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# Retailing Sustainability

Enacting responsible consumers

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## ***Preface***

This mid-project report presents the findings of the research project “Green shops: sustainable retail and value creating practices” financed by Handelns Utvecklingsråd ([www.hur.nu](http://www.hur.nu)).

Researchers in the project are Professor Cecilia Fredriksson (project leader) and PhD Christian Fuentes, both at the Department of Service Management, Lund University. In addition, Catharina Wingner Leifland has worked as research assistant.

Read more about the project and the researchers involved at [www.ism.lu.se/retailresearch](http://www.ism.lu.se/retailresearch).

## **1. Introduction**

Concepts such as organizational sustainability, corporate sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility, corporate citizenship and green marketing have gained popularity during the last 20 years. The notion that organizations can be agents for positive social change is now well established and widely accepted among both scholars and practitioners (Banerjee 2007).

The retail sector is no exception. Wall Mart, the Body Shop, Marks and Spencer, Tecso and numerous other retailers are making an effort to be greener, fairer and more involved in “social” issues (see, e.g. Iles 2007, Jones et al. 2005a, Jones et al. 2005c, Lai et al. 2010). Similarly, in Sweden retailers now commonly include environmentally friendly and fair trade products in their stock, sponsor local organizations and events, contribute to different charities, and promote recycling (see, e.g. Blombäck and Wigren-Kristoferson 2011, Anselmsson and Johansson 2007). Sustainability issues are in focus in current retail discussions and sustainability strategies seem now to be fairly common among Swedish retailers.

But what exactly is organizational sustainability about? Sustainability has since the 90s been framed as a strategic issue within corporations and other organizations (see e.g., Banerjee 2007). Sustainability strategies are argued to be important not only because organizations have an obligation to society but also because sustainability activities can contribute to improve business/organizational operations. In the formulation of this approach to sustainability, societal goals and the organizations goals are aligned in a seemingly unproblematic way (Banerjee 2007). From this perspective, one of the most important aspects of organizational sustainability is its ability to add value to the products and services provided by corporations/organizations. By marketing sustainability activities and strategies as well as environmentally friendly/fair trade products the organization is to construct value for both its products and brand. The organizations sustainability work is translated into a marketing resource and a business strategy.

Framing organizational sustainability as a marketing strategy presents both challenges and risks. For an organizations sustainability activities to add to the retailers products and services they must also be made meaningful to consumers. That is, it becomes not only a matter of working with sustainability within retail organization but also a matter of retailing sustainability. If we abandon the idea that marketing is purely informative and instead see it as a socio-cultural and performative practice through which products and services are both added value and made meaningful (see, e.g. Sherry 1998, Peñaloza 1999, Kozinets et al. 2004, Arnould 2005, Fuentes 2011) one important question becomes: how do retail organization work to make their sustainability work meaningful and valuable to consumers? What practices and processes are involved in this?

These questions have not received the attention they merit. While corporate sustainability and CSR are much researched subjects (Banerjee 2007, Dobers 2010), the marketing of sustainability work remains relatively unexplored (Wanderley et al. 2008). Likewise, while organizational

sustainability as a concept and practice has entered the retail sector, research on sustainability and retail remains limited (Blombäck and Wigren-Kristoferson 2011, Bansal and Kilbourne 2001).

Against this background, the aim of the project “Green shops: sustainable retail and value creating practices”, is to contribute to the understanding of how sustainability strategies are used as marketing and value-adding strategies by retail organizations. This is done through an in-depth ethnographic study of three retailers that have all received attention for their sustainability work: Åhléns, Boomerang and Myrorna.

Three questions are central in this study: What sustainability activities are marketed to consumers? How and through which channels is the sustainability work of the retail organizations marketed to consumers? What meanings is sustainability given in and through this marketing work?

In the next section, I briefly present the study carried out before moving on to present and discuss the findings of the project.

## **2. Method and materials: the fieldwork**

At the time of writing two of the four planned sub-studies have been conducted and the third is in progress:

1) *Preliminary study*: the preliminary study focused on collecting media material and mapping retailers' sustainability strategies on the web. The media material collected consists of around 100 articles and the mapping of sustainability strategies on the web generated about 60 pages of printed material. The aim has been to get a preliminary understanding of the different sustainability strategies being used in retail.

2) *Sustainability strategies*: The second sub-study examines the sustainability strategies mobilized by the three retail organizations studied more closely. Six in-depth interviews with sustainability strategist and other staff in leading positions were carried out. These interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, were transcribed in full, and generated approximately 60 pages of transcript.

3) *Sustainability marketed at the store*: the third sub-study centres on the stores. How are the retailers' sustainability strategies materialized at stores? Do they impact on the way the stores are organized and if so in what way? Observations are currently being conducted at Åhléns, Boomerang and Myrorna stores in Malmö, Lund, Helsingborg, Göteborg and Stockholm. At the time of writing approximately 20 observations lasting between 15-90 minutes have been carried out generating approximately 80 pages of field notes.

4) *Consuming Sustainability*: The consumer study remains to be done. The idea is to interview around 40 consumers individually and/or in focus groups about their shopping experiences. How do these consumers use “green shops”? In what ways does the sustainability work done by retail organizations enable the meanings constructed by consumers?

### **3. Marketing Sustainability**

What sustainability issues are addressed by these three retail organizations? And what devices are used in the marketing of these sustainability issues?

What sustainability issues an organization markets can be a complex question. Social and environmental issues are different between industries and corporations and change over time (Wanderley et al. 2008, Banerjee 2007, Frostenson et al. 2010). As organizations cannot be expected to address the entire range of possible issues, they often identify and focus on a specific set of issues. Research has shown that these issues often relate to the company's core business (Frostenson et al. 2010). Furthermore, not all sustainability work is marketed to consumers (Jones et al. 2005b). Sometimes the possibilities are simply not acknowledged, at other times there is the fear that marketing oneself as a responsible or sustainable corporation might bring on criticism or create too much expectations (Wanderley et al. 2008).

When organizations do choose to market their sustainability work they tend to employ a wide range of marketing devices. Catalogues, brochures, annual reports as well as sustainability reports are commonly used to inform stakeholders of companies sustainability work (see, e.g. Catasús 2000, Wanderley et al. 2008). Stores are, or at least can be, effective marketing devices in their own right (Jones et al. 2005b, Fuentes 2011). So, while the web may be a popular vehicle for the dispersion of organizational sustainability information (Wanderley et al. 2008), it is far from the only marketing device that retail organizations use.

In this section I discuss what sustainability issues these retail organizations market and how they market them.

#### **Åhléns: making sustainable products available**

Åhléns is one of the leading retailing companies in Sweden specializing in consumer goods within fashion, beauty and interior design. Åhléns wants to be women's favourite shopping destination and improve, simplify and enrich the lives of many women. ([www.youtube.com/user/byAhlen](http://www.youtube.com/user/byAhlen) 28 February 2012)

Åhléns markets itself as a caring company that is concerned with both the environment – usually the more common theme when retail organization report their sustainability work (Frostenson et al. 2010) – and “social” issues. This retailer's sustainability work touches upon such diverse issues as diversity and equality among the staff, staff education, environmental concerns, animal rights, labour rights, and child labour.

Much of the sustainability work done by Åhléns is aimed at providing sustainable products to its customers. Åhléns carries both environmentally friendly and fair-trade products.

Our buyers are always looking for more products to bring into our more sustainable range. At present, availability of this type of product varies widely in fashion, beauty and home furnishings. It is for

instance relatively easy to find organic clothing, but more difficult to find eco-labelled crockery. (Åhléns Sustainability Report 2010, Page 11).

Selections of these products, those that are deemed to meet the high environmental and social standards of the company, are also labelled with Åhléns own responsible choice label called “Å, wow”

Our goal is for the ‘Å, wow!’ range to account for ten percent of product sales by 2013. By April 2011, we had reached three percent of sales. (Åhléns Sustainability Report, Page 12).

In addition to increasing the amount of environmentally friendly and fair-trade products in its assortment, Åhléns also excludes products that do not align with their “company values”:

*Down* – Åhléns rejects down plucked from live birds.

*Leather* – Åhléns accepts only leather that is a by-product of meat production.

*Mulesing* – The merino wool in Åhléns’ private-label products must be guaranteed mulesing-free.

*Fur* – Åhléns rejects fur and is a member of the Fur Free Alliance.

*Sandblasting* – Sandblasting is not accepted as a production method for Åhléns’ private-label products.

*Wood* – Åhléns rejects wood products made from endangered species.

*Anti-bacterial substances* – Åhléns does not permit anti-bacterial substances that can lead to resistance to antibiotics, or products treated with such substances. ([www.ahlens.se](http://www.ahlens.se) 24 February 2012)

Åhléns also works to lower the energy used by the department stores and offices and the environmental impact of their transports. It is looking into the possibility to switch to renewable energy and is also a member of the Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI).

Åhléns markets its sustainability work using a wide range of marketing devices. Like many other organizations (Frostenson et al. 2010, Wanderley et al. 2008), Åhléns relies heavily on its website as a communicator of its sustainability work. On the website consumers can read about Åhléns sustainable label ‘Å, wow!’, its different sustainability projects, the company’s values, its sustainability strategy, and more.

Also Facebook is used to communicate at least some aspects of the company’s sustainability work. Åhléns Facebook page has been utilized to for example launch a new ecological skin care brand ([www.facebook.com/#!/ahlens](http://www.facebook.com/#!/ahlens) 28 February 2012). This interactive platform also allows consumers to communicate directly with Åhléns and be part of the companies sustainability work by for example testing new eco-product lines.

Åhléns also skilfully uses the media to get attention for its sustainability work. Press releases are written to comment on “hot” topics - such as the practice of mulesing, feathers from live birds - and to inform

about the sustainability activities done by the corporation such as the launching of their eco-label or their recycling project with Myrorna.

Finally, the department stores are important marketing devices through which Åhléns makes their sustainability work known to consumers. As mentioned, much of the sustainability work carried out by this retailer focuses on making environmentally friendly and fair-trade products available. At the department stores these products are given attention and clearly demarcated using signs and labels. Consumers can easily find the ecological and fair trade assortment marked as “Good choice” at the department stores. Consumers can also read about ecological cotton, what the different eco-certifications stand for, and more if they look at the tags of the products. For example, on a cotton sweatshirt I found a tag that stated:

This cotton was grown without the use of pesticides or synthetic fertilisers. It is healthier for farm workers, better for nature and beautifully soft and natural for you to wear (Field notes 15 February 2012).

The tags on the products also direct interested consumers to the corporate website for more information regarding Åhléns sustainability work.

In sum, Åhléns uses the web, the media and the retail space of its department stores to market its sustainability work. TV commercials and the Åhléns Magazine contain limited information concerning the company's sustainability work (Although they have a commercial featuring Åhléns ecological products). Instead, Åhléns utilizes PR work, web marketing, and the carefully arranged shopping trails of its department stores to market itself and its products as sustainable in different ways.

### Boomerang: re-use and remake

Boomerang's sustainability work is less diverse. While also this retailer is marketed as a caring company concerned with environmental and “social” issues, the sustainability work they carry out and market is more focused. More specifically, the focus for the sustainability work of Boomerang has been recycling. On the website visitors can read:

There is a reason our logo is a boomerang. We believe that what you give is also what you get back. That is why we have created the Boomerang Effect. That means you can return your Boomerang clothes to the shop when you no longer want them. As our thanks for your contribution, you will get a 10% discount on a new garment, but above all, you will be helping to make sure the clothing is re-used. Some garments are labelled with the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation's 'Good Choice for the Environment' label and sold as Boomerang Vintage. Others are cut up and made into furniture for Boomerang Home. We use waste materials from the factory in the Effect Collection: stylish everyday products in classic Boomerang textiles. ([www.boomerang.se](http://www.boomerang.se) 27 February 2012)

This text captures the sustainability strategy of Boomerang: to encourage recycling in different ways. The company resells old products labelling them as “vintage”. Products not suitable for reselling in the vintage line are instead remade into furniture in their “Boomerang Home” product line. Finally, waste products (pieces of textile and so on) from the manufacturing process of their regular products are used to make a separate line of products: The Effect Collection. Boomerang works thus to encourage both recycling and upcycling. At the time of writing, the company reports having received over 7000 clothing items ([www.boomerang.se](http://www.boomerang.se) 2012-02-27).

Boomerang uses its website and Facebook page to promote its sustainability work. Boomerangs Facebook page, for example, promotes both its vintage products and the Boomerang effect product line. On the boomerang webpage consumers can read about the company’s work to recycle their garments. Consumers can read texts presenting the boomerang effect concept and “philosophy”, the Vintage collection, the Boomerang effect collection (products made from the excess material generated by the regular manufacturing process of Boomerangs clothes), and the Boomerang Home collection (furniture and carpets made from recycled Boomerang garments). The website also includes information about Boomerangs Code of Conduct and the company’s broader commitment to selling quality (durable) products.

Like Åhléns, Boomerang has been skilful in getting attention in media for its sustainability efforts. One can find numerous articles on Boomerang and its sustainability work. For example, in an article in *Dagens Industri*, Boomerangs designer Catti Lange talks about the quality of Boomerang products:

Boomerang garments are very high quality and can be re-used several times before they wear out. And when they cannot be used anymore, they can be recycled as rag rugs, for instance. (Catti Lange, Boomerang designer, quoted in *Dagens Industri*, page 11, 8 November 2008)

Boomerang and its reselling and recycling concept has also been written about in home interior decorating magazines such as *Allt i Hemmet* and *Sköna Hem*, as well as in the daily papers such as *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Göteborgs Posten* and free papers like *Metro* and *City Stockholm*

Worth noting is that, for the most part, these articles describe the Boomerangs sustainability concept and work. That is, critical questions are seldom included in the articles. The media works as just another marketing channel for Boomerang, a platform where they can communicate their sustainability concept to consumers.

In addition, Boomerang does some advertisement for its sustainability line “the Boomerang effect” and it also markets its sustainability work at different events such as the Econow fair and Stockholm Fashion Week.

The Boomerang stores, however, leave something to be desired when it comes to the marketing of the company’s sustainability work. While the Boomerang effect product line is marketed at the Boomerang stores and some stores also carry the “vintage” collection, the sustainability work of

this retailer is not as visible as one might expect. The Boomerang effect collection is difficult to distinguish from the regular collection. And although some Boomerang stores more clearly market both the vintage collection and other aspects of its sustainability work, many stores do not seem to make this a priority.

In sum, Boomerang markets its sustainability work mainly through its PR relations and website. The catalogue and more importantly the stores remain underused as sustainability communicators.

### Myrorna: re-use and recycling for social work

Finally, similar to Åhléns, Myrorna has a diversified sustainability profile. Through their second hand shops Myrorna works to promote the reselling of goods and thus also, they argue, contribute to the development of a more environmentally sustainable society. In addition, the proceeds generated from this activity go to social work carried out by the Salvation Army (of which Myrorna is a part of):

The surplus generated by sales goes to the Salvation Army's social services. This can provide a second chance for a teenager with problems, a warm night for a homeless person, Christmas presents for children who would otherwise go without, or help paying the rent for a single parent.

But concern for the environment is equally important. We want everybody to re-use more. For example, buying a t-shirt at Myrorna instead of a new one will save more than 17 bathtubs full of drinking water. This is very important for people who live without daily access to water. ([www.facebook.com/Myrorna](http://www.facebook.com/Myrorna) 29 February 2012)

In this text, which can be found at the stores and on its website, Myrorna works to interconnect environmental concern and social work. On the website visitors can read that while its main focus is on the promotion of re-use through the selling of second hand goods, it also aims to be 'a way into the job market for people who are unemployed for various reasons' and contribute to the development of third world countries. Myrorna is also concerned with promoting gender equality and diversity among its staff and volunteers and makes an effort to green their own organization by for example furnishing the offices with second hand products.

As one can expect of a "social entrepreneur", Myrorna sustainability work is ambitious. At the website visitors can read that:

The surplus generated in 2009 will be used for the following services in 2010:

*Kurön*, an island in Lake Mälaren – rehab centre for people with addictions

*Nylösegården*, Göteborg – supportive housing for men with addictions

*The Social Centre on Bergsundsstrand*, Stockholm – drop-in care centre that works with homeless persons and addicts

*Locus*, Stockholm – supportive housing for socially at-risk youth

*Sundsgården*, Ekerö – school and rehab centre for socially at-risk teenage boys

*Vårsol*, Jönköping – family centre for families with social needs

*Drop-in Care Centres in 15 places in Sweden*, where we meet people who need help of various kinds, such as emergency financial support, counselling, a support person to accompany them on various errands, or home visits.

*The Akalla Centre* – work with immigrant families, primarily women and children

*15 corps around the country* that run various types of social services for people in at-risk groups. This may involve, for instance, emergency financial support, counselling, support persons to accompany people on various errands, home visits, or day activity programmes. ([www.myrorna.se](http://www.myrorna.se) 29 February 2012)

As we can see, the social work of the Salvations Army, which Myrorna contributes to, focuses on a broad range of groups such as addicts, homeless people, and troubled youth.

In sum, the sustainability work of Myrorna balances environmental issues and social work, aligning its organization to contribute to both issues in different ways.

How is this sustainability work marketed? Similar to Åhléns and Boomerang, Myrorna does not use catalogues, brochures or TV-commercials to any great extent to communicate its sustainability work. Instead this second hand retailer relies on a combination of website, Facebook page, PR, and the stores themselves to market itself and its sustainability work.

Also like Boomerang and Åhléns, Myrorna communicates much of its sustainability work through its website. On the website consumers can read about the positive environmental impact that Myrorna has in terms of reduced water consumption, carbon dioxide emissions, and chemical waste (according to an estimation done by Myrorna). Consumers can also read about the social work done by the Salvation Army (see above) and the different sustainability projects carried out by this non-profit organization. Much of the information on its website is also aimed at encouraging consumers to donate items and explaining what happens to donations after they are received.

Myrorna also uses Facebook to communicate with consumers. On its Facebook page it posts news item and answers questions from consumers. On the website one can read about new stores opening, Christmas fairs, recycling fairs, vintage fairs, awards received, new collaborations, and much more.

Myrorna also has a YouTube channel on which it posts videos on relevant topics. Here consumers can get answers to questions such as “what does Myrorna do with the surplus generated?”, “who works at Myrorna?”, “what is the difference between re-using and recycling?” and “what can I find at Myrorna?”

Myrorna are, as mentioned above, also active when it comes to fairs and other events. It regularly attends Christmas fairs, eco-fairs, furniture and interior decoration fairs, vintage fairs and other fairs in an effort to market itself and its sustainability work.

At the stores consumers can find references to Myrorna's sustainability work. At some stores one can find a large sign stating the environmental benefits of shopping at Myrorna as well as the societal good that the organization does. Signs thanking donors for their gifts and Myrorna's "re-use" bags are commonly found at the stores and serve as reminders of the organization's environmental and social work. At some stores consumers can also find large colourful Myrorna posters with the text 'Re-use saves the Earth's resources' in large print. And below in much smaller print 'Your gift also helps people in need in Sweden' followed by the organization's logotype and the text "Love reuse".

Together these and other posters and signs contribute to communicate the organization's sustainability work to consumers. This marketing work is however modest, I argue. Although one can find signs, posters, specially designed bags and more at Myrorna's stores, these marketing devices do not usually occupy much of the retail space available. In addition, there is great variation between the stores: some are overflowing with signs and other marketing devices; others have only one or two signs.

In sum, what we can see when examining Myrorna's marketing work is a retail organization that uses multiple marketing channels to market itself and its sustainability work. Although this is a non-profit organization its marketing strategy does not seem to differ in any significant way from the two other companies discussed. And, like the other two cases, Myrorna also relies largely on its website and PR work to communicate its sustainability efforts.

## Summary and discussion

To conclude, although all the three retail organizations studied market a multitude of sustainability activities cutting across a broad range of themes, some companies take a broader approach to sustainability. And, although these retail organizations use similar marketing strategies and devices to communicate their sustainability work, important differences can be observed.

Åhléns and Myrorna have complex sustainability profiles in which environmental and social issues are combined. In contrast, Boomerang focuses its efforts on one aspect: the promotion and enabling of re-use and re-cycling. However, all three companies have a specific focus. For Åhléns it is providing sustainable products, for Boomerang it is, as mentioned, the promotion and enabling of re-use and re-cycling, and for Myrorna it is the promotion and enabling of re-use.

In regards to how the sustainability work of these retail organizations is marketed one can note similarities. All three organizations used their corporate website as their main sustainability communicator. Also, while Åhléns department stores did use signage and labels to mark their

sustainable products and to communicate the company's sustainability work, this aspect was less visible at the Boomerang and Myrorna stores.

## **4. Sustainability is remade, sustainability remakes**

We have now an idea of what sustainability issues are marketed and through which channels/devices they are marketed. But what meanings is sustainability given by these retail organizations? How is *sustainability* framed through this marketing work?

As is often stated, for sustainability work to make sense it has to be adapted to a specific context (see, e.g. Strannegård 1998, Cramer et al. 2004, Cerne 2008). Retail organizations, like other organizations, therefore work to modify sustainability concepts and practices in order to fit their needs and the specific context in which the organization operates (Jones et al. 2005d, Cerne 2008).

Examining how these retail organizations market their sustainability work through marketing material, websites and at the shops, one can note three very different ways of defining and enacting sustainability. That is, as could be expected, these different retail organizations have different ways of translating sustainability. In each of these cases sustainability is assigned a different role as it is made part of the world enacted by the marketing materials and devices of the retail organizations.

### **Sustainable products for the active woman**

Let us begin by looking more closely at the marketing material of Åhléns. Examining the corporate website, Facebook page, press releases, member's magazine, TV-commercials and the department stores one can note that it is a complex image that this retailer communicates to consumers. Through its marketing work Åhléns builds on and reproduces a specific understanding of the world we live in, consumers, and the sustainability role of the company.

Åhléns sees "active women" as their main customer:

After all, we have a fairly distinct focus on ... women ... I suppose in the early middle-age group actually, 25 to 45 ... So, women living very busy lives with kids and so on, with very full calendars  
(Interview with Karin Hanses, Åhléns, 25 May 2011)

Åhléns goal is to be first on her shopping trip and a one-stop store for fashions, beauty products, and home decoration. This retailer wants to be "women's favourite". In the world enacted by Åhléns women have active lives and many choices. It is a consumer society where shopping can be fun but can also be a time consuming task, shopping in this world can be both play and work (Bäckström 2006, Babin et al. 1994, Bäckström 2011).

In this world women need assistance to be sustainable. Women are conscious about these issues; they care. Karen describes Åhléns customers:

I believe this target group is very aware of these issues. They get very involved; they care deeply about sustainability both in terms of the contents of the products purely ... well, organic and such, that the products should be organic, as well as all the fair trade aspects...  
(Interview with Karin Hanses, Åhléns, 25 May 2011)

The problem is then not that they do not care but that they do not have time. According to Åhléns active women do not have the time nor the resources to manage the complexities involved in sustainable consumption ((this is also something expressed by green consumers when interviewed, see e.g., Cherrier and Murray 2007, Connolly and Prothero 2008, Fuentes 2011).

Against this background, the task that Åhléns takes upon itself is to be what Sadowski and Buckingham (2007) call choice-editors. The company works to enable consumers to make sustainable choices by including sustainable products in their assortment, clearly marking them and providing information about these products. But it also makes choices for consumers by excluding certain products and also by choosing the issues addressed and to what extent they are addressed. In a manner of speaking, Åhléns wants to do the thinking so their consumers do not have to:

Ideally, you want to get to the level at which our customers believe 'if I go to Åhléns and shop, I know they've done the thinking for me. And I can trust that what they have there are good products'  
(Interview with Karin Hanses, Åhléns, 25 May 2011).

This way of thinking about sustainability and sustainable products is an extension of how Åhléns defines its "mission". In Åhléns sustainability report (2010) one can read:

We offer our customers a unique mix of on-trend products that offer good value for money in Fashion, Beauty and Home. Our mission is to improve, simplify and make women's lives a bit more special. We aim to be the woman's favourite, and there is no question in our minds that we have to act responsibly as an organisation and work every day to increase our more sustainable range.

Being responsible and offering an assortment of sustainable products is thus an extension of Åhléns self-defined role as enablers of women's active lifestyles.

Through the marketing work done by Åhléns sustainable consumption is defined as the purchasing sustainable products. The responsible consumer is here an active woman who is fashion interested but also conscious of the environmental and social problems that exist in consumer society. The way to consume sustainably is by purchasing the right (Åhléns) products.

However, not only is sustainability redefined by Åhléns as it is incorporated into its product offering. Conversely, the introduction of

sustainability issues transforms the service that Åhléns offers; it transforms this retailer's value proposition. Åhléns adds value to its service by providing its consumers with an assortment of sustainable products. It puts in a lot of work into finding, developing and marketing sustainable products. Åhléns does this so their consumers do not have to. It works as a choice editors and enables these active, fashion-interested women to be sustainable. With the assistance of Åhléns consumers can now be more than fashionable women and mothers; they can now construct themselves as environmentally and socially conscious fashionable women and mothers.

### Recyclable and re-usable products for Scandinavian preppies

Boomerangs main consumer is not an active woman but rather "design" interested men and women. Boomerang calls its style "Scandinavian preppy":

Right from the outset, they [the founders of the company] drew up plans for a Scandinavian brand of premium quality casual clothes. The first spring collection presented a range of piqué, cotton shirts, oxford shirts, cord and canvas trousers solid or in stripes. Clothes that to this day still form the basis of the Boomerang range and style that we call Scandinavian Preppy ([www.boomerang.com](http://www.boomerang.com) 7 March 2012)

Three themes are combined in the marketing of Boomerang clothing: the nautical, Scandinavian, and preppy. Boomerang products, this retailer makes clear, are for those interested in high-end quality clothing and wish to be associated with the preppy style that these products convey.

So how does sustainability come into this? Also Boomerang reproduces the notion that we live in a consumer society, but the problem enacted here is not one that has to do with the complexities of choosing sustainable products. Instead Boomerang focuses on the environmental problems of the throw-way consumer society; we purchase too many easily discarded products, the company tells consumers. The answer, however, is not to stop consuming altogether. Instead the solution, Boomerang tells consumers, is twofold. First, to purchase quality products that can stand the test of time and, second, when these products for some reason become obsolesce for their previous owners, to re-sell them or re-cycle them.

Ever since we started Boomerang in 1976, nature has been our great source of inspiration. The sea, the rocks and the waves which never abate. The ice and snow that freezes and melts, and freezes again. A never-ending cycle. Exactly the way we want our clothes to be.

That is why we have created The Boomerang Effect. This means that you can hand in your old Boomerang garments in the shop when you no longer use them. Some of them we will mark with the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation "Good Environmental Choice" and give a second chance as Boomerang Vintage in selected shops. But even the garments which cannot be sold will be recycled in other forms.

When you come in to have a look at what's new this spring, bring the jacket or the favourite shirt that's been worn. To show our gratitude, we will give you a 10% discount when you buy something new and at the same time you are contributing to a more durable and better world.  
([www.boomerang.com](http://www.boomerang.com) 7 March 2012)

In this text we see how Boomerang and its products are connected to nature. Boomerang, we are told, wants its products to be part of a never-ending cycle, to be part of a "natural" cycle. Boomerang offers here a solution both for material and symbolic obsolescence (on design and obsolescence see, e.g. Tham 2008). When it is simply a matter of symbolic obsolescence – previous owners might want to change style or simply want something new – the garment is resold and given new value as "vintage". When instead the clothing item is to worn, it is used to make a new product such as a rug or a piece of furniture (so called upcycle). Thus, for Boomerang sustainability is not primarily about consuming products that are labelled sustainable, but rather about buying things that last, re-using old things and re-cycling those that can no longer be reused. Thus, the service that Boomerang provides is that it enables its consumers to be sustainable while continuing to consume the (Boomerang) products they enjoy so much. Boomerang allows consumers to construct a green Scandinavian preppy style.

### Promoting fashionable re-use

The case of Myrorna is more complex. A version of consumer society is also reproduced in the marketing work of Myrorna. But in this version there are at least two problems that need to be addressed.

First there is the before mentioned problem of the throwaway society. In contemporary consumer society we consume too much and do not reuse and recycle enough, consumers are told. The consequences are severe in terms of environmental degradation. High-energy consumption, elevated carbon dioxide emissions, chemical contamination are just some of the negative consequences of overconsumption, consumers are told by Myrorna.

Second, the marketing work of Myrorna also reminds consumers that there are those that do not have the resources required to participate in consumer society on equal terms. For example, Myrorna has designed shopping bags with the text 'This bag may contain help with the rent for a single parent' printed on the side of the bag. Similarly one can at the stores find signs that say 'Good for you, the buyer. Good for those who are in need.' emphasising that purchasing Myrorna products is not only beneficial for the consumer doing the purchasing but also for those in need that receive help through the donations made by Myrorna. Through its marketing work Myrorna draws attention to those that Bauman calls "failed consumers" (Bauman 2007: 31). It draws attention to the "collateral victims of consumerism" (Bauman 2007: 31), those that lack the financial resources to partake in the consumption project.

The solution marketed by Myrorna is to consume their second hand products. By consuming second hand at Myrorna consumers can

simultaneously contribute to environmental and social sustainability. Myrorna's makes an effort to enlist consumers to contribute to its central mission:

Myrorna shall work to bring about a more sustainable world by actively driving a trend towards increased re-use. By this means, Myrorna shall generate a consistent and significant surplus directed to social services provided by the Salvation Army. ([www.myrorna.se](http://www.myrorna.se) 7 March 2012)

But to whom is this solution offered? Myrorna directs its marketing to a specific type of consumer: the fashion consumer (see also Fredriksson 2012). While surely there are many other types of consumers that visit and purchase items at the stores and while these almost certainly have different motives for doing so (financial, for example), Myrorna focuses on the fashion aspect of second hand when marketing its products.

The fashion theme is perhaps most visible at the stores. The stores have special sections that are called 'more personal' in which much of the more fashionable retro and vintage items are put on display. Some of the stores also have sections called "designers" in which consumers can find more up-scale clothing items such as for example Chanel coats.

Myrorna also tries to follow and adapt to trends and seasons, attends fashion events, vintage fairs and collaborates with fashion retailers such as Lindex and Åhléns.

To conclude, what Myrorna offers consumers is the opportunity to be fashionable, individual, "develop their own style" as they phrase it, while at the same time contributing to environmental sustainability and important social work. Myrorna offers consumers the discursive and material resources required to add "sustainability" to their style constructions.

## Summary and discussion

As we can see from the analysis above, sustainability is redefined by these three retail organizations. In each case it becomes something different. This confirms previous research which has stated that sustainability (or CSR) is redefined by different retail organizations, adapted to fit the purposes of the specific company (Jones et al. 2005d, Jones et al. 2008, Cerne 2008, Frostenson et al. 2010). However, the analysis also indicates that the way in which sustainability is remade is not only, or simply, connected to the industry in which these retailers operate. Instead, it has to do with ideas of who the consumer is. In each of these cases it becomes apparent that sustainability issues are reformulated to fit into an imagined consumer lifestyle: active women, Scandinavian preppy and fashion interested consumers looking to construct a personal style. And, in each case, the value proposition made by the retailer is transformed. These retailers become enablers that offer consumers the opportunity to be sustainable – in different ways – and be part of a specific lifestyle.

To be clear, this is not simply a matter of retailers targeting specific consumer types and lifestyles. Through this marketing work these retailers

are instead actively enacting specific versions of sustainable consumers. These retailers are through their marketing work showing consumers how they should be in order to be “responsible consumers”, they are in fact working to construct values (as in notions of what is right and wrong) in the processes of co-producing value.

## **5. Conclusions and discussion**

What preliminary conclusion can be drawn from this analysis?

In line with previous research on sustainability and retailing this study shows that while retail organizations may have complex sustainability strategies covering multiple environmental and social issues they tend to focus on a few issues when marketing their sustainability work to consumers (see also Frostenson et al. 2010).

This study also shows that while retail organizations use multiple marketing devices to market their products – corporate websites, Facebook pages, YouTube channels, magazines, TV advertisement, outdoor advertisement, magazine advertisement, the retail space itself, and more – they only use a few of these to market their sustainability work. There is, as other studies also have shown, a great reliance on corporate websites (Wanderley et al. 2008, Moreno and Capriotti 2009) while stores and other marketing devices are underused in the communication of organizational sustainability (see also Jones et al. 2005b). And, as expected, a close reading of the marketing work done by these retail organizations showed that sustainability indeed is redefined, as it becomes part of the retailers’ product/service offerings. However, the way in which sustainability is remade is not only, or simply, connected to the industry in which these retailers operate but has to do with ideas of who the consumer is and their lifestyles. These retailers’ sustainability work and communication seems to be guided by imaginary consumers. Their work is guided by ideas of consumers rather than flesh and body consumers. In fact, these retailers seemed to know little about their customers and how they related to sustainability issues. Instead, different ideas about “the consumer” underline the way they talk about sustainability and how they market it. These retailers effort seem thus to be guided mainly by a specific understanding of their consumers. These understandings however do not seem to be grounded in consumer studies but rather on discursive constructs of the consumer (see also Lien 2004, Svensson 2003, Svensson 2007, Lien 1997). And although these discursive constructs are developed within the retail organization and enacted through their marketing practices, they draw on broader discourses about consumers (for an overview of different ways of talking about consumers see Gabriel and Lang 2006, Aldridge 2003).

Åhléns active woman has much in common with “the rational consumer” – perhaps the most dominant image of the green consumer today and one often reproduced economic and psychological consumer research (see e.g., Granqvist 2000, Harrison et al. 2005, Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al. 2006, Shaw and Shiu 2003, Tan 2002). These consumers are thought to be rational problem solvers that evaluate their sustainability choices and choose according to their ethical beliefs.

The design interested Boomerang consumer envisioned by the retailer and enacted by its marketing practices are a combination of the knowledgeable green connoisseur - a consumer that knows quality when he/she see it – and the green hedonist in search of the good life (see e.g., Connolly and Prothero 2008, Soper 2007). The argument is that for consumers to engage in green consumption practices, these practices must provide them with cultural, psychological, and practical benefits (see e.g., Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). Soper introduces the concept of “alternative hedonism” to explain what is involved in this form of consumption. She argues that:

The hedonist aspect of this shift in consumption practice does not reside exclusively in meeting the desire to avoid or limit the unpleasurable by-products of collective affluence, but also in the sensual pleasures of consuming differently. (Soper 2007: 211)

In the process of producing green experiences, the pleasurable and the moral can indeed be integrated, Soper argues. For Soper, alternative hedonism develops within consumer society; it is a self-reflexive practice that leads to the search for alternative pleasures. What is involved in green consumption is “a distinctively moral form of self-pleasuring or a self-interested form of altruism: that which takes pleasure in committing to a more socially accountable mode of consuming” (Soper 2007: 213).

And, finally, Myrorna’s fashionable and style-driven sustainable consumer has much in common with the identity seeking green consumer that socio-cultural consumption research has described and conceptualized (Soper 2007: 213). From this perspective, green consumption, like any other type of consumption, is closely connected to the formation of identity. Studies in this vein demonstrate how consumers construct complex identities for themselves as environmentally conscious subjects through the consumption of ordinary goods such as shopping bags or foodstuffs (see e.g., Moisander and Pesonen 2002, Autio 2004, Cherrier 2006, Cherrier and Murray 2007, Connolly and Prothero 2008).

What does this tell us? On one hand, it is possible to argue that because these retailers draw on widely dispersed discourses of the green consumer they are in fact making use of research. After all, these conceptualizations of the green consumers have been developed through empirical studies. On the other hand, it is very likely that a specific study of these retailers’ customers and potential customers would reveal greater heterogeneity. For example, observations at Myrorna indicate that only a few of its customers fit Myrorna’s ideas of the consumer as a sustainable fashionable and style driven consumer. Many seem simple to be in search of a bargain. Thus, relying on imaginary or ideal consumers is possibly standing in the way of an understanding of the different forms of sustainable shopping consumers carry out.

However, one must be careful not to ignore the performative aspect of marketing (on the performativity of marketing see e.g., Skålén et al. 2008, Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006, Araujo 2007, Fuentes 2011). Through their marketing practices and devices these retailers are actively working to construct sustainable consumers: sustainable active women, green Scandinavian preppies and sustainable fashionable style-driven consumers.

One can then interpret their marketing work as an effort to create responsible consumers (see also Fuentes 2011).

But, as consumer culture studies have taught us, consumers do not simply passively receive and accept messages and products from organizations. Instead they actively translate and reconfigure them to fit into their practices and life projects. So, what we need to know now is: is the world-view produced and the sustainable products/services marketed by these retail organizations meaningful to consumers? And if so, in what ways are they meaningful to consumers? In what ways do these products and services become part of consumers' practices? What role(s) do these sustainable products and services play in consumers' life projects? Do Åhléns consumers see/construct themselves as sustainable active women? Are Boomerang consumers living the Scandinavian preppy lifestyle and if so are they interested in greening that lifestyle? Do visitors of Myrorna feel that they are contributing to environmental sustainability and social work while at the same time being fashionable?

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