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Representations – A critical look at media's role in cleanliness conventions and inconspicuous consumption

Jack, Tullia

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*Total number of authors:*  
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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# Sovereign Dupes? navigating cleanliness conventions in everyday life

## Abstract

Conventions are part of everyday life; we are surrounded by representations of what we should aspire to from many different sources. If resource intensive practices are regularly represented as conventional, these potentially become naturalised and unsustainable consumption will increase. Understanding how conventions interact with everyday practices is thus fundamental in tackling unsustainable consumption.

To gain new insights into how representations and conventions interact, this paper explores how people respond to cleanliness representations in Swedish media. Cleanliness is chosen as a case for its role in accelerating water and energy consumption (Shove, 2003), and Sweden as cleanliness activities are in line with this upward trend (Jack, 2017). In this paper focus groups read magazines, discuss content and how this relates to their lives. Participants perceive cleanliness as being intertwined with a host of co-conventions such as freshness, health, femininity, masculinity, self-presentation, sustainability, et cetera. Participants have strategies to receive and resist representations, and are especially averse to representations that they suspect are meant to increase consumerism. Dilemmas for participants do not arise from deciding when or how to receive or resist. The real dilemmas arise when trying to integrate conventions into everyday life given the multiplicity of meaning around cleanliness, as well as new challenges around social stratification and sustainability. Participants see conventions as influencing

wider society, but see themselves as individuals critically interacting with discourse, a sovereign dupe<sup>1</sup> juxtaposition. Sovereign dupes critically perceive conventions and conscientiously object to those that are deemed oppressive, but also desire participation in wider society to positively construct everyday life in their own and the world's best interests.

## Inconspicuous consumption – a sustainability problem

We consume critical resources during the course of everyday life, without necessarily being aware of our increasing environmental impact. Most consumption occurs not for its own sake, but within and because of practices like eating, cleaning or transport etc. (Warde, 2005: 145). Environmental impacts arise because we want a clean load of laundry, to get to work quickly, to have cool air on hot days or light in the evenings; not because we set out to consume energy and release CO<sub>2</sub>. Because consumption of energy and water is often hidden in other practices and therefore invisible, decreasing the environmental impact of everyday life is not as straight-forward as providing information about more sustainable ways of doing. Not even those who identify as environmentalists consistently consider sustainability in everything they do (Halkier, 2001: 34). Neither do households who identify as climate change aware necessarily act in an environmentally friendlier way (Bartiaux, 2008: 1176). Rather, meaning and social normality<sup>2</sup> are key (Shove et al., 2012: 45): given the availability of materials (like washing machines) and competencies (knowing how to start a load) the presence of these elements in no way guarantees that practices will occur. Most everyday practices occur because they are the conventional thing to do.

If the bulk of consumption is a 'routine, ordinary, collective and conventional' (Warde, 2005: 146), then knowing how conventions form is useful in tackling unsustainable consumption. While consumption practices are routine, they can be reflexive at the same time (Halkier, 2001), constantly performed but can be drawn

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<sup>1</sup> Sovereign dupe was my twitter "about" for the last five years, to acknowledge the fact that although I try to think and act purposefully, I often find myself going through the very same patterned behaviours that I am critical toward. The name fits so well to the discussions that came up during this research that I use it here, with the same spirit of self-reflexive fun.

<sup>2</sup> Social Normality – the most common course of action for the group under investigation, sociologically useful in understanding likely practices and associated resource consumption.

into the conscious realm and reflexively reproduced in environmentally friendly ways (Jack, 2013: 420). Interventions should consider both the social context and the individual (Warde, 2014) be participatory and immersive (Hoolohan and Browne, 2018) and address a variety of sub-conscious levels (for a good discussion see Keller et al., 2016: 84-86). Common intervention strategies often focus on the conscious level, including individual behaviour change, behavioural economics ('nudge') and technological approaches, however these approaches all have their limitations (Keller et al., 2016). Individualistic interventions often fall short of instigating long-lasting change: even when provided with "precise, professional and customised information", household consumption routines are unlikely to change (Bartiaux, 2008: 1177). Looking at consumption as a product of individual choice and decision making is suboptimal when trying to change unsustainable consumption (Warde, 2017: 185). Changing what is conventional is key in making consumption more sustainable.

Conventions are appealed to by many scholars coming to terms with unsustainable consumption. They are often appealed to as the wider meaning overlapping myriad consumption practices (e.g. Shove, 2003; Shove, 2002; Evans, 2011; Warde, 2017: (45 times)). Conventions are discussed as shared symbolic structures of knowledge, part of action and social normality (Reckwitz, 2002: 246), contributing to harmonious ordering of practices (Schatzki, 2002: 8). However-much conventions are appealed to in the literature on consumption and social practice, they still lack a clear definition and empirical investigations.

In this paper I address this gap by asking how conventions are navigated in everyday life. To do this I use the case of inconspicuous consumption stemming from cleanliness practices, with an empirical base in Sweden. Empirically, an opportunity to observe conventions can come through people's negotiation of meaning and sense-making around representations. Discourses may have the potential to normalise un/sustainable practices as representations of the surrounding world, over time, sediment into common-sense ideas that organise social reality (Wibeck, 2012: 3). Such empirical data has the potential to provide new insights into negotiation, resistance and reception of representations as well as convergences and divergences of conventions, relevant to understanding stability and change in consumption practices.

# Research design

## Focus groups as method

To research conventions and everyday practices, I used focus group discussions centred around cleanliness in popular Swedish magazines. Media representations of cleanliness provided a useful vignette, or simulacra of what is socially accepted. Focus groups are useful in studying processes of “attitude formation and the mechanisms involved in interrogating and modifying views” (Barbour, 2007: 31), and proved to be particularly useful in investigating cleanliness, a sensitive and also resource intensive practice. Group settings inspire discussions around sensitive, intimate matters as participants share, relate to, and encourage each other, resulting in more honest discussions compared to one-on-one interviews (Browne, 2016). Accessing cleanliness conventions through magazines adds complexity as audiences actively interpret representations using their past experiences, reproducing identity performances (Millard, 2009: 156). People constantly (re)produce themselves in all contexts of interaction by “telling, negotiating, re-telling and performing their self-narratives, each self-narrative equally ‘authentic’” (Halkier, 2010: 76). Even as these individual performances are staged and created through deliberate effort, they are not necessarily deceitful; but rather an insight into accepted social narratives (Millard, 2009: 161). As participants discuss, argue, and try to make sense of the focus group’s subject, these interactions provide the key to understanding meaning-making (Barbour, 2007: 113; Wibeck et al., 2007), helping to illuminate the relationship between personal and social normality (Warr, 2005). Limitations to the focus group format can arise from potential participants not being able to find a mutually convenient time, a vocal minority dominating conversations and hindrances to open sharing if rapport is not established early on. Keeping these limitations in mind, for this study, focus groups helped to access ways that people relate to cleanliness representations and conventions more broadly. This study drew forth a range of experiences around reading and reacting to messages. This study also allowed participants to discuss surrounding issues like hygiene, gender, sustainability, class, respectability, health, risk and ethnicities’ role in shaping cleanliness meanings as well as how they navigate conventions more generally in everyday life.

### **Recruitment**

I recruited participants for the focus groups through snowballing via personal, professional, social media networks and notice boards. A call for participation

poster in English and Swedish (see appendix 1) was sent via email, handed out to friends and colleagues and pinned up on notice boards in and around Lund, Sweden. I also created an event on Facebook and invited people in my extended network to invite their friends and posted it in various community groups relating to Lund (e.g. 'Buy and sell stuff in Lund', 'International Students Lund' etc.). The announcement linked to a doodle<sup>3</sup> where participants selected the focus group and time that suited them. Once groups reached a maximum of six intended members, no further participants could sign up, as I wanted to keep the groups small to give participants a better chance to be involved (McLafferty, 2004). My aim was to include a wide range of sociodemographic backgrounds, to provide a diverse range of discussions allowing a broad picture of how different people negotiate conventions in everyday practices.

<b>Group #</b>	<b>Number (f/m)</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Date</b>
FG (pilot)	6 (4/2)	18-35	Swedish	September 2016
FG (pilot)	4 (2/2)	18-35	English	October 2016
FG 1	4 (2/2)	18-35	English	March 2017
FG 2	4 (3/1)	18-35	English	March 2017
FG 3	3 (3w)	36 and up	Swedish	March 2017
FG 4	4 (4m)	18-35	Swedish	March 2017
FG 5	4 (2/2)	18-15	English	March 2017
FG 6	4 (4m)	36 and up	Swedish	March 2017
FG 7	3 (2/1)	18-35	English	April 2017
FG 8	6 (3/3)	18-45	English	April 2017
FG 9	4 (2/2)	18-55	Swedish	April 2017
FG 10	5 (4/1)	18-75	English	April 2017
FG 11	4 (3/1)	18-35	English	April 2017
FG 12	2 (1/1)	18-45	Swedish	April 2017
<b>Total</b>	<b>57 (31/26)</b>	<b>18-75</b>	<b>44% Swedish 56% International</b>	

*Table 1 Participants*

<sup>3</sup> Doodle is an online schedule tool. These ones were anonymous and participants could not see names of others but only that e.g. three people had already signed up for Wednesday 6pm.

## **Participants**

The participant pool was varied. Of 57 people over 14 focus groups 31 were female and 26 were male (see table 1). Age ranged from 21 to 71 years old with average age of 34. Participants were well educated (many had a master degree or higher), and/or working in white collar jobs such as lawyers, journalist or teachers. 44% of participants identified as Swedish while the others came from many different countries including China, Colombia, Germany, Greece, Japan, North America, Turkey and more. The international discussions were a way to see how globalised conventions are, and indeed many meanings were shared by participants across borders. Social normality is embedded in gender, class, ethnic relations and thus everyday life is different for people with different backgrounds and so I attached these categories to participants quotes.

## **Environment**

Focus groups were held in a variety of venues including my home, participants' homes, university group rooms and the state library. At each of these venues I aimed to create a private and welcoming setting to help participants feel relaxed so that the discussion was central. It didn't take long for participants to delve into the conversations regardless of the location. Conducting focus groups in a wide range of locations reflects the varied and contextualised nature of everyday life, a useful microcosm. The focus group discussions lasted from 40 minutes to over 2 hours, the recordings were on average 1 hour and 32 minutes, in addition to a pre-discussion fika<sup>4</sup> and post focus group debrief, which I did not record.

## **Language**

Participants chose the discussion language, as using the mother tongue encourages "spontaneous and open discussion" (Barbour, 2007: 99). Groups often had a mix of English and Swedish speakers and it was up to the participants to choose a language that was most comfortable, and indeed some of the groups shifted between the two languages with participants translating for each other, just under 50% of the participants spoke in their native language. I transcribed in the language of the focus group and translated quotes to English for this paper.

## **Prompts**

Five pages from three magazines were used as vignettes to centre the conversations (figures 1-5). The pages, including both advertisements and articles (i.e. commercial and journalistic content), were chosen to represent the themes

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<sup>4</sup> Swedish coffee and cake break, usually enjoyed with friends or colleagues.

revealed in previous studies – aspiration, shame, medicalization (Jack, forthcoming) – to explore how the different cleanliness representations elicit different responses. The images provided vignettes from which to launch broader conversations on cleanliness representations, persuasion, resistance, meaning, conventions and everyday life. The pages used as prompts helped to elicit socially recognisable (Halkier, 2017) discourses, to which participants could relate and contrast their own practices.

To start the focus groups, I spoke for about three minutes to contextualise participants, encourage them to discuss with each other, and to state that I would try to disrupt as little as possible (appendix 2 focus group guide). I wanted them to talk about what was important to them, making the best use of them as co-analysts (Barbour, 2007: 113). The conversations aimed to elicit responses important to participants and thus were non-structured, although I had a topic matrix to ensure that similar topics were covered and that group conversations were comparable. When I did enter the conversation, I used open-ended questions and said as little as possible. By focussing on participants’ interpretations, results come closer to social normality, allowing participants to emphasise issues they see as important.



Figure 1 Vitt & Värmt, sköna hem, issue 3 2017, p149.

**WHITE AND WARM**



## **Ethics**

The recruitment process included a description of the project (see appendix 1) so that participants could judge if this was a comfortable topic for them before signing up. As a further precaution, participants received a plain language statement (appendix 3) detailing their rights regarding withdrawing, and deleting previous input, that I would use pseudonyms for them when writing about the discussions for scientific papers. With the participants' written consent (appendix 4), I recorded the discussion using a mobile phone. Participants received a sek50 voucher at ICA, a national supermarket, to acknowledge the time and contribution they make to the study (Grady, 2001: 40). Payment was at the beginning of the focus group to communicate that it is for participation rather than for a specific "right" kind of discussion (Head, 2009: 341). The material was stored on a password protected computer, and consent forms in a locked cabinet.

## **Analysis**

The focus group discussions resulted in more than 20 hours of reflexive discussion on the prompt-images, cleanliness representations in media more broadly, persuasion, resistance, meaning and everyday life. Even though some groups went for over two hours, there was always space for further discussion, sometimes we sat and talked for an extra half hour after concluding the formal session. Sometimes I restarted recording with consent, or wrote summarising notes afterward and included all material in my analysis. The longer we talked, the more nuanced participants became, and the more examples they could think of from their own lives, but they also changed viewpoints about how much representations influence them, or gave juxtaposing arguments to previous positions. This fluidity of position also points to the multiplicity of meaning. While participants could give contradictory accounts, they are not necessarily dishonest but rather performing that they understand socially accepted narratives (Millard, 2009: 161). This testing out of different positions is also how meaning is built up in the real world and so these focus groups reflect the messiness of conventions interacting with individual performances. The resulting data set provides a rich source of information on the relationship between conventions, persuasion, resistance and everyday life.

To store and analyse the material I transcribed the interviews into NVivo<sup>5</sup> and coded for various responses to media representations, along the continuum from influential to indifferent, via aspiring, being sceptical, resisting and forming consensus. I was interested to see how participants respond spontaneously to representations, what meanings they appeal to and how they agree, disagree, and

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<sup>5</sup> Qualitative data analysis software.

come to consensus around conventions. I was also interested in examples they shared from their lives of being influenced by or resisting representations. In the following results section I provide some of the discussions from persuasion through to resistance. Here I focus on the conversations and, rather than inserting entire chunks of verbatim transcription, I use quotations from individuals that sum up the group discussion as an efficient and effective way to illustrate the topic (Morgan, 2010). The quotations used are chosen as representing longer discussions. This following section presents emerging findings: unrealistic expectations, societal influence and personal resistance all stemming from participants' own definitions of the meaning of cleanliness, and their experiences of accepting and resisting conventions.

## Results: cleanliness conventions and everyday life

The focus group method combined with the open-ended design of this study made space for participants to bring up their dilemmas, not only around navigating media influence, but creating a sovereign everyday in the best interests of themselves and wider society. The media content used in this study (Figures 1-5) provided a vignette for the participants to contrast their assumptions and everyday lives, and reflect over whether their own practices accord with or differ to the proffered discourses. This contrast throws one's own everyday life into sharp relief, bringing into focus how one is conforming to and resisting these representations with one's own practices. The relationship with media itself is not antagonistic, rather people joked about influence *"they are trying to trick us (laughing)"* (m, 44, British, Scientist), or were wryly self-deprecating *"I hope I'm not influenced, but I'm sure I am"* (m, 38, Swedish, PhD candidate). Media representations can be a fun way of coming into contact with new ideas and new ways of doing. Through considering discourse's influence on cleanliness practices, people became aware of their ability to be both sovereign and dupe in everyday life. In this study, media provides a mirror to compare participants' everyday life to and become more reflexive over influences, especially in the group discussion context.

To ensure a shared departure point, participants were tasked with defining what cleanliness meant for them, and these definitions provide the backdrop to the rest of the discussion. Definitions were neither singular nor exhaustive, participants found cleanliness tricky to pin down: *"But what is cleanliness? That is also*

*something super weird. (It's the absence of...) Yeah but what? If my jeans are dirty, I... it looks bad and they might smell bad but... usually the bacteria we have around us are not harmful"* (f, 35, Swedish, biologist). Cleanliness is not a pathological necessity, but rather an abstract construct: *"It's cleanliness that is disassociated with the body, it's cleanliness as standard, rather than as a human decision or human activity"* (f, 75, American, retired). Cleanliness was seen as culturally relative: *"Definitely different cultures have different ideas about what cleanliness should be"* (f, 26, Swedish, lawyer). In some cases, representations and examples from participants lives were described as too clean *"Like 50 years ago we didn't have this obsession with whiteness or cleanliness. Maybe it was okay to smell of sweat. Maybe it was something more natural. Maybe we are a little bit fixated with this cleanliness lifestyle nowadays"* (f, 28, Swedish, checkout operator). Participants built on each other's definitions and there were no major disagreements around cleanliness, they all saw cleanliness as a relative, broad standard that guides everyday life around washing and removing dirt that is increasing. There seems to be a shared definition of cleanliness that most people know. That participants in this study could agree on what cleanliness means emphasises the sharedness of conventions.

Participants could agree about the meaning of cleanliness as a broad principle, but they also brought up many other meanings during the discussions. These suggest that cleanliness meanings are intermingled with freshness, health, femininity, masculinity, the good life, class, sustainability, risk and so on.

Freshness was the most commonly appealed to meaning around cleanliness, the words 'fresh' or 'fräsch' came up more than fifty times during the discussions (29 times in Swedish and 24 times in English, give or take transcribing errors). In many of the mentions it was appealed to in terms of clean and fresh, to emphasise the cleanliness, e.g. to *"be shaven, to be fresh to be just out of the shower"* (f, 27, German, student) or *"Clinical, clean, fresh... light and fresh"* (m, 30, Swedish, PhD student). The colour white is also associated with cleanliness and freshness. *"I like white very much. It's very fresh. But you always see it in Swedish media, or media in general. White and fresh"* (f, 28, Swedish, checkout operator). Freshness also came up in discussion of clean food, that one should prepare fresh food as part of being healthy.

Health was a common co-meaning, coming up nearly thirty times during the discussions. *"Cleanliness also means healthiness"* (f, 27, Japanese, student). Healthiness is part of a clean-living trend *"There's been a new idea of the word clean and clean living in the last five years or so, with environmental studies and new lifestyles, and vegans and gluten free and all these clean diets..."* (f, 28,

French, waitress). Cleanliness is also part of creating a healthy life *"Cleanliness ... a way of living your life ... eating raw food in the morning, and going to work-out... cleanliness is done as a very structured way to be extremely healthy and only eat ecological food or train to a certain schedule"* (m, 38, Swedish, consultant). Cleanliness, as part of health conventions, also shapes what people eat, and how they take care of their bodies.

Gender also has meanings that overlap with cleanliness, with reflections focusing around the extra pressure exerted on women, but also on increasing pressure for men to be extra clean and well-groomed:

*I think society imposes different rules. I think there are much tougher rules on women in general. Most of the women I know are feminists and they're super into their rights and they try and be as equal as possible. And the men in my life. But I do think society imposes different rules* (m, 24, British, student)

Most discussions came to agreement around women having higher demands than men. *"It's more okay for a man to be unclean than a woman. It feels like women are always scared... it's just more acceptable for men not to be clean"* (m, 41, Swedish, unemployed). This points to cleanliness being part of performing femininity, performing masculinity on the other hand involves being a little more dirty. *"You can have laundry or so on, but if you have trail boots or hiking pants and actually wear them properly, I feel a sense of satisfaction when they get dirty... like I'm on the right path"* (m, 28, Swedish, student). However, men are coming under increasing pressure from marketing to also care more about cleanliness.

*Men aren't supposed to care so much about grooming. Like traditionally. That's been a feminine domain. Now it's a market opening up (mmm) for men as well and the producers think oh we can also make men groom in their very most intimate detail, and powder and shower and huff and puff* (f, 36, Swedish, social worker)

Cleanliness conventions are gendered; to be feminine one should be clean and clean one's surrounding area, and while men should still be clean, masculine identities could also afford a little more dirt. The performance of either gender identity can become more or less resource intensive based on gendered conventions. For example, many of the focus groups discussed hair removal, especially relating to Zlatan (figure 3) and the prevalence of men who shave and "manscape". An alternative convention, according to the discussions, is for women to not shave, this new femininity tied to political conventions of equality and alternative gender identities prevalent in especially Malmö (according to discussions). To shaving or not to shave draws on conventions of gender, and has consumption implications in terms of water razors, shaving cream, waxing etc.

Resisting the pressure to be hysterically clean for either gender is linked to performance of class. *"Certain people buy many of these hygiene products, use half of their salaries for it. It can be very lower-class to buy... I mean there is a lot of status in saying no to these products"* (m, 48, Swedish, artist). Lower classes had more pressure to be clean according to many discussions, but higher classes could be *"charmingly messy"* (m, 29, Swedish, student). Ethnicity was in some ways a bound to class, those born to overseas parents, or growing-up in working class suburbs use more perfume, hair gel and other products, according to the discussions. *"When I grew up I used a lot of perfume. I grew up in a suburb in Stockholm where there a lot of people that were from like, the working class"* (m, 35, Swedish, freelancer). According to the discussions, those with a precarious class position adhere more strictly to cleanliness conventions.

Acting sustainably, or at least telling each other that they did, was seen positive as by participants, being clean was linked with using less harmful chemicals, recycling and cleaning up the environment. The environment or sustainability (also including the Swedish *miljö* and *hållbar*) were mentioned more than sixty times during the groups. Participants often talked about actions they were taking for the environment, for example (m, 32, Swedish, personal assistant) emphasizes that he uses environmentally certified laundry powder, (f, 28, French, waitress) tries to save water by taking shorter showers and (f, 28, Swedish, checkout operator) buys as many organic products as she can, as well as many more examples where participants, especially the younger ones, 'drop-into' the conversations ways that they are being environmentally friendly. Being sustainable and taking care of the natural environment is part of cleanliness for the participants.

That cleanliness overlaps with a myriad of other discourses suggests that participants wrestle with a multitude of meanings and connections in their own understandings and doings of cleanliness. These discussions suggest that cleanliness does not only mean clean in body and home, but also has wider implications for freshness, self-presentation, being healthy, doing gender, class and being a good-citizen.

## Unrealistic expectations and anxiety

A common discussion in the focus groups was the tension between perfection shown in magazines and the messiness of everyday life. When comparing one's own life to representations, it was often seen as lacking, thus creating insecurity. This is present in representations of bodies and health: *"Like a little guilt... or bad*

*conscience because I haven't flossed properly"* (f, 28, Swedish, architect). Insecurity is also present in relation to homes, the following quote shows the negativity with feeling that one is not clean enough: *"... you have to have a really clean home, and if you don't have a really clean home, there's something wrong, you're not doing enough"* (f, 28, Danish, student) or *"it's an image of a good life to aspire to, it's pretty hard to measure up to"* (f, 28, American, student). Creating unrealistic expectations and insecurity is part of a wider understanding of marketing, which participants feel aims to sell more products by creating dissatisfaction and insecurity: *"it must be some kind of advertising. I suspect that this magazine is commercially financed"* (m, 33, Swedish, lawyer) responding to the halitosis article (figure 2), magazines having commercial interested was seen as negative. When comparing the physical appearance of bodies and homes with representations, they were widely agreed on as unrealistic and damaging to self-worth. The discussions about creating insecurity felt almost expected of and by participants; there is an existing narrative around media creating unrealistic expectations that they hooked into.

Unrealistic representations of hyper-perfectionism were felt to be persuasive in everyday life. Participants spoke about feeling insecurity or even paranoia when comparing themselves to dominant discourses. One participant responding to the article about halitosis (figure 2): *"I read that once and got some kind of panic, like how... how should I know? What if I had this disgusting breath"* (f, 32, Swedish, social worker). Although in a different focus group with the same image: *"Thinking about possible bad breath... I don't think there're so many people who can be bothered with that. I brush my teeth twice a day and that's that"* (m, 41, Swedish, unemployed). Interestingly, the discussions about influence were quite general; participants elaborated a consensus that discourses influence collective ideas, without admitting that they themselves were influenced. *"Advertisements and TV also make an impact on what you think is clean. If you watch a series, or sitcom maybe you start to think like the people in the sitcom. Like 'oh that person cleans a lot' and you start to, not copy the person on TV, but unknowingly start to act like that"* (m, 28, Swedish, producer). *"If you just show something again and again and again then it's just normal. That's what it's supposed to be. They are pretty good at using how the human brain works. We just tend to appreciate to whatever is repeated"* (m, 33, Turkish, researcher). Participants agreed that cleanliness discourses are influential at a social level, images that circulate through media act as simulacra for socially accepted standards and can create wider feelings of anxiety.

## Navigating conventions: resistance, indifference, adherence

Once focus groups came to consensus that discourse is influential, they continued on to times when they had been influenced, or more often, strategies for resistance. The few specific examples of influence were often from early teenage years, and used an "other" more naïve self as the protagonist. *"When I was 12 or 13 I read Vecko Journalen<sup>6</sup> with all their tips of everything and I was... I went on diets and I cleaned my face morning and evening. I thought that was really normal."* (f, 26, Swedish, PhD candidate). Some of the accounts of the gullible teenage years were more general: *"I remember when I was a teenager, I became aware, or extra aware, of all sorts of implications.... I think it just stuck in my head. I think there is still requirements to be hygienic, you should not smell of BO [body odour] and that is just basic knowledge"* (f, 32, Swedish, art administrator). These two females gave vague descriptions of cleanliness conventions insidiously promoting extra cleanliness standards, that are never quite concrete but instil anxiety that one should shower and clean more. This was quite often the case, women would bring up anxiety over meeting expectations, and men would highlight that it was a systematic problem. *"Well yes people aspire to that... I think this could be intimidating or stressing for people to see, they will not be able to really achieve it"* (m, 32, Swedish, journalist). While participants resisted aspiration images, they were vehemently opposed to messages suggesting that readers were inadequate. *"This is more insidious, more evil ... they are literally saying normal isn't good enough"* (m, 34, Australian, accountant). These discussions suggest that participants try to be aware of potential influence and resist it. If admitting influence, it was in broader more generalised terms, in describing specific times using an "other", often younger self or an imagined duped majority.

Discussing influence on the duped majority was in comparison to the sovereign self, participants emphasise scepticism as part of maintaining immunity to magazines' hyper-perfect representations. *"I think magazines can definitely be aspirational, I would look through for ideas and things. But I would always be a bit suspicious..."* (f, 30, British, researcher). Here the participant is open to media suggesting idealised worlds, but tries to keep a distance to her own life. Some assertions were more dismissive: *"It doesn't affect me at all I don't believe in that... It's not reality"* (f, 28, Swedish, checkout operator). *"To be honest I don't think I would spend another second on that picture – I would just flip the page, it's so*

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<sup>6</sup> Women's weekly magazine

*unrealistic anyways*" (f, 29, Greek, lecturer). *"I know all the processes behind magazines. It doesn't affect me anymore. I hate that business. I would just turn the page."* (f, 35, Swedish, designer). These claims were in response to wider discussions on the coercive persuasion of media, respondents did not like the idea of being controlled and tended to insist they were indifferent, even if this seemed somewhat feigned. Being gullible was not a desirable position for the participants. Flat-out refusals to accept influence on their own lives were often followed-up with more nuanced descriptions of navigating conventions. Participants didn't claim that they were automatically immune to persuasive representations, but that resistance is a continuous part of engaging with the world around us. *"We read this... like either now or next week we'll be thinking about this halitosis, it'll be subconsciously in my mind. Maybe like one level up I know it's totally bullshit, but I have to keep telling myself how much bullshit this is"* (m, 25, American, student). *"Everyone gets influenced all the time... there's no person on this earth who isn't constantly falling into these traps. I also feel comfortable, I've spent enough time thinking about it that I've built up an efficient filter, so my alarm bells go off all the fucking time"* (m, 35, Austrian, researcher). These two participants acknowledge that discourses are influential and respond by asserting that they resist by constantly reminding themselves not to be sucked in like the duped mainstream.

Strategies to resist are manifold and include: avoidance, only superficial engagement and being critical. *"I don't read these magazines I try to avoid them. Other media gets more easily to me. I have to watch at least a few seconds on YouTube before I can skip"* (f, 33, Austrian, PhD candidate). This participant does not like representations of especially women and tries to avoid these by not reading magazines and avoiding arenas where she where she thinks unrealistic representations may circulate. Some participants could enjoy flipping through media at a superficial level, but would avoid engaging too deeply by not reading the text *"I like looking at those interior magazines, I'm happy if I have to wait at the doctors, that's where you find them instead of spending money on them. But I never read the text because I think they are quite bullshit"* (f, 27, German, student). For this participant, idealised representations can provide a pleasant escape from reality, but she tries not to bring the fantasy back into her own life. If participants were struck by a message they could contest it, especially common for dissonant messages or if they suspected manipulative intent. Participants assert that nothing one encounters in a potentially commercial space should be trusted: *"These magazines, or TV series... everything. If you're thinking about... criticizing ourselves and how we live our lives. Media gives us this idea of how it should be and then we become more critical of how we live. That's not a good thing"* (m, 38,

Swedish, consultant) and *"I'm very biased against these magazines. Whenever I see them I feel like I'm always going to look at it very critically like 'Oh here's another horrible ad. Here's another horrible thing they want me to think and do'"* (m, 25, American, student). These participants resisted as they feel that representations of cleanliness in these magazines tell them that they aren't good enough. Resistance was often talked about with some irritation or even anger, participants used swear-words and raised their voices. Resisting seems to be a chore, taking up cognitive energy, but also giving participants some satisfaction in establishing themselves as uncoerced. That people use these strategies in many ways confirms that conventions are influential, otherwise resistance would be unnecessary. The continuum of strategies from avoidance, via detachment to resistance helps participants to maintain a self-image of autonomy from intended influence when making sense of and comparing representations with everyday life.

People also have strategies of engaging with discourses, to the current, sovereign (as opposed to other naïve) self. Even if being duped – especially by marketing aiming to sell products – is seen as negative, participants also expressed pleasure in being part of new trends:

*After I clean my room, I look at my room and feel really calm and happy like 'yes!' It looks like something I've seen. I look at my apple computer and I'm like, 'I have this.' Or I hold a Starbucks, no I don't drink Starbucks, but if I have a Starbucks it's a status symbol. It makes you feel good because you've been exposed to certain symbols that mean something, so you've somehow arrived (mmm)* (f, 28, Danish, student).

That this participant, as well as others, mention particular brands here points to brands offering particular ideals into the mainstream. This participant's sense of having high status symbols, indulging in a particular lifestyle and of giving-in and accepting new conventions (and brands) gives her a sense of pleasure. Cleanliness could be similar, having a long shower, putting clothes through a special process or spring cleaning one's home may also be a way of integrating aspirational imagery into everyday life, and finding pleasure in adhering to high-status conventions. The following quote highlights this when responding to *Personal trainer in necessities* (figure 4). *"They point out your personal success, you the sporty person. After training your skin is more amenable to caring products because the pores are open and your face flares up from the sweat, if you train you should buy these products"* (f, 28, Swedish, unemployed). This participant also enjoyed reading representations and deciphering the message. She seemed to take satisfaction in understanding the message and went on to discuss how she enjoys trying new face-creams and beauty regimes. That people let some messages in

suggests that while resistance is constant, people are also weighing-up advantages and disadvantages of (in some cases literally) buying into various discourses. This shows further that adopting a convention into one's own life can bring a sense of relief, accomplishment and pleasure. Participants felt that – after weighing up the pros and cons – you no longer have to struggle and resist but that the sovereign you can decide to enjoy a suggested alternative, for the comfort, and possibly status, it brings to your life.

In some discussions, participants took this further, recognising themselves and various elements of their lives in the representations, suggesting that representations and everyday life can be very close to each other. *“Even if she has super white teeth, she looks kind of normal. She looks like a normal person”* (f, 35, Swedish, circus performer). Recognition also occurred for homes: *“But this is actually not an unreasonable home. I know people whose homes are like this”* (m, 28, Swedish, senior advisor) or *“This is exactly like under the sink of every single house I've ever lived in”* (f, 29, British, researcher). These responses were to images of an immaculately white kitchen and a *throw the rubbish with style* tips article (figures 1 and 5), and show that participants are accustomed to these images. Recognising one's life in the representations may arise from participants growing up with these representations, and maintaining their bodies and homes in accordance with them. Recognising one's life may equally well point to recalibration; people recognise that magazines show people and places at their best. *“When I see the picture, I feel that this represents what the kitchen looks like maybe 5% of the time. Like if you have just done a spring clean. Just scrubbed the floor. Everything tidied away... Sometimes it looks like this... sometimes, but very rarely”* (m, 29, Swedish, student). Participants also agreed that they had become accustomed to the hyper-cleanliness: *“We don't really notice because it's so normal to show something very clean. You don't really notice how clean the picture actually is”* (f, 26, Swedish, PhD candidate). That participants see themselves and their lives in the representations, points to conventions circulating through reality as well as media, and that sovereign dupes can appreciate and relate it to their lives.

In summary, the common understanding of cleanliness conventions (as represented in Swedish magazines) is that they create unrealistic expectations, influence the duped majority but can be filtered, resisted and potentially incorporated by the sovereign self. This suggests that there are shared meanings around cleaning and the media circulates these meanings. I also found many meanings that intersect with cleanliness. Cleanliness does not act in a vacuum but contributes, and is contributed to, by other conventions such as freshness,

femininity, masculinity, health, sustainability etc. The negotiations playing out in the focus group discussions suggest that conventions navigate different contexts that may call on cleanliness, or other meanings in different ways, and the people are likely to respond as the contexts suggest. Discussions indicate that cleanliness is socially desirable, but resisting persuasion is even more so, and participants want to show that they can do both. In the focus groups participants agreed that conventions are influential, but were at the same time positioning themselves as sovereign resisters, and lauding each other's self-presentations as critical navigators. Showing that one was critical towards representations was socially condoned; there was less laughing and justifications after such statements. Considering and making sovereign choices was a desirable self-presentation in the focus groups.

## Discussion

An interesting finding in the context of Swedish magazines, is that media *qua* interventions into cleanliness conventions, while trying to increase cleanliness, has rather "cried wolf". Consequently, audiences now expect hyper-idealisation in such representations, and may recalibrate before comparing with their own lives. If this is the case, people are likely to be desensitised to the "anxiety-creating unrealistic expectations" discussed in the findings section (above). Whether or not people are sensitive to (hyper)representations, there is a strong case for media acting as a circulator of normality, a place for people to gauge (unrealistic) expectations, become reflexive over their own ideas and perhaps re-align their practices with reference to available resources. This train of reasoning calls for the heightened visibility of locally relevant environmental challenges in public discourse. If transparent knowledge about limits to natural resources becomes part of wider collective conventions, there is a good chance that people will re-align practices within the confines of their context. This could lead to the normalisation of environmentally friendly practices, and indeed cases of environmentally friendly ways of being are becoming more conventional, especially corresponding with increasing education (Meyer, 2015). In summary, media is a circulator and intervener into conventions, reflecting meaning back into society with the potential to create consciousness and reflexivity over one's own ideas, practices and life.

A concern raised in the beginning of this paper was that if resource intensive practices are frequently represented in public discourse, these become naturalised

and increasing consumption will ensue with potentially negative social and environmental consequences. Going by the discussions however, this concern seems to be unjustified as participants can engage critically with cleanliness representations, maintain reflexivity over their everyday routines and justify their practices to each other, often with reference to environmental concerns. The main tension arising for participants was not whether to receive or resist, as they had established strategies to filter, critique and incorporate, but rather how to construct everyday life to meet myriad priorities, not least of all sustainability. This is a clear case of information not “cutting mustard” (Warde, 2017: 186): participants felt that there were too many competing and inconsistent messages, they didn’t trust sources and they were averse to representations that they perceive as consumerist. In the group discussion setting, people could be both dupe in accepting and more or less agreeing to wider social conventions, while at the same time being self-aware and discussing developments in their own and wider society’s best interests when responding to the representations. During these sessions, participants could be quite reflexive and many positioned themselves as conscientious objectors, not needing to plead the Nuremberg defence in just following conventions that lead to a global environmental catastrophe. Rather, given space to consider their lives, participants could be quite lucid about critiquing various representations and incorporating meanings that they perceived as socially and environmentally beneficial. They had their own Schindler’s lists of actions they were taking to save the environment. Resisting, while cognitively strenuous, is a socially desirable self-narrative, but I would argue that it is not media representations that participants of this study critique, rather the underlying commercial interests that aim to accelerate consumption. Participants resisted the commercial representations, and the routine consumerism inherent in daily life. Given the space they articulated ideas about alternative modes of existence that address social and environmental challenges. This study shows that while participating in wider conventions, individuals are reflexively re-constructing their own ideas and shifting wider conventions in socially and environmentally sustainable directions. In this study, participants expressed satisfaction in doing everyday life in sovereign, environmentally and socially positive ways. In the context of these group discussions, they were collectively reflecting over proffered discourses, weighing up potential implications and then discussing with each other to establish the social understanding to give the confidence to act differently and redefine accepted ways of doing. This may be how conventions reproduce, also in broader social contexts. By looking at ways that people navigate cleanliness representations in magazines and relate them to their own lives, this study has provided an empirical case of renegotiating conventions in everyday life.

## Generalisability

There are several factors to consider when generalising the results of this study. Firstly, participants were attracted through snowballing, and while I aimed for a wide representation, many participants had post-graduate education and high-status jobs, and may therefore respond differently to conventions compared to different groups. These well-educated participants discussed the tendency of those with precarious class and ethnicity positions to care more about conventions (in the multiplicity of meaning, above). A further consideration arises from the conflation participants had in responding to the media representations of cleanliness, at some moments talking about evil media, switching to oppressive discourse and then appealing to conventional ways of doing. The results thus have a distinct media flavour stemming from the empirical material, and not always articulating a clear difference between socially accepted ways of doing and mediated representations of perfection. Keeping these limitations in mind, this study shows that conventions are drawn on in shaping everyday life, can be negotiated in context and that people can be simultaneously sovereign and dupe.

## Conclusions

This paper explores how people respond to cleanliness conventions in group settings with the aim of understanding meaning construction around practices that entail inconspicuous consumption. To this end, focus group participants read cleanliness related content in popular magazines and discussed how this relates to their everyday lives. Participants in this study perceived conventions as influential on a broad social scale, but as individuals positioned themselves as resisting, i.e. as sovereign dupes. Strategies to resist include avoidance, superficially skimming and if one is confronted by a discourse, to consciously resist by reminding oneself how manipulative consumerism is. Participants used a “younger other” or “duped mainstream” as a device to show how uncritically accepting aspirational representations increases anxiety. At the same time sovereignty was used to show how being critical helps to construct everyday life in the best interest of the participants and the environment and people around them. Resisting was seen as mentally strenuous, and so being a dupe and buying into conventions can be a relief. The real tension for participants in this study was not deciding whether to receive or resist, but rather incorporating conventions into everyday practices given the many – sometimes conflicting – discourses around cleanliness, freshness, health, femininity, masculinity, the good life and not least sustainability. Potential

interventions into unsustainable consumption could thus constructively inject locally relevant environmental concerns in public discourse, and sovereign dupes would arguably consider reliably established environmental limitations in constructing their practices. Sovereign dupes resist oppressive conventions but at the same time want to participate in wider society in creating practices and conventions that benefit themselves and the world around us.

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## Appendix 1: Call for participants (in Swedish and English)



LUND UNIVERSITY

# Vill du prata om tidskrifter i en fokusgrupp?

Hej mitt namn är Tullia och jag är doktorand vid Lunds universitet i sociologi. Jag är intresserad av hur vi läser och förstår innehållet i tidningar. För att göra detta, jag genomför fokusgrupper där vi kommer att läsa olika tidningsartiklar tillsammans och diskutera innehållet. Teman att diskutera är bland annat hur tidningar motsvarar verkligheten (eller inte) och om framställningar relateras till vår vardag.

Fokusgrupperna hållas i mars 2017. De kommer att köra i grupper om mellan 5 och 7 i 1,5 timmar inklusive fika. Deltagarna får en sek50 ICA kupong som liten tack. För mer information och anmälan gå till [doodle.com/link](https://doodle.com/link)

tullia.jack@soc.lu.se eller 0722805145.



Photo: Lisa Vanovitch

# Appendix 2: Focus group guide (in Swedish and English)

Focus Group Guide – media-ating cleanliness practices

**Intro/recruitment** – Looking for focus group participants to discuss how cleanliness is represented in the media.

**Arrival** – round-table, read the three articles, drink coffee, read plain language, sign ethics including demographics age, income, education, and ethnicity, and media habits (how often they read magazines, watch television, and use the Internet), put on name badges...

**Intro round** – after about 15 minutes participants introduce each other – this signals the start of the focus group.

**Inform** – This focus group will take approximately two hours during which we will discuss cleanliness in magazines, we will have the chance to take a break after 1 hour. In the beginning, I will ask you to read three articles, they will form a springboard for our discussion today. Focus groups are different from interviews, as the point is to discuss amongst ourselves and see how we relate, agree, disagree with each other, and try to uncover some of the assumptions we have in everyday life. I'm really interested in hearing from everyone, in focus groups there are sometimes some people who say more and others less, it's important to hear from all members so what normally happens in is that someone asks the quiet ones what they think, so I'm relying on you to do this. You are more than welcome to ask each other and ensure that everyone has a chance to share their thoughts and respond. I'm going to not moderate too strictly as I want to make space for things that are important to you to emerge, but I will jump in with new questions when we've discussed in enough detail. Finally, there are no wrong answers - the point of a focus group is that all experiences, stories and arguments are important, if something pops into your head please add it to the discussion. The main point of today is to discuss what you think and feel in relation to cleanliness in these magazines, it's the discussion that is the interesting bit. So, the first discussion point...

Structure:

1. Have you seen cleanliness in the media recently? If so – how was it presented?
2. **Exercise.** Choose one article that you find interesting to and then tell everyone why you find it interesting.
3. **Describe** the sort of cleaning people do in everyday life? Do you have a cleanliness routine? Do you think everyday life is similar or different to what is shown in the magazines? (If no discussion 'For example, some people shower when they wake up twice a day, some twice a week?')
4. Describe what you think each of these articles are trying to do? What do you think it says to the audience? Go on discussing until it's clear for you where you agree

and where you disagree. (Pick-up question – ‘I noticed many people/no-one mentioned the difference between men and women, do you think that magazines treat men and women differently?)

5. **Moralising.** Can you give some examples on what you think is “good” or “bad” cleaning? How does this compare to the magazines? Is there such a thing as too clean? Go on discussing until it’s clear for you where you agree and where you disagree.
6. How do you react to these images? **Evaluate** how magazine representation corresponds to your own life? To cleanliness in general? Please go on discussing until it’s clear for you where you agree and where you disagree.
7. Pick up question ‘I’ve noticed that water consumption (or saving water) has come up a lot, tell me more about how you think about it...’ or ‘No one has mentioned water/energy/chemicals, what role do you think they play in cleanliness practices’
- 8.

**Convenors role** – ask for examples, take notes, describe the interactions, moods, expression, shift in mood when it becomes heated, bored, who is playing the lead role, who is the compromiser, negotiator.

**Outtroduction** – How did you feel about this focus group? Do you really feel that you listen to magazines? Would you have talked about this if I hadn’t asked you? Where there any questions that were hard to talk about? Please let me know if you want to withdraw or change any part of the interview – or if you have any further questions email me ☺

## Appendix 3: Plain Language Statement (in Swedish and English)



LUND UNIVERSITY

Dear ,

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in the research project 'Cleanliness representations in the media.' This interview is being undertaken as part of a Doctor of Philosophy Degree at Lund University, Faculty of Sociology by research student Tullia Jack.

The aim of this process is to gain an understanding of the ways that representations of cleanliness in the media are received. Results will be used as part of my PhD thesis, and possibly scientific articles.

Results will be confidential, and individual respondents and any characteristic features will not be identified, unless express permission granted. All information will be kept on a protected drive stored in a limited access office, and will be securely kept for five years. By participating in this research you acknowledge that, although highly unlikely, results may be the subject of a subpoena or freedom of speech act.

Involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to leave at any time, and withdraw any previous responses.

If you have any concerns please mention this to me, or if you feel uncomfortable please get in touch with Lisa Eklund at Lund University, [lisa.eklund@soc.lu.se](mailto:lisa.eklund@soc.lu.se).

If you would like a summary of the results please let me know.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research.

Tullia Jack  
PhD Candidate  
Department of Sociology  
Lund University  
[tullia.jack@soc.lu.se](mailto:tullia.jack@soc.lu.se)  
Box 188, 221 00 Lund  
+46-2222 95 65

# Appendix 4 Consent form (in Swedish and English)



LUND UNIVERSITY

## Department of Sociology

Consent form for persons participating in a focus group

### CLEANLINESS REPRESENTATIONS IN THE MEDIA

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of investigator(s): Tullia Jack (Supervised by Profs Åsa Lundqvist and Lisa Eklund) \_\_\_\_\_

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.
2. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form it will be retained by the researcher.
3. I understand that my participation will involve a one and a half hour focus group discussion and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.
4. I acknowledge that:
  - (a) the possible effects of participating in the survey have been explained to my satisfaction;
  - (b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
  - (c) the project is for the purpose of research;
  - (d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
  - (e) I have been informed that with my consent the data will be stored at University of Lund;
  - (f) my name will not be mentioned in any publications arising from the research;
  - (g) I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I agree to this.

I consent to participate in this research  yes  no

Year of birth \_\_\_\_\_

Gender  f  m

Nationality \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings (please provide email)

I read magazines  daily  weekly  at least once a month  less often

Participant email: \_\_\_\_\_ signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_