogether, by analyzing what interviewees said, and how they said it, we formed an understanding on the field of vegan and sustainable consumption and could in that way “show how the members of the field construct and reconstruct their social reality” as well as “what is constructed and reconstructed and under which conditions” (p.82). We show *how* by highlighting important words, phrases and categories collected from the interviews, and *what* by presenting phenomena found from the interviews.

Followed by sorting the material is reducing, since it is not possible to include all elements from the data. Reducing can be seen as “a dialog with the material” (Becker 1998, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.108) where the analyst needs to choose the representation of the empirical material. Here, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) suggest a ‘categorial reduction’. This means that after conducting the interviews, our categories were identified, and thereafter reduced to the ones that were helping in presenting “detailed depictions that truly add a new explanation, compared to superficial depictions listing things we already think we know” (p.111). When the categories had been chosen, the next step could be an ‘illustrative reduction’, referring to “identifying excerpts specifically highlighting a decisive process or a feature in the chosen category” (p.116). We, the authors, did this together by going through the material thoroughly in order to find what could illustrate our phenomenon in the most clear way. The last step in the analysis is arguing, which is a crucial part since this is where our contribution to research comes in. It is here of importance that the argumentation is theorizing. Here, we aimed to propose a perspective by explaining vegan and sustainable consumption from a new point of theoretical view. This requires a good balance between rich empirical facts and theory (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Data analysis is a widespread process which required us to spend much time with the data and go back and forth with it. Not all data can be used, and certain themes and ideas need to be left out in order to contribute with theoretical insights while at the same time answering the research question.

3.6 Quality of Research

When conducting research, researchers need to ensure that the study meets certain standards and criterias to be able to present a convincing case that is academically sound (Shenton, 2004). This is dependent on the chosen method, which determines the collected empirical data and in turn provides an accurate representation of vegan and sustainable consumption and its underlying ideologies and myths. This study pertains to a qualitative research method aiming to be what Stake (2006) calls ‘expressive study’ meaning that it is “investigating cases because of their unique features, which may or may not be generalizable in other contexts” (cited in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.90). Trustworthiness and authenticity are of value within qualitative research and are criteria that indicate the qualitative study’s worth (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). They are important concepts in particular for our study’s ontological and epistemological position which argues that there are multiple realities to be discovered.

The trustworthiness is dependent on the “availability of rich, appropriate, and well-saturated data” (Elo et al., 2014, p.1) which emphasizes that data collection, analysis and results of the study go closely together. Therefore, a detailed preparation of the different sections before

conducting a study is essential to increase trustworthiness in terms of “data gathering, content analysis, trustworthiness discussion and result reporting” (Elo et al., 2014, p.1).

There are four criterias to accomplish the quality standards concerning the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. These are (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability and (4) confirmability (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Ensuring a true picture by providing suitable interviewees for the case study of Maria Nila can lead to a good credibility. This also regards following the guidelines of ethical research, which includes keeping a dialogue during the interview where questions were asked to make sure we interpreted the answers correctly. We also contacted the interviewees if there was a risk that any information was misunderstood or needed to be clarified. When addressing transferability, researchers aim to provide detailed information about the research context, processes and methods for the readers (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The dependability criterion is difficult to meet in qualitative studies, since it regards to strive to enable other researchers to replicate the study (Shenton, 2004). Here, we aimed to provide thick and descriptive explanations of our research process. Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) also suggest that biases need to be considered in a qualitative setting to establish trustworthiness and quality, as well as being able to showcase that the result of the study emerged from the collected data to reach confirmability criteria (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To further enhance the study’s trustworthiness, both researchers were present during all interviews, and aimed to ask open questions.

Finally, authenticity regards “convincing the reader that the researcher has a deep understanding of what was taking place in the organization” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.88). By, among other things, including an interview guide and quotes from the interviews, we aimed to be transparent with our understanding of our researched phenomena.

3.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the research philosophy that the study origins from is presented, which pertains to a relativist position within social constructionism. Our qualitative research approach means that we are able to understand specific processes, meanings and qualities of a social phenomenon, in this case the underlying ideologies and myths behind vegan consumption. We do this by being exploratory and using an abductive approach. We use a ‘context of context’ and interviews as a way to understand the ideologies and myths that have risen in Sweden over the last decades and how this has been met by the brand Maria Nila. In

this way, we understand how a vegan beauty brand is able to engage around citizens' ideologies and values.

4 Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, the main findings of the study are presented. First, a historical and cultural understanding of the societal situation in Sweden is provided and how this has led to certain cultural ideologies, myths and contradictions to be met by Maria Nila. Thereafter comes the findings from the managerial interview, including the brand's communication and how it responds to the ideologies, myths and contradictions described in 4.1.1. Finally, the interviews from consumers are presented and what they indicate with regards to the underlying ideologies and myths within vegan consumption.

4.1 Historical and Cultural Understanding

4.1.1 Societal Context

In order to understand the underlying ideologies and myths that have led to a demand for vegan consumption in society, we will start by looking at the national ideology in Sweden which led consumers to Maria Nila as a way to solve their experienced cultural contradictions. We have found that there is a specific societal tension that has been around in Sweden for some years with regards to sustainability and veganism. Firstly, an examination of the ideology of environmentalism is provided, followed by veganism.

The national ideology of Sweden has during the last century been influenced and connected to environmental issues. 'Environmentalism' became an issue in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s as anxiety arose regarding the impact that consumption and production patterns have (Connolly & Prothero, 2008). In Sweden, in 1993, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency published "Hur ska Sverige må år 2020?" (in English: How should Sweden feel in 2020?), which outlined the different environmental issues facing Sweden as

well as the whole planet: the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, acidification, eutrophication and so on. They mentioned that the starting point in Sweden was better in comparison to other countries, but Sweden's future state was also to a great extent affected by other countries' actions and development. They argue that "[t]his gloomy picture of the future is urging a radical changed direction for the development of society, both within and outside the country" and "[w]e have to choose direction now. The braking distance is long. Powerful solutions can not wait" (Naturvårdsverket, 1993, p.7, own translation). Sweden has for many years been seen globally as a pioneer within sustainability (Sarasini, 2009). A number of 'environmental goals' have been addressed through, for instance, "Sveriges miljömål" (in English: Sweden's environmental goals) which contains of 16 different goals that are describing the different actions that these goals are aiming for (Sveriges miljömål, n.d.).

Initially, these environmental issues and solutions were connected to public policy and government strategies, and were a political issue. With time, this has been moved to be seen as "everybody's business" (Arnould & Thompson, 2018, p.270). It was suggested that the consumers should be part of the solution, which gave rise to the phenomenon of the 'green consumer' (Connolly & Prothero, 2008). This includes the responsibility given to consumers in their consumption choices and lifestyle (Connolly & Prothero, 2008).

The issue of global warming is of course a global issue and has been handled globally in particular through the World Economic Forum (Arnould & Thompson, 2018). According to former US Vice President and WEF (World Economic Forum) member Al Gore, "the solution of global warming was about a passionate commitment from all involved stakeholders to become a society in which 'each one of us is a cause of global warming, but each of us can make choices to change that with the things we buy, with the electricity we use, the cars we drive'" (Arnould & Thompson, 2018, p.271). In addition, it was emphasized that those corporations who embraced green consumerism would be both economic and moral leaders. Research demonstrates that over the last years, there has been an uptake globally in "consumers integrating sustainability solutions into their daily routines" (Arnould & Thompson, 2018, p.55). For example, families are more aware of where their food is coming from. Different political environmental activist groups such as Greenpeace have increased and there is a large pressure on taking action and contributing (Krystallis et al., 2012). These global discussions impact Sweden as well. Sweden is involved in a number of international environmental strategies, mainly through the European Union and United Nations, such as through the Sustainable Development Agenda (Naturvårdsverket, n.d.).

Naturskyddsföreningen (in English: Swedish Society for Nature Conservation) has an online page with the title "Together for a global environmental movement" (Naturskyddsföreningen, n.d.a), emphasizing the importance of working globally with these issues. They also published a "green guide" including suggestions on how to be more environmentally friendly with

regards to travelling, the home, the workplace, clothes and food (Naturskyddsföreningen, n.d.b). The latter one is particularly interesting. It suggests that consumers should aim to eat green and organic. This has also been touched upon by Livsmedelsverket (in English: Swedish Food Agency), who suggests that citizens should eat less meat and more vegetarian, because of the impact the meat industry has on the environment (Livsmedelsverket, n.d.). In this way, we understand that environmentalism has become a part of the national identity of Sweden.

The rise of environmental concerns has also been vivid in popular culture. The genre “cli-fi” – climate fiction – has become increasingly popular, which can be because it helps us understand and care for what is happening to the climate (Gårdemyr, 2019). Movies released in the 90s such as *Waterworld* and *The Arrival* showed a distant future with a damaged and troubled environment. Climate fiction has also appeared in literature, such as the book *The Coming Global Superstorm* which was released in 1999, demonstrating the effect of global warming. The book was filmaitzed in 2004 through the movie *The Day after Tomorrow*. In Sweden, Greta Thunberg has become an impactful spokesperson for environmental issues even on a global scale. Her engagement has led to the concept of the “Greta Effect”, much because of her global school strikes for the climate. Her life has also been cinematized in the movie *Greta* and inspired the book *Greta and the Giants* where a young Greta is trying to save the forest and its animals (Zucker, 2019). In addition, she has been painted on different murals globally with environmental messages (Koran, 2019). Thunberg is also vegan, and expressed her worry for the environment and animals in an interview and that she convinced her parents to stop eating meat (Fluckiger, 2020).

The worry for environmental issues are seen among citizens in Sweden, in particular young ones, through the rising phenomenon ‘klimatångest’ (in English: climate anxiety), meaning that citizens are anxious about the negative development of environmental issues and are trying to find ways to contribute to the solution (Lagerblad, 2010). In addition to the environmental issue, there has over the last years been an increasing awareness and worry of animal-welfare. Although Sweden has many laws against animal cruelty, videos and pictures showing the reality of Swedish slaughterhouses and animal-testing have been brought up to light that showed the opposite to happy animals on ‘organic farms’. During the 20th century, Swedish newspapers such as *Aftonbladet* and *Göteborgs-posten* published images of animal cruelty happening in Sweden to healthy animals with titles such as “Outrageous” and “Just like the Wild West” (Linton, 2000, p.45, own translation). As a result, many consumers were shocked and upset which led to a new societal anxiety where consumers acted as active agents through their consumption to show their discontent towards animal cruelty that seemed to be somewhat ignored from authorities. Moving to the age of social media, this exposure has been published through posts on social media and documentaries on the topic have been published

informing citizens of animals in bad conditions (Fegan, Svensson & Lindahl, 2021; Preston, 2020). Over the years, the law of prevention of cruelty to animals has been re-written, animal testing has been changed and organisations such as Djurens rätt (in English: Animals' Rights) and Forska utan djurförsök (in English: Swedish Fund for Research Without Animal Experiments) have had an exponential growth in recent years through their number of members and allowances (Djurens rätt, 2018; Forska utan djurförsök, 2020). Many consumers today are boycotting companies engaged in non animal-friendly actions and choosing vegan products instead (Hedander, 2019). Altogether, we can see that a new myth has risen in Swedish society among consumers: the ethical, caring consumer myth.

Linton (2000) argues that the reason why the emerging vegan movement among youths during the 19th century did not stop is because Sweden, and other parts of the Western world, is living in a time of party-political crisis and moral philosophy revolution. Young people were tired of politics within parties and the more general philosophical questions increased interest. Ethics became trendy, the study of philosophy at university became a popular choice and radio channels started philosophical discussion series. Simultaneously, veganism and animal rights arose and became one of the most bespoken philosophical subjects. The book publisher Nya Doxa gave out the book *Djur & Människor, en antologi i djuretik* (in English: Animals and Humans, an anthology in animal ethics). Animal rights became an academic field and the philosophical discussions continued, including one with Torbjörn Tännsjö, one of Sweden's most famous philosophers (Linton, 2000). Since then, the vegan movement has continued to grow stronger and stronger and has in many ways become mainstream (Hancox, 2018). This can in particular be seen at the supermarket supply in Sweden, and at cafes where plant-based milk alternatives are available (Strömlad, 2019; Franklin-Wallis, 2019). In addition, the description of veganism in news and popular culture is not as extreme and negative anymore, which it in some ways used to be (Cole & Morgan, 2011; Jallinoja, Vinnari & Niva, 2019).

We argue that the ideology of environmentalism in Sweden has led to the myth of the ethical, caring consumer. Consumers are not only aiming to be ethical towards the environment, but have also increased their awareness towards animal welfare. This is rather something that has been discovered and established by consumers alone, as a movement. This is different to the environmental agenda that is pushed in Sweden. Eating more vegetarian food is communicated, but mostly from an environmental standpoint. The idea that animals should not suffer is a mindset that has been promoted from consumers themselves.

4.1.2 Brand Context and Cultural Contradiction

The frustration connected to environmental issues and animal-cruelty has left consumers with a wish to help the planet in some way through consumption. This can be seen through the increased tendency among consumers today to consume in a ‘friendly’ way: both towards animals, the environment and self. In other words, citizens aim to meet the nation’s ideology of being environmental, but it can be difficult to do so. This goes along with what Holt (2004) described as acute contradictions in society. There is a collective anxiety experienced by Swedish citizens, to “do good” and care about its environment and animals. As people got exposed to these environmentally friendly beliefs of the society, Maria Nila made an entrance on the marketplace in Sweden by expressing these values.

The company was founded in 1999, when the founders’ interest was raised from chemistry and ingredient development. However, results had been poor, and they realized that they needed their own niche. They saw that all other hair care products on the market had animal ingredients, and this was the factor they wanted to do differently. The new vision was that the products should not harm animals, the environment or humans in any way. This was also demonstrated through their products that included certifications and stamps that showed their authenticity as a vegan and environmentally friendly company.

It was not until 2012 that they became fully vegan and environmentally friendly. In 2012, the company did a large ‘rebranding’ and many changes were done in the company, in particular its vision and symbolism. In this way, Maria Nila tied its products with crucial societal concerns by being the first completely vegan hair care company in Sweden that also put a lot of emphasis and value on its environmental profile. Maria Nila provides in this way a product solution that responds to the anxiety experienced by consumers, and helps them in that way to solve the contradiction.

4.2 Brand Narrative: Manager Interview

To further understand how marketplace ideologies and myths shape vegan consumption, we have looked at the meanings and values that the vegan brand Maria Nila wants to communicate. It has become clear that what drives consumers towards Maria Nila is what they represent: important ideals, values and providing high performance products. As presented earlier, consumers have an increased awareness of the impact of consumption and feel morally and ethically responsible to ensure societal well-being (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Carrington et al. 2016). Brand myths are created to appeal to consumers that are based on

anxieties and current concerns in the society (Thompson, 2004). For example, environmental issues are presented as an important problem to solve in society (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Even though beauty products such as shampoos and conditioners are simple, everyday products, they may represent important ideas and concerns of the society where the products are mirroring the social and cultural values.

4.2.1 The Ideology and Mythology of Sustainable and Vegan Consumption

Maria Nila is strongly connected to being environmentally caring and animal-friendly, which is aligned with their vision ‘leading sustainable beauty’. Maria Nila stays relevant on the marketplace by addressing these anxieties and desires, making their brand a representative of the environmentalist ideology of the Swedish society. In our interview with the Marketing Director at Maria Nila, the company vision is explained as something that the company is continuously striving for and working to improve but something that they will never fully achieve.

“...Leading sustainable beauty is the company vision and that is something that we will never achieve but something that we are always working towards. The new factory was a great step in the direction, to have it run on solar cells. Now we are looking over our packaging, our latest launch is made of recycled plastic, and now we look into having all our corks on our products made by recycled plastic.”

“...We are looking into whether our distributors can switch out their product range when it comes to packaging and we work actively to become climate positive by 2025.”

According to Thompson (1984) in Hirschman’s article from (1993), ideology is referred to as “[...] the worldview of value-and-belief system of a particular group or class of people” (p.538), where the dominant group in a society promotes their values and beliefs by making them appear obvious and unavoidable. Clearly, the dominant ideology in the Swedish society emphasizes the importance of sustainable living and it is strongly encouraged in the cultural marketplace. This includes adapting to a sustainable and ethical lifestyle, where the society is requesting people to consume organic, recycling personal waste and to support companies that reject harming nature and animals. It is advocated from a multitude of sources: brands, large corporations, institutions, the government and between consumers, hence, it is everyone’s business to save the planet.

Maria Nila communicates sustainable values and practices, striving to make the world a better place by encapsulating important beliefs and ideals of a society. The brand gives value to consumers by supporting their ethical identity work by providing them with the ethical, caring

myth which they have authored. This can be connected to Shepherd, Chartrand and Fitzsimons (2015) who are claiming that “brands may reflect different aspects of one’s society and its dominant ideology, and in so doing, they may reflect what consumers like or dislike about their society and what it represents” (p.77). One may argue that Maria Nila as a brand has associations to what consumers both like and dislike about contemporary society. People dislike that there is an ongoing environmental crisis and animal cruelty happening and that they feel an individual guilt and responsibility for it, as stated by Giesler & Veresiu (2014), but like that Maria Nila communicates a solution to their worries.

As the Marketing Director states, leading sustainable beauty is something that ‘they will never achieve’ but something that they ‘continuously strive for’. Maria Nila is aware that it is impossible for them to have a major impact in saving the world from its human abusers since they are a small hair care brand, and that they will never achieve the title of being the leading force of sustainable beauty. From this perspective, one can argue that it is something that they may not want to achieve either, since they will lose their reason to exist. If there is no societal issue to solve, no anxiety and guilt present in the minds of the consumers, there is no need for a sustainable and ethical brand like Maria Nila on the marketplace. Consequently, they would need to re-adapt the ethical and caring myth which they have now authored, to one that fits the new condition of the marketplace, solving new concerns for consumers.

This can be linked to Holt (2006) explanation of the myth market, where he states that myths are “[...] imaginative stories and images that selectively draw on history as source material, which function to continually re-imagine and revitalize the nation’s ideology” (p.359). As mentioned before, environmentalism has become a national ideology of Sweden and Maria Nila has adapted their brand to this ideology of environmentalism. In addition, they have authored and manifested the myth of the ethical, caring consumer. They have accomplished that through their environmental and animal friendly discourses and activities which suggest that consumers should care about themselves, animals and the environment. In this way, the experienced tensions and anxieties experienced by consumers can be argued to be smoothed over by the myths of the ethical and caring brand of Maria Nila, which have arisen from the mismatch between ideologies and reality (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020). Maria Nila tells the story of a brand that helps the world in many different ways. For example, the Marketing Directors states that:

“... We have our charity projects every year that are separated from our products where we try to involve consumers in what we call ‘the friendly year’, where we have an animal in focus every year. This year we had the focus on Beluga whales, white whales at a sanctuary in Iceland, where we donated half a million on a project to preserve two white whales.”

“We also do other things for our clients. Instead of sending out Christmas gifts to our distributor clients that many do every year, sending out candy or wine bottles or whatever it may be, we donate money in our distributors’ name to the ‘Perfect World Foundation’ and then they find a project that they are actively looking into, and see where the money will be of best use at the moment. Last Christmas the money was given to bonobo chimpanzees.”

In this manner, the brand not only provides the consumer with vegan, cruelty free and environmentally friendly products, they are also telling compelling stories of being a caring and ethical brand engaging in several charity projects. According to Holt (2004), storytelling is one way for brand managers to create compelling myths and powerful brands. The second statement confirms that Maria Nila has the same strategy when it comes to their distributor clients. The brand mediates sustainable initiatives providing the distributor clients with the same myth as the individual customers, which makes the brand reflect an authentic, consistent image on the marketplace. Authoring the myth of being an ethical, caring brand creates a compelling story, smoothing over tensions for consumers where they may ascribe meanings to their purchase, which according to Holt (2006) makes a powerful brand.

“We don’t want to be extremists in regards to pushing people towards a vegan lifestyle. We are rather making it easier for people to make a friendlier decision. If you are choosing between two different shampoos we want to encourage people to take the vegan shampoo. The basic idea is to make it easier for people to choose.”

The vegan identity of Maria Nila is the kernel of the company and something that they strongly communicate to their consumers. They want to do good for the planet and simultaneously make their consumers feel good about purchasing their products, providing consumers with a multitude of values speaking to different consumers. The brand provides consumers with a tangible myth (Holt, 2004), imposing attractive values to their products, targeting consumers who want to do good for the planet. As the Marketing Director states, Maria Nila does not want to push people towards a vegan lifestyle, which can be interpreted as a strategy to not cause more anxiety and tensions experienced by consumers, rather, they want to be the solution to these tensions and anxieties.

One can argue that Maria Nila can be seen as a ‘cultural vanguard’ (Pineda, Sanz-Marcos & Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020), which means that a company is adapting to the current cultural climate and an emerging myth on the market. Profiling Maria Nila as a sustainable, animal-friendly and vegan brand makes it stand out from the ocean of beauty brands on the market and is in accordance with the national environmentalism ideology in Sweden. In that way, Maria Nila can be viewed as a company with an ‘ethical aura’, that helps consumers

solve the dilemma of making the ethical and ideologically correct decision on the marketplace.

4.2.2 Communicating Values and Beliefs

It is important to question why people feel pressured to make the right choices, such as adapting to a vegan lifestyle and choosing the perfect product. One answer is that people might feel pressured from society's ideologies and myths, since consumers are portrayed as the group to blame for the world's ills (Thompson, 2003; Thompson & Kumar, 2018; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

The kernel of the company is their sustainable initiative that permeates the company vision and mission. The brand mission, which according to the Marketing Director is to "provide the world with professional beauty in a friendly, curious and honest way" are reflected in the main values that Maria Nila wants to communicate: be friendly, stay curious, and act honest. Since the brand is using influencers and ambassadors to a great extent on their social media accounts, we asked how and why they pick them out.

"...All of them do not need to be vegans, that is not the purpose, but these people can encourage other people to make a friendlier decision while we at the same time get our influencers and ambassadors to think about their impact by working this way."

The Marketing Director states that they need to fit into one or more of the mentioned main values: be friendly, act honest and stay curious. 'Be friendly' is explained as everything that the brand represents: the products' campaigns, those who work in the company and all their cooperation partners. Stay curious refers to the curiosity to continuously change and improve their business. Act honest means that they care about being transparent in everything they do. Regardless which value that the Marketing Director connects to the influencer or ambassador, the focus seems to be on if they can influence people to make a friendlier decision and make them reflect upon their own consumer behavior. Holt (2002) states that cultural meanings "must be channeled through brands to have value" (p.82). In this sense, it is of importance that the values of being friendly, honest and curious are being communicated by Maria Nila, so that these attributes are becoming important in the eyes of influencers, brand ambassadors and consumers alike. For example, when Maria Nila expresses the importance of animal-friendly products, they impact the manner in which consumers relate to veganism. The Marketing Director further explains the different collaborations that the brand has with different influencers, which is a strategy with different purposes.

“Looking at our collaboration with Elsa Hosk that we had, it was primarily to reach a global market. It was during our launch in the USA, which makes sense since she is the biggest model there. She is Swedish and that strengthened the Swedish aspect of it [the brand], but we know that she is not a vegan.”

“The Zara Larsson collaboration was about ‘act honest’ and the transparent side, to find individuals that are outspoken and standing for different things, which is something that we want to be connected to as well. Moreover, the collaboration with Sadie Sink in the USA was more focused on the sustainability, climate compensation aspect, how we produce our products and the vegan lifestyle.”

By using influencers and brand ambassadors with different niches they reach out to different audiences on the marketplace, encapsulating a broad spectrum of consumers. Cova (1997) explores brands as symbolic resources for constructing identities and that the social link of a product might be more important than the product itself. Maria Nila has a majority of young consumers (25-35), where many are active on social media, following different brands and influencers. Many people in this consumer segment are devoted to influencers, viewing them as close friends and are trusting their opinions. For example, Elsa Hosk was chosen to represent Maria Nila when launching in the USA, since she is Swedish and is a globally famous model that has strong associations with the beauty industry and Sweden. Zara Larsson, on the other hand, is an opinion leader in Sweden, and has a strong voice for feminism. She has the visible ability to influence people to impact their buying behavior. People look up to her social position and lifestyle and if she praises a sustainable brand like Maria Nila, consumers will believe in the information and perhaps take a step in the direction of adapting to a sustainable lifestyle. As argued by Cova (1997) consumers consume in order to perform their identities and by buying the suggested products, one may enhance one’s identity and maintain one’s position in a social group. Again, the social link of a product plays a major role since consumers often want what the influencers have, even though they might be aware that it is paid advertisements.

Arnould and Thompson (2018) argue that products offer support to identity performance, which can be comprehended with that the value of a product may be symbolic, social, emotional, aesthetical and play a societal role in one’s community. As argued by Jones and Kramer (2016), the social motivation for beauty products may exceed the hygiene motivation where the reason for self-adornment may be “anxiety about facial appearance, conformity to social norms and public self consciousness” (p.2). In this sense, the influencers can be viewed as pioneers of the values and societal norms, a representation of ‘what the society really wants from us’. By adapting to the suggested lifestyle that the influencers express and stand for, one may improve one’s self image and perception towards others. It may also assist them in

solving anxieties and attain identity related goals. The consumer culture that the chosen influencers are framing on social media creates certain consumption patterns and behaviors and become part of the target groups' culture. As explained by Arnould and Thompson (2005), advertisements are often aligned with current marketplace ideologies and instruct people how to look, act and which lifestyle one should aspire to have.

"When it comes to the use of influencer marketing, we have been very strong. Many people like to talk about our products, many people have very nice things to say about our products. So much of the perception of the consumers has not come from us but has been created by our partners and people who have used our products, which has been a strategy for us."

This may indicate that Maria Nila is aware of the fact that the myth of the caring, ethical company that they are authoring is embodied by the influencers that they have chosen to collaborate with. In order to stay relevant, they have targeted the ideals of the society and are in that way activists of the leading culture (Holt, 2004) and are able to "develop an authentic populist voice" (p.10).

Another example of the myth making of Maria Nila is their presence at the music festival Way Out West in Gothenburg. The festival is completely vegetarian and is built on the concept of encouraging people to live an environmentally friendly lifestyle which speaks to Maria Nila's brand identity. At Maria Nila's festival tent people could get their hair done by professional hairdressers that used their products while consumers could learn more about them. This in turn can be interpreted as a way to allow consumers to experience Maria Nila as an author and symbol of the ethical, caring myth and build a relationship with the brand. According to the Marketing Director, the purpose of attending the festival was to talk to consumers that are conscious about the environment and genuinely interested in the brand and share their values. This means that as conscious consumers were coming to Maria Nila's tent and getting their hair fixed with vegan and sustainable products, they were able to consume the ethical, caring myth in a tangible form. Furthermore, Maria Nila may also have deepened their connection to the environmentalist ideology of Sweden due to their attendance at the environmentally friendly festival, since the connection of being a caring and ethical brand in this way could be enhanced. In other words, the values and associations that consumers have of the festival may have transmitted to the brand of Maria Nila.

Finally, the company has also done a number of campaigns that help them in responding to and representing certain ideologies and myths. For example, in 2016, the company did a #ichoosefriendly campaign, including videos on Youtube with influential Swedish people and their animals (Maria Nila, 2016). The videos include short shots of animals running around looking happy and the influential person explaining her bond to her animal and the role it

plays in life. The videos are genuine, conversational and non-advertising. This was also one of their ‘breakthrough performances’: the videos address the ethical, caring myth and stick in consumers’ minds which helped them to further “develop an authentic populist voice” (Holt, 2004). This, and much of their other content, sets place in the populist world. For example, in 2018, another commercial following the same theme takes place in South Africa and its wildlife, explaining Maria Nila’s initiative in ‘Elephants Alive, The Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit and Bush Babies Environmental Program’. The environment is taking place far away from commerce and a voice during the video is saying: “If we believe it enough, we can work together to build a perfect world. Where we embrace animals and confront the unfairness we expose on them for our own pleasure” (Maria Nila, 2018). By consuming Maria Nila, consumers are contributing to planting new trees in this area, which enables them to be part of this populist world which is driven by beliefs rather than interest.

When we asked who the target consumer is, the Marketing Director emphasized that they don't want to lock themself into having one specific target group. Instead they:

“[...] are working to find different tribes with different interests and work with community building specifically within the different tribes. It is rather about finding people with mutual interest than working with demographics and looking at age, gender, where they are at, income and so on. Looking at the vegan side, or people who are very aware about nature and like to discuss it, there are Facebook groups regarding vegan products. For the people who are more invested in sustainability, here we talk about the fact that we are vegan, cruelty-free and how we are managing our factory, this has more importance. If we look at people who are updated on what is new on the market and that are extremely interested in beauty products, here we might draw attention to the performance of the products. Then there are people who are more interested in design and the scent which we are also trying to satisfy. “

This indicates that Maria Nila is targeting specific groups for their communication, being aware that people are purchasing and using their products for different reasons. Consumers desire brands that impose attractive ideals and values that help them to express themselves (Holt, 2004), therefore they want to be associated with brands that are matching their own beliefs and values. This motivates the reasons why Maria Nila possesses and communicates a multitude of values and meanings. The brand wants to fit into a broad spectrum of what consumers desire in a brand. Some might partly or only care about the performance of the products which they communicate by stating that they are a professional hairdresser brand. For consumers that focus on being responsible, the brand’s profile suits well since they possess a caring and ethical profile which they showcase in their communication and charity projects.

To conclude, the managerial interview provided us with knowledge about what values, beliefs and associations that the brand wants to possess and communicate to its consumers. From this information, we analysed how their practises and activities are linked with ideologies, myths and cultural branding. In turn, this will help us to answer our research question.

4.3 Consumers' Narratives

In this section, the findings from the consumer interviews are presented, which has been divided into three main themes: (1) consumer responsibility, (2) conscience, self-respect and social group and (3) Maria Nila and its symbolic value where we also thoroughly discuss consumers' perception of Maria Nila as a vegan brand and its connection to myths and ideology.

Following the financial global crisis in 2008, consumer demand has increased for “greater sobriety and understated simplicity” and a need for “less waste and a need for greater selectivity” (Saviolo & Marazza, 2012, p.11). Consumers have become more willing to pay a price premium for products that are seen to provide a life of more quality to them. This means that certain issues are of increasing importance, such as sustainability and environmental issues. These concepts are today not only a way to recognize a business’ legitimacy, but are used to make business thanks to the value it provides to different stakeholders. Consumers are demanding brands that provide authenticity and value through innovation, and because of this brands must “have its own vision of the future and set out to achieve a positive impact on the lives of its customers” (p.12). Brands are today not only expected to produce products, but also content which contributes to a certain lifestyle: it becomes a “creation of culture and compelling experiences” (p.13).

4.3.1 Consumer Responsibility

From the historical and cultural background in 4.1.1, we understand that in the last century, Sweden has pushed for environmental agendas which eventually led to consumers embracing the responsibility to solve the issues. In the last years, it has come to involve animal welfare issues as well and in that way a wish from consumers to consume ethically both to the environment and animals. This is also discussed by Giesler and Veresiu (2014) who explain

that the raised awareness of global warming in 2003 created political policies and regulation regarding the environmental effect of companies. As mentioned, this has led to companies moving the responsibilization to consumers creating the subject of the ‘green consumer’. By personalizing the global environmental issue and making consumers into solving agents they linked “[...] the individual CO₂ emission reduction to full global environmental recovery” (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014, p.849). In this way, sustainable consumption can be argued to be a part of consumer marketplace culture where the dominant group in the society promotes their ideology making their beliefs appear obvious and unavoidable to take part in (Hirschman, 1993), for example having the responsibility of living a sustainable lifestyle.

The informants reported that consuming vegan and sustainable products is a way to do good in a number of ways. As Holt (2004) mentioned, there are collective anxieties and desires in a nation experienced by the citizens. The informant My, who is 24 year old and non-vegan, emphasized how she has noticed that the sustainable and vegan consumption phenomenon in Sweden has increased recently:

“I would say that it is something that has become important lately. I think the whole debate on consuming sustainable and vegan has been brought up very much lately, so of course you have learned a lot about it. It feels like more people are choosing that path which has led to the fact that I think about it in a different way now.” - My

The societal tension experienced by consumers is clear from the interviews. Considering the fact that My senses that more people are choosing a sustainable and ethical path in their lives, she is now experiencing that it is important for her to take personal responsibility to reflect on her own consumption practises and choose the ‘path’ that is encouraged by society. This sustainable and ethical path speaks for the current environmentalist ideology in Sweden. This is in accordance with Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps and Hill (2015), who states that consumers are more likely to engage in sustainable consumption when having a sense of personal responsibility and a positive attitude towards sustainability. Anna, a 24 year old vegan, shares here thoughts on this matter:

“It is hard for me to not see the consequences of not consuming the way I do and I feel that my bad conscience takes over, and it is like this.... I don’t want a cow to just stand there and be artificially inseminated and milked its whole life. My little animal heart says no (...). I try to impact, or move in some kind of right direction and I feel that often what I do has an effect on others. My parents have told me they eat vegetarian and vegan, my friends do it because they learn about what I do and you spread it around, it means a lot for me, not only what I do but also that I can help others to make good choices.” - Anna

Anna expresses the so-called climate anxiety previously described as a recent phenomenon in Sweden (Lagerblad, 2010). Young consumers feel responsible to act, and this consumer in particular experiences a responsibility to impact those in her surrounding as well. This may indicate that not only do consuming sustainably ease consumers' own guilt and anxiety, it gives them a sense of validation of their personal ideological beliefs, and significance to their lives (Luedicke, Giesler & Thompson, 2010), as they turn into promoters of the environmentalist ideology. This goes along with what the interviewee Nellie, who is a 25 year flexitarian, states:

"We are the younger generation and I would like to contribute to society in some way, and if I put my money (...), if I put my resources on buying vegan and sustainable, then I feel that I have contributed to something for a more sustainable future." - Nellie

As a part of the young generation, one can interpret that Nellie feels a need to take responsibility to contribute to a better world by purchasing products that are kind to the environment and to the animals. As a flexitarian who does not eat meat, she has in that decision already contributed more than many. The worry found among consumers is double-sided: a general worry for animals being exploited and tested on, as well as for the environment and its degradation. Some consumers express a worry for both issues, whereas others may only feel a strong worry for one of them. This can be connected to Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps and Hill (2015) who claims that sustainable responsibilization in consumption can originate from emotions such as guilt and pride, morality of doing the right thing, cognition and being socio-culturally influenced. The multifaceted meanings and values of Maria Nila recognizes several needs demonstrated by consumers on the marketplace. Consuming vegan and sustainable products can function as a way for consumers to sense that they are solving environmental issues while at the same time making an animal-friendly choice. For example, Julia, a 25 year old vegan, states that she cares for both issues:

"It is very important that it is vegan, because I don't want to contribute to animal testing, or that animals are hurt in any way, and sustainability is important to me because I care a lot about the environment." - Julia

As mentioned earlier, the rise of environmental concerns has shaped consumers into becoming more aware of their own impact on the environment (Arnould & Thompson, 2018). As Julia states, it is important for her to purchase products that are vegan and sustainable to contribute to the well-being of the planet and the animals. In this way, by purchasing products that fit the profile of being sustainable and animal-friendly, she can solve her experienced tensions. These are connected to matters she finds important and cares about. Furthermore, by purchasing Maria Nila products she can physically demonstrate that she is a responsible consumer and her belonging to the beliefs of the environmentalist ideology. Regardless if the

interviewee was vegan or not, they all reported that they rather choose a vegan product over one that is not. The interviewee My, emphasized the fact that since beauty products are not really crucial for humans, it is even more important that they are vegan:

“Beauty products and such are not really something you need, you would be fine without most of those things, so because of that it feels even better that those products are not tested on animals when you use something that is not really crucial.” - My

Even though beauty products are not crucial for our survival, and hair care products belong to a somewhat mundane product category, they may still represent important values and beliefs of a marketplace ideology. Žižek (2004) explains ideology as “[...] a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our “reality” itself” (p.722). In this manner, one may argue that consumption serves as a way to uphold the ideology and social reality. By purchasing products one may also maintain and enhance one’s social symbolism, and self-symbolism (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Therefore, engaging in self-adornment activities can be argued to be part of ideology as well as one’s social and self symbolism since it is an important outlet in order to improve one’s self image and social perception towards others (Paasschen et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is for many a daily activity and an important ritual. The Western society has shaped an ideology that encourages self-adornment and that tells consumers that they are required to consume various beauty products and services to fit in the society. At the same time, consumers are instructed to behave ethically and be morally responsible for ensuring societal wellbeing (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). In turn, it can be hard for consumers to cope with the many demands they are experiencing. Having a beauty routine that one can practise everyday while still having a good conscience can therefore be solved by using animal and environmentally friendly products. Here Maria Nila answers to a demand by authoring the myth of a caring and ethical company.

We found that consumers actively search for information before purchasing to establish that the product has been made under what they believe are the right conditions. When asking Marie, a 59 year old non-vegan, what she looks for when she is about to purchase beauty products, she says:

“If it is tested on animals, the price, if it is vegan and a reasonable price then I will buy it. In particular I look if it is tested on animals because that is something I don’t want.” - Marie

This indicates that some consumers are well-aware and informative and are actively looking for vegan and sustainable products when shopping for beauty products. Marie emphasizes that she does not want to contribute to the harm of animals for self-adornment purposes. One can argue that when consumers consume sustainable products, they experience a myth. In this manner, consumers are in a way purchasing a myth that makes them believe that they are sustainable and ethical consumers. It may also create a feeling that their unsustainable actions

in other areas are justified when purchasing environmental and animal friendly goods. In turn, it may fulfill one's need to identify as a responsible consumer, removing existing guilt and anxieties. Similarly, Thompson and Kumar (2018) note that it can also replace the need for involvement in social causes. It may seem harmless to consume these products that are containing an ethical aura, but it is in a way misleading since there are other sustainability aspects to reflect upon that also contribute to environmental degradation, such as transportation, material and water usage.

From another perspective, one of our respondents Louise, a 30 year old non-vegan, expressed that one 'should really' look for vegan products, but that she views the vegan attribute more as a bonus.

"...One should really look if there are vegan things, but I would not say that I take my shampoo bottle and say "Oh yes this is vegan and something good", I would not say that, I see it more as a bonus. How nice that this shampoo is vegan since I will use it all my life. That it will ease my consciousness long term." - Louise

An interpretation of Louise's statement is that she is aware of the fact that she 'should' purchase vegan products according to the value-and-belief system in Sweden that promotes and encourages ethical consumption, but that she does not always manage to do so. This may indicate that some consumers experience a failure to commit to the values and beliefs that are shown to be important in a society's ideology. Hence, consumers could sense that they do not live up to the current consumer culture described by Holt (1997) as an "intersubjectively shared interpretive framework" (p.332), because their personal beliefs and behavior are not included in the dominant societal ideology group (Hirschman, 1993). Furthermore, not fully adapting to a sustainable and ethical lifestyle can be comprehended with Holt's (2012) concept of ideological lock-in, which is explained as how consumption ideology unintentionally reproduces unsustainable consumption. For example, unsustainable consumption practises can be reproduced by everyday consumer habits and materialization of ideology structured by market institutions (Holt, 2012). For consumers, this may imply that they are exposed to mixed signals in how to think and act on the marketplace. Consequently, as long as there is an existing consumer culture that also speaks for non-sustainable and non-vegan brands and goods, certain consumers' perception of committing to a sustainable lifestyle might not change.

4.3.2 Conscience, Self-Respect and Importance of Social Group

As products can be seen as identity investments according to Arnould and Thompson (2005), vegan and sustainable products may enhance one's personal identity and goal of identifying as

a ‘green consumer’. When we asked Alice, a 23 year old vegan, how she feels when consuming vegan and sustainable products she states:

“It feels good, it does. It simply feels better for the conscience, and I think many who shop vegan and sustainable recognize themselves in that, that it feels better than shopping other things. A nice feeling, in particular for the conscience, but also to know that no one is hurt in the same way as if I would have bought non-vegan products.” - Alice

Alice, and many other of our respondents, express a desire to consume more vegan and sustainably since it feels good for the conscience. This can be comprehended with what Elliot and Wattanasawan (1998) claim, that individuals use products as tools for expressing self-recognition and identity. However, Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) explain this strive to ease the conscience as a ‘fetish’, since it allows individuals a sense of hope in their harsh reality, believing that they individually can solve environmental issues by consuming ethically. In this manner, consumers increase their self-respect and conscience when engaging in sustainable practices, which makes them continuously consume products that enhance themselves and justify their actions. Furthermore, it can be seen as a statement, one that demonstrates that they care and take a stance, compared to those who do not. This is expressed by Nellie, who says that the fact that she chooses to consume some vegan products in life means that she is doing more than other people are doing.

“You think about it, and you respect yourself more because you care about sustainability and the planet and the animals, and everything else happening around you. You think that “Shit, damn I’m so good that I bought that”, no but I mean you have those thoughts: I have done something good even though there are people that do not do anything but at least I have done my small part. Even if I am not completely vegan, you buy those products that you think fit you best.” - Nellie

Nellie’s statement can be connected to Luedicke, Giesler and Thompson (2010) who claim that taking moral initiatives can provide consumers with a sense of moral superiority. This is demonstrated in Nellie’s statement: ‘Shit, damn I’m so good that I bought that’. These consumers feel superior to others when consuming sustainable and vegan, which according to Luedicke, Giesler and Thompson (2010), can be seen as a moralistic form of identity work. In relation to this, Nellie further states that “there are people that do not do anything but at least I have done my small part”, which also speaks to the fact that she feels superior to other consumers who do not purchase sustainable and animal-friendly products. Thompson and Kumar (2018) state that brands often are misleading consumers into thinking that purchasing goods with an ethical aura is good enough, which might be what Nellie is experiencing.

Similar to what Louise said earlier about the fact that if a product is vegan it is a bonus, Sara said the following:

"I do use a vegan self tanner (...), and I love that so much. It's the best self tanner that I have tried in a very long time. And it was a plus that it was vegan actually but I didn't know it until after the purchase and then I said "Omg it's vegan!" - Sara

Regardless if the consumer is consciously or unconsciously buying sustainable and vegan products, consumers can gain a sense of self-respect and a good conscience when noticing this attribute. This could in turn improve consumers' perception of a brand long-term since they connect positive associations to it as it increases their conscience and self-respect.

Many informants also brought up the importance of their social group and that they discuss and get tips of beauty products through their friends. The vegan informants demonstrate that they aim to inspire their friends to consume more vegan and sustainable products, whereas the non-vegan informants say that they got inspired to consume this way by their surroundings. This engagement to inspire others can be comprehended as moral activism that according to Luedicke, Giesler and Thompson (2010) can entail a "moralistic form of identity work" (p.1029). In addition, these vegan consumers can be viewed as 'ethical agents' within beauty consumption, the concept described by Thompson and Kumar, originally within slow food (2018). The vegan informants are very passionate about their vegan lifestyle, and are in that way able to influence others to understand how important it is that they consume more ethically, which in turn has an effect on conscience and self-respect. This is of importance, since products and consumption act as a tool to express self-recognition and belonging to groups (Saviolo & Marazza, 2012). Nellie pointed out the following:

"I have a friend group and two are vegans (...), you get influenced and you start to think more and more. The more vegans there are in your surroundings the more you start to think thoughts such as 'Hmm, is it healthier if I do this, or is this not better for the future, the environment' and all those thoughts." - Nellie

This goes together with what Louise said, when we asked what influences her consumption:

"It is mostly my surroundings. I have a friend, we used to live together and we bought a lot of vegan stuff, we had vegan hand soap and all that. And I know that if she would be 'on me' and say that I should have vegan shampoo and so on, then I would absolutely think that I should." - Louise

The statements of the two informants demonstrate that as more non-vegans are surrounded by friends that are vegan, or at least aiming for a vegan lifestyle, non-vegans might feel the need to adjust their consumption choices. As they are involved in conversations regarding veganism and sustainability, they are being informed of the consequences of their consumption and might feel guilty if they do not make any changes and do not do ‘the right thing’. Being informed by a good friend rather than a pushy stranger or organization can be impactful, since it could result in an increasing sense of personal responsibility as well as positive attitude, and this in turn leads more likely to engagement in sustainable consumption as described earlier (Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps & Hill, 2015). Hence, consuming vegan beauty can be a quick and easy way to make a right, ethical choice within a social group which in turn eases up the conscience.

In addition to this, the social ties of a product is crucial and is in some cases more important than the functional value (Cova, 1997). We can see that the social link of vegan consumption is essential, since it acts as a way to show where you stand to your social surrounding. In this way, it ties consumers together in society. Letting others know that you consume ethically may therefore be a way to further increase your self-respect because of the demonstration of the conscious choice you are making. Here, a few informants also report that they are part of vegan beauty groups on Facebook which is where they found out about Maria Nila.

4.3.3 Maria Nila and Its Symbolic Value

The informants emphasize that it is important to consume from a “good” company, in this case it means one that is trustworthy in everything it does: ingredients, production and care of employees. Maria Nila is described by the informants as a company that does the things that they value. Their different values of for example being vegan, sustainable, and animal friendly are embedded not only in the products, but also in their communication and advertising. As stated before, Maria Nila can be interpreted as a vessel for the environmentalist ideology in Sweden, responding to the myth of being caring and ethical. According to Arsel and Thompson (2010) brands adapt to current myths in society in order to encourage people to purchase goods or engage people in a certain consumer activity. We can see that the message and values that Maria Nila wants to express to its consumers, are the values that consumers actually associate the company with, here stated by My:

“I think of good products, good ingredients, nothing harmful. Foremost for the hair and so on, and that it is Swedish (...). I also try to think of that even though it is not the cheapest brand, even if it costs a little bit extra, it is a good company that does so many good things, they think about how they create their products, so I think it is worth it in the end.” - My

The fact that the company invests in ethical and environmental initiatives, its ingredients and is locally produced means that consumers are willing to pay extra since it ascribes a higher meaning to their experience. Since moral beliefs can be understood as a mythic narrative (Luedicke, Giesler & Thompson, 2010), one can argue that people are solving their moral conflicts by following normative ideas of the ideology such as consuming local, animal and environmentally friendly products.

However, it is also of importance to emphasize that quality is very important to the informants. As said before, for some it is a must for products to be vegan, whereas for others it is just a plus. All informants value quality products, which also is one of the reasons why they are willing to pay a premium price for Maria Nila. Alice gives us her view on this:

"I think they are within a legitimate price range actually, so I don't think the price matters that much, of course, it is always nice if it is somewhat cheap but it is not a must. I feel that I can spend that money because I know it is of good quality." - Alice

This goes along with what is argued by Holt (2004), that is, that cultural brands are able to charge a profitable premium price. Many of the consumers believe that Maria Nila is somewhat expensive. However, because of everything the brand provides to consumers, which is professional quality hair care products that at the same time are engaging in important values and giving more than just a hair product, they are willing to pay an extra price. In this way, they are justifying a price premium with the fact that Maria Nila is a good company, and in that way demonstrating what they believe are important values in society. From a critical perspective, it can be viewed as a double standard to charge a premium price for Maria Nila products since their vision is to lead sustainable beauty, but in a manner, they are only leading wealthy people to consume sustainably. Consequently, sustainable and vegan products are not available for those consumers who are not able to spend a lot of money into their beauty routine. This is problematic since environmental degradation becomes a money making business instead of a problem people together strive to solve.

Some informants also bring up that the marketing of Maria Nila has assisted in establishing the image they have of Maria Nila as a caring company. When one informant was asked whether they associate Maria Nila with veganism and sustainable products, she said:

"Yes, I do, considering that is what they market. That is the first thing you see when you look at their advertising." - Nellie

Informants also mention that it is very convenient and handy that they push on their vegan and sustainable value directly on their products and marketing, but without being too

intrusive. This helps the consumer in making a good choice without needing to do much research themselves. Ellinor, a 25 year old flexitarian, states that:

"They make it easier by saying it [that it is vegan] indirectly on the product or in their marketing, then you do not need to do that research yourself." - Ellinor

One can argue that it is therefore important how the communication and call to action in the marketing campaigns are portrayed. Based on these findings we argue that Maria Nila is a market resource for consumers that is manifesting the ethical, caring myth. These ideals are of importance to the informants, and by consuming Maria Nila they are able to express who they wish to be recognized as, which is a responsible consumer. Since Maria Nila is offering everyday products, with packages and bottles offering stamps and certificates that further demonstrate these ideals, consumers get a daily or weekly ritual of the feeling of being an ethical consumer. As explained by Holt (2003), consumers experience a brand myth when consuming the product. When consumers wash their hair, using Maria Nila products, they get to experience this myth that is embodied in the product. In this way, the shampoo and other hair products become a tangible symbol of the myth. When it comes to the stamps and certificates, Alice states that she looks for certain stamps indicating that the products are vegan and cruelty free:

"I look mainly for it to be vegan and cruelty free, that is a stamp I want to see on products." - Alice

The certificates and stamps on the products are of great value to consumers. When they see them every day in their bathroom they are reminded of the great choice they have made which adds on to the concept of ritual action. By having stamps on the bottles that are in line with what the consumers value, consumers further get to experience the myth which Maria Nila authors. Everytime they use the products and they experience the myth, they form a relationship with Maria Nila, and this creates a ritual action (Holt 2003, 2004). With Maria Nila, the ritual is vivid. On one hand, consumers engage in ritual action when washing their hair or use any of the other hair products, which is a weekly or daily activity for consumers. In this way, Maria Nila becomes an essential part of consumers' everyday life. In addition, they get to experience the myth by just having and seeing the bottles in their bathroom. We understand that Maria Nila has been very successful in the way that the myth resides in everything it does, including the design of the bottles. This in turn enables a strong emotional connection between Maria Nila and consumer (Holt 2003, 2004).

When it comes to influencer marketing, there are different views among the interviewees if it is positive or negative to involve them when communicating sustainable and vegan values.

"In Maria Nila's case, they are a professional brand and they use an influencer that I identify with, for instance I think that Elsa Hosk is amazing. She is one of the world's biggest models and if she uses Maria Nila I would say of course, if she relies on these products and she's a Victoria Secret model why wouldn't I trust the brand? If she makes this campaign that she is actually using it, not just being paid for saying so, then I might actually trust Maria Nila." - Sara

Sara tells us that marketing campaigns with influencers can be positive if the person's values match the brand values and consumers' values. Since it is a younger group of people that stands for most of Maria Nila's sales, Elsa Hosk can be an appropriate ambassador since she is someone that many girls look up to since she is a Swedish Victoria Secret model. If a person does not already trust Maria Nila as a brand that stands for professional and friendly products, using Elsa Hosk as a brand ambassador might do what it takes to convince that person. In this way, the myth of being an ethical, caring brand that is leading sustainable beauty is channeled through brand ambassadors. As stated by Holt (2002) "consumers will look for brands that contribute directly to their identity projects" (p.87), and for many consumers using Elsa Hosk as a trustworthy brand ambassador will be enough motivation to try the brand.

"I like skin care products, that is something I could try because someone influenced me. But for example, I boycott influencer brands, I would never buy like Bianca Ingrosso's beauty products or like Ida Wargs self tanner because I feel a strong feeling against this trend with influencer brands." - Sara

In contrast to the positive perception of influencers seen in the first quote by Sara, the second quote implies that Sara holds a grudge against influencers who have created their own beauty brands. This may indicate that the brand needs to be careful with who they choose to include in marketing campaigns. If there is a mis-match between what the influencer represents and the value of the brand, there is a chance that the consumer will feel that the product does not support one's identity project, which according to Arnould & Thompson (2018) is essential to consumers.

Furthermore, Ellinor shares a critical viewpoint to sustainable brands such as Maria Nila:

"It is great that they do vegan products but they market themselves very very much towards influencers, they want to expand their sales and that can be a bit counterproductive towards some of their values in the political areas... It is still a bit of a double standard to push sales and at the same time contribute to climate change." - Ellinor

Ellinor demonstrates an awareness that even though the brand stands for good things such as being sustainable and vegan, they are also a part of the problem. Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) discuss ethical consumption as a way to ideologically sustain the destructive

global capitalism that is causing environmental degradation. Influencers can be viewed as opinion leaders in society and representatives of an ideology. Since influencers are impactful, they have the ability to persuade consumers into thinking that if they buy the products suggested by the influencer, they are conforming to the norms of the society, while doing the right thing for themselves and their surroundings. This may in turn incite an increased desire to consume more goods compared to if it was not encouraged by influencers and ambassadors. Consuming Maria Nila may therefore justify their purchase and give a sense of hope to consumers, believing in the fantasy that they can solve the environmental degradation through consuming ethically. In the end, many consumers report that Maria Nila is one of the “good ones”, making it the best choice in today’s society among all large, corporate brands that do not seem to genuinely care about their environmental impact. For example, Anna states:

“I know that for example Colgate and Unilever and so on, Nestlé, that they do not have very good working conditions and their environmental impact has not really been fantastic. I think that Colgate and Palmolive are like the world’s largest actors in environmental pollution or something like that, so it is about the more environmental aspect and to support smaller companies.” - Anna

She mentions that what she likes about Maria Nila is just the fact that they are caring, local and transparent and affiliated with organizations that she trusts. Maria Nila seems to be the justified and most legitimate choice in today’s society when a consumer wants to feel responsible in their beauty consumption. This goes together with the principles of Holt within cultural branding: Maria Nila has successfully embraced the values that consumers strongly can stand behind and wish to be associated with.

To conclude, the consumer interviews provided us with knowledge about the essential elements when they consume beauty products, how and in what way sustainable and vegan consumption is important to them and how Maria Nila’s communication and products respond to their needs. Based on this information, we analyzed how their practises and activities are linked with ideologies, myths, consumer responsibilization and cultural branding. In turn, this will help us to answer our research question.

4.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, a historical and cultural background was first provided in order to understand the societal situation and how that has led to a request of a brand such as Maria Nila. We could understand that because of the worry of environmental issues that has been an issue

over the last years in Sweden, in addition to the exposure of animal-cruelty, a cultural contradiction has risen among consumers for brands that offer a solution to these anxieties. This guided us in understanding that the ideology of environmentalism is promoted in Sweden, and the myth of ethical, caring consumption is requested by consumers. Here, Maria Nila did a re-branding journey in 2012 that replied to these issues. From the managerial interview, we understood that the animal-friendly and environmental values are of great importance to the company, and is something that they want to illuminate in everything they do: in their campaigns, choice of brand ambassadors and even event presence. This meant that they have become a cultural activist in the myth of ethical and caring consumption. Consumers confirmed these values and reported that Maria Nila assists them in making a sustainable and ethical choice, which is very important to them since they feel responsible to contribute to a better world, while still experiencing quality products. They get to experience the identity myth via ritual action everytime they use or see the products. Altogether, we understand that Maria Nila has been able to become a cultural form in society that is embedded with stories that fulfill consumers' desires and needs.

5 Discussion

The analysis explained the mechanisms behind consuming sustainable and vegan and how the cultural ideologies and myths around these goods are mediated and reproduced on the market.

It can be argued that consumers are shaped by consumerism in the marketplace into specific consumption patterns, encouraging consumers to purchase more and more products and services (Holt, 2012). The market has made consumers believe that we are dependent on goods and services to make us satisfied, which eventually will lead to self-fulfillment (Holt, 2004). It is showcased as a desirable goal to obtain material possessions which brings value to our identity creation projects (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998). For individuals, consumption of goods holds meanings and values which are used to enhance one's personal and communal identity project (Holt, 2004).

Environmentalism has become increasingly important to the national ideology of Sweden and for the individual identity of Swedish consumers. The marketplace ideology in Sweden is showing us that it is desirable to be perceived as an ethical consumer, since it appeals to the national ideology of being responsible. We can also see that there is a tension among consumers to act and contribute towards a better, caring environment. The current ideology and myths are making us believe that we are responsible for environmental degradation and should act as solving agents (Thompson & Kumar, 2018). Looking at the study's case company Maria Nila, they have the mission to provide "the world with professional beauty in a friendly, curious and honest way". This demonstrates that the company has chosen to adapt the brand to the current environmentalist ideology seen in Sweden, presenting the myth of being an ethical and caring company. We understand this as a central strength and strategy for the company, since they are addressing market ideologies and myths that today are meaningful to consumers on the marketplace. In this way, the company provides consumers with a myth that fulfills their desires and anxieties.

Governments, companies and institutions are impactful when it comes to influencing consumer choices and steering individuals to act accordingly with the value system that they propose (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). In turn, it has resulted in consumers having developed values and beliefs around vegan and sustainable consumption during the past years in Sweden, which are continuously reinforced and sustained through the marketplace ideology. Maria Nila embraces the contemporary environmentalist ideology that is emerging in the

Swedish culture. It is part of consumers' everyday life to act sustainable and ethical in everything they do. The feeling of individual responsibility to save the world from environmental degradation and animal cruelty is accompanied with the sense of uncertainty of not knowing what to do and how to act to accomplish this. As Gerhard-Luchs, Phipps and Hill's (2015) argue, responsibility decisions can be based on cognition, emotion, and moral and as socio-culturally shaped. This leaves us thinking if the motivation behind consuming sustainable products really are an actual concern about 'saving the planet' or more a concern about the self and enhancing and maintaining one's identity as a caring consumer. By addressing the consumers who wish to be conscious in their consumption, the brand Maria Nila is able to provide consumers with identity value, in particular for a consumer who senses moral and an ethical responsibility for consuming sustainably. In this way, the company manages to become an activist and leader in the culture of sustainable beauty products in Sweden, which creates favorable associations, enabling consumers to tie strong emotional bonds to them (Holt, 2003).

Moreover, Thompson (2004) and Luedicke, Giesler and Thompson (2010) argue that myths are based on consumers' anxieties and concerns, which in Maria Nila's case would mean that their sustainable initiatives may assist consumers in coping with the anxiety experienced. It can also mean that consumers trust the brand's environmental and animal friendly profile and in that way let a company take care of societal issues. For example, during the consumer interviews, no one expressed distrust towards the fact that the brand Maria Nila is sustainable and cruelty free. This could indicate that consumers fully trust the brands and blindly believe that what they communicate is true. Consumers may not want to be sceptical and question a brand's purpose and sustainable initiatives since it is upholding their own identity as well. This goes along with Thompson and Kumar (2018) who notes that ethical identity work is primarily done on the marketplace. If circumstances would change for the brand, for example if there would be a scandal saying that Maria Nila actually is involved in animal testing, more anxiety would arise and one's identity may take harm. One would most certainly reject the company, pushing the associations towards oneself away.

Maria Nila can be seen as a promoter of the environmentalist ideology, reflecting these abstract values of sustainability and veganism, presenting an offer of high moral and ethics from many aspects. With their products, consumers can be kind to the environment, animals and themselves, while still getting the experience of good quality hair products. In relation to this, informants claimed that it is meaningful for them to consume ethically, but it should not be compromised with a trade-off, for example quality versus sustainability. Maria Nila's sustainable and ethical products still have to provide consumers with an alternative that is perceived just as qualitative and effectful as other unsustainable brands on the market, in order to be considered.

Furthermore, it can be seen as a personal failure to not live up to the personal values and beliefs that you stand for in your consumption habits. This is expressed by some of our consumer informants who state that despite their knowledge that they ‘should’ consume sustainably and that they have a willingness to be sustainable consumers, they do not always consume according to these beliefs. However, some recognize the value and need of consuming sustainably and try to do this to a full extent. This can be explained by what Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) call an ethical attitude-behavior consumption gap. The ethical consumption gap is explained by Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) as something that could never be bridged, since there will always be global problems to solve, and room for improvement in one’s consumption practices. One can argue that the pressure to engage in sustainable and ethical consumption actually incite more consumption, since consumers are always looking to replace current products and find new, better alternatives in order to accomplish the identity of a responsible consumer. In this sense, sustainable and ethical consumption may even be legitimized even though it is destructive since consumers want more than the world can deliver (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016). In relation to this, Holt (2012) argues that consumers unintentionally reproduce unsustainable consumption which he presents as the concept of ‘ideological lock in’, which to some extent may explain the consumer attitude-behavior gap (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016). As previously stated, there is a willingness to be sustainable and ethical according to our interviewees. However, as long as there is a market for brands that speak for other ideological values and myths, different to the environmental and ethical ones, which at the same time are aligned with one’s usual habits and beliefs (Holt, 2012), some consumers risk being confused of what to do and how to act. In turn, this could lead to some consumers not changing and adapting to the environmentalist ideology of Sweden.

As argued by Giesler and Veresiu (2014) and Thompson (2004), consumers are made to believe that they, individually, are responsible for solving fundamental societal and ecological problems and that their individual actions are the root of the problem, which moves the responsibility and guilt away from, for example, large companies and institutions. This is problematic because people are made to believe that they are the key element to solve societal issues. Furthermore, it can be problematic if material consumption is only identified with something negative, where consumers continuously feel anxiety and guilt for consuming, as it can be argued that it is something necessary for maintaining social relations and building on to one’s identity projects (Holt, 2004). In this manner, some consumers will experience anxiety and guilt for engaging in something that creates purpose to their lives, something that enhances and maintains their personal and collective identity projects.

Furthermore, this guilt and anxiety that is experienced by some consumers can lead them into being indecisive on what to do in order to make up for the things that they think that they are responsible for in society. Maria Nila gives individuals the opportunity to do well in their consumption by making it easier for people to choose. The products are vegan which means that no animals have been harmed in the process and they are sustainable from various perspectives. Also, as said by the Marketing Director, the brand does not want to force individuals to fully convert into something, or make people feel more obliged and anxious about not fully committing to a vegan lifestyle, which we know is one of the greatest things an individual can do for the environment. This may indicate that ‘veganism’ in contemporary society is still partly connected with an extremism movement, and it is a movement that is not yet completely established in the Swedish cultural ideology. Instead, Maria Nila gives you an opportunity to feel good by encouraging you to make a single choice, and in that way take an active step to not harm any animals and not affect the environment negatively. From a critical point of view, it is not possible for everyone to purchase Maria Nila products and in turn adapt to a more environmental and animal-friendly lifestyle. Not everyone that wants to take responsibility and engage in sustainable consumption can pay a premium price for a Maria Nila shampoo that costs 299 kr for a normal sized shampoo of 450 ml (Maria Nila, n.d.). In turn, sustainable consumption within beauty can be a question of which social class one belongs to. In this way, it can in a way be seen as a movement that is rather driven by profit and not a mutual belief for a better future, which is a mismatch to their vision of leading sustainable beauty.

From this perspective, one may also argue that to prevent environmental degradation, we need to significantly reduce all our consumption. Hence, it is contradictory that the actors on the market encourage individuals to purchase more products, even though the products are sustainable and ethical. Žižek (2004) views ideology as “[...] a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our “reality” itself” (p.722). The encouragement of sustainable consumption supports the fiction that we need to purchase goods in order to solve the climate crisis. However, as we know, consumption is an essential tool for consumers’ identities and everyday life and will more likely continue to be so. Consequently, as long as we live in a society that encourages individuals to always want more and to become our best selves, people will continuously want to live in the made up reality where consuming sustainable products can make up for the harm that one’s identity project causes.

Maria Nila has demonstrated to us that it is possible to shape a brand around crucial ideologies and myths and at the same time assist consumers in reaching the identity of a responsible and caring consumer.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Marketplace Ideologies and Myths Within Sustainable and Vegan Consumption

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate how ideologies and myths shape vegan and sustainable consumption and how brands engage its consumers around these values. This was possible by understanding the historical and cultural situation in Sweden, as well as through conducting interviews with the Marketing Director at Maria Nila and Maria Nila consumers. The findings showed that the Swedish national ideology pertains to environmentalism, and that there is a myth of being ethical and caring among consumers, where consumers feel a personal responsibility to solve societal issues through consumption practises. We also found that there has been an increased awareness of animal welfare, and that consumers today wish to consume animal-friendly products, regardless if they are vegan or not. Because of the Swedish ideologies and myths promoting a sustainable lifestyle, vegan consumption has become a solution to solve this tension. Veganism has moved from being a somewhat extremist movement to more mainstream. Altogether, the cultural contradiction among consumers to wish to consume more sustainably and ethically was something that Maria Nila responded to during their re-branding in 2012. At this time, they changed their vision to be a completely vegan and sustainable company. In this way, we can see that they were able to adapt to the national ideology in Sweden and become a cultural activist in the myth market of ethical and caring consumers. By using Maria Nila's products, consumers are able to feel as a caring consumer, without having to compromise on quality and luxury.

6.2 Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to existing consumer cultural research on ideologies and myths in regards to sustainable and vegan consumption with consumer responsibilization and cultural branding as theoretical lenses. In contrast to previous research on the subject, we have done a case study that focuses on sustainable and vegan beauty products. As the findings show, the

environmentalist ideology and ethical, caring myth in Sweden shapes a need for individuals to be responsible consumers, which they do by consuming brands that fits the national ideology and myths on the marketplace. These findings enhance our understanding of how ideologies and myths structure cultural meanings and ideals in the consumption society in alternative consumption, in this case vegan and sustainable consumption. We also addressed what has been previously criticised within consumer culture, that is the fact that these studies tend to overemphasize micro-phenomenological consumer-lived accounts. We replied to this by including a macro-account through our ‘context of context’, exploring a historical and cultural understanding of Sweden.

Furthermore, this study provided new insights to the literature stream on vegan and green consumption. Previous research on veganism within consumer culture was to a great extent applied to food and diet studies, and not to other categories including beauty. The vegan beauty category was of interest because of its exponential growth in recent years. Our research also demonstrates that hair products, which initially may be seen as mundane, everyday products within the beauty category, are able to become an essential ritual in consumers’ lives because they are seen to embody crucial values. Maria Nila has been able to do so by pertaining these values in everything they do, including the shampoo bottles and their design.

In other areas than those relating to food, research within consumer culture and veganism was limited and mostly existed in research areas such as environment, agriculture and food studies. Overall, research on veganism was limited in its socio-cultural perspective, which we contributed to by looking at the myths and ideologies that shape vegan and sustainable consumption.

6.3 Practical Implications

The findings of this study shows how ideologies and myths shape vegan and sustainable consumption, and in particular how a brand may authorize these values. Therefore, this research has great relevance for managers, brands and decision-makers, in particular those industries that are aiming to target ethical and sustainable consumers. Ethical and sustainable consumers is a group that is growing in its size as consumers are becoming more and more aware of societal issues and wish to contribute in solving them. It is important to emphasize that brands today, through their ideological role, are contributing to more than just a functional value. Our findings show that it is also expected in many cases that brands take a stance on what consumers find important. Those brands that fail to do so, or that disappoint

consumers, risk being avoided and declined by consumers. Furthermore, our findings showed that responsibility is an important concept for consumers, and that they aim to make an ethical choice to the extent it is possible. Consumers use brands to demonstrate their identity and to fulfill unmet desires, and brands need to understand how to respond through their symbolic value, in order to stay relevant for consumers. This in turn enables emotional ties which could lead to loyal and profitable consumers long-term.

The study further shows that it is crucial to remember the national setting of consumers and how the brand acts as a cultural form in the way that it solves cultural contradictions. This study can be of great assistance to brands that wish to embody ideals that consumers value highly in the Swedish society. This has been possible much thanks to the practical example of Maria Nila, a brand that has shown that it is possible to authorize a myth through its marketing and communication and in that way embody the values and ideals of today's consumers.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

The phenomenon of sustainable and vegan beauty, or sustainable and vegan consumption in general, is a limited research domain that has expanded over the years. Since the supply of vegan and sustainable products has had an exponential growth in recent years, it is very much relevant to understand the motivations behind this changing consumption behavior, since it only seems to continue growing.

As with any research, there are certain limitations to reflect upon. We conducted a qualitative method to our study, implementing a case study that focused on one case company. With more resources and time, we would have wanted to interview more people and extend our research to several sustainable and vegan beauty brands. Gathering empirical data in terms of interviews is a subjective approach that allows a multitude of interpretations and comprehensions. Furthermore, a limitation in our study is that the people that were interviewed may not be representative of the Swedish population, since we mostly interviewed young adults that we contacted on Facebook. However, we made sure that we were transparent with our findings and that the informants' answers were representable. In addition, by including the 'context of context' which enabled an overview of the societal situation for the data collection, we were able to provide a thorough analysis, which overall strengthens our findings.

For future research, we would also suggest a study of more global character, and to discover ideologies and myths within sustainability and veganism that are on a global scale. This is because of the phenomenon of global consumer culture: we could see that environmental ideas are a topic of global nature, making it an interesting topic to explore from a global perspective. Another suggestion would be to conduct a comparative study between two countries that have different ideological views on sustainability and veganism. In this way, crucial cultural differences could be found between countries which can be of value in particular for decision-makers and businesses that are expanding to new countries. For example, what challenges a brand that is imposing a sustainable and vegan identity could meet if expanding to a country of different ideologies and myths.

In addition, this study focused on the consumer perspective of sustainable and vegan products. It would be interesting to research from a brand perspective by only interviewing marketing employees to see their views on sustainable and ethical consumption practices in the beauty industry. This could serve us with a deep understanding of how brand managers adapt their brands to ideological meanings and myths in a society. Another idea for future research is to solely interview vegans and thereby investigate their consumption motivations and needs within different categories.

6.5 Chapter Summary

This research has extended the knowledge of vegan and sustainable consumption from a socio-cultural perspective. Employing the combination of a societal context together with interviews turned out to be an enriching method with regards to a study that pertains to consumer culture, and we wish to recommend further researchers to use this perspective. We also invite future researchers to investigate vegan and sustainable consumption further, as it is only increasing in society. There are many product categories to investigate outside of beauty, as well as many different consumer groups and societies that are yet to be explored. We also found that a brand provides so much more than the functional way: it acts as a tool for consumers to carry out ideals that they wish to be associated with in society. In the same way, a company may address ideologies and myths in its brand identity and marketing as a way to be relevant on the marketplace today. Altogether, the cultural role of consumption and brands is an essential element to understand in order to make sense of today's society and consumers.

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Appendix A Consumer Interview Script

General questions:

1. What do you look for when you consume beauty products or similar?
2. Is it important for you to shop sustainable and vegan products? Why?
3. How do you feel when you consume vegan and/or sustainable products?
4. Is it important that others know that you consume vegan/sustainable products? Why?
5. How do you show to others that you consume vegan products?
6. Does it increase your self-respect when you consume vegan products?
7. Do you feel influenced by others to consume in a certain way, for example vegan products? By who?
8. Are you vegan, vegetarian etc?
9. How do you express your veganism values through consumption?

Questions regarding Maria Nila:

1. What comes first to mind when you think of Maria Nila?
2. What values do you believe Maria Nila has/consist of?
3. Do you associate Maria Nila with veganism/cruelty free and sustainable products?
4. How did you get in touch with the products?
5. How important is your hair care or beauty routine for you? How does Maria Nila speak up to that need?
6. What would stop you from consuming Maria Nila?
7. If you are no longer a regular consumer, what could make you one? OR: If you currently are a consumer, what could make you consume more Maria Nila products?
8. Do you associate Maria Nila with professional hairdressers or hair care?
9. How much do you know about Maria Nila's supply? What products do you use?

If relevant: How do you express your veganism values through consumption? Apart from Maria Nila, what else do you do or consume that reflects these values?

Appendix B Manager Interview Script

1. What happened to Maria Nila in and after 2012, when Marcus Wikström took over?
 - a. What changes did you make?
 - b. Why did you do it?
 - c. Has Maria Nila always been vegan?
 - d. How did you come up with this idea of veganism?
2. What are the main values you want to communicate? How do you communicate these values?
3. Is it important for the company that Maria Nila is vegan and cruelty free? Why?
4. Which attributes and associations do you think that consumers have with the brand?
5. Which attributes and associations do you want to mediate to your consumers? How do you evoke your values of veganism in all your manifestations (products, advertising)?
6. How would you describe the “target” consumer of Maria Nila products?
7. How do you think that the use of influencers and hairstylists as brand ambassadors strengthens the brand of Maria Nila?
8. What has been the most valuable platform to gain and maintain consumers? How have you used events, social media, your website etc.?
 - a. Your attendance on Waw out West: what was the purpose and outcomes you have seen?
9. What is the next step for Maria Nila to get more people to consume Maria Nila products?
10. Do you have any strategies and plans to decrease your climate footprint? How do you live these values in your ecosystem?
11. What is the consumer response to the sustainable and animal-friendly efforts made by you?

Appendix C Oral Consent Form

- Before starting the interview, we would like to inform you on your participation in this project. This master thesis is a part of the International Marketing and Brand Management Master Programme at Lund University and is about vegan and sustainable consumption and the haircare brand Maria Nila.
- If you consent to participate in this project, you will be asked to give us, the researchers, approximately 30 minutes of your time.
- We would also like to inform you that your participation is voluntary, you are free to refuse to participate and withdraw at any time.
- Your participation will be completely anonymous, and your name will be replaced with a pseudonym.
- The data collected from your participation will be used for the thesis and journal publication.

Do you consent for your information to be used in this manner?