



SCHOOL OF
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Fashionable & Sustainable?

- A case study exploring the markets contribution to the ethical consumption gap

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS

Ethical consumerism, ethical consumption gap, consumer sovereignty, consumer responsabilization, fashion, market

THESIS PURPOSE

The primary purpose of this study is to examine how the market contributes in creating the ethical consumption gap to serve the underlying structures in which predicates and benefits from the gap. Consequently, the research seeks to add to current theoretical understanding in the field.

METHODOLOGY

The study draws on an ontological relativism position, accompanied by a social constructionist view. Moreover, the research is conducted through qualitative research design with an abductive approach. It incorporates a document study with a case study perspective, enclosing H&M, to collect empirical data. Finally, to get culturally substantial insights on discursive conceptual frameworks utilized by the market, we turned to discourse analysis.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

To answer the research question, the study bases its fundamental standpoint on the grand theory of *governmentality*, which enclose the two primary concepts employed in this thesis, namely, *consumer sovereignty and consumer responsabilization*.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that H&M adopts notions of consumer sovereignty and consumer responsabilization. They also promote the market as the ultimate venue for consumers to get an outlet for their overall ethical concerns while at the same time scattering a steady stream of confusion by conveying self-contradictory messages, keeping the customers in a position of dependence thus, aiding the ethical consumption gap.

CONTRIBUTION

The study adds to the current body of literature by concretely conceptualizing how organizations may contribute in the creation and the upkeep of the ethical consumption gap. Furthermore, we theorize the ways in which the market contributes to the gap by introducing the concept of *fetishistic dubiety*, building upon the presence of confusion among the marketing activities analyzed.

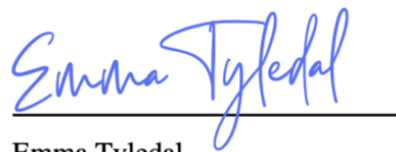
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1. INTRODUCTION

As the debate for a sustainable society progresses, so does the growing body of ethically conscious consumers, which significantly increases the demand for morally satisfying commodities. The enlightenment of the implications of environmental and social ills caused by global turbo-capitalism consumption has paved the way for extensive marketing and consumer research focusing on sustainable outcomes. However, among numerous academic findings in the field, one particular topic brings about a polarized debate. Typically, this line of research refers to an *ethical attitude-behavior gap*, suggesting that consumers strive to be ethical but generally fall short of their motivations, ending up acting on other self interests, due to price-points, availability or conveniences (e.g. McDonagh & Prothero, 2014; Press & Arnould, 2009; Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009). The main focus of such studies is to “guide” consumers on their ethical consumption journey, to essentially close the gap. Critical researchers, however, suggest a different approach. This opposing body of research maintains that there is not much to be gained by closing the gap, claiming that the upkeep of the attitude-behavior gap fosters notions of *consumer sovereignty* and *consumer responsabilization*. Furthermore, these critical studies argue that the ethical consumption gap is posted as a fictional scapegoat that merely acts as a driver of further capitalist consumption. Hence, Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) calls for a reimagination of the gap as a paradoxical construct that maintains, rather than compromises, the ruling and detrimental consumer capitalism. Lastly, the authors suggest that we turn our critical eyes away from the consumers and instead turn our head toward the market and the fundamental capitalist structures that predicates and benefits from the gap.

1.1 Problematization

As opposed to “traditional” attitude-behavior gap studies, where the main criticism is targeting consumers, this project aims to critically investigate the actors in the market that remain uncriticized by the conventional attitude-behavior gap. Therefore, the following chapters act as an extension to the more critical body of literature, seeking to investigate the market construction of the ethical consumption gap to answer the research question:

→ *How does the market contribute to the construction of the ethical consumption gap?*

Considering how the market is a bridge connecting buyers and sellers, this research will be conducted to the sellers rather than consumers. In other words, this paper will explore how corporations contribute to the construction of the ethical consumption gap, only to hold consumers accountable for it. To fit within the scope of this project, the topic will be narrowed down and hence limited to investigating one specific case; one corporation. Such a limit requires the selection of a prominent corporation well established within the ethical/sustainability scene. In this instance, the focus will be on a major player within the heavily critiqued fashion industry. Considering the social and environmental impact caused by that industry, it acts as a sufficient industry to conduct research. Additionally, the chosen corporation must be significant in size to provide enough marketing activity to satisfy the research. One of the most prominent players within the fashion industry is undoubtedly H&M (H&M, n.d.a), who simultaneously has been making strides to meet ethical cravings, therefore constituting a suitable subject for this study. The investigation will be conducted to dig deeper into H&Ms' online marketing activities, to identify if H&M displays discursive evidence of aiding the construction of the ethical consumption gap.

1.2 Research Purpose

The thesis intends to add to current academic findings by providing a conceptualized understanding of corporations' contribution to creating the ethical consumption gap. In a world in dire need of sustainable solutions, environmental studies lay the foundation for evaluating thus far endeavors. Within the flawed neoliberal capitalist market system, it is crucial to investigate and potentially post responsibly on all participating actors, not only consumers. Therefore, this study contributes to the scarce body of critical marketing research focusing on the ethical shortcomings of the market rather than the consumer. Hence, research alike is crucial to the social impact it entails. In our consumption-driven world, it is essential to understand the forces affecting consumers and ultimately enable them to see that they are becoming victims of unjust systematic flaws through the ethical consumption gap.

2. BACKGROUND

The following chapter starts with a detailed explanation of the concept of ethical consumerism. It continues with a summary of current academic findings within the field of critical scrutiny concerning marketing ideology and ethicality compatibility on a micro level, thoroughly presenting the ethical consumption gap. Finally, it concludes with a review of research critical to the traditional view on the ethical attitude-behaviour gap and ethical consumerism as such, exploring how “market-based progress” is upheld through a fabric of ideological fantasies. The subjects designated for the background section have been considered essential to create a profound understanding of the phenomenon to be analyzed, i.e., the markets’ contribution to creating the ethical consumption gap, further giving the reader a sense of to why it's critical to do so.

2.1 The Rise of Ethical Consumerism

Planet earth is warming, biodiversity loss is rampant, freshwater sources are decreasing, and public health is in danger due to environmental pollutants (WWF, n.d.). To stop these socio-ecological catastrophes from deteriorating, scholars have turned their heads to the arena of consumption, more precisely, to the field of ethical consumerism (e.g. Boulstridge & Carrigan 2000; Carrigan & Attalla 2001; Papaoikonomou, Ryan & Ginieis, 2011; Newholm & Shaw 2007; Vermeir & Verbeke 2006). Ethical consumerism is a phenomenon that has grown steady since the 1980s (Lang & Gabriel 2005), fundamentally established on the premise that purchasing products and services stemming from more humane and environmentally friendly origins creates progressive social change, bringing people to a better sustainable relationship with the rest of the biosphere. Generally, ethical consumerism is acknowledged as being borne out of the environmental movement and green consumerism. However, the distinction between those two concepts is crucial, as ethical consumerism encloses a more comprehensive range of issues and, therefore, a more complex decision-making process for consumers (Shaw & Shiu, 2002). Hence, ethical consumerism considers problems with workers’ rights, animal welfare, and fair trade, but it also encompasses purely environmental issues, such as deforestation and disposal of waste. Thus, green consumerism is comprised within the more broad category of ethical consumerism (Carrington, Neville & Whitewell, 2010).

However, the idea of creating social change through the means of consumption originates further back in time than in the 1980s, although in an entirely different fashion. In short, older social movements fought for a larger piece of the pie (e.g., populist progressives, social democrats), and today, the symbolically progressive act lies more within the consumers' decision to purchase cakes specially made with fairtrade ingredients at the organic bakery. To better understand this analogy and development, we briefly revisit the mid-twentieth century, as one of the first widespread organized consumer movements was formed here, starting due to a recognized exposure of wide-scale food adulteration and lousy trade (Lang & Gabriel, 2005). Its adherents saw their task as making the marketplace more efficient, championing the consumers' interests within it, further educating them about features enabling them to act effectively as consumers, and ultimately allowing them to get more value for their money. In 1960, Naderism emerged as a movement going beyond the vision of "getting more bang for your buck," focusing more on improving consumer goods' safety and quality standards (Lang & Gabriel, 2005). The main message here was to become frugal, to get wise in "the vital art of self-defense," to "protect yourself in the marketplace," whether buying health insurance, clothes, or food (Nader & Smith, 1992). Thus, consumers were expected to demand secure commodities and accountability from companies, i.e., to combat the anarchy of the market by themselves.

Ethical consumerism, which represents the current phase of consumer activism, has evolved to include multiple movements concerned with globalization, corporate power, social justice, and human rights. Thus, the ethical consumers operating within ethical consumerism are demanding more and more ethical commodities, such as clothes not derived from sweatshops, fairtrade chocolate, and locally grown food, hoping to be able to "vote with their dollars" (Shaw, Newholm & Dickinson, 2006). Dollar voting, more concretely, refers to the theoretical impact of the consumers' choice on producers' actions, providing them with economic incentives to deliver particular products or services (Investordictionary, n.d.). In other words, the belief is that if one chooses to consume ethically, progressive social change and decreases in environmental degradation can, indeed, occur as a direct effect of more environmentally friendly consumption behavior.

The growth of ethical culture and consumerism (Shaw, Newholm & Dickinson, 2006) has undoubtedly drawn the interest of corporations aiming to meet those demands of the ethical-minded (Polonsky, 1995). From conscious clothing collections and all-electric

vehicles to fairtrade labeled coffee and ice cream, marketing strategies targeting the ethical consumers are vastly adopted to reach this potentially profitable market segment, promoting the responsible and environmentally sustainable credentials of one's corporation, brand, and products.

2.2 The Ethical Consumption Gap

However, the compatibility between market ideology and ethicality has been subject to critical assessments for many years, starting already in the 60s (Carson, 1962; Meadows, Meadows & Randers, 1972). Nonetheless, it wasn't until relatively recently that such inquiries more frequently began to emerge in mainstream marketing journals (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014; Press & Arnould, 2009; Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009). Yet, the solutions to fundamental quandaries like the unsustainability of ever-expanding markets and the increasing consumption following such expansions, brought forward by the more recent articles, are often based on change within the already existing system (Kemper & Ballentine, 2019). Simply put, scholars within the marketing discipline commonly seem to encourage incremental reformation rather than revolutionary transformation. Thus, most marketing journals related to sustainability don't address macro-level matters, institutions, and the logic preventing markets from becoming truly sustainable (Kemper & Ballentine, 2019). Rather, they concentrate on micro-level issues, more precisely on consumers and their purchasing decisions based on sustainability benchmarks.

Within the literature stemming from research conducted on this micro-level, perhaps the most consistent finding has been the inconsistencies between consumers' self-expressed intention and actual behavior, a phenomenon in social psychology often referred to as the attitude-behavior gap (e.g., Godin, Conner & Sheeran, 2005; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Moreover, in the light of ethical attitudes and consumption behaviors, this disparity has further been defined as the so-called *ethical consumption gap* (Carrington, Neville & Zwick, 2016). Thorough marketing and consumer academic research have followed, aiming to explain the origin of those gaps, with the more profound intent to close them, hoping the environmental and social ills brought by the growth of contemporary capitalism would diminish if that were to transpire. Furthermore, the studies attempting to understand the factors underpinning the ethical consumption gap and thus the ethical consumption transgressions of individual consumers present diverse findings. First, when the actual

consumption choices fall short of the ethical consumption intentions, researchers have observed the broad use of post-rationalization strategies amongst consumers to minimize feelings of guilt and remorse, facilitating and sustaining the existence of the gap. For example, in Juvan and Dolnicars' (2014) study, the lack of cognitive dissonance is distinguished in the debate concerning the gap between environmentally friendly attitudes and environmentally harmful flight behavior, a term used to describe the psychological feeling of discomfort obtained by simultaneously holding two or more incompatible beliefs, attitudes, or values. The respondents in the research successfully managed to avoid the cognitive dissonance regarding their flying behaviors by, among other things, denying the damaging effects caused by aviation and by insisting their number of flights would be even higher if it weren't for their concern for the environment. This type of rationalization permits the bypassing of feelings of guilt and assists individuals in their continued behavior of purchasing products (here, airline tickets) at odds with their ethical concerns. Likewise, Chatzidakis, Hibbert, and Smith (2007) draw upon neutralization theory to outline how ethically minded people justify their unethical consumption behavior regarding fairtrade products, including *the denial of responsibility* and *the denial of injury*. In the market context, they are, in their most basic form, techniques that simply separate right from wrong through the medium of money rather than morality. Similarly, Belk and Eckhardt (2005) found in their study about *consumer ethics across cultures* that it was common for all informants to use diverse justifications to explain their unethical consumption practices, regardless of national culture and social status. Secondly, other literature treating individuals' ethical consumption intentions examines consumers' inner lifeworlds, further showing how multiple and competing identities inhibit consumers' terminal choices to consume ethically. For instance, Connolly and Prothero (2008) discovered that a green consumption identity only constitutes one of many dimensions of the individuals' general sense of self. Moreover, maintaining critical social relationships could, thus, lead to negotiation and compromises of ethical beliefs in consumption choices, casting the individual consumer as the prominent actor in their consumption behaviour.

However, those studies tend to assume consumers to be self-aware and solid decision-making subjects, designated to solve all the environmental and societal problems through their consumption choices. Such assumptions have raised questions amongst critical marketing scholars (e.g., Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016; Cronin & Fitchett, 2021) who instead

redirect attention away from the (un)ethical consumer, rather placing focus on the (im)moral market structures inflecting their very purchasing-behaviors.

2.3 Ethical Consumerism through a Critical Lens

In opposition to previously mentioned studies, a limited body of research casts a critical eye on the ethical consumption gap and the underlying ideology funding it. The following section will examine existing academic work expressing the critical view.

2.3.1 Ideology Problematization

As mentioned in the former section, critical marketing scholars have started to problematize the attitude-behavior gap and its underlying neoliberal assumption that consumers can be left alone to solve the environmental crisis and other ethical issues prominent in today's society (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016). For example, as opposed to the traditional view of the attitude-behavior gap, Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) draws on Althusser and Žižek in order to instead critically examine the ideological function behind the gap, starting by implying the notion of ethical consumerism to foster the belief that consumption may be both the cause and the cure for capitalisms' ills and evils. According to Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016), this paradox serves an important ideological utility in preserving the specific neoliberal market philosophy that ethical consumerism seeks to reform. As a result, the market protects consumers from the illusion that the market can fix all issues, particularly those caused by the market in the first place (Cronin & Fitchetts, 2021). The authors' name: materialism, economic inequality, and exploitative and abusive work conditions, as symptoms of direct systemic market failures caused by global turbo-capitalist consumerism (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016). Although states and corporations continue to abdicate responsibility for personalizing such market failures, the sovereign authority and blame rests with consumers. Thus, the gap retains the belief that consumers are the primary actors, with the duty to alter the ways of the world through their buying patterns.

Furthermore, Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) illustrates that if non-ethical capitalism is set out to bring down capitalism, then ethical consumption entails the ability to save capitalism from itself from its own endeavors. The continued reinforcement of 'capitalistic consumption', ethical against unethical, causes an 'antagonistic deadlock'. Thus, ethical consumption is crowned the solution to fix the flaws following the capitalist system, while simultaneously refraining from ever questioning or challenging the system in the first place.

The authors stress that the ethical consumption gap is but a “marketing fairytale device”, promising the outcome of a greener, more equal and brighter future. In reality, however, ethical consumption does not entail the prerequisites for such offerings. Ethical consumption is instead said to be an illusionary bringer of a "kinder" configuration of capitalism, and the notion only guarantees the preservation of capitalism rather than challenging it. Furthermore, this phenomenon reflects Freuds’ theory of a so-called fetishist disavowal of reality (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016).

Bradshaw and Zwick (2016) explore the same phenomenon by looking at company sustainability managers that deny capitalisms’ adverse repercussions, perpetuate this fetishistic view, and enables a fetishistic outlook to prevail as a "cohesive symbolic realm in which capitalism can be sustainable" (Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016, p.269). Thus, according to both Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) and Bradshaw and Zwick (2016), this "fairytale device" of ethical consumerism, functions as a fetish preventing us from tackling the true issue. Although, it's essential to point out the fact that the ethical marketer does not merely suppress the real. If that would be the case, the only thing we would have to do is explain to her the ineffectiveness of her actions within the context of the capitalist system. However, it is a worthless metric since they, nonetheless, believe the fiction is true. Therefore, given this destructive capitalistic construct, the fetishist denies reality by succumbing to this fetish dream, leaving the fetishist with the awareness that ethical consumerism, can, in fact, redeem capitalism from its own excesses (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016). As a result, the ethical consumption gap is necessary for legitimizing destructive and immoral capitalism while providing a false feeling of optimism. Taking everything into account, neoliberal consumer capitalism has built a system that cannot be questioned, using consumers as its scapegoat to carry both responsibility and reasonability for its shortcomings. The notion of the ethical consumption gap expects consumers to consume themselves out of a situation that was caused by consuming in the first place. The system promotes customers' reliance on the market, hence ensuring the continuous existence of neoliberal capitalism through the parts of consumer responsabilization. Ethical consumerism, therefore, functions as an ideological band-aid, a fixed mechanism that hides the systems’ flaws. Because of ethical consumption trends, such as ethical consumer demands, the system continues to lean on consumers in this neoliberal capitalist cycle and manages to keep them reasonably happy within the market. To summarize the essence of Carrington, Zwick and Nevilles 2016s work, the broken capitalistic system continues unabated, leaving its users to rely on the market to address their problems

through ethical consumption and the newly captivated ethical consumption trend. In the end, it doesn't matter which side a customer takes, ethical or not, since the consumer remains a pawn in a system that remains the same. Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) concludes their work with an invitation to reimagine the ethical consumption gap as a construct that paradoxically supports – rather than challenges – hegemonic and destructive consumerist capitalism, and calls for further research to refocus on the underlying economic systems that generate and profit from maintaining the ethical consumption gap.

2.3.2 Fantasies of Market Based Progress

Other scholars have also devoted work to the ideological functioning of ethical consumerism. Cronin and Fitchett (2021), for example, integrated Nietzsche's visions of self-overcoming combined with a 'Žižekians' toolbox' to investigate how market-based progress is endorsed "through a fabric of ideological fantasies" (p. 3). Here, the authors uncovered a fantasmatic framework centered on pragmatism, the pursuit of unassailable truth, and the continuation of a prehistoric lineage by examining Huel, a nutritionally balanced British food brand associated with progressive and techno-utopian discourses, further implying that such fantasies provide 'illusory support' for the idea that market logic and ethos are alone responsible for humanity's great overcoming. Thus, a *fetishistic inversion* gravitating around subjects' belief of the detached spectatorialism of consuming is closer to the image of Nietzschean 'Overhuman' than to its opposite, the 'last human.' To briefly summarize Nietzschean philosophical stance on progress, according to Cronin and Fitchett (2021), metaphorically portrays human evolution as a never ending strive to become the next, better version of humanity, hence the "Overhuman ". The Last Human, on the other hand, prefers to stay frozen in evolution and represents the standstill that will bring humanity to extinction.

Cronin and Fitchett (2021, p.3) describes progress as "the vague telos of all societal and civilizational activity and intent", implying it to serve as a symbol of some eventual end state of humankind and an impetus for the acts needed to achieve that end state. Despite the fundamental idealism that drives and sustains progress, the concept is now firmly identified with and embodied in market logic and ethos (Shankar, Whittaker & Fitchett, 2006). Furthermore, the link between progress and the market is dependent on the markets' delivery of 'use values' to people that join with them to achieve increasingly purposeful and pleasant ways of living for themselves (Fitchett, Patsiaouras & Davies, 2014; Harvey, 2005). The presumption here is that progressively improved lifestyles can be attained through increasing

access to marketer-generated commodities or the ideology that the market provides the most acceptable framework through which consumers may approach an 'ideal future' and 'access its utopian bounty.' As a result, consumption is glorified as a progressive act and the most efficient approach to addressing societal ills (Bajde, 2013).

However, consumption is never downright progressive; instead, its activities and consequences might be categorized as “regressive, stagnant, or ambivalent” (Cronin & Fitchett, 2021, p.4), and the consumption brought by developments in the market many times goes hand in hand with the increasing environmental and social ills.

Furthermore, within the food industry, rather than encouraging people to eat healthy foods, the ideology of market-based progress based upon more extensive “use values” have given rise to issues concerning high-caloric processed foods becoming greatly attainable, ultimately resulting in obesity and nutrition-related illnesses. The markets’ counter to the concerns caused by them in the first place, has been to provide food that is now out of their natural state and adorned with value-added health claims, such as being low-calorie & fat-free. Consequently, consumers can engage with neoliberal imperatives for self-care and good health through the beneficence of 'guilt-free' modern amenities like decaffeinated coffee or low-fat cream, but they do so passively by delegating the effort required to accomplish such things, at least partially, to the marketplace. This brings the authors to why market-based progress appears legitimate and manageable when it is inextricably “deadlocked by its own regressions” (p. 4).

Thus, Cronin and Fitchett (2021) explains how market-based progress is sustained by a web of ideological fantasies that mitigate for consumers its flaws and contradictions, making its extensive existence appealing. The authors further draw out the fantasmatic placing of consumption as a type of ‘utopian solution’ to its own ills, or rather the persistence of believing that the solution is always more consumption, although in new, ever more imaginative and compelling forms. The main critical perspective utilized in their analysis draws on Žižekian theoretical anchors, which casts ideology as a *fantastical matrix* that obscures a situations’ real horror, and Nietzsches’ philosophies concerning mankind’s will to power and need for self overcoming. Moreover, to simplify the study, the authors dive into the case of Huel, a brand enclosing vegan powdered food, presenting itself as a business associated with nutritional health, environmental aspects, reduced waste, and scientific

rationality. Huel enables customers to transcend their animal nature and sublimate their libidinal drive to eat into a more progressive, reasoned form as an inexpensive, sustainable, and nutritionally complete alternative.

Understanding how Huel supports this purportedly techno-utopian call to action necessitates confronting the discursive operations that supply market-based development with its fictional coherence and consistency more broadly, and it is here that two contributions to marketing theory crystallize. First, the authors add to the emerging body of ideological inquiry into markets, marketing, and consumer culture by arguing that market actors succeed not because they can persuade consumers that what is false is true, but rather because they can persuade "consumers that the truth is false and unreal". To specify, theorists simply must view the collective functioning of the market as a sphere of conceivability, shielding consumers from the definite objective condition of things, including the harsh reality that the market cannot solve all issues, including those of its own creation. Acknowledging the colonization of progress by market-based remedies adds considerable descriptive texture to examinations of how markets replicate themselves and incorporate even their own opposition (Giesler, 2008; Holt, 2002). Secondly, exploring the market through such lenses allowed the authors to contribute to the conceptualization of the *post-sovereign consumer*. Outside post-sovereignty in words of limited, self-contradictory, or tampered desires, Cronin and Fitchett (2021) argue that post-sovereign consumer theory must focus on the absence of a recognizable political orientation. The market allows a subject to experience freedom only in respect to a symbolic instead of a political idea of freedom, assuring that, from Žižekian standpoint, individuals feel free because they have a vocabulary deficit to articulate their unfreedom. Market liberties suffocate the feeling needed for individuals to express their sovereignty through politically rooted demands. Hence, the lack of such demands creates symbolic and market-coordinated theaters of consumer culture replacing political venues concerning food, nutrition, health, and the environment. Lastly, the authors continue the tradition of prompting marketing theory to be more critical about the macrostructures to which their work both speaks and is located within, and the depoliticizing consequences of these systems on social subjects.

To sum up the essence of Cronin and Fitchetts' (2021) work, the idea concerning market-based progress functions in compliance with its subjects' participation. Through their research, the authors stress that Huel is a symptom, not a creator, of an underlying fantasmatic framework at the core of consumer culture that allows consumers to consume

with amnesty. Thus, the takeaway to marketing theory is that ideology really isn't ontologically contained in marketplace assets, but rather in the device through which individuals who bow down indulge in collective self-delusion, as well as the game of reveries that ensues so that they might stay deceived.

While comparing their work to Bradshaw and Zwick (2016), who investigate *fetishistic disavowal*, in which the subject within the capitalist system acts as if they do not know the truth, their studies indicate *fetishistic inversion*, in which the subject acts as if the exact opposite is true. Pointing to the evidence shown by the market-based progress spectatorialism, which limits customers to the position of the last human, simultaneously, enabling them to imagine being the inverse, thus the Overhuman. Lastly, the work contends that the post-sovereign consumer is formed, interpellated, and eventually weakened along the fanciful limitations of market-based progress and the seductiveness of gradually enhancing comforts, safety, and health by assigning commitment and involvement to market activities. The primary myth of this subject is that by properly purchasing the correct items, we can solve all social issues (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). This detached interpassivity has an undeniable attraction, assuring that the subject surrenders the very things that make him or her sovereign, including what Nietzsche refers to as one's "will". Via amenities, just as nutritionwise complete food, freedom is attainable at a marketized level, thus denying the necessity to attain it through political interactions, resulting in a dead heat that consumers will have troubles rising above. All included, brands like Huel embody the markets' response to a problem of its own making (Cronin & Fitchett, 2021).

2.4 Theoretical Contribution

Previous research concerning the critical scrutiny of marketing ideology and ethicality compatibility, concentrating on the individual transgressions of consumers as the primary reason for continued and growing social and environmental ills, has sparked a relatively novel and critical literature stream. Here, the focus is redirected away from the individual consumer towards the (im)moral market structures, inflecting the very purchasing behaviors of consumers. In short, authors like Carrington, Neville and Zwick (2016) bring the idea of ethical consumerism forwards as a notion, sustaining a broken capitalistic system, leaving its users to believe and rely on the market to address and solve all problems through its offerings of products and services stemming from more humane and environmentally friendly origins.

In reality, however, Carrington, Neville and Zwick (2016) deem that, in the end, it doesn't matter if consumers choose to be ethical or unethical since the consumer remains a pawn in a system that remains the same, a system guilty of creating the societal and environmental issues in the first place. A critical analysis of their work thus implies that ethical consumerism works as a fairy tale device, or maybe just a quick fix solution parallel to killing fire with fire. Consequently, Carrington, Neville and Zwick (2016) highlight the tragicness of "maintaining the gap as a symbolic act when marketers realize that little would truly be resolved by closing it." (p.33). They, therefore, conclude with a call on marketing researchers to refocus their investigation from the ethical consumption gap to the marketing construction of it. Furthermore, Cronin and Fitchetts (2021) bring attention to the ideological fantasy of market-based progress, implying that the understanding of the market as the most credible force for achieving progress, must be approached as less of a concrete truth, as it constraints how we think about and act upon the problems related to, in their case, the food systems in general. If the market had not already made unhealthy and calorie-dense food cheap and available, and if the political model placed the accountability responsibility on producers rather than on individual consumers', market offerings like Huel would simply be less needed. Still, the market is promising progress through solutions neglecting the necessity for real creativity, instead establishing interpassivity, thereby restraining uncertainty by staying within the current market system.

As a response to the call made by Carrington, Neville and Zwick (2016), i.e., to refocus the investigation from the ethical consumption gap to the marketing construction of the gap and the underlying structures benefiting from it, we chose to examine how H&M, a major player within the capitalist system is doing just that, with the more profound motivation originating from the importance to open up a scrutinize of the most influential agent on the market, i.e., organizations, since it yet remains undone, with some exceptions (e.g. Cronin & Fitchett, 2021). Thus, this research seeks to contribute to an alternate approach parallel with Cronin and Fitchett (2021), exploring the dimensions and activities of H&M as a useful context to unpack the structures that ensure the market as the fundamental arena where the prevention of societal and environmental disasters can be made.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following chapter seeks to present and clarify concepts and theories utilized while analyzing the gathered empirical material. First, the chapter presents governmentality, which constitutes the grand theory enclosing the two primary concepts employed in this thesis. Naturally, the second part entails and explains those particular concepts: consumer sovereignty and consumer responsabilization.

3.1 Governmentality

Through early researchers' efforts to understand human behavior, Micheal Foucault developed theoretical contributions that eventually formed the expression “conduct of conduct”, referring to a specific lead of peoples’ behavior (Skålen, Fellesson & Fougère, 2006). The phrase emphasizes government, in which our behavior and that of others are shaped, regulated, and controlled by a system of social practices that hold various levels of reason. Furthermore, governmentality is a controlling mechanism to lead via freedom, where people are free to select their acts but are constrained by limitations such as cultural standards. Hence, individuals are free to choose their course of action, as long as it is within societal norms. These limitations are deeply rooted in our human behavior and come so naturally to us that even recognizing them poses a challenge. As a result, those who hold power to influence the status quo and determine the "do's and don'ts" in society ultimately possess the authority to form the scope in which we are allowed to act freely (Egan-Wyer, 2019). Smart (2003) states that government is integrated within our knowledge, justifying individuals' urge to control their own and others' actions "in regimes of truth" to fit in with our internalized rules. To simplify, the view of governmentality expresses peoples’ freedom to conduct themselves as they choose, while the alternatives presented are formed and guided towards the choices deemed correct (Skålen, Fellesson & Fougère, 2006). Government is, however, not to be confused with domination. While the government seeks to guide its objects towards the right choice of action, feeling, or thought, domination, on the other hand, seeks to withdraw such capacity from submissives. Egan-Wyer (2019) further explains that Foucault also differentiated between power and violence, suggesting that power has to be gained from those with freedom of choice; if not, the governing party exercises pure violence on its subordinates.

While looking at governmental rationality, some scholars imply that subjectivity is "embedded in discourse" (Skålen, Fellesson & Fougère, 2006, p.277). Hence, people choose how they wish to be ruled by adopting certain subject positions rather than the discourses defining subjectivity. Foucault's approach to governmentality merges freedom and control by highlighting the mechanism rooted in an individual's inclination to submit oneself as a subject while utilizing adopted subjectivities for self-governance. Smart (2003) adds to the conversation and explains the controversial characteristics revolving around the critical role in governmentality posed by the power and knowledge dynamic. He draws on the notion that people simultaneously act like subjects and objects of both action and knowledge. In addition, the government attempts to form freedom in the form of norms and rules. At the same time, governmentality subjects are awarded the capacity for action and thought while practicing self-governance. Therefore, rationalities are applied when people decide how to act, think and feel regarding an issue that requires knowledge or insights. Hence, the phenomenon concerns the 'regime of rationality' or 'mentalities of government.' As a result, the mentalities of government stress "technologies of the self," a term referring to the thought process integrated into government and submerged via language and technology instruments.

Such mentalities are a frequently collective view of how reality appears and are rarely challenged by its operating actors. Dean (2010) further explains that "the way we think about exercising authority draws upon the expertise, vocabulary, theories, ideas, philosophies, and other forms of knowledge that are given and available to us" (Dean, 2010, p. 25). Furthermore, the rational mentality perpetuates governing employs political discourses or words mixed with pictures to elicit emotional rationalities. According to Foucault (1977), 'symbolic power' exists when information is offered by an actor considered expertise or a specific class hierarchy to aid individuals' self-government. The aspects of ourselves that we want to alter or improve, the methods we use to accomplish so, and our motivations for doing so. The identity we aspire to acquire depends on our participation in a specific discourse practice. Though individuals rely on class hierarchy and expertise from specific industry specialists to legitimize their conduct, people are constantly fighting to reject power. Smart (2003) states "where there is power, there is resistance," implying that resistance exists in every capacity where power is practiced, and the relationship between them is society (p.130). Furthermore, Smart's (2003) compilation of Michael Foucault's work recognizes "the techniques of the self," referring to how individuals construct and shape themselves by changing their bodies, ideas, and behaviors. For example, because it involves productive

power relations and has both political and economic importance, the body is considered as a crucial component for wielding power. As a result, the relationship between power, body, and knowledge becomes a set of tactics for employing certain identities. Additionally, Dean (2010) established an analytical framework of governmentality drawing on Foucault's concepts and theories, which investigates the ethical government of the self in four dimensions; (1) the first concerns ontology, and entails a dimension where the regime aims to act upon by exploration of the element of what individuals desire to govern: (2) concerns ascetics regarding how governance is done, for example, the governance of ethical principles: (3) concerns deontology, which focuses on who individuals become when governed, or the mod of subjectification; (4) concerns teleology, entailing why people are governing or are being governed, and how all exercises of government work to achieve a goal or predetermined purposes. Hence, the framework investigates the circumstances under which certain structures appear, alter, and exist. Further fostering an analytic framework that stresses the many modes of governance and how individuals conduct oneself, as well as the regimes in which they do. Thus, subjectivity operates in settings where government rationality is encouraged and regulated, and where choice is enacted. In addition, subjectivity is attained through providing knowledge that serves such predetermined end goals, to exercise both repressive and productive power (Smart, 2003). While undergoing an analytical approach to governmentality, Dean (2010) recognizes the many government activities and their relationship to various interpretations of 'truth,' which are formed through discourses from either social, cultural, and political spheres. Accordingly, people govern themselves and others via the spectrum of truth, bringing about the formation of various routes to conduct truth. As a result, government does not only concern power and authority, but also the state of self and individuals identity.

3.2 Consumer Sovereignty

The early version of *consumer sovereignty* was first uttered in 1931 by William Hutt, who coined terms such as: “the customer is always right” and “the customer is i king”, yet, these ideas are suspected to be even older (Tadajewski, 2017, pp. 11). Consumer sovereignty is placed at the very heart of marketing (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006), fostering the belief that consumers have the ultimate power to influence and dictate the production decisions of the market. Thus, consumers' spending power effectively translates to a ‘vote’ for adequate commodities. The firms operating within the market respond to the votes generated by

consumer preferences and produce goods and services accordingly. Hence, the concept of consumer sovereignty acts as a manifestation of the “invisible hand”. Put simply, the definition of consumer sovereignty is “the right to choose among a sufficient range of products so that the particular demand specifications of a particular consumer can be reasonably matched” (Fisk, 1967, p.680). Scholars argue that consumer sovereignty is one of the many ways of the world, however, others argue that it is a fabrication of fiction. The latter implies that firms produce services and commodities, then apply various marketing techniques to make sales.

Within the discipline of marketing, the consumer sovereignty paradigm is a distinguished feature of critical reflection and commentary (Tadajewski, 2010). Although the concept dates almost a century back, its presence is still prominent in contemporary marketing studies. Gamble (2007) even states that seemingly communist states have accepted the proposition of the consumer as ‘god’ or ‘emperor’. However, whether the idea acts as an “accurate representation of marketplace agency is questionable” (Tadajewski, 2017, pp. 11). The concept is utilized in various settings by business owners, marketing managers as well as brand advocates to encourage consumer satisfaction. Hence, the notion acts as a mechanism of control which shapes the expectation of experiences delivered (Gamble, 2007). Skålen (2008) claims that even though these efforts may not always succeed, the underlying intent remains unchallenged. Tadajewski (2017), further explains that sovereignty values the individual choice, but proceeds questionable, implying that the amount of choice offered does not enhance human welfare. Consumers' preferences are generally vague, and when presented with excess information and multiple options, they tend to get paralysed by the overload. Then, the information overload may stunt consumers' choice-making and consequently lead to suboptimal outcomes (Botti & Iyengar, 2006). Hence, Tadajewski (2017) considered the amount of free choice presented to the consumers a double-edged sword. Furthermore, scholars vary in their opinion about how consumer preferences are structured. For example, Galbraith (1958) refers to the increasing centralisation of power within the economic sphere, demanding more use of consumer research, advertising and marketing to guide consumer preferences. He further refers to this phenomenon as *management of consumer tastes* (Galbraith, 1970), by drawing from Zinkin's (1967) view on marketing as a performative function in *consumer demand creation*, but deviates from Zinkin's initial notion of the demand being fostered by a remake of already available preferences, instead of a novel construct. Subsequently, the notion of consumer sovereignty is not as simple as one might

assume. Hildebrand (1951) illustrates that pure sovereignty consists of individual consumers processes dictatorial powers, while external forces of control (such as state, government or other external forces) do not prevail in this fantasy world. Other scholars agree, pointing to how an individual is 'deemed' sovereign when they are able to make thoughtful and rational choices (Sirgy & Su, 2000). According to Cluley and Dunne (2012), three powerful criticisms of consumer sovereignty have emerged. The first critic concerns consumer sovereignty's ability to be self-contradictory, pointing to how health and pleasure are commonly "at odds with one another within many areas of consumption" (p.252). To illustrate such, the authors draw on the examples of tobacco, alcohol and junk foods, areas of consumption where consumers' self-interest is logically identical from self-harm. The second critique, in line with Tadjewski (2017), states that the amount of choice offered to consumers has become excessively burdensome. Thus, consumer sovereignty is believed to create more obstacles for consumers than it solves. Lastly, the unlimited amount of consumer choice is said to foster the *externalization of morality* in which environmental implications of consumption have had much effect on the pursuit of ethical consumption.

Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) agree, suggesting that consumers' power and responsibility to decide in a rational manner has been gravely tested by experiential research streams. Additionally, Galbraith (1970) expresses that consumers do not often take part in deliberation of their consumption decision, and oftentimes are led by their feelings, as well as their habits and opinions of influential others. Although, consumers are said to dictate what products and services are to be offered by the market, yet, companies normally 'anticipate' (Hutt, 1940) or 'imagine' (Galbraith, 1970) 'the average consumer's wishdream' (Scitovsky, 1962, p. 267) before that desire is expressed to the market. Consumer desires or 'dreams' are then created via marketing communications, to which firms have been taught to listen in order to maximize customer welfare. It is then up to those firms to discover, produce and retail commodity goods and services to sustain customer desires (Smith, 1987). While further looking through the lense of critical theory perspectives, mainstream marketing along with the consumer sovereignty paradigm fails to recognize the power imbalance within the consumer-corporation relationship (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016). Galbraith (1970) suggests that we must not forget that corporations have sovereignty of their own, meaning that producers may choose if they want to meet requests in the free marketplace, or not. Ultimately, the manufacturer has to weigh the anticipated risk in his/hers/their decision making process before meeting any consumer requests. The manufactures action following

the risk/reward analysis may be conservative in order to stay clear of large scale financial mistakes (Tadajewski, 2017). Firat (1996) joins this debate, implying that the decisions of an entire supply chain have already taken place before consumers even research the market where they are presented with the options made available by powerful corporate actors. Within the gray area lingering between corporations' control and consumer choice, consumers are being fed the fantasy of choice when their assumed needs and desires underlying such choices are created and controlled by marketing managers (Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2016). In other, rather short words, Smith (1987, p.10) suggests that "consumers are not really sovereign under capitalism; they only think that they are. Marketing fosters this belief".

3.3 Consumer Responsibilization

The term *responsibilization* originates from sociological theorizing on governmentality literature, referring to the process through which subjects are being rendered individual responsibility for a matter that was the duty of another party before (usually an agency of state) or a matter of which that may not be recognized as a responsibility initially. In addition, responsibilization is named one of Foucauldians "technologies of the self" whereby individuals are influenced by their ethical self-understanding (Shamir, 2008; Smart, 2003). Hence, responsible consumers are being governed as moral subjects and are therefore responsible for the implications brought by their consumption choices. Thus, consumers may base their decision on the liberty of choice, regulated by various ethical guidelines designating the "right choice." Similar views have been expressed by Devinney et al. (2010), who showcases that consumers pursue moral imperative while simultaneously executing consumption choices lined with their ethical beliefs. Giesler and Veresiu (2014) conceptualized responsible consumers, implying that responsible consumption requires active creation, re-creation, and management to construct consumers as moral subjects. Their study highlights the importance of responsible consumer subjects as a serving function of the underlying capitalist market goal for stability and continuous growth. In other words, Giesler and Veresiu (2014) insist that the upkeep of the responsible consumer compels consumers to bow to norms that reinforce current capitalistic social structures.

Giesler and Veresiu (2014) further suggest that consumers are actively being governed through their consumption choices. In other words, they are implying that everyday consumers are not granted the liberty of governmental control; instead, they are a vessel

enforcing such control by embodying the underlying strategy to alter decisions and fabricate ethical consumer-morally. Consequently, the governmental rule creates responsible consumer subjects rather than being created by the experience. The responsible consumer, i.e., the moral subject, is, as per Giesler and Veresiu (2014), first constructed, then implemented, and lastly sustained through *Consumer responsabilization* and its four distinct yet interrelated processes. Together, these processes constitute the *P.A.C.T routine*, an acronym for; personalization, authorization, capabilization, and transformation. First, the initial process of the routine, personalization, covers the enhanced moral responsibility of consumers as key players in bringing about solutions to any imminent social problem. Second, the authorization process draws on accessible scientific expert knowledge to aid further development and endorse the responsible consumer. The third process, capabilization, draws on creating a market that contains products and services that sustain consumers for active and ethical self-management. Finally, during the transformation process, a new and moralized self-understanding is embraced by consumers individually. Responsible consumers are "reconstructed as free, autonomous, rational, and entrepreneurial subjects" during this last process (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014, p. 841-842). Hence, the responsible "ethical" consumer is firstly created, then implemented, and lastly maintained through the processes of the P.A.C.T routine.

Brown (2013) additionally declares that individual consumers are taking responsible actions of self-regulation according to their surroundings and socioeconomic status alike. In other words, consumers' socioeconomic status dictates if they can act freely by placing the responsibility for a consumers' choices onto the consumer. Illustrated from the governmentality of liberty perspective, indirect moldings of "free" social practices control consumers (Smart, 2003). In addition, as per Giesler and Veresiu (2014), the "free" market may be considered a force of liberation which promotes "good moral conduct and individual responsibility" (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014, p.842). Hence, the market system guarantees accessible resources to meet individual desires. Nevertheless, all the ethical and socio-moral responsibility is placed on consumers rather than the market that produces such resources. Therefore, the market actively influences the formation of multiple consumer subjectivities and fosters a notion of consumers turning into "enterprises of themselves". Here, consumers associate with the desired society through consumption while engaging with the risks and responsibilities connected to that society. Consequently, consumers shape themselves into subjects through laws brought by ethics and morals, deeming some actions right and others

wrong (Smart, 2003). Later, Brown (2013) presented the idea of "bad behavior", which occurs when individuals set boundaries to define the line between acceptable (good) from non-acceptable (bad) consumer behavior. Thus, consumers hold themselves accountable for their consumption choices and the consequences following those specific choices. Any form of consumption, in that manner, is subsequently a production of the self, considering how the consumer utilizes their "free" choice of subjectivity, consumption, and adoption to individualize itself.

4. METHODOLOGY

The following chapter will discuss the research decisions and the underlying motivation of those choices. The methodology chapter demonstrates qualitative research utilizing an abductive approach, conducting a document study through electronically acquired data.

4.1 Scientific Approach

The long and well-established considerations regarding reality, existence, and knowledge provide the cornerstone for any research project, as the philosophical standpoint influences how we view the world, thus, affecting the methods we adopt to understand it. When looking at the underlying ontology assumptions regarding the nature of reality, this project endorses a relativistic position, as the data found concerning the markets' contribution in creating the ethical consumption gap potentially is subject to different interpretations, meaning there is not one single truth, but instead many (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021).

Furthermore, the epistemological stance constitutes the general set of beliefs about ways of inquiring into the nature of the world. Thus, epistemology is the theory of knowledge, influencing how researchers frame their research in attempts to discover knowledge. Moreover, our research follows social constructionism, which is based on the idea that "reality" is constructed by people rather than by objective and external factors and that the reality of each individual is given meaning through peoples' daily interactions and usage of language to communicate and share experiences. As this research aims to understand how the market contributes to the construction of the ethical consumption gap through an investigation of H&Ms' official and online marketing activities, we, as researchers, become a part of the study itself, as our experiences influence the sense-making of the data gathered.

Given the nature of the research objective, an abductive research approach seemed most suitable as it allows an ongoing interchange between theoretical and empirical findings (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). Hence, as the abductive process allowed us as researchers to easily move between theory and research material, we could explore the gathered data more thoroughly, facilitating a more profound coding frame, ultimately

resulting in a richer understanding of the phenomena in question. To clarify, in line with recent interpretative works that rely on brand-related material, we gathered, coded, and categorized our combined sources of data in a hermeneutic back-and-forth manner that enabled ideas to be approved or rejected at each iterative turn with the mutual consent of both writers (Brown, McDonagh & Shultz, 2013; Pirani, Cappellini & Harman, 2018). Ultimately, the back-and-forth method helped disclose early themes based on evidence of relatively discrete underlying meanings formed from limited ranges of language, argumentation, and reasons. Those themes were in the following phase structured underneath more extensive categories. Thus, the abductive approach facilitated the discovery of new perspectives and empirical insights by allowing us to consult earlier research observations and remarks throughout the entire research process (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2018; Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

4.2 Research Design

The scientific approach and philosophical standpoint further influenced the chosen research design, ultimately dictating the direction of the research and the choices made within it. Since our study aims to understand the markets' construction of the ethical consumption gap, qualitative research was favorable due to its flexibility and exploratory capability. Strauss and Corbin (1998) also claim qualitative research methods to be beneficial for producing empirical material that one can't collect through strictly statistical data techniques. With that in consideration, a qualitative research strategy was chosen, further motivated by the fact that it is a suitable design when the study has an investigative purpose, seeking to gather an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon within its natural setting (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Hence, we considered a quantitative approach to be inappropriate, as we did not aspire to measure and quantify H&Ms' sustainable and ethical endeavors but rather examine and analyze how H&M, through their official and online marketing activities, contributes to the construction of the ethical consumption gap. Moreover, a strictly quantitative approach would have implied that our research should test a hypothesis similar to "H: Is H&M contributing to the construction of the ethical consumption gap?" which, as mentioned above, simply wasn't the objective of our project.

4.2.1 Case Study

A case study examines one or a small number of organizations, events, or individuals, generally over time, aiming to acquire rich insights into a phenomenon in its real-life context, ultimately constituting a beneficial research strategy for novel findings. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2018) case studies can be designed consistent with the perspective of a relativist and constructivist epistemology, even though many dominant texts about case study research are written by positivists. Moreover, researchers from a constructionist epistemology often advocate single cases, i.e., cases solely focusing on one specific unit of analysis, whereas researchers aligned with positivist epistemology generally endorse multiple cases, i.e., the examination of two or more specific cases (Yin, 2018). As we aimed to investigate how the phenomenon of the ethical consumption gap is enabled through the market by adopting a constructivist research design, we chose a single-case method. More precisely, we choose to focus on the online marketing activities of one specific organization rather than the activities of many various organizations. The decision to choose a single case over multiple ones can further be justified if one unique case alone can present a valuable source of information. As H&M constitutes one of the largest fashion corporations globally (Statista, 2022a), we believed them to be a suitable unit of analysis, single-handed providing us with rich and sufficient data, ultimately allowing us to answer our research question satisfactorily. Furthermore, according to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019), a case study is a fitting research design when the research question intends to address *how* and *why* something occurs, e.g., how the phenomenon of the ethical consumption gap is enabled through the market sphere. With that in mind, a case study was yet again considered fitting for our research, as it was perceived to be adequate in relation to the purpose of our thesis and as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of the particular case of interest, e.g., an organization, a location or an industry.

4.2.2 Selection of Industry

To answer our research question, we chose to narrow down the field of research to the fashion industry, more precisely to, as already mentioned, the case of H&M. This decision was made partly to restrict the data results but mainly because of the industry's globally extensive size (IBIS World, 2022) and its substantial role in creating environmental and social ills (UNEP, 2018), while at the same time offering solutions to the very same issues by selling so-called “ethically” produced items. Hence, considering that the clothing industry

has been much presented in the ethical consumption debate, and since it has been vastly criticized for its exploratory nature and unethical ways, it constitutes a relevant and important industry to examine. The last few decades have been imprinted with various social and environmental scandals circling the fashion industry, varying from 3rd world textile factory collapses, childlabor, and 85% of all textiles ending up in landfills each year (The Environmental Cost of Fashion, 2021). The environmental and social costs of the fashion industry is pushing us to reconsider fashion and emphasize the importance of more sustainable business models and practices. However, even though the industry brings about significant social and environmental problems, it is still a significant market in the global economy adding up to 2.5 trillion \$USD, bringing employment to over 75 million individuals globally, etc. (The Environmental Cost of Fashion, 2021). Thus, we judged the fashion industry to be suitable for our research, as this particular sector was assumed to play an essential part in the market's construction of the ethical consumption gap due to its considerable size alone and its incongruous activities. Lastly, the decision to focus solely on one industry and organization allowed us to balance breadth, depth and quality when collecting and analyzing the empirical material, which could comprise a challenge if instead examining a larger sample of corporations and industries simultaneously.

4.2.3 Selection of Case

So often, the market is understood as a place, physical or online, where various parties, usually buyers and sellers, gather to facilitate the exchange of goods and services (Kenton, 2021). However, the term market is broad and can thus be interpreted in many different ways. In our research, when investigating how the market contributes to constructing the ethical consumption gap, we look more specifically at how the operating agents within the market, namely corporations, contribute to the creation of the gap. Thus, to answer our research question about how the ethical consumption gap is constructed through the market, we chose, as mentioned above, to examine the online marketing activities of H&M. H&M is one of the worlds' largest fashion corporations, operating a larger economy than many 3rd world countries, ultimately making them more influential on the international market than entire nations. What's more, according to the ranking of most valuable clothing and apparel brands globally, H&M was ranked in 8th place in 2021 with a reported brand value of 12,368 million dollars, once more demonstrating their powerful position within the fashion industry (Statista, 2022b).

Furthermore, H&M constitutes one of eight clearly defined brands (H&M, H&M HOME, COS, & Other Stories, Monki, Weekday, ARKET, and Afound), all operating underneath the H&M Group, a multi-brand matrix organization (H&M Group, 2022a). All these brands offer customers a wealth of styles and trends in fashion, beauty and accessories, both through online channels and physical stores worldwide. Regarding the empirical data collected and analyzed, due to the limited time at hand and the scope of our research, we made a conscious choice only to focus on one brand, namely the H&M brand. The decision to concentrate on one brand allowed us as researchers to seamlessly balance depth and breadth in the data collection and analysis process, ultimately resulting in a study focused more on quality and details than on quantity and perspicuousness. Examining all eight brands functioning within the H&M Group was purely ruled out as we believed doing so would permit us only to scratch the surface of the accompanying brands, ultimately hurting the research outcome rather than enriching it. Thus, by focusing on the H&M brand alone, we could spend more time and effort obtaining profound information about how a specific corporation, working within the market sphere, potentially contributes to the construction of the ethical consumption gap. Furthermore, the choice to focus on the H&M brand instead of the other accompanying brands was motivated by the fact that it constitutes the beginning of the entire H&M story, founded already in 1947, when Erling Persson opened the first store, called Hennes, selling women's clothing. The name was changed to Hennes & Mauritz in 1968, when Persson bought the hunting and fishing store Mauritz Widforss in Stockholm, Sweden, including a stock of men's apparel, thus marking the start of also including menswear in the offering (H&M Group, n.d.a). However, the H&M Groups' first additional brand, COS, wasn't founded until 2007 and the latest addition to their extensive brand portfolio, Afound, launched as close in time as 2018 (H&M Group, 2022b). Thus, the H&M brand has been around for the longest, and today, it's also the most prominent brand within the H&M Group in terms of having the most physical stores, the biggest retail market, and the most extensive online market (H&M Group, n.d.b). Consequently, the H&M brand alone, due to its scale of operation, offers a large base of data for us to collect, also constituting an organization with great power to impact the creation of the ethical consumption gap, therefore making it a relevant agent to include in our research. Moreover, choosing one of the other accompanying brands or a more undersized company, in general, would not only impact the availability of data, but one could also assume the significance of their contribution to creating the gap to be significantly smaller.

4.4 Data Collection

When deciding upon how to gather relevant data, i.e., deciding upon what method to utilize, we discussed the importance of obtaining accurate and reliable information, ultimately resulting in us choosing to collect facts about how H&M potentially contributes to the construction of the ethical consumption gap directly from the original source. More concretely, we chose to collect empirical material from the H&M Groups' and H&M's official website (www.hmgroup.com & www.H&M.com) and through H&M Groups' annual reports, all constituting publicly available data. This type of research method is, as explained above, based on a constructionist design and is more precisely called a *document study*, where the emphasis is placed on documents not produced at the request of a business researcher but rather on documents simply just "out there," waiting to be assembled and analyzed (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). As previously stated, the research design dictates the direction and choices made throughout the research. Hence, we chose a document study as a method for the data collection considering the qualitative design selected, further motivated by the fact that it allows for an intensive and detailed investigation of the particular case chosen.

4.4.1 Document Study

When gathering data about H&Ms' potential contribution to the creation of the ethical consumption gap through its online marketing activities, we focused on gathering written words and imagery data from so-called virtual and visual documents (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Virtual documents are, more precisely, documents appearing on the internet, whereas visual documents consist of a broad scope of graphic and artistic images, visual content found on websites, and video data, including films and Youtube clips. Regarding the virtual and visual material collected for the examination of the marketing activities of the H&M brand, we made a conscious choice also to include data from the H&M Group, as mentioned above. The motivation behind that decision is based on the fact that H&M Group constitutes the foundation for the H&M brand. Thus, it comprises a valuable source of data, allowing us to answer our research question fairly and satisfactorily. Hence, as the H&M brand operates within H&M Group, H&M Group naturally plays a vital part in creating the marketing activities of the H&M brand, thus affecting the H&M brands' potential contribution in creating the ethical consumption gap.

In addition to using the official websites of H&M Group and the H&M brand as sources for our research, we decided to also include so-called organizational documents as empirical material. Organizational documents constitute a significantly heterogeneous group of sources, providing researchers within the field of business and management with rich and valuable data, not least because of the immense quantity of documentary information available within most corporations. Some of these documents can be found in the public domain, such as annual reports, mission statements, and press releases. Other documents, however, aren't as available to the broad masses, including company newsletters, memos, and internal and external announcements, to name a few (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Considering the purpose of our research, studying official documents, i.e., publicly available documents, was judged to be suitable and adequate, as those documents, to a much greater extent than unofficial records, reach consumers. Hence, as we aimed to examine how the market contributes to creating the ethical consumption gap, a gap very much involving consumers, we believed it important to enclose documents accessible to that particular segment, as those documents, due to their availability, possess the power to actively affect buyers' purchasing behavior, much more so than unofficial documents.

Moreover, as already mentioned, when deciding upon what type of organizational documents to include in our research, the choice fell on annual reports, i.e., comprehensive documents designed to provide readers with information about a company's performance in the preceding year. This decision is motivated by the fact that annual reports are identified as one of the best and most effective forms of corporate-stakeholder communication, constituting a valuable tool for creating, protecting, and improving company image and reputation (Corporate Finance Institute, n.d.). Thus, we believed annual reports to be a suitable source for our research as it composes a proper representation of the H&M brand. Hence, as annual reports often contain self-selected highlights, objectives, and goals for future years as well as a letter from the CEO enclosing details about matters most important to them, these documents provide readers with solid knowledge about values and priorities closest to the company's heart. Thus, annual reports make up a fair portrayal of an organization and its character, which is why we judged annual reports to be a sufficient source, providing us with adequate and relevant data about H&Ms activities. Moreover, the annual reports chosen as empirical material for this study comprise all complete reports published from 2012 until today. Hence, our study examines the H&M groups' published annual reports from 2012 to 2021; thus, ten reports. We chose to analyze ten reports instead of the 23 reports currently

available on the H&M groups' page due to our decision also to examine H&M's two websites. Thus, considering the limited time frame, we judged the data available through ten reports, together with the material found on H&M websites, to provide us with adequate information and a holistic view of how H&M contributes to creating the gap.

In addition, we chose the annual reports to provide lengthy written statements to get culturally substantial insights on discursive conceptual frameworks utilized by the organization in question (H&M). Initially, discourse analysis builds on the grand theory of discourse (e.g., Foucault, 1972; Fairclough, 1992). It constitutes a frequently employed methodological approach in interpretative marketing research, used to pinpoint specific versions of the social world as illustrated through terminology in marketing and among consumers (Elliot 1996). By scrutinizing *lines of arguments* as an alternative to tracing groupings of people, one can uncover fundamental ideologies. Potter (1996, p. 131) names these lines of arguments *interpretative repertoires*, further defining them as "systematically related sets of terms, often used with stylistic and grammatical coherence, and usually organized around one or more central metaphors. They are historically developed and make up an important part of the common sense of culture." This means that *inside* a specific cultural context, all written words are vital, even artificial and fabricated material, since it still comprises repertoires, ultimately giving meaning to particular debates. From the perspective of examining how the market potentially contributes to creating the ethical consumption gap, Potter's framework is of most relevance. It allows us to look for specific interpretative repertoires that H&M uses when writing about their operations, further permitting us to see how these repertoires work and function within the discourse itself.

Furthermore, the annual reports collected and analyzed are issued by H&M Group, the multi-brand matrix organization comprising the eight brands presented earlier. Our purpose was and remained to examine the H&M brand solely. Still, as they don't issue standalone reports, the annual reports distributed by H&M Group were gathered as empirical material since they contain specific and relevant information about the H&M brands' operations. Moreover, as the H&M brand is part of the H&M Group, the annual reports issued by H&M Group most definitely reflect the true actions of the H&M brand, as the H&M brand acts according to the values of H&M Group. Thus, we believed the annual reports of H&M Group to be a sufficient source considering the purpose of our research.

Annual reports also include detailed financial information, such as balance sheets, income statements, cash flow statements, and auditor's reports. However, as we aspired to answer *how* the market contributes to the construction of the ethical consumption gap by seeking an in-depth understanding of the phenomena through qualitative research methods, we considered the financial information included in the annual reports to reach beyond our objective study. Accordingly, the financial information in H&Ms' annual reports is thus excluded as a source for data gathering. To clarify, as we aimed to collect and analyze the H&M brands' online marketing activities through written text and imagery rather than financial numbers and statistical data techniques, we chose not to include those particular parts of the annual reports as empirical material for our research.

Moreover, as the content found within H&M's annual reports and official website hasn't been created specially for the purpose of business studies, it comprises *non-reactive data*, i.e., data unaffected by the research process (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). With that in mind, document studies counter the concerns related to reflexivity inherent in other qualitative research methods, such as interviews and observations. For instance, the result of our research might have looked different if we had chosen to collect data through interviews since we as researchers could have risked inadvertently communicating preferred research outcomes during the questioning, ultimately affecting the interviewees' answers. Furthermore, conducting interviews with personnel from H&M was further ruled out as a research method for two additional reasons. Firstly, given the purpose of the study, we considered H&Ms' official websites and annual reports to alone be a sufficient source, as it contains both text and imagery clearly illustrating its online marketing activities. Thus, we judged the data collected from H&Ms' websites and annual reports to be enough for us to be able to answer the research question satisfactorily. Secondly, as H&Ms' official websites and annual reports are available for everyone, obtainable without the creators' permission, we deemed a document study to be more time-efficient than interviews, still providing us with reliable data, as the material found on H&Ms' websites and through their annual reports comes from H&M itself.

Furthermore, by focusing on H&Ms' official websites as a source for data collection, we could guarantee up-to-date information about our research topic, reducing the risk of accumulating material, not in line with H&Ms' current efforts. In addition, concentrating on H&Ms' official websites and annual reports, instead of seeking information from secondary sources, e.g., external articles and prior studies, allowed us to avoid problems such as

collecting data already analyzed by other authors, thus permitting us to sidestep data that might have been affected by hidden agendas or personal opinions and beliefs. Lastly, our choice to include both virtual and visual documents in the study was based on the fact that both written text and imagery constitute valuable communication tools, having the capacity to convey a brand's identity, vision, and mission (Melewar, Bassett, & Simões, 2006). Thus, we presumed it necessary to collect and analyze both written words and pictures to gain a holistic view of how H&M contributes to the construction of the ethical consumption gap through its marketing activities.

4.5 Analysing Data

When analyzing the material gathered on H&Ms' main pages as well as from the annual reports, we sought to identify grouped patterns within the data, dividing it into diverse themes, i.e., building theory from categories that are “grounded” in the collected data, rather than framing data according to pre-existing structures. Hence, this approach constitutes a so-called grounded analysis (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). Moreover, a grounded analysis allows the researcher to combine interpretations of an image with an extended analysis of other sorts of data, like written words, ultimately revealing more information about its context (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). Since our research aimed to do just that, this type of approach to qualitative data analysis suited the purpose of our study well.

Furthermore, the process of discovering relevant themes within a grounded analysis is often defined as open coding, where we as researchers carefully examine the selected data, labeling and organizing it to establish different categories. A code is, more precisely, a word or a short phrase summarizing the essence of a more significant piece of data, such as a sentence or an element within a picture (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). As we aimed to collect and analyze both written words and imagery data, codes were thus applied for both virtual and visual documents.

More concretely, the coding process involved us going through and collecting data from both H&M groups and H&Ms official website, as well as the annual reports, further labeling the data with various codes, primarily based on recurring repetitions in the written text, and common patterns within the images. This method allowed us to distinguish numerous themes,

which later were structures underneath three distinct categories (1) Forced Discourses, (2) Ground for Salvation and (3) Market Offerings, separately and jointly, demonstrating how H&M, i.e., the market, contributes to the creation of the ethical consumption gap through its online marketing activities.

4.6 Quality of Study

During the research process, we have had the utmost respect for research quality, and worked thoroughly to incorporate it in every step of the way. There are several conceptions for assessing the quality of a study, thus, epistemological and ontological perspectives drive research and quality measures (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Valizade, 2018). Hence, while doing observational research in the form of a document study, it is required to create trustworthiness regarding the collected data, provide factual results from which ones' draw conclusions, and develop analytical interpretations (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Furthermore, Guba and Lincoln (1989) recognize four quality criteria to establish trustworthiness: (1) credibility, with the goal of establishing internal validity, (2) transferability, the fabrication of external validity, (3) dependability, the goal of maintaining reliability, and finally, (4) confirmability, the goal of achieving objectivity. Initially, credibility was ensured by revising the written material several times and constantly comparing and exploring it for fresh ideas and themes. Second, transferability relates to the generalization of empirical findings, or how transferable the findings are to different settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Because of the limited sample size, determining the relevance of the study to diverse contexts is challenging. As a result, we advocate further studies using comparable methodologies in another environment. A document study is a form of research approach in which the focus is placed on documents that are not generated at the request of a business researcher but are just "out there," ready to be compiled and analyzed (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Hence, as previously mentioned, we are confident that the annual reports and the official websites of H&M Group and the H&M brand include sufficient empirical evidence to analyze the phenomenon within the research restricted time frame. To highlight additional consistency and replicability, dependability was developed by precisely detailing the decisions made during the study process (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The research attained dependability by providing detailed explanations of the employed theories and sources since the research followed the principles of a document study and adapted existing public data. Though we acknowledge that this does not guarantee that a replica of the work would offer similar

results. As this study employs a constructionist approach, the research assumes that there is not one truth to be identified (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Valizade, 2018). Belk (1989) proposes that such specific research methodologies can achieve dependability by observing phenomenon throughout time. Yet, given the time constraints of this study, the researcher assured dependability by collaboratively transcribing and categorizing the obtained results, offering a mutual understanding of the interpretation, and revising the material on many occasions all throughout the process (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Lastly, the study's quality may be assessed by confirmability. An objective perspective was challenging to produce since the interpretation of the data was heavily impacted by the researchers' analytical abilities. Consequently, both of the cooperating researchers have collectively collected data utilizing reflexive journals in which empirical material was documented and analyzed. Such measurements reduced potential research bias and drove the authors to adopt a reflexive stance, being open to novel findings, thus increasing the research's confirmability (Houghton, Casey & Murphy, 2013).

4.6.1 Limitations with our Research Design

Although a document study of this kind provides researchers with a rich source of data, it can, like with all research methods, be subject to concerns regarding validity and reliability. Another issue related to document studies is their distinctive ontological status, meaning they sometimes are viewed as an absolute source of knowledge about reality (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Documents shared by organizations, such as the content found on H&M's official websites and in the annual reports, could thus, be considered to be a representation of the reality of the entire organization of H&M. However, as truths and facts within the relativistic position are socially constructed, formed, and based on the observers' experiences, there is skepticism about the extent to which documents ought to be viewed in that way (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Instead, researchers should review documents in terms of the context in which they were produced, as well as their intended readership. When viewed in this way, the researchers are urged to also consider the documents' intended accomplishment, which is vital to ensure high quality of these kinds of studies, as documents created by organizations often are published with the purpose of putting themselves in a favorable position. Based on that, we have sought to analyze the gathered data, still bearing in mind it's produced and published by the H&M brand, and naturally by the H&M group.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

While conducting online-based research it is crucial to undertake ethical practices to achieve a responsible study. The ethical researcher must acknowledge oneself's participation in the research when collecting and analyzing data (Markham & Buchanan, 2015). Considering the document study approach founding this body of work, one must, therefore, consider the potential interference of ones' motives, and exciting feelings. Hence, the present study seeks to provide a transparent view of its objectives in order to establish reliable interpretations. There is a widespread misconception among internet researchers that all published information is public data. Therefore, scholars are testifying to a consent gap concerning public data and online research. However, in most cases, informed consent is not required for archive data (Kozinets, 2010). Using pre-existing documents as empirical material, therefore, usually raises fewer ethical concerns than other qualitative techniques. For instance, public records are available for anyone to examine and are often anonymous. Moreover, authors of books, articles, and reports emerging both in real life and on the internet are generally aware of the fact that anyone will be able to read their content. Accordingly, we acknowledge that the brand-related data is represented as one of the many ways it could be interpreted. The gathered material is a distillation of the originally published source to base our own interpretations in order to facilitate our ideas. Additionally, the empirical findings were derived entirely from publicly available sources. Regarding the text quoted from H&Ms' official websites and the annual reports, we realize the internet's dynamic nature and note that electronically posted content may alter over time. The research disclaims intentions to make H&M a target for criticism. Instead, we investigate the symbolic discourses of H&M as a case subject of an actor within the capitalist market system.

5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The following chapter represents the research empirical analysis, in which the gathered data has been analyzed. Furthermore, the theoretical framework is present through the empirical analysis to add depth to the authors' analytical perspective to facilitate the process of identifying unique discoveries in the empirical data.

By carefully examining the collected data, labeling it, and organizing it by employing the method of open coding, numerous themes have been discovered. These themes were then categorized underneath three more extensive categories. Thus, the three categories are built upon the identified themes. The themes, and thus the categories, compose essential elements, clearly indicating how the market, i.e., H&M, contributes to creating the ethical consumption gap through its online marketing activities. The categories/themes presented are developed to provide the reader with structure, further facilitating their understanding of the investigation of the chosen phenomenon.

The categories developed, forming the foundation of the analysis, are and will be presented as follows:

- 5.1 Forced Discourses
- 5.2 Ground for Salvation
- 5.3 Market Offerings

5.1 Forced Discourses

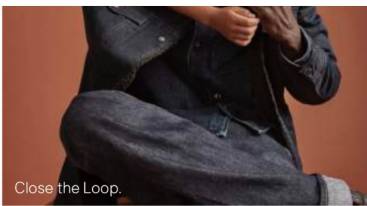
The first significant category draws extensively on H&Ms various discourses, steaming from the annual reports, H&M Group, and H&Ms official website. Hence, we name the first category "Forced Discourses", and suggest that these discourses, in different ways, make use of the concepts of both *consumer responsabilization* and *consumer sovereignty* and, by doing so, pave the way for H&Ms further and future contributions to the creation of the ethical consumption gap. Divided into three, this category will present and simultaneously analyze discourses concerning sustainability, consumer demand and social conditions.

5.1.1 Emphasizing Sustainability

Navigating through the empirical material was almost like steering through a jungle of self-praises rooted in sustainability-based endeavors. Thus, the annual reports hold a vast amount of sustainability-inspired sermons, containing everything from sustainability awards won to lavish goals and diversity and equality ambitions.

Long-term approach and strong shared values.

SUSTAINABILITY IN EVERYTHING WE DO



SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP AWARD

H&M's CEO Karl-Johan Persson received the Sustainable Leadership award for 2016 from NMC The Swedish Association for Sustainable Business. He won the award for "inspiring and challenging the whole fashion industry by addressing complex sustainability issues,



Figure 1 Demonstration of sustainability endeavors through annual reports (H&M Group 2022a;2022j).

In addition, throughout all the annual reports analyzed, the particular words *sustainability*, *sustainable*, and *sustainably* occur to a great extent, almost to such an extent that one would believe it's simply added to every sentence possible. In fact, in the annual report from 2019, constituting a report of 88 pages with imagery included, these words appear 167 times in total. Moreover, in the 92-page annual report from 2020, these words appear 189 times, thus demonstrating a percentage increase. *Sustainability*, *sustainable*, and *sustainably* are used in different contexts within various

sections of the annual reports, such as in CEO letters, sustainable development segments, highlights of the year, and imagery captions, thus permitting every inch of the reports. The following statements compose clear examples of how H&Ms integrate their sustainability endeavors in the format of text:

The H&M group's vision for sustainability is to lead the change towards circular and climate positive fashion while being a fair and equal company. We work according to our ambitious sustainability strategy produced jointly with external and internal experts. Our sustainability work spans the entire value chain, focusing both on our own operations and, together with other stakeholders, the industry in general. (H&M Group, 2022c, p. 5).

H&M Conscious Exclusive, spring 2020. The collection is made of sustainable, innovative materials such as recycled polyester, CIRCULOSE®, made of chemically recycled fibers, and the leather alternative VEGEAH, made of discarded grape skins and stalks. (H&M Group, 2022c, p. 11).

Together with our ambitious sustainability agenda, our ongoing transformation will make us more resilient and adaptable in the future and will contribute to sustainable and profitable growth for the H&M group in the long term. (H&M Group, 2022d, p. 5).

H&M is working extensively to make the clothing industry more sustainable. Sustainability embraces the environment, ethics, human rights and anti-corruption, among other things. Substantial efforts are made to promote social development and reduce environmental impact. The aim is to create positive change in the communities in which H&M is active and to secure H&M's sustainable development long term. (H&M Group, 2022e, p. 28).

It is important to emphasize that other phrases associated with sustainability also frequently appear throughout their reports, such as *recycling*, *consciousness*, *climate change*, and *biodiversity*. As presented in the method section, lines of argument or sets of terms used with eloquent and grammatical coherence make up an essential part of the common sense of culture. In the case of H&M, it seems like they are absorbing all general and in-depth conversations concerning sustainability to then let it seep out as grand words and caring phrases in their reports, hoping to appear as an organization genuinely concerned for the

environment and society. Thus, one can interpret it as H&M trying to create a brand image and establish a company culture centered on sustainability through the means of text. An attempt that, of course, is meticulously conveyed to all its stakeholders through public, available, and accessible documents.

— THIS IS H&M —

**Fashion and quality
at the best price**

**H&M's business idea
is to offer fashion
and quality at the
best price in a
sustainable way.**

Figure 2 Illustration of H&M's changed business concept. On top: Business concept until 2014. Below: Business concept from 2015. (H&M Group, 2022i:2022h).

Moreover, in 2015, H&M updated its long-lasting business concept, going from “Fashion and quality at the best price” to “Fashion and quality at the best price in a sustainable way.” Thus, adding the phrase “in a sustainable way” to the old notion, again demonstrating an eagerness to convey concerns for ethical issues by words, further indicating their part in the journey towards more sustainable fashion and, thus, a more sustainable world.

What's more, in the annual report of 2021, H&M states: “Sound corporate governance ensures that companies are managed as sustainably, responsibly and efficiently as possible in the interests of the shareholders. It is a matter of complying with external regulations and doing the right thing” (p.21). One distinct pattern located when analyzing the empirical material, is that the sustainable discourses ultimately reinforces *consumer responsabilization*, promoting their customers to be responsible consumers and moral subjects (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). Tracing back to the PACT routine, H&M sustains all of its four correlated but different processes. First, the personalization process outlines consumers' increased moral

responsibilities as a major element in bringing about remedies to pressing societal problems. This notion is displayed through the messages suggesting that consumers must consume ethically, and that their demand for ethical solutions is what's needed to combat social ills.

**“More transparency
is needed so that
customers can make
sustainable choices.”**

Figure 3 Sustainable Choices (H&M Group, 2022f, p.36).

Discourses as listed above, presents H&Ms' view of consumers being the ultimate decider in the market world. In other words, “consumers need to be provided with transparency in order to make sustainable (better) choices”, further proving that H&M fosters *consumer responsabilization*, where the consumer is made responsible for the products offered by the market. This allows H&M, and brands alike, to surrender their shortcomings as if they only offered consumers what they wanted. Second, the authorization process depends on easy - to - access scientific expert information to help with future development and to promote the responsible consumer. This process is present in the statements on the authentic and authoritarian sources utilized in their texts about the critical state of the environment, as illustrated in the example below:

The world is growing, and the planet, with its finite resources, must provide for an ever larger population. The UN estimates that by 2050 there will be 9.7 billion people in the world, and also predicts a rapidly growing middle class. Satisfying the needs of current and future generations in a sustainable way demands new ways of making and consuming products. A shift is needed to a circular approach in which discarded products are no longer seen as waste but instead are recycled as valuable assets, and where growth is decoupled from the use of natural resources. (H&M Group, 2022f, p.36).

Here, H&M lists the UN as an expert source to further promote the responsible consumer. H&M leaves consumption to be a cure to all of its own issues, and as a result, these problems are not hidden but are addressed openly and aggressively. The climate crisis has become a

key part of H&M and it is represented on many portions of the brands' websites as well as in the company annual reports.

Third, the process of capabilization, focuses on developing a market with products and services that encourage customers to engage in proactive and ethical self-management. Considering H&M's position in the market, they are one of the very actors that offers the products for the responsible consumer to self manage. Thus, the fulfillment of this process is at the very heart of their organization:

We feel you. It can be super tricky to know if you're making environmentally friendly shopping choices. But we want to make it easier! So, our aim is for all our products to be made from recycled or other sustainably sourced materials by 2030. This actually already applies to 80% of the materials that we use. (H&M, n.d.b).

We are a customer-focused, creative, value- driven, responsible fashion and design company. Our business consists mainly of sales of clothing, accessories, footwear, cosmetics, home textiles and homeware to consumers. Sales take place through digital and physical channels, i.e. online and in retail stores. (H&M Group, 2022a, p.6).

In the statements presented, H&M presumes consumers' responsibility on their behalf by implying that: "We offer you a solution to all these problems..." instead of "you can be of help solving these problems". By doing so, they shield customers from having to participate in important social change firsthand. Customers perceive H&M consumption as a legitimate delegation of ethical and political action, helping them to get joy and comfort from the outcomes promoted by H&M. Finally, during the transformation process, a new and moralized self-understanding is embraced by consumers individually. In this last process, consumers are expected to rely on the market to sustain their new "responsible" motives. Therefore, when H&M have successfully conducted the previous processes, they may rely on the responsible consumers self-managing through consuming their offerings. Thus, H&M are welcome to further capitalize on consumers who have been pronounced responsible by H&M discourses in the first place.

5.1.2 Consumer Demand

When analyzing the collected empirical data, a clear pattern emerged of H&M presenting its customer, hence the consumers, as the leading force behind the corporations' activities and decisions. Thus, one can assume that H&M builds its success in its ability to provide its global consumer base with commodities they genuinely desire. In short, the empirical material and the discourses focused on demand, portrays an image of H&M as a sincere customer caregiver who is making sure to give the consumers solutions for their every fashion need. Indeed, the idea of H&M as a customer caregiver seems to be one of the true founding cornerstones in its entire operation, deeply rooted in the heart of their business. Naturally, their strive to fulfill the wants of their consumers permeates the content of both their official websites and their annual reports, as exemplified below:

Our customer is always our focus, from the design process to the shopping experience. Understanding and meeting our customers' needs is at the core of everything we do. We offer fashion with high attention to quality to everyone. We want our customers to feel confident they are getting the best possible deal when shopping at H&M. (The H&M Way, online, n.d.a).

We always listen to our customers, to understand their expectations and needs so that we can offer them the products they want. (H&M Group, 2022b, p.29).

In response to customers' growing interest in circular fashion, we are also developing services such as clothes rental, garment repair and second-hand commerce, with a view to extending the life of the garments even further. (H&M Group, 2022c, p. 12).

The concept of consumer sovereignty is, as said, utilized as an instrument by business owners, marketing managers as well as brand advocates to encourage consumer satisfaction. Through such statements as presented above, H&M, one can say, is nourishing the concept of consumer sovereignty by accepting, or rather promoting the proposition of the consumer as "god" or "emperor" (Gamble, 2007). However, despite the fact that customers are considered to control what commodities and services are provided by the market, firms often "anticipate" (Hutt, 1940) or 'imagine' (Galbraith, 1970) "the average consumer's wishdream" (Scitovsky, 1962, p. 267) before that desire is, in fact, revealed to the market. Hence, consumer wishes or

"dreams" are thus generated through marketing techniques, to which businesses like H&M have been taught to listen in order to optimize consumer welfare. It is then up to those enterprises to create, manufacture, and sell commodity products and services in order to satisfy customer desires (Smith, 1987).

The H&M groups' unique brands meet customers' demand for the best combination of fashion, quality and sustainability at affordable prices. We give customers unbeatable value and access to a more sustainable lifestyle. (H&M Group, 2022a, p.6).

Thus, the statement provided above entails that H&M is "meeting" a customer demand that was, in fact, created by them in the first place, taking great pride in doing so. This move manifests *consumer demand creation*, meaning that H&M simply constitutes a need for their own products, which further becomes most prominent in their sustainability focused activities, as shown in the figure below:

“With customers around the world, we can create large-scale demand for circular solutions.”

Figure 4 Large-Scale Demand (H&M Group, 2022j, p. 41).

There is an ambiguity in H&Ms' communications regarding its position in relation to the origin of consumer demand. Occasionally, they are simply offering what consumers demand and other times they are creating consumer demand, as demonstrated in figure 4. Furthermore, when stating they are creating a demand, it is, as just shown, most often in relation to demands concerning sustainable solutions, such as clothes rental, garment repair and second-hand commerce, feeding the idea of them holding the ultimate services and products to consume if one wishes to shop and still be "ethical". Hence, the strategy used, i.e., the strategy to "create a large-scale demand for circular solutions", plays a vital part in the creation of the ethical consumption gap, as it can be interpreted as that they are in fact working to solve the environmental and societal ills by creating a demand for their more sustainable offerings. With all this in consideration, H&M are indeed breeding the fantasy of

choice when the customers' assumed needs and desires underlying such choices are created and controlled by H&M themselves.

5.1.3 Social Conditions

Other common discourses present in the gathered material regards the production aspect of H&M's offerings. Due to the many social and environmental implications brought by the fashion industry's production methods, one may see the importance for such corporations to address these concerns. H&M did that exceptionally well, dedicating many pages in the annual reports to its ethical manufacturing efforts. One of the recurring discourses entailed hopeful collaborations inspired messages, like the one presented below.

Working together for good conditions in the supply chain

Figure 5 Working together for good conditions in the supply chain (H&M Group, 2022j, p.43).

These discourses emphasize bettering of social conditions throughout the entire supply chain, and are sprinkled with positivity towards a more ethical fashion future. As mentioned above, H&M reserves much space in the reports for connotations alike:

Our focus is on ensuring fair jobs with fair compensation and benefits in safe, secure workplaces free from discrimination, where everyone has the right to freedom of association and equal opportunities to develop. (H&M Group, 2022a, p. 31).

Some of the findings within the reports also insinuate that H&M is appointing itself as a guiding star, a compass, setting the example for how external stakeholders should act to reach the social standards of its own operations.

Acting consistently and with a strong ethical compass is highly important, because we operate in many different markets that have different challenges and where the laws, environmental requirements and social conditions may differ. (H&M Group, 2022a, p. 21).

Expressed differently, through the discourses put forward by the annual reports, it almost seems like H&M is trying to render its sustainability work as an ultimate and universal template for environmental and societal progress, applicable to both nations and the agents operating within H&Ms supply chain.

ROADMAP FOR A FAIR LIVING WAGE

Figure 6 The blueprint for equality (H&M Group, 2022i, p.38).

At an initial glance, the recurring header presented above, seemed somewhat harmless. However, while revisiting the empirical material, we noticed that such a message is heavily loaded. The fashion industry has long been a target for criticism due its unethical ways of production. H&M, as a market leader within that industry, here, however, claims that it possesses the roadmap, hence the key solution to providing fair living wages.

H&M wants all its suppliers' textile workers to be able to live on their wage. Wages are an important sector-wide matter for the textile industry in the sourcing markets. H&M wants to contribute to lasting improvements and has been working actively for many years to help strengthen the textile workers' influence and contribute to a functioning dialogue between the parties in the labor market. H&M is also working to influence decision makers, and some wage increases have been made. CEO Karl-Johan Persson has visited the prime ministers of both Bangladesh (in 2012) and Cambodia (in 2013) to discuss labor market conditions in the textile industry in these countries and to call for annual wage reviews. There remains great potential to improve wage structures both at national level and at factory level, which is why H&M has introduced a new plan for its work on wage issues. In a holistic approach, the roadmap includes improved purchasing practices, further training in the textile industry to improve skill levels, higher starting wages and the introduction of regular wage negotiation by democratically elected workers' representatives [...] This initiative aims to contribute to more stability in the sourcing markets, which will benefit both H&M and the suppliers. (H&M Group, 2022g, p. 33).

In the statement above, H&M states that it is actively seeking to influence decision-makers. The report then continued by informing the readers about (now former) CEO Karl-Johan Perssons visits to the prime ministers of both Bangladesh and Cambodia, visits made with the more profound intention to discuss labor market conditions and mediate H&Ms calls for annual wage reviews. Henceforth, they imply there is much to do regarding wage structure on both national level and at the factory level, followed by them introducing their so-called roadmap for a living wage. Thus, through the discourses presented in the reports, it almost occurs as if H&M are presenting instructions to which nations and factories should adhere to, in order to impose proper labor compensation. H&Ms roadmap is simply outlined as the ultimate tool to fix the broken working environment in the third world nations hosting its production. In addition, by stating “there remains great potential to improve wage structures both at national level and at factory level, which is why H&M has introduced a new plan for its work on wage issues” H&M grants itself the liberty to act out on its compulsory need to be the hero. By carrying out its vision, this roadmap “aims to contribute to more stability in the sourcing markets” to benefit both H&M and the suppliers. Interestingly, this strategy enables H&M to benefit twice by also feeding its underlying desire of posing as a knight in shining armor. However, in the 2020 annual report (p.51), H&M states that the factory-level wage management systems, implemented as a part of this fair living wages strategy, led to a 2.9 percent average wage increase and that the workplace dialogue programs implemented resulted in a 2.0 percent average wage increase, compared to suppliers not enrolled in these programs. Although these increases look promising, there is no concrete evidence throughout the annual report that any of H&M's supply chain factories, in fact, offer their employees a fair living wage.

What's more, even though the "roadmap towards fair living wages" is a noble cause, H&Ms supplier oriented discourses, unfortunately, end up being self-contradictory. Through the numerous lavish messages of H&M taking responsibility for the production of its offerings, it still manages to disclaim that responsibility by discourses as follows:

Like most fashion companies, we don't own any factories or make our own clothes – we outsource production to independent manufacturers. This means we don't pay garment workers' salaries, nor can we decide how much they are paid.
(H&M Group, n.d.c).

Hence, H&M are presenting two polar opposite messages. First, they claim to have the roadmap for fair living wages, then secondly, they do not own any of the factories and are unable to make any pay-related decisions. Another interesting observation from the quote listed above, is that H&M describes themselves as being “like most fashion companies”. While simultaneously, presenting itself as a corporation “leading the change towards a more sustainable fashion future,” implying they are not the average fashion company. Once again, H&M is making self-contradictory messages. This time it is regarding its role as a buyer, sometimes it is in relation to them leading the change forward. H&M’s responsibility and sustainability-related ambitions clearly seem to vary depending on the context. Hence, when it comes to expressing commitment to ethical issues, H&M is not late to point out sustainability awards won and programs implemented to transform the industry. However, when the situation calls for actual actions, e.g., the matter of fair living wages, the fast-fashion giant is as quick to remind the world of its minimum power to influence how much the employees of their factory workers are paid. Thus, H&M hides behind the fact that this is “just how this industry functions,” an industry they are so desperately trying to reform, or are they?

5.2 Ground for Salvation

The second noteworthy category draws heavily on how H&M pleads market logic as the most suitable venue to justify and resolve the consequences of consumption. We name this category “Ground for Salvation” and propose it enclose the idea that despite knowing that the products, like many other products, hold some of the problems brought on by capitalism, H&M still displays their offerings as the most reasonable pathway for sustainable improvement. Categorized in two, this category will explore the following themes: market dependence and positive effects of consumption.

5.2.1. Market Dependence

Firstly, ethical consumption is, by market logic, left to be envisioned as a “cure-all” solution to all of its self-made issues. Accordingly, the concerns of the environment and society aren’t disguised by H&M but instead addressed candidly and boldly. The care for the climate emergency and the depletion of our natural resources are thus, as mentioned earlier, significantly prominent parts of H&M’s business, reflected in various sections of the brand’s official websites and annual reports, not least in the CEO letters.

Our planet doesn't have enough natural resources for us to keep doing what we've been doing. Period. That's why we need to do things differently. (H&M, n.d.c).

Let's face it. While we love fashion, it has a huge impact on the environment. The industry has to change and someone has to take the lead. So, let's make that us. (H&M, n.d.d).

We want to help drive the fashion industry in a more sustainable direction, with faster development of circular solutions, reduced energy consumption and greater use of renewable energy. We have ambitious materials targets, including that all our materials are to be recycled or otherwise sustainably sourced by 2030. The H&M group also aims to be a fair and equal company, working extensively for good working conditions in the supply chain. (H&M Group, 2022c, p.9).

In short, the marketplace constitutes the essential foundation for the birth and continued existence of the ethical consumption gap. Therefore, when examining how the market, and thus H&M, contributes to creating the gap, one vital strategy found is H&M's constant recurrence of them and the market as the main arena for change, as H&M constantly reminds consumers that they are "leading the change to a better fashion future." (H&M Group, n.d.d). A critical interpretation of their marketing activities, thus, suggests that they are recommending individuals to get an outlet for their ethical concerns by consuming goods mediated by the marketplace, as that is the most effective way to contribute to more sustainable fashion hereafter.

We're committed to Leading the Change to a better fashion future. This starts with improving sustainability performance in our own value chain and demonstrating the resilience of sustainable business. (H&M Group, n.d.d).

Our vision is to lead the change towards a circular, fair and equal fashion industry. We are pushing for fair working conditions and greater transparency. (H&M Group, 2022f, p.12).

Moreover, to unravel the complex challenges facing humanity, one can interpret it as H&M is trying to ensure that consumers should entrust the much-needed change efforts to the market, as it is portrayed to provide simple and feasible solutions, that is, to consume products from H&M:

The shortcut to more sustainable shopping? Conscious choice. [...] Conscious choice can be found across all our departments — just look for the green hangtag! (H&M, n.d.b).

The fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries in the world as well as one of the most water-intensive. [...] An innovation that we're really proud to be a part of is Loop: the world's first in-store recycling system turning old clothes into new ones. It was installed in one of our Stockholm stores in 2020. By shopping with us, you help turn ideas like these into reality. (H&M, n.d.c).

Indeed, there could be elements of truth in H&M's stated endeavors and in their central promise to their consumers, that is, to “offer fashion and quality at the best price in a sustainable way.” (H&M Group, 2022h; H&M Group, 2022j). For example, in terms of user values, there are numerous benefits provided by H&M. Firstly, H&M reaches customers worldwide, both through physical stores and an extensive online market, making them available to the very many. In addition, they offer affordable products, some of which are made from organic cotton, recycled polyester, lyocell and responsibly produced down. Ultimately, with all that considered, H&M constitutes a low-priced brand, offering somewhat sustainable clothes to people globally. Thus, they make fashion and design, produced for the good of people and the planet (according to themselves), accessible to everyone while at the same time reducing consumers' expenditures on clothes. Or, as they express it: "We give customers unbeatable value and access to a more sustainable lifestyle." (H&M Group, 2022a, p. 6).

5.2.2 Positive Effects

To further strengthen the idea of the market as the most practical entity for consumers to delegate their consumption and ethical responsibilities to, H&M are repeatedly promoting the positive effects of shopping with them in terms of job creation results and decreased poverty for both individuals and nations.

H&M does not have any factories of its own; instead, items are manufactured by independent suppliers. For many countries, the jobs created by exporting clothing manufacturers spark further industrial development, leading to increased productivity and higher wages. These jobs help to lift individuals and nations out of poverty. The continued presence of long-term, responsible buyers is therefore vital to the future of these countries. (H&M Group, 2022g, p. 32).

Shopping at H&M contributes to jobs and development around the world. As well as H&M being a workplace for more than 148,000 employees, jobs are created throughout the value chain – largely in the Asian textile industry, where much of H&M’s sourcing takes place. H&M does not have any factories of its own but instead outsources manufacturing to independent suppliers, which together employ around 1.6 million people. The majority of the suppliers’ employees are women. For many women this is their first job that provides an income, their first work outside the home and so a first step to independence. (H&M Group, 2022h, p. 37).

According to Carrington, Zwick and Neville (2016) the ethical consumption gap is a so-called fairytale device used by operating agents within the market striving to promote a happy ending of a humane, green, and fair capitalism. It is further said to serve as a function deflecting the responsibility for creating and solving social and environmental problems from marketers in the turbo-capitalistic system and onto marketing-constrained consumers. By using phrases like “Shopping at H&M contributes to jobs and development around the world” and “These jobs help to lift individuals and nations out of poverty” (pointing to the jobs created by H&M), the power and burden, if you will, of doing right by society are thus placed on potential customers of H&M. In short, H&M is openly and proudly demonstrating its part in creating jobs worldwide, which ultimately results in them being able to help foster global development and reduce poverty. At the same time, however, they are relying on individual consumers to shop with them for this to transpire, thus, deflecting the responsibility for creating and solving social and environmental ills from themselves onto consumers, thereby aiding the ethical consumption gap.

Moreover, when examining the data gathered, there are some vague yet notable indicators of H&M pointing to failures of well-meaning laws concerning quality, further claiming they are a corporation going beyond regulations to ensure the highest possible satisfaction amongst

their consumers, yet again implying the market to be a reasonable venue for ethical and sustainable development and progress.

[...] We follow all the laws and regulations, but at times even they are not enough. For example the shoulder-strap on a bag may slip off when worn which may not be dangerous or in conflict with any rules, but that's not good enough for us and in such cases we need to find a method to test and assure the quality. (H&M Group, n.d.e).

We usually employ the precautionary principle or the strictest law in all our sales markets. We're far ahead when it comes to work on chemicals and we're always actively trying to find better alternatives. Since 2013, for instance, we've banned fluorocarbons which many competitors use to make outerwear water-repellant. Instead, we use alternative chemicals which don't harm the environment. (H&M Group, n.d.e).

H&M demands that, at the very minimum, all suppliers agree to observe the legal rights of their employees, and that suppliers live up to H&M's Code of Conduct. But H&M goes far beyond those demands. In promoting sustainability at the suppliers, for example, H&M trains and educates both suppliers and their employees in many important areas such as workers' rights, health and safety. In addition, all suppliers must adhere to H&M's rigorous restrictions on chemicals – the toughest in the industry. (H&M Group, 2022e, p. 28).

To further help reinforce the idea of the market as more effective for sustainability improvement than anything else, even more so than regulation and law guidances, a detailed picture is drawn by H&M, displaying people as aware subjects with the capacity to take accountability for the earth through sovereign choices as consumers.

H&M aims to be the more sustainable choice for today's increasingly aware customers. (H&M Group, 2022i, p. 9).

Our customers are knowledgeable and demand both the best design and quality from our products, and also an increased awareness of sustainability, from

materials used to the carbon footprint of transporting the products to the stores.
(H&M Group, n.d.a).

Thus, H&M encourages consumers, who, according to H&M itself, is capable of making conscious choices, to turn to the market, more specifically to H&M, to contribute to the working economy via sensible consumption choices so that H&M can continue its journey towards 'sustainable fashion', and thus, preceding its operations.

5.3 Market Offerings

The last evident category, Market offerings, addresses both H&M's extensive portfolio of offerings and its strategies of pleasing both the conscious and unconscious consumer, altogether making up essential elements in which H&M utilizes to create and aid the ethical consumption gap.

5.3.1 Neverending Options

Tadajewski (2017) suggests that the enormous choices offered by the market don't enhance human welfare. Instead, it tends to paralyze consumers, consequently leading to suboptimal outcomes (Botti & Iyengar, 2006). In addition to H&M's focus on creating a demand for so-called circular solutions, *Conscious collections*, and *Conscious choice products*, H&M offers a wide range of other types of apparel and accessories, not explicitly labeled as "made with a little extra consideration for the planet", which their conscious clothes are. Thus, based on Tadajewski's (2017) idea about paralyzation, one could assume H&M's consumers to become numb in the face of all possible choices, which might cause them to shop by habit rather than by their concern for the environment and society at large.

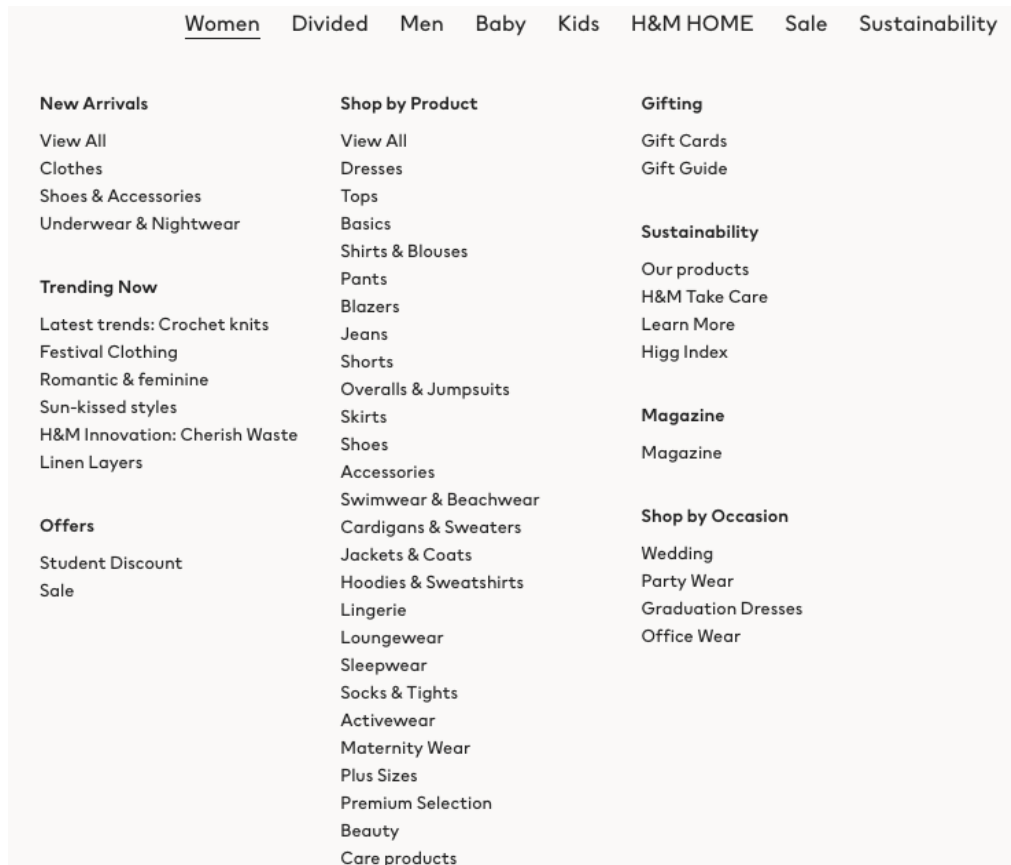


Figure 7 H&M dropdown offerings (H&M, n.d.e).

A somewhat interesting reflection of H&M's massive offerings is that instead of downsizing their product range, it seems like H&M instead "adds on" new, more ethical-made items, steadily increasing the objects displayed on their official website. Thus, it looks like one of H&M's strategies is, rather than just reducing their extensive portfolio of offerings, to add counter opposite products to combat the global ills.

5.3.2 Ethical Spectrum

While gathering the sustainability-inspired data, there was a continuous and notable presence of H&M's Conscious collections. These collections offer consumers a variety of "more ethically" sourced products for customers to choose from. H&M describes it as following: "Our Conscious choice products are created with a little extra consideration for the planet". As introduced in the first and second categories, H&M presents various messages of its sustainability-inspired work, which then ultimately channels down to their Conscious collections. The Conscious collections therefore represent the outcome of all sustainability-inspired activities. Subsequently, the sum of all their ethical work becomes a collection of clothing made with "a little extra consideration". Due to H&M's enormous

emphasis on their sustainability and ethical endeavors, and the lavish premonition of their Conscious collections, the particular wording, of “a little extra”, seems rather weak in comparison. The “a little extra consideration for the planet” later reveals its criteria:

CONSCIOUS CHOICE

Our Conscious choice products are created with a little extra consideration for the planet: at least 50% of each piece is made from more sustainable materials, like organic cotton or recycled polyester. The only exception is recycled cotton, which for quality reasons, can only make up 20% of a product.

Figure 8 Conscious Choices (H&M, n.d.f).

H&M itself presents it as: “Every year H&M also offers collections with extra sustainability value under the “H&M Conscious” label. These collections include garments and accessories produced in more sustainable materials” (H&M Group, 2022e, p.16). Hence, H&M label products (that meet the criteria stated in figure x) as a conscious choice in order to help consumers make more sustainable consumption choices. With the conscious choice label, consumers may easily tell apart the good, “more sustainable choice” from the bad and “unsustainable choice”. The chosen wording of “with a little extra consideration for the planet” brings about an undertone of the conscious collection being a tidy bit better while readers are left to assume that its regular clothingline are created without consideration for the planet. Thus, dividing H&Ms offerings into two polarized categories, fitting either into the sustainable side of the spectrum, or the unsustainable. See example below:

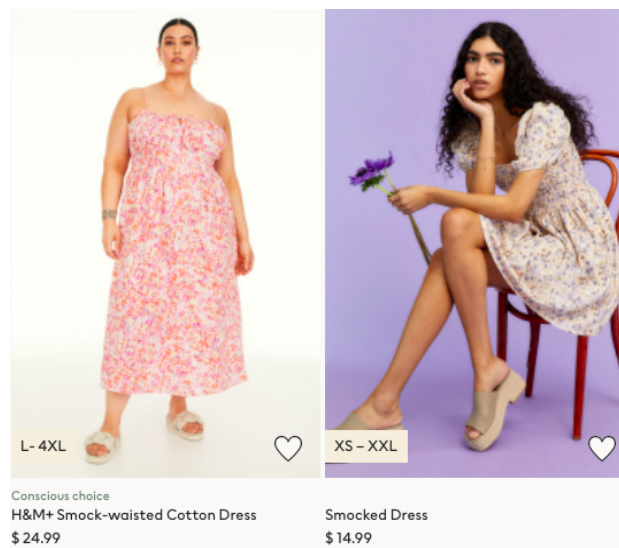


Figure 9 Conscious and Non-conscious choice Label (H&M, n.d.e).

The figure presented above illustrates two similar dresses, one with the conscious choice label and one without. Despite the fact that the dresses are visually similar in design and name, the dress labeled with conscious choice has a significantly higher price tag than the one without. Arguably, the material of the conscious choice dress is more expensive to produce than the one of the “not conscious” dress. The differences presented suggest that the categorization of either conscious choice or “nothing” displays a superior versus inferior product line. The superior one, the conscious choice, must be the better, considering that it is more ethically pleasing and the more expensive choice. While the other inferior product line, without the label, is the bad and cheaper customer choice. In fact, their conscious collection is also substantially smaller than their “regular” non-conscious product base. At the time of writing, H&M’s conscious choice women’s collection included 1 766 items, while its entire women’s catalog entailed 5 968 items, making 4 202 of those items not conscious choice labeled (H&M, n.d.e; H&M, n.d.f). Put differently, the conscious choice label makes roughly 30% of their entire women’s collection, and the other 70% are produced without “a little extra consideration of the planet”. Thus, there is a substantial size difference between their “ethical” collection and their “non-ethical” collection, indicating that the vast majority of their offerings are not consciously produced. A quite self-contradictory fact, considering the self-proclaimed motto of embracing “sustainability in everything that we do”, presented previously in figure 1. With all considered, there is a mismatch between the sustainability-inspired discourse and the sustainable offerings. The sustainable propaganda, in lack of a better term, only highlights a fraction of H&M’s actual operational offerings, suggesting that H&M engage in discursive closure (i.e., the act of presenting a carefully thought out fragment of one’s organization, displaying it as a complete and true representation of the entire corporation), since they broadcast a small essence of their operation while promoting it as if it represented the entire organization. This way, H&M is able to display one favorable feature while suppressing other less favorable images of their operations.

Additionally, H&M consistently encourages increased consumption on its official website by written *calls to action* attached to favorable imagery illustrating well-put-together outfits and accessories at reduced prices. Also, now and then, banners in loud colors covering widespread parts of the landing page present the remaining time of a current sale, often implying that it “ends soon.” They also spur more consumption by providing higher

percentage discounts for more money spent (e.g., 15 % off when spending 60\$ or more, 20% off when spending 80\$ or more, etc.).



Figure 10 Advertising banner on H&M’s landing page on the 25th of April 2022 (H&M, n.d.g).

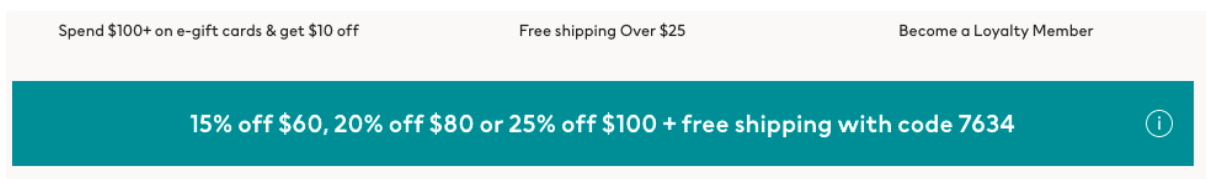


Figure 11 Advertising banner on H&M’s landing page on the 9th of May 2022 (H&M, n.d.g).



Figure 12 Advertising banner on H&M’s landing page on the 24th of May 2022 (H&M, n.d.g).

Furthermore, H&M entices people to become actively involved in the marketplace by urging them to become consumers of their brand by offering discounts to new members, referring to the discounts as “rewards just for shopping.” However, the phrase “rewards just for shopping,” in contrast to H&Ms’ massive emphasis on sustainability, immediately becomes contradictory, as the vast expansion of the fashion industry has brought on high environmental and social ills in the first place (Geneva Environment Network, 2021). Thus, by spurring consumers to consume even more, one could say that H&M is going against its own sustainability preaching by facilitating actions that, in fact, have played an enormous part in the current poor state of the environment. Moreover, the primary purpose of sales promotion is to attract existing and potential customers toward business activities to increase profit margin and instant sales (Kotler et al., 2006). Therefore, one can only assume H&M to be acting on personal interests, increasing their profit by discounts and consequently boosting sales, and in this case, with little concern for what that might do to the planet.

**Become an H&M Member & get 10% off your first purchase +
rewards just for shopping!**



Don't forget to opt into Fashion News to have your offers and rewards delivered right to your inbox!

Figure 13: Banner on H&M's landing page on the 5 of May 2022 (H&M, n.d.g).

Considering the substantial difference in supply size, conscious or not, there is a statistically higher probability that the offerings on the non-conscious side will provide customer satisfaction. One can also assume that H&M's extensive wide range of offerings, together with its frequently set up sales, causes both confusion and triggers amongst consumers, provoking them to fill their shopping baskets to the absolute maximum. Hence, H&M have created a structure in which consumers are more likely to shop on the less ethical side of the spectrum. As previously discussed, that spectrum also offers a significantly lower price point. Even though they have made it easier for customers to spot the more ethical choices, they have also made it easier to spot the difference in price. Combined, these conditions are setting the consumer up to lose when pursuing ethical shopping desires. Since the start of H&M, their key mission has been to offer affordable or even cheap fashion apparels to the price-sensitive consumer segment. This tradition along with the contemporary sustainability additions, have created ethical vs unethical structures. Thus, H&M and brands alike are able to capitalize on both sides of the gap, while simultaneously guiding consumers to the "wrong" side of the spectrum. Further, H&M's emphasis on their conscious collections combined with their sustainability-inspired discourses present in the empirical material, indicates that H&M engage in promoting, implementing and sustaining the ethical consumer for self-management. Thus, further indicating that H&M acts as a vessel for *consumer responsabilization*. To conclude, drawing on Cronin and Fichetts (2021) previous work on Huel, H&M's conscious offerings provide the eco-enlightened customer an outlet to indulge in guilt-free shopping. By extracting the negative and shaming associations of its predecessor, i.e. unethical consumption, H&M has created a venue for further capitalistic consumption, excluding the customer guilt trips. The numerous environmental and social implications brought by the fast fashion industry are old news. But, considering how a fast fashion organization creates a collection as a counter opposite of its previous unfavorable operations, H&M creates a poor solution to the problem, parallel to killing fire with fire. Hence, it offers consumers a solution to a problem of their own creation, while enabling them to capitalize on the polarized sides of their ethical consumption gap.

6. DISCUSSION

The following chapter demonstrates an overview of the empirical findings, structured below are the carefully composed themes, emerging from the data collected and analyzed. Furthermore, the forthcoming discussion aims to apply the findings to a general scale larger than H&M.

6.1 Empirical Findings

In the previous chapter we explored how H&M contributes to creating the ethical consumption gap. The following categories and themes were discovered:

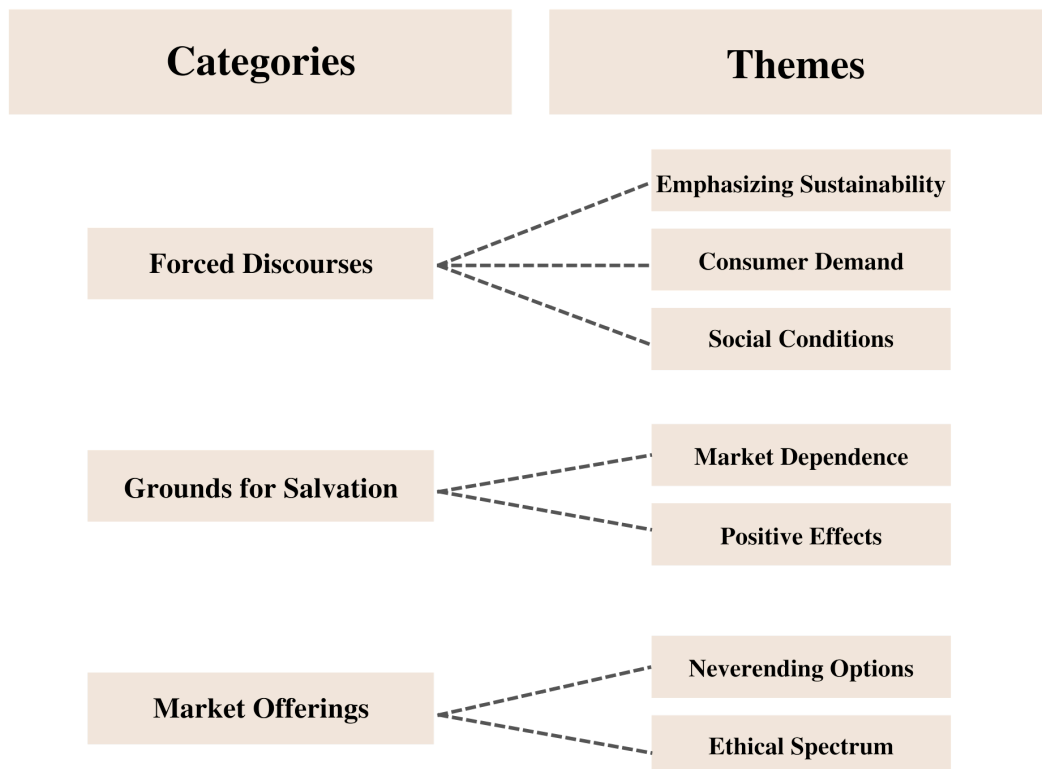


Figure 14 Empirical findings, categories and themes.

The amount of self-contradictory and ambiguous messages found within the gathered empirical material feeds a noticeable element of confusion. Throughout its own discourses, H&M portrays itself as both a follower and a leader of consumer demand. At the same time,

they are illustrating themselves as a supreme provider of ethically conscious products while simultaneously supplying a substantially more extensive unethical collection, urging people to consume by offering large discounts and “rewards just for shopping.” Indeed, there might be some positive aspects to H&Ms’ ethical endeavors, and by providing trendy choices made with a little extra consideration for the planet, one could, for example, argue that the product perks of H&M match up pretty well with some of the most basic expectations of today's ethically-minded fashion consumers. However, the change towards a more sustainable future, a change that H&M so very often claims to lead, is still based on the assumption that individual consumers, through their consumption decisions, hold the ultimate power to combat environmental and social ills. Thus, entirely without the need for political interference or questioning of the current capitalistic system. Hence, to unravel the complex challenges facing humanity, one should simply entrust the much-needed change efforts to the market, which is providing a simple and accessible solution, namely the consumption of H&M goods. As the marketplace constitutes the essential foundation for the birth and continued existence of the ethical consumption gap, H&Ms’ strategy of constantly reassuring the market as the main arena for change, plays a critical part in creating and sustaining the ethical consumption gap. Nonetheless, what's' portrayed as rather easy, might, in fact, as touched upon in the beginning of this chapter, be nothing less than an illusion, carefully fabricated and upheld by bewilderment.

Looking at it from an even bigger perspective, such ambiguous marketing activities allow corporations like H&M to continue their operations in a way where the unbearable reality is kept at bay, i.e., that the solution to contemporary problems reaches beyond the ethical actions of individual consumers, instead being an issue that organizations must confront on a higher level, altogether. It almost seems like if H&M, through its sustainability-related discourses, adopts an approach that would, in fact, require a reduction of production and the harmful activities closely related to the operations of fashion. Instead, they encourage consumers to do the complete opposite by adding more so-called conscious items and labels to choose from, rather than lowering the range of offerings. That exact blueprint also seems to dictate the content displayed in written form, adding tonnes of phrases associated with ethicality and sustainability to annual reports and websites, however, with little concrete evidence of real-impact change in terms of, for example, social conditions.

Suppose H&M and other prominent operating agents within the capitalistic system embraced raw and honest transparency rather than forcing sustainability-related words into most of its public archives. If that were to be the case, real change could, perhaps, transpire. However, to diminish the risk of losing market shares at the expense of being the only one exposing the brutal truth, something no profit-seeking organization desires to do, such a scenario would require the participation of the majority of all market players. Because if all parties involved agreed to reveal the true horrors of the current state of consumption, sustainable or unsustainable, one might actually be able to seek ethical guidance from the marketplace. It is important to emphasize that we as writers aren't necessarily looking for a solution requiring separation from capitalism altogether. Instead, there might, indeed, be ways of working within the prevailing system to halt problems like global warming, and by doing so buying more time for further research and practices to promote collective and critical responses to such issues. However, for that to befall, one might need to turn their head away from consumers, and instead examine the relationships between the operating agents within and outside the market (e.g. governments and nonprofit organizations), as those particular relationships, in fact, could impact the choices, and thus, the consequences of other market actors. Hence, by focusing on reconfiguring the structures of such business interactions and doing so by gaining knowledge of the current, assumed and seemingly strained relationships breeding ethical trespassings due to competition, one could possibly change them for the better and, by doing so, increase the morality of the market participants, thus, positively affect the environment and society at large. However, this undoubtedly constitutes a project challenging to set in motion. Why it, as for now, simply might be "easier" for corporations to aid the ethical consumption gap by maintaining the idea of the consumer as sovereign, alone responsible for their choices, yet again redirecting authority away from corporations.

Moreover, the ambiguity caused by marketing activities similar to H&Ms', allows organizations to act like ethical camouflages, changing colors whenever it is deemed necessary. Thus, they look like sustainable heroes without having to accept accountability. However, the reasoning of the market as the most effective venue for environmental and social change and the promises of development through ethical consumption choices must be approached as less of an objective fact and more as a constructed fantasy, confusing and thus, constraining peoples' thoughts and actions concerning contemporary problems, ultimately keeping the customers in a loop ruled by corporations. Marketing discourses, like H&Ms, are symptoms of the illusionary framework within consumer culture which allows customers to

presume their consumption habits with a pardon. The primary myth of this subject is that by properly purchasing the correct items, we may cure all of our social and environmental ills (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). Thus, freedom is provided at a “marketized and symbolic level”, negating the need to obtain it through political procedures, resulting in a dead end that the consumer will struggle to rise above (Cronin & Fitchetts, 2021).

Moreover, the findings show that corporations, in this case H&M, embrace and promote conceptions of *consumer sovereignty* and *consumer responsibility* in order to ensure that consumers hold the obligation and power to consume the world into a better place. The organization perplexes the customer with ambiguous, avgue, and self-contradictory statements, while strongly advocating the market as the ultimate destination for resolving ethical-related concerns. When the customer then goes to the marketplace, they are presented with an overwhelming number of possibilities, forcing them to select the most convenient decision. Because of market dynamics, the most easy option is almost certainly also the most unethical. The contradictory and polarized nature of the consumer focused discourses create unholistic structures that inevitably cancels one another out, ultimately creating a deadlock in which formation of consumption remains unchanged. From a philosophical point of view, the deadlock shares similarities with the Nietzschean notion of self-overcoming. Instead of placing the human or the market at the “man” in question, we suggest placing the system in that position. The “Overhuman” or in this case, the *Over Capitalism*, is always striving to become a better version of itself. Through ethical consumption practices, the goal is to turn to the flawed system and make it into a more green and fair version of itself. However, the antagonistic deadlock surrounding ethical vs. unethical consumption, creates a standstill in which the system is free to remain the same. This standstill indicates that even though we are trying so hard to achieve *Over Capitalism*, the ethical consumption gap creates structures in which we allow it to be the *Last Capitalism*: a creation without desire to ever change bearing way for its own doom.

Drawing on Carringtons et al. (2016) fetisihic diswoval of reality, and Cronin and Fitchetts (2021) fetishistic inversion, our study showcases *fetishistic dubiety*: in which the subject is being paralyzed by a steady stream of confusion in order to lean on market-based progress. Thus the fetisht acts as if market-based progress is the only vessel for social change, and may indulge in seemingly guilt-free shopping. Hence, the market creates a haze of confusion behind which the underlying structures may hide. To clarify, by engaging in various types of

conflicting and ambiguous marketing activities, which for the average consumer may be difficult to detect, corporations are able to captivate consumers, keeping them in a loop by asserting the impossible, that is: consumers hold the ultimate power to construct real-impact change as its said that their demands dictate the production; the market has the primary authority to lead the way towards a sustainable future, as it is up to the operating agents to create demand. They simply design a constellation that one cannot grasp, breeding confusion that lingers in consumers' subconscious, causing even the most skeptical consumers to eventually shrug their shoulders, forget the one thing rubbing them wrong, and return to filling up their carts.

7. CONCLUSION

The closing chapter of this study includes a general conclusion of the empirical data in regard to the research aim, which is to answer the research question. The study article is revised, and an overview of the theoretical contributions is presented and debated in light of the new conceptual framework. Lastly, the study's limitations are discussed, accompanied by recommendations for future research.

7.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of this thesis was to contribute to existing academic findings by offering a conceptualized understanding of corporations' role in the formation of the ethical consumption gap. In a world in desperate need of long-term solutions, environmental studies establish the groundwork for evaluating previous efforts. Therefore, it is critical to analyze and perhaps post responsibilities on all participating actors, not just customers, inside the defective neoliberal capitalist market system. As a result, this study adds to the limited amount of critical marketing research that focuses on the market's ethical flaws rather than the customer. Through the study conducted, we found a plethora of marketing activities and discourses showcasing corporations' contribution in creating the ethical consumption gap, thus allowing us to answer the research question: *How does the market contribute to the construction of the ethical consumption gap?*

The findings reveal that organizations, in this case, H&M, adopt and promote notions of *consumer sovereignty* and *consumer responsabilization* to ensure that the consumer bears the responsibility and power to consume the world into a better place. Moreover, H&M firmly promotes the market as the ultimate place where consumers may solve all their ethical-related problems. By doing so, they very much lay the foundation for the ethical consumption gap, as its very existence depends on the idea of the market as the optimal venue for change. When the consumer then turns to the marketplace, they are being fed a paralyzing amount of options, pushing the consumer to make the most convenient choices, which, due to ambiguous marketing activities, most likely will be the “bad” and unethical choices. Thus, one could suggest that H&M, even if they provide options “made with a little extra consideration for the planet”, enables consumers to fall short of their ethical motivations, conclusively extending the gap. Lastly, H&M scatters a steady stream of confusion by

conveying vague and self-contradictory messages, altogether functioning as a mechanism allowing consumers to scarcely touch upon the truth. And when they think they have it all figured out, that truth slips right through their minds and fingers, redirecting the consumers back to square one, the landing page of its official website or the entrance to its stores. Hence, consumers are enslaved in a loop from which it is impossible to escape. Subsequently, we are placed at a deadlock, where the confusion serves as the clasp and the market as the key. However, as it looks like today, the market isn't planning on turning the key in the lock anytime soon.

7.2 Theoretical Contribution

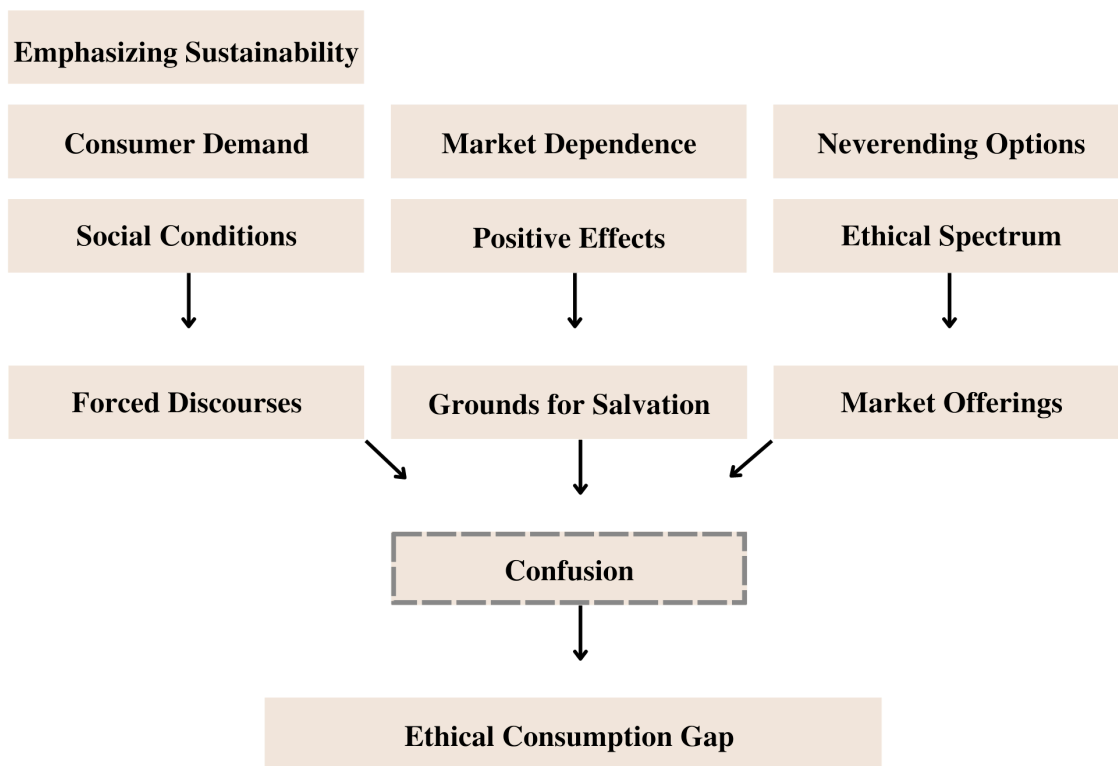


Figure 15 Illustration of theoretical contribution.

The chart presented above, are based on the findings within the empirical analysis and demonstrate those discoveries in relation to the ethical consumption gap. Like a funnel, the findings narrow down through themes to categories to confusion, then lastly down to the gap.

The top layer represents the underlying cornerstones of the gap, elements including H&Ms uses of the concepts introduced in the background and theoretical framework sections: *market-based progress, consumer responsabilization, consumer sovereignty*. All these outer themes, separately but jointly, construct the three overall categories, which, thus, are built upon those themes. Furthermore, those categories funnel down to a scattered fog of confusion. As previously stated, that confusion acts as a veil behind which corporations and the underlying structure may hide uncriticized from the public eye.

Moreover, drawing on Carrington, Zwick and Nevilles (2016) fetishistic disavowal of reality, and Cronin and Fitchetts (2021) fetishistic inversion, our study showcases *fetishistic dubiety*: in which the subject is being paralyzed by a steady stream of confusion in order to lean on market-based progress. Hence, the market creates a haze of confusion behind which the underlying structures may hide. To clarify, by engaging in various types of conflicting and ambiguous marketing activities, which for the average consumer may be difficult to detect, corporations are able to captivate consumers, keeping them in a loop by asserting the impossible, that is: consumers hold the ultimate power to construct real-impact change as its said that their demands dictate the production; the market has the primary authority to lead the way towards a sustainable future, as it is up to the operating agents to create demand.

The notion of *fetishistic dubiety* may provide organizations with valuable insights to better their suitability-inspired operations. Even though we have assumed the ambiguous messages to have been created with the corporations' intention, that might not be the case. Thus, *fetishistic dubiety* might act as a reality check, inviting corporations to carefully look over their operations so that they could, instead of confusing consumers, begin their real journey towards a sustainable future, fully transparent and honest.

Lastly, the findings illustrate a valuable insight to the dysfunctional power dynamics between corporations and customers. By exploring the contributions of all the actors operating within the market, rather than one, we may access a more holistic view of the problem at hand and may address the following actions accordingly. By doing so, we are getting closer to resigning the ethical consumption as a customer curse. Surely, adding sustainability loaded words in every sentence possible does highlight one's' intentions. However, when the following actions are not as solid as the written words, organizations unwillingness to “walk the talk” shines through.

7.3 Limitations and Future Research

While examining the text and visual pictures may entail how corporations add to the ethical consumption gap, the methods utilized are unable to display how consumers really act upon those messages. Thus, the purpose of this research is not to discover how consumers internalize the gap, but rather to discover the marketing activities performed by the opposite actor within the market. Due to the time-constrate of the research, the study needed to be limited accordingly. Thus the scope of the research was restricted to only investigate one particular case, within one particular industry. Thus, we acknowledge that the contribution might be case-specific. However, similar marketing activities might be applied by any corporation within any industry, thus, the empirical findings established from the specific case of H&M, displaying how the market contributes to the creation of the ethical consumption gap, could potentially act as a representation for various organizations. Further research needs to be applied in order to fathom the extent to which market actors inflict confusion through various organizations and industries.

Whatever paths future studies may select, we would like to emphasize that the views presented regarding ethical consumerism should not be misinterpreted as a demand to discover methods to inflict the different limits that influence individual consumers. Like Carrington, Zwick and Nevilles (2016), we see the ethical consumption gap as a myth of individual agency pushed to divert critical attention from the underlying systemic ills of capitalism. Like them, we are skeptical that a relatively small group of people has the agency to save the world and turn it into a better place by eradicating the inconsistencies between their ethical intention and behavior. Our shift from consumers participation in ethical consumption gaps towards market activities is an attempt to recognize and advocate against this consumer repositioning approach in achieving ethical sustainability. Therefore, we call for marketing researchers to continue investigating the markets' part in constructing the ethical consumption gap by examining other agents within the fashion industry and agents operating within fields other than the fashion industry. We, too, invite researchers answering such calls, to keep the newly developed notion of *fetishistic dubiety* in mind, to see if it's utilized beyond the case of H&M. In that event, one may use that notion and knowledge to enlighten corporations employing it, as they might not even be aware of it. Thus, that knowledge could boost market agents to begin their real journey towards a sustainable future, fully transparent and honest.

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