Fashioning the Ecological Crisis

Sustainability and Feminism in Fashion Advertising and Communication in Contemporary Sweden

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Abstract:
The corporatisation of social justice (gender justice, LGBTQI+ rights, racial justice) and environmental justice ideals in the last decades has grown immensely in western countries, exemplified by rainbow-clad ATM's during Pride month or Nike using images of NFL player Kaepernick's anti-racism protest action of taking a knee during the USA national anthem in a marketing campaign. One of the industries that has been particularly inundated with symbols of social justice is the fashion industry. This dissertation focuses on articulations of the environment, gender, and race through a study of sustainability and feminist discourses in fashion advertising and communication in Sweden – a country that prides itself on being a leader in sustainability and gender equality. The global fashion industry is one of the most polluting and environmentally damaging, for example, its contribution to climate change is significant. At the same time, profits from garment production rely on the exploitation of cheap, often female labour, predominantly from the global South. There is an inherent contradiction in discourses in the light of the material impacts which marks the importance of investigating the gender/environment nexus in fashion.

While public awareness of greenwashing and insufficient ethical standards in the fashion industry grows, mass-consumption of clothing is not slowing down as a consequence. This conundrum is a central question in the thesis. Through analyses of interviews, social media and visual advertising material, the dissertation seeks to understand how discourses of sustainability and feminism circulate amongst digital media and consumers. It argues that ideology and interpellation play an important role in maintaining the dream of sustainable and socially just imaginaries of fashion.

Key words: feminism; fashion; advertising; marketing; sustainability; consumption; gender; social media; greenwashing; femvertising
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Chapter 1

Introduction

As I sit down to make the final edits of this manuscript, I am being inundated with Black Friday sale advertisements through text messages, e-mails, and targeted advertisements on Instagram and TikTok. This North American phenomenon, which reached Sweden only about a decade ago and has since become a well-established annual retail event (Anselmsson 2020). Meanwhile, on the streets of Dhaka, Bangladesh, widespread protests have erupted in response to the recent minimum wage negotiations (the previous minimum wage of 8,000 taka (66 EUR) was increased to 12,500 taka (104 EUR), which is still 'far below the 23,000 taka a month workers say they need to keep their families from starvation')(Begum and Ahmed 2023). These mass demonstrations have been met with police violence and threats, leaving at least four people shot dead allegedly by police (Begum and Ahmed 2023). The low prices of fashion that have become so normalised, are directly related to the unliveable wages of garment workers. Many of the brands that rely on these low wages and on the depletion of the natural environment claim they are doing everything in their power to become more sustainable and ethical.

This doctoral dissertation is a story about fashion and the ready-made garment (RMG) industry. It is about the concept of sustainability, and how and why this has become so very important for the fashion industry globally. It is about understanding why sustainability and gender are so intertwined, especially in the realm of fashion and marketing[1]. This story is about clothes and fashion to a certain extent, however this zooming-in on one specific industry is a way of trying

[1] I use the term 'marketing' to encompass traditional advertising, social media paid partnerships, corporate sponsored ads on social media and social media content including company gifted or sponsored items.

to understand the larger structures of production and consumption under capitalism.

Fast fashion is characterised as clothes that are mass-produced, sold relatively cheaply, and are very demand-led in the way that new collections can be ordered and produced quickly based on trends and seasons. The term fast fashion emerged in the late 1990s when brick-and-mortar[2] trade was most common, while today the vast majority of fast-fashion brands also operate online (and some of them exclusively online) (Maynard 2013). Spanish company Zara (owned by Inditex) and Swedish company H&M are usually thought of as the two pioneers of global fast fashion and are still two of the largest players in the industry. Zara's parent company Inditex owns Zara, Zara Home, Oysho, Pull & Bear, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, Stradivarius and Uterqüe, and the H&M Group owns H&M, H&M home, Cos, Weekday, & Other Stories, Monki, Arket, Sellpy and Afound; they are both empires. What is even faster than fast fashion might be called *ultra-fast fashion* (Monroe 2021). Ultra-fast fashion brands tend to be completely online based (although Shein for instance has now announced that they will be opening physical stores to compete further with other brands) and have an even faster turnaround from trend forecast to purchasable product. Monroe (2021, para.30) writes:

> Two decades ago, Zara was revolutionary for offering hundreds of new items a week; nowadays, Asos adds as many as 7,000 new styles to its website over the same period. Fast-fashion companies used to brag about getting a new style up for sale in as little as two weeks. Boohoo can do it in a matter of days.

Brands like Boohoo, Fashion Nova and Shein are extremely quick on trends and are also known for often copying outfits worn by celebrities and selling affordable versions of them. Shein in particular has become enormously popular amongst Gen Z[3] consumers through apps like TikTok[4]. 'Hauls', 'OOTDs' and 'fit checks' are phenomena that are very popular on TikTok and YouTube. Hauls are where

[2] Businesses that have physical retail stores.

[3] Gen-Z or generation Z comprises of the people born between 1996-2010.

[4] TikTok is a Chinese video sharing social media app.

a social media creator[5] has bought a large quantity of items and goes through each one, showing them (or sometimes trying them on in the case of clothes, this is called a 'try on haul') to their viewers and followers. Fit checks or OOTDs (Outfit of The Day) are videos popular on TikTok where creators explain where each item of their outfit is from. In 2021, 'Bama Rush' became a viral[6] trend on TikTok. Bama Rush refers to the week-long recruitment process of potential new members (or PNMs) to the various sororities at Alabama University (Jones 2021). During this intense week of events and parties, freshmen women at Alabama University created a trend on TikTok where each day they did a 'rush week OOTD'. The outfits often comprised of dresses, skirts, shorts and tops from fast fashion brands like Shein, shoes from Steve Madden and Target, earrings from Shein and various Instagram boutiques, mixed with jewellery inherited from their mothers and grandmothers. The University of Alabama enrolled 38,320 freshman students in the fall semester of 2021, and there are thousands of Bama Rush videos on TikTok (The University of Alabama 2021). Fashion and social media have thus become integral parts of each other in more ways than one, and ultra-fast fashion continues to grow, exemplified by Shein acquiring the British brand Misguided in October 2023 as well as acquiring a significant part of the Forever 21 business.

Most of the companies I will refer to in this dissertation, I classify as fast fashion due to their price points, trend sensitivity and production volumes. Some of these companies may not however classify themselves as fast-fashion brands. Fast fashion specifically is often the target of criticism when it comes to the environmental problems relating to the fashion industry; however, from the perspective of overconsumption and overproduction globally, a wider cast of criticism is necessary, as it is the totality of clothing production, and not only fast-fashion brands specifically, that constitutes the problem. The fashion industry has faced many and varied issues in the last few decades in almost every section of the industry, ranging from sweatshop scandals and child labour in production, to unhealthy ideals being pushed in the modelling industry, precarious jobs across

[5] People who are paid to create content on apps such as TikTok are referred to as content creators or social media creators.

[6] Something going 'viral' refers to a piece of content such as a photo, a video, a meme, or a trend that is seen and shared by a very large groups of people on the internet over a short period of time.

it, forced labour in cotton farms, sexual harassment in garment factories, and most recently the daunting and inescapable issue of all the detrimental environmental effects the fashion industry produces. As such I argue that the fashion industry is in a crisis. Concurrently, environmentalism, feminism, social justice, racial justice, and LGBTQI+ justice have become popular social movements, not the least within youth culture. As a response to the intersecting problems of racism, climate change and sexism, to name a few, and the subsequent social movements against those injustices, corporations have responded by incorporating the language of these movements into their communication, advertising and products (Gill 2008). Although this phenomenon of co-optation of progressive ideals has been spreading exponentially recently, it was already happening in the 1920s and the 1960s and 70s as well (Thanhauser 2022). More recently, from Dior's $600+ 'We should all be feminists' T-shirt to fast-fashion brands printing feminist slogans or climate justice slogans like 'There is no planet B' onto their garments, brands are creating an image of female empowerment and social justice, as a way of positioning themselves in the current cultural and political discourse.

This is part of a wider trend of wokeness[7] being appropriated by corporations. Apart from sustainability and feminism, corporations of all different kinds are touting the importance of social justice, racial justice and LGBTQI+ justice through their advertising and communication. Companies communicate to their customers that they can help fight inequality and climate change through purchasing their products, thus consumers and corporations might be interpreted as being partners that work together in order to achieve sustainability goals such as the UN's Sustainability Development Goals (SDG). On the other hand, one could also argue that both empowerment and sustainability have been depoliticised and reduced merely to things you can buy on the market.

Defining sustainability and sustainable fashion is not straightforward. In the empirical chapters of the dissertation, I will discuss more in depth the different definitions of sustainability and sustainable fashion that are used by different clothing companies in Sweden. The *Dictionary of Sustainability* defines sustainability as 'the state in which the needs of all members of the biosphere are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'

[7] The Cambridge dictionary defines wokeness as 'a state of being aware, especially of social problems such as racism and inequality.'

(Robertson 2017, 137). In the current trajectory of the global climate crisis, the fashion industry as a whole is not sustainable, as it is a large contributor of greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of environmental degradation. Already in the 2010s, sustainability and eco-friendly discourse was beginning to seep into the mainstream fashion industry, while niche sustainability-focused clothing brands were earlier on this front (Maynard 2013). This dissertation does not focus on small, niche ethical fashion brands that are specifically focused on sustainability. Rather, it is concerned with mainstream brands and the way that concepts of sustainability are understood and used in the mainstream fashion industry. Today, in 2024, you will likely find a statement about ethics and sustainability on almost every fast-fashion brand website. For instance, the concept of circularity (and circular fashion, circular economy) is used widely by fast-fashion brands.

If sustainability and the environmental cost of fashion is one of the biggest current concerns for the fashion industry as a whole, labour is the other. Working conditions and wages for garment workers is a continuous problem where drastic changes have not occurred, although some improvements have been made over time. Organisations such as the Clean Clothes Campaign, Fair Action, The Fair Wear Foundation, Labour behind the Label, and the Fashion Revolution Foundation among many others work tirelessly to improve the working conditions of garment workers globally. Although general awareness around the problems of garment industry seems to increase generally, the problems themselves do not disappear. In the 1990s, people in the global North were shocked to hear of labour exploitation in sweatshops and child labour incidents in garment production (Kumar 2020; Palm and Alsgren 2021; Klein 2014). Protests and brand boycotts ensued, but brands like Nike and H&M continued to thrive. In just the last few years, major labour rights issues in the fashion industry have come to light. For example, many of the global North's fashion companies have been connected to forced Uighur labour in Xinjiang and other parts of China. In many production countries, garment worker jobs were lost due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent cancellations of orders and factory closures (Kabeer 2021). Shein, the aforementioned, incredibly popular fast fashion brand, has been in the fires for poor labour practices, as exposed by the Swiss advocacy organisation Public Eye (Kollbrunner 2021). An estimated 220,000 garment workers in Myanmar lost their jobs in the year of 2021, 90 per cent of them women, due to factory closures (this was due to pandemic-related

factory closures, as well as many companies halting their orders from Myanmar due to the ongoing military coup) (ILO 2022). At the end of 2021, headlines of the worst wage theft (estimate of over £41m) in the history of the modern fashion industry came out, with more than 400,000 garment workers in Karnataka, India, having been denied minimum wage since April 2020 (Kelly 2021).

The year of this writing, 2023, marks the ten year anniversary of the largest disaster in modern fashion history: the fire disaster and collapse of Rana Plaza in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013, where at least 1,132 people lost their lives, and more than 2,500 garment workers were injured (ILO 2023). Since then, 190 companies and organisations have signed The International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry, several Swedish brands included. However, as the Accord expired, not all signatories renewed their membership, amongst them Swedish company Ellos Group which owns the brand Ellos. In 2021, Swedish fashion and interior company Ellos had an influencer award entitled *Ellos Awards: Women for Women*, on the theme of female empowerment. Individual Swedish (and some Nordic) influencers were nominated for categories such as 'women for liberation', 'women for body positivity', 'women for equality' and 'women for entrepreneurship', with a price money of 50,000 SEK (roughly 5,370 USD or 4,700 euros). After a backlash on Instagram, with social media users complaining about the hypocrisy of a fast fashion company that had not renewed their Accord membership hosting a female empowerment award, and pressuring Ellos to renew their signature, the company finally conceded and renewed their Accord membership. On Ellos's own website and in their sustainability reporting, they are adamant about their high standards of ethical conduct when it comes to the safety and fair wages of garment workers. Gina Tricot, another Swedish brand, has hosted the *Power Girl Awards* gala in conjunction with International Women's Day and in partnership with UN Women Sweden, a charity event where the accrued money is donated to UN Women Sweden. Swedish celebrities, artists, influencers, journalists, social commentators and scientists were invited and nominated for prize categories such as 'superwoman of the year', 'future of the year', 'power girl of the year' and 'power look of the night'. Needless to say, brands' position in society is quite different today from the 90s and early 2000 – they are no longer relevant only for style and status, but also for moral grounding and positioning. Already in 1992, H&M was criticised for using very thin models in their advertising campaigns, some of whom had reportedly had very negative experiences at the advertorial shoots (Palm and Alsgren 2021). In response to this,

Stefan Persson, then CEO of H&M said 'I do not think the anorexia problem can be cured by us hiring some full, fat models – that's for sure' (quoted in 1992 in Palm and Alsgren 2021, 33, my own translation). Today, 30 years later, the same company touts body inclusivity and body positivity and positions itself strongly as a feminist brand. Clothing brands today enter partnerships with international organisations (for example Gina Tricot's partnership with UN Women or H&M partnership with UNICEF). As such, clothing brands have become part of global development discourse. Sustainability, corporate ethics, fair wages and female empowerment have become topics enmeshed into many clothing brands' communication and business strategies; what this means concretely is not always easy to discern and is thus one of the focal points of this monograph. What do clothing companies really mean by taking these issues seriously? What does sustainability and ethics actually mean and how are they implemented? These are some of the questions that this dissertation will continuously address.

1.1 Problem Formulation and Aim

The fashion industry is a major contributor to the current global ecological crisis. According to the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, the industry is responsible for two to eight per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and uses up to 215 trillion litres of water per year, as well as contributing significantly to the world's industrial wastewater pollution (UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion 2023). The climate crisis is ongoing and poised for severe exacerbation, meaning that the industry's contribution to it – most basically though its reliance on fossil fuels – can hardly be denied (Hoskins 2022). There is ample information about the other grave realities of the fashion industry too; from labour exploitation to air pollution to water pollution to excessive cotton farming to the toxicity of leather tanning and garment dyeing to landfill waste to microplastic waste from petroleum-based garments. The industry is aware of these problems and so are many consumers. The industry is also an important global employer: about 86 million people globally, majority of them women, work in the garment industry. The UN states that 'without major change to production processes and consumption patterns in fashion, the social and environmental costs of the sector will continue to mount' (UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion 2023). Efforts to make the fashion industry sustainable exist: reducing plastic packaging,

introducing recycling schemes, partnerships between brands and organisations such as the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), small businesses choosing not to adhere to fast-changing trends and seasons, switching to renewable energy in production processes, to name a few. However, most of these efforts fall under the categories of techno-optimism or changing consumer behaviour, rather than changing the very structures of production and consumption globally (Brooks et al. 2017).

Putting a halt to the entire industry would have hugely detrimental repercussions, especially for low-paid garment workers who will suddenly not have a wage, an issue that we have already had to witness throughout the past years of the Corona pandemic with factories closing and fashion brands cancelling or pausing orders (Clean Clothes Campaign 2020). However, an endless growth of the industry and an ever-increasing global consumption is not compatible with a sustainable future. In this thesis I will argue that encouraging sustainable consumption – in the form it has today – ultimately is an ineffective way of making the fashion industry sustainable and just. The aim of my research is thus not to simply show all the negative environmental effects of the fashion industry. What I am interested in is rather understanding the narratives and discourses around sustainability and social justice issues that seem to saturate the marketing and communication of the fashion industry, and understanding how they are reproduced. Investigating where they come from, and why they seem to be so effective, is a start to understanding the current solutions proposed by the industry, and why they are ineffective at best, and further contributing to the problem at worst. The purpose of this study is therefore to map out, analyse, and criticise the different ways in which fashion brands in Sweden have responded to the various crises the fashion industry finds itself in.

The way that sustainable consumption is framed today encourages continued consumption rather than opening up for alternative solutions that involve lowering consumption on a global scale. Lowering consumption is the elephant in the room, it is the one thing that governments and corporations do not want to encourage. Soper (2020) writes about governments and how consumption is so closely tied to a high standard of living and development, so taking it away is unfathomable for many. When it comes to the discourse of sustainable fashion, I argue that the dominating narrative is a neoliberal one that is both techno-optimistic and uncritical of consumerism.

In my research I investigate what role gender plays into this logic of so-called sustainable consumption. Moreover, I argue that gender is an essential lens and dimension for understanding sustainable consumption and fashion. This is partly because fashion and clothes are so intimately tied to desire and performativity, and gender is a key lens for studying those elements. I argue that through the way women are constructed in fashion discourse, a dichotomy is created between empowered, conscious consumers and empowerment seeking workers, creating an assumption that through the act of consumption, informed and benevolent consumers can help create a sustainable and socially just future. This intensifies the dichotomy between the global North and the global South in a way that is perhaps not reflective of reality, and it creates a hierarchy that I believe is harmful. More specifically, I investigate how postfeminist sensibilities and neoliberal feminist values inform fashion industry discourse and advertising, and what this means for consumers and garment workers alike. The thesis is thus guided and informed by feminist concerns, following important scholars who have nurtured similar concerns of the effects of neoliberal feminism and corporate co-optation of feminism, such as Fraser (2013), Eisenstein (2010), Gill (2007), Rottenberg (2018), Banet-Weiser (2018), and Wilson (2012). I also show how gender plays an important role in the social media realm and influencer industry, which in turn comprise a significant part of fashion advertisements.

Due to my own situatedness, and in the interest of setting realistic boundaries for my research, I have chosen to focus on Sweden as location. Therefore, most of my primary data will come from Swedish company reports, ads from Swedish brands, and Sweden based influencers. Important to note, though, is that many of these brands operate internationally, and some globally (like the H&M Group). Their advertisements are also mostly online and marketed to a global audience. Through critically analysing interviews I have conducted with sustainability managers and social media influencers in Sweden, and visual material I have collected in the form of advertisements and website material, this dissertation aims to understand the broader discourses and narratives of sustainability, ethical consumption, female empowerment, and labour issues as communicated by the fashion industry in Sweden. This is a distinctly interdisciplinary thesis, drawing on scholars and themes from political ecology, feminist theory, media studies, sustainability studies, and postcolonial studies. Through the presentation and analysis of empirical material in the form of images collected over a five-year period and interviews, I show in this thesis how nature, gender, and race are intimately

intertwined in fashion discourse, narratives, and advertisements, as well as in our material world. Guiding the thesis are some specific research questions I have asked along the lines of undertaking this PhD project.

1.1.1 Research Questions

1. What do representations of sustainability and female empowerment look like in the Swedish fashion industry?
2. How does green marketing work in creating environmentally conscious subjects?
3. How does the intersection of gender and the environment function in the fast-fashion industry? What is the significance of this intersection?
4. How do discourses of fashion, consumption, sustainability and feminism thrive in the online social media space?

1.2 Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter two is a background chapter which provides necessary context for understanding some of the vast history of the textiles industry, including the making of clothes and the shift from subsistence-based garment making to industrial manufacturing. This chapter also covers when, how, and why clothes became a global trade with such an intricate value chain. It discusses the role of gender and women in the history of clothes and labour in the textiles industry, and also contextualises Sweden in the world of fashion and textiles. In chapter three I present my theoretical framework and conceptualisations that have inspired my dissertation. In this chapter, I discuss the concepts of discourse and representation, and Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding. With the help of Hall, I develop an understanding of the racial aspects of representations in fashion communication, and specifically representations of women as the racialised Other. The concept of ideology is also presented and discussed in this chapter in relation to how certain discourses are used to hail consumer subjects. Here I also introduce and develop what I call 'aspirational interpellation' and how this functions. The chapter further covers the

role of neoliberal feminism and postfeminism in fashion industry discourse and female empowerment narratives, including aspects of aesthetic labour, emotional labour, intimacy, and authenticity in relation to social media and the marketing of clothes. In chapter four I outline the methodological choices I have made in this dissertation, and which specific methods I have used to collect and analyse data. In this chapter I write about digital ethnography, and how I collected data online. I also write about interviewing as method, and how I analyse the interviews, as well as how the visual material is analysed. The chapter ends with a section on research ethics. Three empirical chapters then follow. Chapter five is focused on the concept and narratives of sustainability in the Swedish fashion sector. Although gender is an analytical lens used throughout the entire dissertation, chapter six is particularly focused on gender and the idea of female empowerment in the garment industry. I have divided this chapter into a section on consumption, and a section on production. Chapter seven is about the cultures of social media, and how they affect not only the fashion industry and its marketing, but also us as people and consumers. In this chapter I develop the concept of aspirational interpellation and apply it to empirical material in order to explain it further. Chapter eight is a concluding chapter. First, I present the findings of my research in relation to the research questions laid out in the introduction chapter. Then I show the ways in which my dissertation contributes to broader discussions about the fashion industry, ethical consumption, sustainability and feminism.

Chapter 2

Background

The empirical chapters of this thesis are mainly based on analyses of representations, discourses, and narratives in and of the fashion industry in Sweden. However, representations do not appear in vacuums. Rather, they are all results of the long and complicated global history of fashion and garment production. Therefore, it is important to contextualise not only my research questions and inquiries in this study, but the material and discourses I observe and analyse, against how different aspects of the garment industry came to be. This chapter will therefore provide background information and context to the historical aspects of the fashion industry that are important to be prefaced with in order to engage with the rest of the dissertation. The history of garments is ancient and vast. I will not be able to cover it in its entirety in this chapter; however, I want to situate and contextualise my research temporally, spatially, and politically, so the choices I have made in this dissertation can be clarified and the utility of a feminist analytical lens demonstrated. My aim with this chapter is to situate Swedish fast-fashion companies in a historical global context that paved way for such entities to grow and establish themselves.

The chapter is structured as follows. The first section is an overview of the dangerous and violent history of garment work. The second focuses on women's work in the garment industry, and why female labour has often been preferred in this line of work. The third covers the role governments have played in the global structuring of the garment industry in terms of protectionist policies and trade regulations; this section will show that the government has always played a heavy hand in the rules of the garment industry. This discussion continues into the fourth section where I write about trade liberalisation, labour flexibilisation and offshoring, and what significance this has had on shaping the modern global value chain of fashion. The fifth section focuses on consumer culture and the advent of the advertising industry and the phenomenon of gendered advertising. Finally in

section six I conclude the chapter and situate my dissertation in the context of the Swedish fashion industry by providing an overview of the Swedish garment industry in historical perspective.

2.1 The Textiles Industry has a Violent History

In his book *Empire of Cotton: A Global History,* Beckert (2015) highlights the significant role of violence and coercion in the making of a globalised textile industry, particularly when it comes to slavery. As Thanhauser (2022, 136) explains, slave labour was precious and slave owners did not want to waste this on making garments: 'Mass-manufactured garments for enslaved peoples developed as an industry in 1840-60. By buying cheap, mass-produced clothes, planters discovered, they could avoid using valuable slave labor in stitching'. Even after the abolition of slavery, African American people continued to be coerced into working in the cotton industry (Beckert 2015, 284). Indeed, he argues that in North America, Freedpeople were easier to turn into wage workers in the cotton industry compared to any other group, since they in most cases did not own any land. In many cases, Freedpeople were also indebted, which often pushed them into dependency vis-à-vis their landlords who had control over the land and the cotton crops (Beckert 2015). On a global scale, Beckert argues that once wage labour had emerged, the turnover of workers was very high in the cotton manufacture industry and instilling discipline in factories was extremely difficult. The reason for this was partially the 'revolutionary nature' of wage labour: the idea of selling one's labour and body in exchange for money was unheard of and therefore difficult to enforce (Beckert 2015, 179). One of the consequences of this new system of labour was that even without a system of slavery, factory owners employed other forms of violence and coercion in order to ensure productivity. According to Beckert, 'violence, coercion, and enslavement were not just incidental to the spread of capitalism, but critical to it' (Beckert 2015, 116). The turnover in garment manufacturing has continued to be high to this day, as the job continues to be characterised by informal contracts and gruelling conditions and a permanent reserve army of labour (Standing 1999). The continuing low wages mean that many garment workers today are also indebted (Karim 2022).

Textile manufacturing has historically been hard and dangerous labour, where workers often died young and lived in poverty (Beckert 2015). Textile workers in the late eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century worked very long hours, and suffered from extreme heat, noise and dust, which in many cases caused respiratory and other diseases (Beckert 2015; Thanhauser 2022). Garment work is still extremely laborious today, and garment workers still suffer from being exposed to dangerous working conditions as well as unhealthy environments and chemicals (Blanc 2016; Thanhauser 2022; Barber 2021; Hoskins 2022). The globalisation and liberalisation of trade continues to move textile manufacturing to countries with lower wages and often lax environmental laws. Today, there are many parts of the production of clothes that are dangerous both for the environment and the workers' health. Leather tanning, viscose production and denim dyeing are just some of the very toxic processes in the fashion industry (Hoskins 2022; Blanc 2016). Textile workers thus still often work under dire conditions, the specific countries to which corporations decide to outsource their production have simply shifted over time.

Although a large part of garment production was outsourced from countries in the global North to countries in the global South, there is production in other parts of the world as well (Dobos 2021; Hammer 2023b). Manufacturing for apparel, accessories and shoes is also a prominent industry in Western Europe, the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Dobos 2021). Conditions of super-exploitation (where workers are paid below a living wage) also exist in the global North (Hammer 2023a). Phạm (2022, 126) argues in her book *Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Social Media's Influence on Fashion, Ethics, and Property* that the idea that 'the ethical purity or authenticity of Western design and markets (e.g., the idea that Western-made products are more ethically produced than Asian-made products)' is a myth. What is true, is that garment work is in many cases racialised, and it is no coincidence that the workers subjected to highly exploitative working conditions and labour abuse scandals in the garment industries of the global North are often migrant workers. In 2022, garment workers in Los Angeles, USA, most of whom were women migrants from Mexico and Central America, were subjected to widespread wage theft and illegal pay practices (Flores 2023). In 2020, *The Guardian* reported that Pakistani migrants who worked in factories in Leicester, England, were working under appalling conditions, and being paid far below the legal minimum wage (Baloch and Bland 2020). In 2021, several employers in Prato, Italy, a town famous for bag and accessory assembling

factories, were found to have exploited migrant workers, who were underpaid (and working 12 to 14-hour days) and forced to work during state-mandated covid lockdowns (ANSA 2021). Reuters (2021) reported in the same year that police in Florence, Italy, had arrested a factory owner couple for labour exploitation. This particular factory assembled handbags for Burberry. This is also why, although I focus on fast fashion in my dissertation, I do not believe that fast fashion is the only problem nor that other forms of fashion are by definition more sustainable and ethical. Indeed, in discourses of ethical or sustainable fashion, fast fashion is often used as a means for class shaming, as shown by (Phạm 2022). Such moralising stances are not of interest to me or my research. I focus on fast fashion because I believe investigating this industry can teach us things about the rapid acceleration of the consumer society, however luxury fashion and other types of fashion are all part of the multifaceted crisis to which I speak.

2.2 The Role of Gender in Textile Manufacturing

Throughout the history of garment production, female labour has consistently been a key feature. Historically, textiles manufacturing has employed more women workers compared to other manufacturing industries (Hunter and Macnaughtan 2016). Thanhauser (2022, 17) explains that textile work is often thought by archaeologists to have been 'originally assigned to women because it was an activity that was safe to do with children nearby'. Spinning and weaving in particular is widely considered to have been women's work in prehistoric times (Øye 2016; Hunter and Macnaughtan 2016), and spinning remained a female-dominated job during pre-industrial times (Valverde 1988) whereas for instance in the middle ages in Northern Europe, weaving became a male-dominated work (Øye 2016).

Cotton manufacturing has existed in many countries around the world for centuries and was traditionally a small-scale affair. Once garment production was mechanised during the industrial revolution, it was by no means a safe activity anymore, especially not for children and women. As Thanhauser (2022, 18, emphasis in original) writes, 'neither would be safe: where blowing cotton destroying lungs, ears were deafened by the sound of machinery, and belts regularly tore off scalps'. From the 1790s and onwards, the exploitation of land

and cheap labour has been a key feature of the garment industry (Thanhauser 2022; Beckert 2015).

Thanhauser (2022, 38) explains that the technological advancement in the form of sewing machines did not make garment work any easier for seamstresses; rather it increased competition in the industry and the resulting working environment was gruelling: workers were monitored, bathroom breaks were limited, and sexual harassment was rampant (alarmingly enough these exact workplace issues are still rampant in garment factories today). Over two centuries later, despite many technological advancements, manufacturers have still not been able to eliminate the huge amount of human labour that is required in garment manufacturing (Thanhauser 2022; Kumar 2020). Kumar (2020) argues that this is due to the underlying capitalist logic which says it will always be cheaper to exploit cheap labour than to advance technology, consequently, there continues to be an incentive for using cheap human labour.

In the US and Japan and many countries in Europe it was common for women to move away from home to live in textile factories, which made it much easier for factory owners to exert control over their workers, which, according to Beckert (2015, 191), was 'a critical condition for textile industrialization'. Thanhauser (2022, 15) gives us an example from 1767:

> Sarah, like other New England girls from poor families, had been boarded out to live with another family, where her spinning labor paid for room and board, and sometimes allowed her to accrue extra yarn to put toward a trousseau. Spinners like Sarah were paid by the length of the thread they spun – marked off in ties.

According to Hunter and Macnaughtan (2016, 706), this 'urban-rural distinction, originating in pre-industrial production, led to male dominance of artisanal production and female dominance in much rural production'; thus textile producers 'turned to rural areas for their labour supply' under the assumption that 'rural labour was cheaper than urban, and that rural women were even cheaper.' Even this is an aspect of the industry that shows its traces today. In Bangladesh it is very common for young women to move to Dhaka from rural areas in order to work in garment factories, although they do not actually live in the factories (Karim 2022). The same trend exists in for example Myanmar, where young women leave their homes and move to the capital Yangon to work in textile factories producing clothes for brands such as H&M (Nguyen 2021). According

to a former sustainability manager for H&M in Myanmar, moving to the city to work in garment factories 'opens up new opportunities for another life, and makes it possible to send money back to the family' (H&M 2019; my own translation from Swedish). For very poor young women to move to urban cities on their own in order to work in textile factories might in many cases mean that they do not get to see their own children or family members regularly – this contemporary picture then becomes a stark reflection of the conditions that women in the textiles industry worked in over 200 years ago as shown in *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (Beckert 2015). However, when multi-billion-dollar global corporations and their employees frame this situation, it becomes a narrative of female empowerment and the success of leaving the countryside to lift oneself and one's family out of poverty. Linking these contemporary examples to the research of historians such as Beckert (2015), Thanhauser (2022), and Hunter and Macnaughtan (2016) serves as a reminder that although the geographies of the textile industry have changed, the inherent system of exploiting cheap female labour has not. Important to note is that the 'pursuit of cheap rural female labour' has not in all cases been associated with this aforementioned type of rural-urban relocation (Hunter and Macnaughtan 2016, 706). In many cases, the putting-out system or other home-based production has employed women in the garment sector, for instance lace-makers in India (Mies 2012), textile producers in Turkey and Uruguay (Hunter and Macnaughtan 2016), and lace-makers in Britain (Rose 1986).

Over time, the gender roles in textile production have fluctuated widely over various political, economic, geographic and technological conjunctures. And while there is no common pattern that has been followed globally over time, gender has undoubtedly played a significant role in the division of labour and in deciding who is allowed to work in textiles manufacturing, and which groups should be excluded. For example, working in cotton mills was often regarded as not respectable (for women), and such moralising arguments were used in certain instances as an attempt to exclude women from working in the mills (Valverde 1988). As Hunter and Macnaughtan (2016, 705) argue that 'the presence of women on the factory floor was often determined by social constructions of gender over time in any one nation, and whether women were 'permitted' to work in large numbers outside of the home.'

As I will discuss more at length later in this chapter, it has often been argued that women are better suited for garment work due to their smallness and 'nimble fingers' (Elson and Pearson 1981). Elson and Pearson (1981) have debunked this reductionist argument, explaining instead the real reasons for the feminisation of the global garment industry, trade liberalisation followed by labour flexibilisation being a significant one.

Another aspect of the garment industry where women have historically played an important role is the labour rights movements, which were often fore fronted by women (Thanhauser 2022; Beckert 2015; Trentmann 2016). Already in the latter part of the 1800s when clothes had begun to be mass-produced, the 'English Ladies' Free Grown Cotton' movement was established, joining the abolitionist boycott movement (Beckert 2015). In 1844, 'weavers famously rebelled in Silesia', and in 1824, women cotton mill workers in New England 'walked off their job in Pawtucket, Rhode Island…making it the first strike by factory workers in the United States' (Beckert 2015, 197). Also in the USA, women workers started 'The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union' (ILGWU) which 'adopted a strategy that would give responsibility for factory conditions to those who designed, purchased, and sold the garments produced by the small contract shops' (Thanhauser 2022, 176). Thanks to unionisation and the labour rights movements in the garment industry, working conditions improved. However, as garment production began to be outsourced, it was once again possible to put a downward pressure on wages in order to maximise profits for the clothing companies (Thanhauser 2022; Kumar 2020).

Thanhauser (2022, 293) writes:

> In 1850, it was commonplace for women seamstresses to live near starvation levels while working fourteen-hour days making shirts. In 1950 this kind of life was unthinkable for a seamstress defended by a union. Today it is a commonplace again.

How did this happen? The next sections will show the important role trade liberalisation has played in ensuring that producing clothes remains a cheap business, at the cost of workers livelihoods and the natural environment.

2.3 The Feminisation of Labour in Neoliberal Global Markets

Neoliberalism is a concept associated with a set of policies that were implemented from the 1980s, spearheaded by institutions such as the International Monetary fund (IMF) and the World Bank, to liberalise global markets and expand market capitalism (Bahramitash 2005; Hornborg 2011; Stilwell 2012). Since the Washington Consensus emerged in the wake of 1989, countries in the global South were increasingly encouraged to open up their borders for free trade, making it easier and cheaper for the USA and western European countries to import from those countries. This trade liberalisation was a catalyst for many countries shifting from mostly agricultural economies to export-oriented industrialisation. One of the consequences of this was that many economies became not only highly reliant on their export sectors, but extremely vulnerable to sudden changes in price on the global market (Bahramitash 2005; Coote and LeQuesne 1996; Roberts and Parks 2007). This is especially true for countries that export a limited variety of commodities. Some countries in Asia that quickly moved to a more manufacture and service-oriented economy and subsequently experienced fast economic growth. Most notably Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore, are often chalked up as success stories of neoliberal policies. Bahramitash (2005) uses empirical findings to show that many of those Asian cases were in fact due to government intervention and the guarantee of cheap female labour rather than simply free trade. According to her, 'the use of certain kinds of empirical evidence to prove the legitimacy of neo-liberalism is highly problematic' (Bahramitash 2005, 177). It is important here to mention ecologically unequal exchange, because the price of the products that countries in the global South export for the markets in the global North do not include the cost of the social and environmental damage that is embedded in their extraction or production (Hornborg 2011; Roberts and Parks 2007). An uncritical, neoliberal view on trade liberalisation sees increased employment for women as a positive measure of poverty alleviation and female empowerment, not paying attention to the fact that trade liberalisation causes 'downward pressure on labour standards' (Hale 2002, 33). This does, however, greatly benefit the capitalist system, as explained by Nayak (2009, 109):

> in this 'inclusionary' effort, there are major gains for the modern capitalist patriarchal system of production. For instance, employment of women brings down the general price of labour, since thanks to the sex/gender ideology that devalues women, their labour is cheaper than men's.

Francisco and Antrobus (2009) argue that this inclusionary attempt of 'engendering' policies began around the 90s, largely by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). They reasoned that this would lead to 'interventions that make poor women more efficient contributors to – and women in politics more effective policymakers for – the systematic expansion and deepening of trade liberalisation reforms' (Francisco and Antrobus 2009, 158). This type of reasoning marks the neoliberal agenda for gender equality and global development; women needed to be made productive and efficient by ensuring their labour was being accounted for in the global capitalist system. These developments also coincided with the Rio Summit (The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) in 1992, which was a defining moment in global environmental politics around gender. Many feminist scholars argue that attempts to include gender in environmental policies manifested itself during this summit in homogenising ways, where women of the global South were identified as caretakers of the environment, which resulted largely in an even heavier environmental burden on women (Elmhirst 2015; Harcourt and Bauhardt 2018; Harcourt and Nelson 2015).

Apart from the added environmental burden laid on women, neoliberal discourses of development and sustainability are also often imbued with the notion of female empowerment, which is to be achieved through work and entrepreneurship. Looking specifically at the fashion industry, garment work is often portrayed by fashion companies as a path out of poverty and towards empowerment for women in the global South (H&M 2019). Critics on the other hand may argue that garment work is highly exploitative. What both of these perspectives tend to miss are the nuances of power and agency at play. In his book *Monopsony Capitalism: Power and Production in the Twilight of the Sweatshop Age*, Kumar (2020) argues that policy papers often neglect the role of labour and worker struggles in terms of collective bargaining in the garment industry. Feminist scholar Kabeer (2017) also emphasises the agency that garment workers hold and argues that simplifying garment work as being only exploitative is victimising. It is important to make a distinction here between agency that workers may embody through labour

struggles and fights for collective bargaining, and agency as something that is presumably inherent to garment work. In a similar vein, I do not understand female empowerment as a static state that can be achieved through a job. Rather, as Kabeer (2017, 650) writes, 'empowerment relates to processes of change. In particular, it refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the capacity for choice gain this capacity'. So, while many corporations claim that they are empowering women worldwide by providing them with jobs in the garment sector, Kabeer (2017) complicates this narrative by arguing that for a choice to be meaningful (and by extension, empowering), one must have the ability or opportunity to choose *something else.*

In 1981, Elson and Pearson (1981) problematised the neoliberal argumentation (which grew from the 1975 United Nations Conference of International Women's Year) that women of the global South needed to be integrated into global development through employment, and that the lack thereof was the reason for women's lower status in the world. They argued instead that it was the very ways in which women were being 'integrated' into development processes which needed to be criticised (Elson and Pearson 1981). In their seminal article, Elson and Pearson (1981) paint a picture of the amalgamation of conditions which led to so much of global production being shifted to the global South. In the 1960s, while automation in many cases was too expensive, transport and communication technology was advancing, making it increasingly easy and cheap to move production to countries far away from the US and Western Europe, who also modified 'their tariff provisions to provide for duty-free re-entry of goods assembled abroad from parts and components exported from the developed country' (Elson and Pearson 1981, 90). Free Trade Zones were set up in many countries, which added to their attractiveness as production countries. Let us look closer at what Elson and Pearson (1981, 90, emphasis in original) write about the conditions under which production is actually worth moving to countries in the global South:

> It must be a labour force which prevails at existing centres of capital accumulation in the developed countries. And this superior ratio must be achieved without superior technology. It is by now well documented that this has been achieved in world market factories by a combination of much lower costs of employment and matching or even higher productivity than that achieved in developed countries. Wages in world market factories are often ten times lower than in comparable

> factories in developed countries, while working hours per year are up to 50 per cent higher.

This is important, as it illustrates how the evidence stands in contrast to the dominant neoliberal discourses about global production processes, and female participation in paid labour and global development. In one of my interviews with a sustainability manager, it was insinuated that production countries in the fashion sector are chosen based on where historical, cultural and artisanal expertise for each type of product or technique lies (arguing that this is a way of honouring local traditional handicrafts). This is a simplified view of global capital which obfuscates the unfair power relations between the global North and global South, while simultaneously framing the global fashion industry as ethical and culturally sensitive.

Visions of the essentialised female consumer are often reflected in the way that 'green' products are marketed to women as a group. Essentialised femininity creates the assumption that female consumers are naturally and innately more nurturing and caring of the environment and therefore more likely to want to purchase green products. Similarly, it is an essentialised (and racialised) stereotype of the 'Third World Woman', with small hands and 'nimble fingers', which for a long time justified the exploitation of female labour in the global South, claiming that these women were naturally better suited for assembly production labour, not that their labour was cheaper and easier to exploit due to patriarchal structures (Elson and Pearson 1981). As they explain:

> Women are considered not only to have naturally nimble fingers, but also to be naturally more docile and willing to accept tough work discipline, and naturally less inclined to join trade unions, than men; and to be naturally more suited to tedious, repetitious, monotonous work. Their lower wages are attributed to their secondary status in the labour market which is seen as a natural consequence of their capacity to bear children. (Elson and Pearson 1981, 93).

> Elson and Pearson (1981) emphasise the fact that these so called 'nimble fingers' are not naturally inherited traits, but rather learned and trained skills and proficiencies that have been handed down to women from their mothers and grandmothers, and so forth. It is thus the gendered nature of domesticated (unpaid and feminised) tasks that lead to so many young women in the global South being able to quickly learn how to work in garment factories, not their naturally nimble

> fingers. Kumar (2020) makes an adjacent argument, reminding us that ideas of 'skilled' versus 'unskilled' work are socially constructed.

The essentialising of women and racial othering of women of the global South in particular works together in order to naturalise difference and justify their subordination:

> Typical of this racialized regime of representation was the practice of reducing the cultures of black people to Nature, or naturalizing 'difference'. The logic behind naturalization is simple. If the differences between black and white people are 'cultural', then they are open to modification and change. But if they are 'natural' – as the slave-holders believed – then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. 'Naturalization' is therefore a representational strategy designed to *fix* 'difference', and thus *secure it forever*. It is an attempt to halt the inevitable 'slide' of meaning, to secure discursive or ideological 'closure' (Hall 2013, 234, emphases in original).

As the quote above suggests, racialising works in representational and discursive ways, and as seen through the work of Elson and Pearson (1981), such racialising is equally mobilised in policy. Looking closer at the specifics of women's subordinate role in the labour market, there are several aspects that characterise it:

> women's rates of pay tend to be lower than those of men doing similar or comparable jobs: and that women tend to form a 'reserve army' of labour, easily fired when firms want to cut back on their labour force, and easily re-hired when firms want to expand again. This tends to be explained in terms of 'women's role in the family' or 'women's reproductive role'. In a sense this explanation may be true, but it is ambiguous in that for many people 'women's role in the family', 'women's reproductive role', is an ahistorical fact, given by biology. What has to be stressed is that woman's role in the family is socially constructed as a subordinated role – even if she is a 'female head of household'. For it is the female role to nurture children and men, work which appears to be purely private and personal; while it is the male role to represent women and children in the wider society. And it is the representative role which confers social power. (Elson and Pearson 1981, 96)

But women have not only worked in garment factories, they have also, and still do, work from their homes for various sections of the garment industry. In what Mies (2012, 195) calls 'housewifization' in her seminal book *The Lace Workers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market,* 'mainly poor rural and

urban women are recruited as housewives to produce lace as so-called spare-time activity, in their own homes'. She argues that by defining this labour as housework (and therefore not work, but rather leisure), female labour is continuously exploited in the process of capital accumulation (Mies 2012). This type of housewifisation can only exist because of the public/private division whereby paid work was seen as material reproduction, and unpaid work (often performed by women) was seen as 'symbolic reproduction' (Fraser 2013). Connections can be seen with the realm of digital labour, particularly the social media and influencer industry, where work is precarious, and there is a constant reserve army of labour in the form of young women who are ready to jump in at any given moment (I delve deeper into this issue in the section on the feminisation of influencer labour in chapter 7). The flexible nature of social media work makes for a situation where irregular work becomes the norm, which on the surface may seem beneficial for women who can then simultaneously maintain their reproductive role and role as head of household, while participating in paid labour, the downside being among many things the lack of job security, benefits and pension.

The defeminisation of garment manufacturing

The flexibilisation of labour globally which has also lead to informalisation has contributed to the growth of female employment, as women's position in society has made them generally more likely to take lower paid jobs that may be more irregular, casualised and less protected (Elson and Pearson 1981; Standing 1999). This is referred to as the feminisation of labour, which is evident for instance in the sharp rise of female labour in garment manufacturing in the years 1975-95 (Standing 1999). Standing argued that in the thirty years from about 1970-1999, 'the trend across the world has been for female labor force participation to rise, while the male participation rate has been falling' (Standing 1999, 588). He concludes that the flexibilisation and feminisation of labour has led to a general trend towards less protected and more informalised work, although women's work over time has not gotten more informalised (men's work has) (Standing 1999). Despite the increase in women's participation in the documented labour force, 'the conditions in which women and men are typically in the labor market do not seem to have been improving. The trend is toward greater insecurity and inequality' (Standing 1999, 600).

Since Standing's seminal text on the feminisation of labour, researchers have also found an opposing trend of *defeminisation* of labour in manufacturing since about

the mid-1980s (Kucera and Tejani 2014; Tejani and Kucera 2021; Tejani and Milberg 2016). Tejani and Kucera (2021, 534) argue that after a phase of feminisation due to export-oriented industrialisation, there may be a phase of defeminisation that follows, which is partly related to 'technological upgrading' (a similar kind of conjunctural fluctuation in the gendered character of textile labour happened during the Industrial Revolution). In their study, six of fourteen countries experienced defeminisation, 'defined in terms of falling shares of female employment: Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Taiwan (China)' (Tejani and Kucera 2021, 563). The phenomenon of defeminisation in labour is important to keep in mind as it represents the changing nature of the labour market, and also confirms that women's role in the global labour market has often been subordinate historically. When technological advancements are implemented, it is oftentimes not women who experience job promotions and developments. Furthermore, while entry into wage work is touted as the single most effective measure for female empowerment, it also causes unintended consequences that need to be taken seriously. Elson and Pearson (1981, 102) argue that 'there are inherent limits to the extent to which the provision of wage work for women through capitalist accumulation can dissolve the subordination of women as a gender'; such subordination, they argue, tends to be transformed rather than eliminated when women enter waged manufacturing labour. For instance, women workers may be subject to sexual harassment by male supervisors in factories. They may also be subject to an intensification of subordination within the home if their husbands do not like the idea of their wives working under the authority of other men (Elson and Pearson 1981). Or, as Karim (2022) found in her research on garment workers in Bangladesh, instances of men leaving their garment worker wives due to feelings of jealousy that they were supposedly benefiting more from global development than the men, was not uncommon. Although much has changed since the early 1980s when Elson and Pearson wrote their article, sexual harassment and abuse in garment factories are still rampant today (Human Rights Watch 2019).

2.4 Trade Liberalisation in the Garment Industry

The word 'trade liberalisation' suggests a scenario of free market capitalism, where governments are small, and everything is left to the free market to solve. In reality,

governments have played a huge role in the shaping of the global garment industry under capitalism. According to Kumar (2020), the relationship between export processing and the state has been undertheorised. As both Beckert (2015) and Thanhauser (2022) show, the state has always used taxes and laws to protect certain actors and restrict others in the production and trade of cotton, textiles, and garments. In the 1760s, the British 'Parliament's effort to tax the colonies provoked boycotts of British goods' (Thanhauser 2022, 17). For instance, wanting to avoid any competition of sales, England imposed protectionist policies in the New World, banning commercial linen production (Thanhauser 2022). This illustrates how developments in garment production were halted at the hands of governments. In the almost century-long period between 1685 and the early 1770s, England went from imposing tariffs on calicoes and linens produced in India, to banning imported printed cottons, and eventually criminalising the sales of Indian cottons in England altogether (Thanhauser 2022; Beckert 2015).

After WWII, the US made it easier to move garment production offshore, and thus began a widespread outsourcing, which meant it became much cheaper to purchase clothes produced in countries in Asia (Thanhauser 2022; Standing 1999). For instance, the rise of the garment manufacturing industry in Bangladesh is a result of labour flexibility and outsourcing (Karim 2022). Likewise in India, the export-oriented garment industry grew out of trade liberalisation in the 1990s (Kumar 2020). Thanhauser (2022) argues that Asian imports were ultimately disastrous for the US whose national garment and textiles industries were made effectively obsolete due to these cheap imports, even as countries like Japan 'committed to voluntary export restraints on clothing and textiles in response to pressure from U.S. congressional textile protectionists' in 1957 (Thanhauser 2022, 186-187). To illustrate the magnitude of Asian imports, Thanhauser (2022, 187) writes, 'the first cotton blouses arrived in 1947. By 1954, with the end of the Korean War, 171,000 cotton blouses were imported from Japan. A year later, it was four million.'

In 1974, the Multifibre Agreement (MFA) was established with the purpose of restricting developing countries from cheaply exporting garments and textiles to wealthier nations. Under the Multifibre Agreement,

> countries who had reached their export limit were incentivized to outsource production to countries who were new exporters. New exporters were permitted to trade with no quotas at first. Firms in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea

> subcontracted production to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries like Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines, where quota limits could be evaded, and labor costs were lower. Between 1960 and 1980, apparel production for export to the U.S. spread to countries around the world. By the 1980s, more than one hundred countries were exporting garments to the U.S. market. By 1981, the U.S. trade deficit in apparel reached $7 billion (Thanhauser 2022, 195).

Companies in the US wanted the global garment industry to be more liberalised, and the lobbying for this resulted in NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) which opened up free trade between Mexico and the US and expanded trade between the US and China. According to Thanhauser (2022), the development of NAFTA and the subsequent end of the Multifibre Agreement in 2005 is what simultaneously made clothes incredibly cheap, and effectively killed the US garment industry. 'China produced the majority of global garment exports in the immediate years following the MFA-phase out' (Kumar 2020, 92). Later on, other countries such as Bangladesh and Myanmar started to catch up, but. China is still today the world's largest garment exporter.

In the 1950s, Japan was able to export cotton garments cheaply to the US partially due to the fact that they were importing large amounts of subsidised US cotton that was in surplus. The protectionist policies in the US which made its cotton cheaper thus led to higher rates of garments being imported, competing out the US garment industry (Thanhauser 2022). The US still subsidises cotton farming heavily, effectively 'depressing the price of cotton and hurting other cotton producers in some of the poorest regions of the world', according to critics (Thanhauser 2022, 54). In 2001 the U.S. government paid $4 billion in subsidies to cotton farmers, in 2017 they paid $1.1 billion (Beckert 2015; Thanhauser 2022). Throughout the different phases of regulations, restrictions and liberalisations in history, governments have always played a heavy hand in the global business of cotton exports and garment manufacturing.

2.5 Consumer Culture

A significant part of this dissertation is about the different ways in which fashion companies co-opt social movements and political discourses. Marketing and

advertising have played a central role in consumer culture since the 1920s, and as we will see throughout the chapters, marketing strategies have evolved to cater for the notions of ethical and sustainable consumption. Understanding some of the history of advertising and co-optation helps us contextualise and better understand contemporary marketing and advertising. Co-optation in the fashion industry is not novel, for instance, already in the 1960s and 70s, American fashion brands were commodifying the counterculture attire in the style of Maoist worker wear (Thanhauser 2022). The advertising industry was born in the 1920s, the first consumerist decade of mass production (Slater 1997; Kellner 2014; Lewis 2013; Thanhauser 2022; Mathur 2013). Kellner (2014, 176) argues that in this new consumer culture, corporations needed to both create consumers and 'promote consumption as a way of life'; often they did this by creating anxieties and needs that would justify said consumption (Lewis 2013). Thanhauser (2022, 137, 138) writes that by 1920 'women's fashion comprised 76 per cent of the industry' and by 1922 'the primary market for nearly every category of garment was people under thirty'. The fact that both the world of fashion and advertising were heavily geared to target women is not a coincidence. Men and women were divided into 'separate spheres' – men in the world of production and work, and women in the world of consumption and the home' (Entwistle 2014, 26). The idea of 'Mr. Breadwinner' and 'Mrs. Consumer' (De Grazia 1996, 7) quickly proliferated through the advertising industry and its traces are still visible in advertising today. According to Fraser (2013, 213), in the 50s and 60s, the 'family-wage ideal still served to define gender norms and to discipline those who would contravene them, reinforcing men's authority in households and channelling aspirations into privatized domestic consumption.'

As an increasing share of ready-made garments were being designed for women, the majority of fashion advertisements (and a vast amount of other advertisements such as for household products and baby products) also targeted women, which is still evident today over a century later. Thanhauser (2022, 37) explains how Singer targeted their sewing machine advertisements specifically towards women, promising to free up 'women's time, in the same ways that washing machines and dish washers have'. Advertisements for household appliances were not only about freeing up women's time though; they were equally about convincing women that electric appliances would help them become better wives and mothers, as shown in research conducted by Bowden and Offer (1996) on the marketing of household appliances in the interwar period England. The hopes of electric

appliances – which were not only pushed by appliance companies, but also stipulated by the Electrical Development Association – were then to free up women's time so that they could dedicate more of their time to caring duties (increasing their caring burden) while also raising the level of cleanliness in their homes (Bowden and Offer 1996). Similarities can be seen in how 'green' products have been marketed specifically to women and mothers, with well-sounding messaging about protecting the family and babies from harmful chemicals for example has led to an additional environmental burden for women to carry (Sandilands 1993). While these examples pertain mostly to household-related products, today we see moralising advertisements in the fashion industry as well, where women are yet again targeted as ethical consumers who want to do good through the act of consumption.

Fashion in this era was also about upward mobility as ready-made-garments became more available and affordable (Thanhauser 2022). Coco Chanel played an important role in making garments more available to less wealthy women, through the process that is often called the democratisation of fashion, by for instance inventing women's clothing that would today be called 'basics' (Falk 2011). The novel advertising industry and consumer culture led to the emergence of a 'commodity self' whereby 'different products allowed individuals to develop or present different aspects of 'their' personality that could be produced or shaped by using the right products and producing the right image' (Kellner 2014, 178). In a similar vein with ethical and sustainable consumption, we see today how buying the 'right' products can help consumers position themselves politically (Takedomi Karlsson and Ramasar 2020).

Trentmann (2016, 677) writes that there are two veins through which criticisms of consumption have been presented, and that neither of them is historically compelling. The first of those two criticisms is based on the idea that consumption has caused human society to fail morally by succumbing to conspicuous consumption and greed. This is thus a moralistic line of argument. Trentmann takes issue with this view as he believes it only tells a very small part of the story of consumption – for instance, he argues that the type of everyday consumption that has made our lives more functional and convenient (such as household appliances) carry a much larger share of global consumption than luxury consumption (Trentmann 2016). The second criticism he finds trouble in is what he calls the 'obsession with economic growth that triumphed after the Second

World War' (Trentmann 2016, 677). This view, he argues, has too short of a historical perspective. The post-war version of the criticism of consumerism assumes that it was standardisation and the rise of mass production which made people want more things and associate the pre-war era with needs-based consumption and the post-war era with wants-based consumption. Trentmann (2016) argues with the aid of many historical examples that material desires for fashionable items have existed long before the post-war era and even long before the industrial revolution in many parts of the world. Yet, considering the current social-environmental crisis that the global fashion industry finds itself in, criticism of consumerism is a necessary intervention. I believe such a criticism can be offered without falling into moralising or ahistorical traps.

2.6 The Swedish Fashion Miracle

To conclude this background chapter, I would like geographically contextualise my research further and answer the question of 'why Sweden?' – why is Sweden an interesting case to look at when it pertains not only to fashion in general, but sustainability and feminist marketing of fashion specifically?

Sweden has a rich history of garment production, which historian Daun (2022, 329) divides into four phases: the 'prelude' to industrial production (1890-1920) where garments were mostly produced in the home or in workshops, the 'breakthrough years' (1920-1945), where textile production shifted to a wider industrial-scale factory production, the 'golden years' (1945-1970), in which Swedish garment manufacture was booming, and the 'crisis' (1970-1990), which ended in a near-total dismantling of the Swedish textiles industry. The interwar period saw huge growth in the industry with the number of textile workers doubling from 1920-30 and doubling again from 1930-1940. By the 1950s, around 50,000 people in Sweden were employed in textile production, about 40,000 of them across some 700 factories (Daun 2022). From the 1960s onwards, the Swedish textiles industry became outcompeted by other countries, initially in other parts of Europe. During the decade of the 1970s, production in Sweden reduced by 40 per cent, and the number of workers declined from 28,000 to 12,000 (Daun 2022). The reason for the decline of the Swedish textiles industry was two-fold: the Swedish industry's capacity to meet demand was undermined

by that of other countries, and Sweden signed trade agreements with countries (mostly in Europe), which gave overseas production an even higher competitive advantage than they already had from their lower wages (Daun 2022). Technologically, factories overseas did not differ much from those in Sweden, however the working conditions and wages did. During the decline of Swedish production, Swedish companies first turned to Finland, where production costs were about half of that in Sweden. Later, production moved to Southern European countries such as Portugal and Eastern European countries, before moving even further, to Southeast Asia, where most production is today, and even more recently to countries in East Africa. During the span of Swedish textiles production, Swedish workers worked together with many migrant workers, from Finland, Yugoslavia, and Greece (Kustfält 2022). The industry in Sweden was consistently female-dominated, with about 85 per cent of the workforce being women (Daun 2022).

Despite the effective death of Swedish garment production, Swedish fashion continued to grow on the global scene. The term 'det svenska modeundret' or 'the Swedish fashion miracle' was coined in the early 2000s and has come to describe the rapid growth and success of the Swedish fashion industry in the decade leading up to 2000 (Falk 2011). According to Falk (2011), H&M has played a huge role in popularising the idea of democratic fashion in Sweden, and has become a model for many brands that followed. Thanks to H&M, Swedish fashion has become known for its classic, understated, and inexpensive style (Falk 2011).

Today, the Swedish fashion industry is still marked by the idea of democracy, but increasingly the idea of sustainability is catching up in importance. This development has been called the 'Swedish sustainable fashion miracle' by Sweet and Wennberg (2021). A connection can be made between the marketing strategies in the Swedish fashion industries and the global positioning of the Swedish state when it comes to both feminism and sustainability. The Swedish state has an outspoken aim to be a global leader in sustainability and has also been outspoken about having a feminist foreign policy. I see both of these ideals being reflected in the way that Swedish fashion brands market themselves as being sustainable and feminist companies, as we will see throughout this thesis.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I will outline the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings to my ideas and arguments, drawing from works and thinkers that I have been inspired by when writing my dissertation. A significant part of the chapter is framed through Stuart Hall's thinking and writing on discourse, ideology and representation. Prioritising representations in the fashion industry lends well to the work Stuart Hall has done in cultural studies and the contributions he has made in understanding critical analysis of media. Using Hall's ideas as a guiding path, I suggest a mid-way approach which engages both with discourse and ideology, without falling into some of the pitfalls for which theories of ideology is sometimes criticised. The chapter is structured as follows. The first section covers discourse and representation, how I understand those terms and how they are connected to the material I am studying in this thesis. The second section describes Hall's theory of encoding/decoding and how I see this benefiting my research theoretically and methodologically. In the third section, I cover the concept of ideology and interpellation from an Althusserian perspective as well as Hall's understanding and interpretation of Althusser. Here I also introduce what I call 'aspirational interpellation', a process by which aspirational subjects are interpellated into various discourses particularly within social media. This is a concept that I will develop further in chapter seven of the thesis. In the fourth section I write about postfeminism and neoliberal feminism, two very important concepts for understanding the representations of female empowerment and feminism within fashion marketing and social media marketing. The fifth section explains the concept of green consumerism and how eco-conscious subjects are formed. The chapter ends with final remarks in section six.

3.1 Discourse and Representation

Stuart Hall defines a discourse as:

> a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed (Hall 1992, 201).

As per this definition, thus, discourses can be both dominant and marginalised, depending on the power relations at play. Hall also refers to Foucault's understanding of discourse, whereby statements within a discourse can relate to one another as well as support each other, and amass into an accumulation of discourses, creating a 'discursive formation' (Hall 1992, 201). As a discourse constructs a topic, it creates meaning around that topic through various representations. Discourses are not mere reflections of an objective world or a material reality, they are a product of meaning making. Thus, a discourse is a way of representing something (Hall 1992). What, then, is *representation*? Representation connects 'meaning and language to culture' and is an 'essential part of the process by which meaning is produced' (Hall, Evans, and Nixon 2013, 1). It is 'the production of meaning through language' (Hall, Evans, and Nixon 2013, 2). Hall, Evans, and Nixon (2013) describe three different approaches to representation: the reflective (where language is seen as simply reflecting an objective truth), the intentional (where language is a product of the intended meaning of the speaker) and the constructionist approach, whereby meaning is constructed in and through language – this is the understanding of meaning and representation that I adhere to in my work. Advertisements and social media content are then a form of a signifying practice which produces different meanings. In my research, the empirics in question are the discourses of sustainability, feminism, techno-optimism and social justice (among others) in the fashion industry circulating through advertisements, through online spaces on social media, and through corporate communication. These types of material are disseminated by fashion companies, advertisers, and social media influencers.

There are many aspects of sustainability, feminism and wokeness in the fashion industry. The main focus of my dissertation is the representations of sustainable

fashion and feminism in fashion advertisements. This is why images of advertisements, website communications, and social media, make up such a large part of the empirical material in this thesis. Representations can of course be found in the interview material as well, however in my analysis of the interviews, representations are not the only focus, here, other discursive and ideological elements are detected and discussed.

One of the major ways in which Stuart Hall discusses representation is his work on how the 'other' is represented, which becomes relevant also for my work, due to the nature of labour in global fashion. Discussions about gender in relation to global production value chains and global development would not be sufficient without considering racial aspects of the portrayals of labour, and particularly in this case female-coded labour in the global South. To get the full picture, not only gender, but an analysis of other axes of difference, such as race and sexuality, are necessary. In his chapter entitled 'The Spectacle of the "Other"', Hall (2013) discusses how difference (specifically racial difference in this case) is represented in media and advertisement, for example through stereotypical images. Hall defines stereotypes as follows:

> A stereotype is a one-sided description which results from the collapsing of complex differences into a simple 'cardboard cut-out.' Different characteristics are run together or condensed into one. This exaggerated simplification is then attached to a subject or place. Its characteristics become the signs, the 'evidence', by which the subject is known. They define its being, its *essence*. (Hall 1992, 215).

According to Hall (2013, 228), the racialisation of the 'other' in popular culture and media in the western world has been shaped largely by three main encounters, namely the 'sixteenth-century contact between European traders and the West African kingdoms', the 'European colonization of African and the 'scramble' between the European powers for the control of colonial territory, markets and raw materials in the period of 'high Imperialism'', and 'the post-Second World War migrations from the 'Third World' into Europe and North America'. During the imperialism of the late nineteenth century, racialised images were used frequently in commodity advertisements such as for soap, coffee, and biscuits (Hall 2013; McClintock 1995). These advertisements were a 'means by which the imperial project was given visual form in a popular medium, forging the link between Empire and the domestic imagination' (Hall 2013, 229). 'Commodity racism', as coined by McClintock (1995, 209), was thus born, and this, she writes,

was 'distinct from scientific racism in its capacity to expand beyond the literate, propertied elite through the marketing of commodity spectacle'. Hence, commodity racism made racism much more accessible across class lines. Well over a century later, commodity racism still exists in many forms, although often more subtle. For example, Swedish Zoéga's (which is owned by Nestlé) marketed coffee 'Expedition Kahawa, Mästarens Blandning' which translates to 'Expedition Kahawa, the Master's Blend'. Good intentions aside, the similarities between this coffee packaging, and some of the imperial commodity advertisements Alice McClintock studies, are striking. The choice of naming the white man on the packaging the 'master' in the context of coffee that has been sourced in Kenya to be sold by a Nestlé owned company is difficult to overlook. This is a visual example of how representation works to produce and reinforce certain meanings over others.

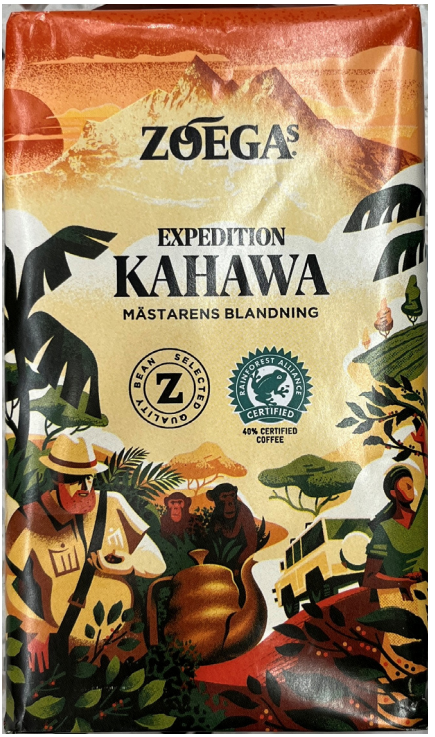


Figure 1. Zoéga's Kahawa coffee
Copyright Mariko Takedomi Karlsson

Although in a less overtly imperial and perhaps more neo-colonial manner, in my own research I show how stereotyped images of people in the global South in a fashion advertisement reduce them to workers who need to be educated and saved by the white consumer (Takedomi Karlsson and Ramasar 2020).

As Hall explains, combatting negative stereotypes of racialised images with positive images is a strategy that has been used in media and advertising. There are important positive aspects and gains of this strategy – visual representation of diversity is important as it reflects the world more realistically. It can reflect acceptance and celebration of difference.

But as explained in this following quote from Hall, the problem is that no amount of positive imagery can undo or displace the negative imagery out there.

> The problem with the positive/negative strategy is that adding positive images to the largely negative repertoire of the dominant regime of representation increases the diversity of the ways in which 'being black' is represented, but does not *necessarily* displace the negative. Since the binaries remain in place, meaning continues to be framed by them. The strategy challenges the binaries – but it does not undermine them. The peace-loving, child-caring Rastafarian can still appear, in the following day's newspaper, as an exotic and violent black stereotype.. (Hall 2013, 263).

Another important pitfall to consider is that of co-optation and 'woke washing' – in many cases the representation of minorities is done in order to position oneself and gain points without having to make changes in the given company or organisation. Feminist scholars Kanai and Gill (2020) address this issue in their study on woke-washing in consumer culture. In their article, they 'observe movements where feminism, queer pride and antiracism are curiously associated with desirable trends and the circulation of normative affective orientations towards capitalism' (Kanai and Gill 2020, 11). 'Yet at the same time', they write, 'we see a corporate environment saturated by messages of rebellion and the apparent championing of identity politics in what is increasingly termed "woke-washing" or "woke capitalism".' (Kanai and Gill 2020, 11). While representation and visibility of minorities are important, they argue that 'what requires scrutiny in relation to corporate wokeness, however, are the *conditions* under which and ways in which historically marginalised bodies are accorded visibility' (Kanai and Gill 2020, 23; emphasis in original). If the ways in which marginalised peoples may be represented in media is restricted by neoliberal capitalist values of

'inspiration' or 'excellence', while their real conditions in life and politics are unchanged, the visibility and representation likely disproportionately benefit the corporation or organisation that produce the images. This is precisely the way in which representations are implicated in power relations; they can work to simplify, warp, or mystify for instance the contradictions that exist between neoliberal dynamics and real living conditions.

In order to develop an understanding of how discourses and representations are circulated, and subsequently received by an audience (or consumer), I take aid from Hall's theory of encoding/decoding.

3.2 Encoding/Decoding

Encoding/decoding is Stuart Hall's theory of communicative moments in media representations. Although his theory pertains mainly to television media, I take inspiration from it and see benefits in applying it to representations in advertisements and social media content. I take both methodological and theoretical inspiration from Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding. Methodologically, as will be covered in the following chapter, encoding/decoding provides a useful way of analysing and understanding representations in visual media material, in my case mostly advertisements and social media posts. Theoretically, it provides a way for me to consider and theorise the meaning production in fashion advertisement and communication, in an attempt to coming closer to make visible the ideological elements that are at play in certain preferred codes and representations.

The process of encoding begins when the producer (in my case, for instance an influencer or a clothing company or marketing team) produces an image, which is imbued with discursive elements pertaining to for example gender norms, fashion trends, and assumptions about who the viewer (consumer) is and what they want to see or buy. The image is then circulated (in this case mostly online) and received by a viewer, who decodes the image in order to form an understanding of it. This can be seen as a production process of images and discourses – Hall (1980, 130) nods to Marx, writing that 'circulation and reception are, indeed, "moments" of the production process in television and are reincorporated, via a number of skewed and structured "feedbacks", into the

production process itself.' He writes that the receiving of an image is also part of the totality of the production process (Hall 1980). He writes: 'Before this message can have an "effect"…satisfy a "need" or be put to a "use", it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded' (Hall 1980, 130). Depending on how aligned the encoder (producer) and decoder (receiver) are, the meaning structures encoded by the producer and decoded by the receiver will have higher or lower degrees of symmetry. Hall (1980, 135) writes that:

> Often broadcasters are concerned that the audience has failed to take the meanings as they – the broadcasters – intended. What they really mean to say is that viewers are not operating within the 'dominant' or preferred' code.

The theory of encoding/decoding provides a way for us to understand how meaning can be built into a message in one way, and then how the message can be decoded and understood in a number of different meanings by the receiver. Before critical studies took off in the academic sphere, media was studied under the assumption that media messages were simple reflections of the intentions of the communicator (the media companies) (Hall 2006). Even within academia, 'the commercial model tended to dominate the theory' (Hall 2006, 55). Of course, there are academics today who also embrace the commercial model when writing about media and advertisement; however, within social science there was a significant shift from a mainstream and behavioural perspective to a critical one from the 1960s onwards, whereby meaning was no longer believed to be a given fact, but rather something that is produced and thus not fixed (Hall 2006). From the behavioural perspective,

> media messages were read and coded in terms of the intentions and biases of the communicators. Since the message was assumed as a sort of empty linguistic construct, it was held to mirror the intentions of its producers in a relatively simple way. It was simply the means by which the intentions of communicators effectively influenced the behaviour of individuals receivers. (Hall 2006, 57).

My research adheres to the critical perspective, aiming to theorise and understand the discursive practices that are used in sustainability marketing and femvertising in the fashion business, and trying to understand the strategies that are used in order to structure some discourses as dominant, rendering others marginalised.

3.3 Ideology

According to Hall (2006), ideology is a material force which is real in its effects, as well as a site of struggle between competing discourses. He writes that 'the signification of events is part of what has to be struggled over, for it is the means by which collective social understandings are created' (Hall 2006, 65). Ideologies take expression through language, which is why Hall believes it is so important to analyse language:

> Language and behavior are the media, so to speak, of the material registration of ideology, the modality of its functioning. These rituals and practices always occur in social sites, linked with social apparatuses. That is why we have to analyze or deconstruct language and behavior in order to decipher the patterns of ideological thinking which are inscribed in them. (Hall 1985, 99-100).

The concept of ideology is often closely associated with class reductionism and the idea that the ruling class adheres to one dominant ideology. As Hall (1992, 203) explains, Foucault was 'very reluctant to reduce discourse to statements that simply mirror the interests of a particular class'; this was one of the main tenets of the classical Marxist view on ideology that he took issue with. This problem of class reductionism need not, however, be a reason to not engage with the concept of ideology. For instance, Hall engages with Althusser and his conceptualisation of ideology which moved away from a classical Marxist reading of the term. Although *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* is the more famous work of Althusser, where he gives a rigorous explanation of ideology (as will be covered in the next subsection), in his earlier work *For Marx*, he provides a simpler, yet to Hall, more useful understanding of ideology and the problems of ideology. Hall sketches out Althusser's three main criticisms of ideology theory: firstly, the problem in classical Marxism of class reductionism, 'the notion that there is some guarantee that the ideological position of a social class will always correspond to its position in the social relations of production.' (Hall 1985, 97). Althusser's second criticism of ideology theory is in relation to the concept of 'class consciousness' which builds upon the assumption that each class would have only one true ideology (Hall 1985). His third criticism of classical Marxist ideology is the charge of empiricism. Hall writes:

> Knowledge, whether ideological or scientific, is the production of a practice. It is not the reflection of the real in discourse, in language. Social relations have to be 'represented in speech and language' to acquire meaning. Meaning is produced as a result of ideological or theoretical work. It is not simply a result of an empiricist epistemology (Hall 1985, 98).

Thus, Althusser supports the notion of ideology as produced through different practices, not a given. Hall's interpretation of Althusser's is that ideology may be seen as 'systems of representation – composed of concepts, ideas, myths, or images – in which men and women (my addition) live their imaginary relations to the real conditions of existence' (Hall 1985, 103). To relate this to my research, we can say that discourses of feminism and sustainability in fashion marketing interpellate people as consumers who continue to consume under the ideological imaginary that consumption will lead to sustainable futures promised by fashion companies, when in fact all it is doing is ensuring the continued profit and growth of those companies. Looking back at the Zoéga's example, the representations visible in that image can be interpreted to be composed of ideological elements, together working to create a discourse around coffee production where the Western man is portrayed as an expert on the commodity that is provided by happy suppliers in this case, Kenya. Ideology, discourse, and representation, are all linked, as explained by Hall in the following quote:

> The designation of ideologies as 'systems of representation' acknowledges their essentially discursive and semiotic character. Systems of representation are the systems of meaning through which we represent the world to ourselves and one another. It acknowledges that ideological knowledge is the result of specific practices – the practices involved in the production of meaning (Hall 1985, 103).

In his engagement will Althusser and the concept of ideology, Hall makes a distinction between practices which primarily involve transforming 'raw materials into a product, a commodity', and practices 'whose principal object is to produce ideological representations' (Hall 1985, 103). He argues that the production of commodities does not happen 'outside of meaning and discourse', but it is equally not 'nothing but a discourse.' Indeed, 'it does not follow that because all practices are in ideology, or inscribed by ideology, all practices are nothing but ideology' (Hall 1985, 103, emphasis in original). To illustrate the distinction between these two forms of production, Hall writes:

> Those people who work in the media are producing, reproducing and transforming the field of ideological representation itself. They stand in a different relationship to ideology in general from others who are producing and reproducing the world of material commodities – which are, nevertheless, also inscribed by ideology (Hall 1985, 104).

Applying this argument to my research, for example, both garment labour and social media labour are inscribed by ideology, for example that of neoliberalism and economic growth, but advertisers and social media influencers operate under the specific purpose of producing ideological representations to influence desires and to expand mass consumption. Garment labour, on the other hand, although inscribed by ideology, does not have a built-in purpose of disseminating certain ideological discourses in the same way. Hall also points out that 'ideologies do not operate through single ideas; they operate, in discursive chains, in clusters, in semantic fields, in discursive formations' (Hall 1985, 104).

Ideological elements help create discursive formations that secure certain discourses over others. For example, the green discourses within sustainable fashion, which are often techno-optimistic, rely on ideologies of neoliberal global development and the assumption that all developing countries want to and ought to follow the same growth trajectory that western countries have. This supports the current structure of the fashion industry, where cheap labour and natural resources provide the industry with clothes at a price which ensures growing profits for the clothing companies and their shareholders. Since neoliberalism is an ideologically dominant discourse, it is easy to defend the current structure of fashion without having to question the socially and ecologically unequal flows of money and resources that underpin such an industry.

3.3.1 Althusser's Interpellation

Now let us look at how consumers become subjected to certain ideologies, namely through the concept of interpellation as explained in Althusser's *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Interpellation is the process by which individuals are turned into subjects of an ideology. According to Althusser (2014), interpellation is the main function of ideology. There are different ways to understand and use the idea of subjectivity. Both Butler and Foucault, and many feminist scholars see subjectivity as a process

that is both external and internal (Butler 2006). For Butler, individuals are constituted into subjects through categorisation of class, gender, sexuality and race, etc. (Butler 2006). As such, they become at once a subject while also being subjected to a certain category. Butler (2006) argues that we all play along with the expectations put on us, through the process of performativity, because we want to belong, and any conflicting performances to the powerful norms causes great discomfort. The process of subjecting is what Althusser (2014) names 'interpellation'. He argues that:

> ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way as to 'recruit' subjects among individuals (it recruits them all) or 'transform' individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) through the very precise operation that we call *interpellation* or *hailing*. (Althusser 2014, 190, emphasis in original).

Ideological state apparatuses, for Althusser, are the practices and rituals of a society, and these practices and rituals have a materiality to them. The way that ideology functions is through the process of interpellation by which subjects are recruited into the society. The construction of subjects and the construction of ideology is a mutual process whereby subjects constitute ideology and ideology constitutes its subjects (Althusser 2014). Through interpellation, ideologies self-reproduce, and become naturalised; consequently they go unquestioned (Kukla 2018).

The classic example used by Althusser (2014) to illustrate how interpellation works, is the scenario where a policeman yells out 'hey, you there!' and the person being hailed reacts by turning to face the officer because he knows he is being hailed, as individuals almost always already know when they are being hailed (Althusser 2014). Althusser (2014) distinguishes between 'individual' and 'subject' in this way, in order to make sense of the narrative of the theory. The transformation of an individual into a subject suggests a temporal succession, as does the scenario of the hailing police officer. However, Althusser (2014) argues that in reality, the process of interpellation by ideology is a cyclical and not successive one, and this is what he means when he writes that '*individuals are always-already subjects*.' (Althusser 2014, 192, emphasis in original). The successive narrative is thus used as a way to illustrate a process which does not have a distinct beginning or end. He writes, 'In reality, however, things happen *without succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing*.' (Althusser 2014, 191; emphases

in original). In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection,* Butler (1997) complicates this notion of subjects already knowing and recognising their subjection when they are being hailed; if interpellation is the process by which subjects are formed, how can the subjects already be subjects before the interpellative process? As Davis (2012, 883) explains her reading of Butler, 'The narrative of subject-formation is thus a circular one that must assume the subject that it seeks to explain'. An assumption of who the subjects are must thus exist in order for ideology to create those subjects. For Butler, individuals only become intelligible by becoming subjects, which happens through the interpellative process, so the existence of an individual before the subject is not something we can make sense of. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Butler writes:

> The reprimand does not merely repress or control the subject, but forms a crucial part of the juridical and social *formation* of the subject. The call is formative, if not *per*formative, precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject (Butler 2011, 81-82; emphases in original).

Thus, the interpellative process summons the performative response in the hailed subject – which manifests in a subject position that is intelligible. For instance, the social position of 'woman' exists before me, but it is only through the interpellative process through which I am hailed as a (cis, middle-class) woman that I become an intelligible subject. Hall also challenges Althusser here and writes that the idea that 'ideologies are always-already inscribed does not allow us to think adequately about the shifts of accentuation in language and ideology, which is a constant, unending process' (Hall 1985, 113).

Althusser (2014) does not really delve into why the turn in the interpellation process actually works. He writes that nine times out of ten, the subject reacts to the hailing by turning around because he recognises the hail as referring to him. However, this process is somewhat mysterious, as also discussed by Davis (2012). Althusser (2014, 191) writes that the action of the turn cannot be explained only by feelings of guilt, but does not explain this much further.

Butler (1997, 107; 108) considers this problem, and argues that the act of turning around is at once an 'appropriation of guilt', a 'readiness to accept guilt' and a turning away from oneself.

> The one addressed is compelled to turn toward the law prior to any possibility of asking a set of critical questions: Who is speaking? Why should I turn around? Why should I accept the terms by which I am hailed? This means that prior to any possibility of a critical understanding of the law is an openness or vulnerability to the law, exemplified in the turn toward the law, in the anticipation of culling an identity through identifying with the one who has broken the law. (Butler 1997, 108)

In her interpretation, guilt seems necessary for the process of interpellation to work. In the way that I will use interpellation in this section, the question of guilt is not central, instead I will focus on the aforementioned assumption that necessitates the subjecting process. Ideology is able to interpellate subjects because a set of assumptions are already made about those subjects, and those assumptions are internalised by the subjects and then acted upon, resulting in the turning of the head as a response to the hailing. The assumptions that are internalised are the ideological elements that subjects accept as truth, i.e. they represent the 'imaginary relation' as per Althusser and Hall to our real lived conditions. This is part of the process by which subjects accept their lives and conditions as objective and true, as fixed conditions that could not be imagined in another way. This is also how we can see that something is working ideologically, since ideology aims to fix meaning (although meaning can never truly be fixed).

3.3.2 Aspirational Interpellation

Against the backdrop of Althusser's explanation of interpellation, I would like to introduce a concept I call *aspirational interpellation*, which I argue to be a significant way in which consumption is upheld. Althusser makes a distinction between repressive state apparatuses and ideological state apparatuses, where the former is repressive by definition as it uses direct or indirect violence through institutions like the police, and the latter functions primarily on ideology and is not violent by definition (Althusser 2014). Ideology functions through institutions like 'churches, schools, television and publishing' (Althusser 2014, 77). Ideology also functions through social media (Fuchs 2021). For instance, Fuchs (2021, 187) argues that in influencer capitalism, commodity ideology is disseminated through social media in an attempt to 'totalise and universalise the consumption of commodities in everyday life'. I argue that the dominant ideologies of influencer capitalism, consumption and the entrepreneurial self, on

social media reproduces itself through a process of *aspirational interpellation,* whereby aspirational subjects are recruited to co-constitute the ideology and support its survival. The process of interpellation in social media ideology thus mainly functions through *aspiration*. Through this process, social media users and aspiring influencers alike are recruited through the narratives and discourses that exist on social media apps, and these narratives and discourses are mediated through influencers and aspiring influencers.

Fuchs (2021, 188) argues that social media ideology reduces 'individuals, viewers, audiences, users, and fans to the status of consumers.' Part of this reductivity comes from the assumptions that are made of those people which allows them to be recruited as subjects. Assumptions are made about consumers based on their behaviours, which may not correspond to beliefs or opinions held internally. But those assumptions become the basis of the subjection process. If a person looks at certain images on social media, follow certain influencers, and buy certain products, assumptions can be made based on those behaviours, regardless of the reasons behind those choices. In other words, a person can hold an internal belief that no amount of consumption will make them happier or achieve someone else's lifestyle but may still exhibit consumption patterns and behaviours on social media that would indicate the opposite. And as such they end up constituting the consumerist ideology on social media. For aspirational interpellation to work, a true belief that a certain set of behaviours or purchases will garner the desired effect is not necessary. The enactment of aspiration is a reproduction of actions that can co-exist with the knowledge that those actions will not bring the subject closer to the aspired position. What the action says is not the same as what the subject necessarily believes.

In chapter 7 of the thesis, I will elaborate on aspirational interpellation, the ways in which it operates and how that might look like in relation to my empirical work.

3.4 Postfeminism and Neoliberal Feminism

This section is a discussion about postfeminism and neoliberal feminism, concepts which will be integral to the analysis in chapter seven of this thesis. In my work, I am inspired by socialist feminists such as Tithi Bhattacharya, Silvia Federici and

Nancy Fraser. Furthermore, the works of critical feminist media scholars such as Rosalind Gill, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Brooke Erin Duffy and Angela McRobbie have shaped my understanding and critique of neoliberal feminism and postfeminism greatly.

Social reproduction theorists argue that productive labour for the market is the 'sole form of legitimate "work"' in capitalism, while 'the tremendous amount of familial as well as communitarian work that goes on to sustain and reproduce the worker, or more specifically her labor power, is naturalized into nonexistence.' (Bhattacharya 2017, 2). Fraser (2017) writes that while 'social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation', 'capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies.' (Fraser 2017, 22). This, she argues, leads to a care crisis. Care, which is a central concept in social reproduction theory, is generally defined as 'the corpus of social relations involving regeneration – birth, death, social communication, and so on' (Bhattacharya 2017, 9). The notion of care also extends into fashion industry discourse whereby consumers are asked upon to exercise care for their clothes and for the workers who made them, through the act of consumption. This consumerist idea of care will be discussed further in chapter six.

Mohandesi and Teitelman (2017, 43) explain how during industrialisation there was a tendency to 'physically separate the workplace from the site of social reproduction, a division which contributed to the belief that there existed two separate spheres of activity.' This ideological separation, they argue, obfuscates the reliance capitalist accumulation has had on for instance textile 'outwork' which was predominantly performed by women and children (recall the section on gendered labour in the background chapter of this thesis) (Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017). Nevertheless, men became associated with work, while women became associated with the home – an ideological separation which led to men being associated with production, and women with consumption. Women have thus for a long time been portrayed and theorised as consumers, especially stereotyped consumers of certain products such as household products, beauty products, and fashion (Zawiska-Riley 2019; Sandilands 1993; De Grazia 1996). While advertisements of household goods have tended to utilise traditional stereotypes of housewives and mothers, advertisements within the beauty and fashion industries have tended more towards portraying women as self-sufficient

professional go-getters (Maclaran and Chatzidakis 2022). The 2010s have been marked by femvertising – advertising that aims to empower women through the product or service that is being advertised – and this has proved to be generally successful and well-received by many women (Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen 2017; Maclaran and Chatzidakis 2022), although it has not gone uncriticised (Takedomi Karlsson and Ramasar 2020). Elias, Gill, and Scharff (2017) describe this postfeminist moment we are in as characterised partly by femvertising, whereby a shift has occurred from simply focusing on women's bodies and appearance, to infiltrating their psychic life of empowerment, confidence, and self-esteem. Femvertising not only asks women to look a certain way, but it demands of them to love themselves and feel empowered *while* looking a certain way.

Angela McRobbie defines postfeminism as 'a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined', where popular culture and media plays a significant role in this undermining process, 'while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism' (McRobbie 2008, 15). She also writes that postfeminism suggests that 'by means of the tropes of freedom and choice which are now inextricably connected with the category of young women, feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant.' (McRobbie 2008, 15).

While some scholars have defined postfeminism as a backlash against 'real feminism', and some grouped it together with other 'post' movements (such as postmodernism), Gill (2007) rejects all of the above, and instead insists on referring to a postfeminist *sensibility*, rather than an analytical perspective. She writes, 'postfeminist media culture should be our critical object – a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire' Gill (2007, 148). This notion of a sensibility 'was designed to be used empirically as a way of analysing popular culture. It called attention to postfeminism as a circulating set of ideas, images and meanings' (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020, 5). The postfeminism of the 90s and the 2000s was marked by the celebratory version of 'girl power' feminism, sexual power and, often, consumption (Gill 2017). Gill (2007) points out the main features of a postfeminist sensibility to be associated with elements like individual choice, sexual autonomy, a focus on women's bodies, and self-improvement. Following Gill's understanding of postfeminist sensibility as an object of inquiry, in my research, I analyse elements of postfeminism in my

empirical material in the form of social media posts and fashion advertisements, as well as my interview material with social media influencers.

The features of self-improvement, consumption, and individual choice in postfeminism that Gill writes about, are highly visible on social media apps such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. What is interesting about the professional field of social media and influencers is that it has a two-pronged effect: on the one hand, it is inspiring to young women or girls who want to emulate a lifestyle that can be dedicated to interior design, outfits, eating out and having a nice home, as well as having the freedom, flexibility, and capital to for example have children young and not have to work in an office. On the other hand, this imagined fusion of happy housewife and powerful businesswoman may add even more pressure on young women. The image that many lifestyle-bloggers produce is very difficult to adhere to or position oneself against, as their career and money-earning capacity rely on showcasing a certain lifestyle. What I mean by this is that, not only do their jobs allow them to afford a certain lifestyle, but their job is inherently connected to showing off this lifestyle; this is where their income comes from, creating content and posting sponsored ads for everything from skincare products to makeup, to clothes, to meal-planning services, to furniture, to house cleaning services, to removalist companies. The showcasing element of social media labour interpellates women into aspirational subjects, as I discussed earlier in this chapter (and this is the main object of study in chapter seven of this thesis).

While postfeminist ideals may seem frivolous, Gill insists that the importance of the concept of postfeminism 'resides…in its ordinariness and everydayness':

> its ability to speak to sense and meaning-making about gender that has become as taken-for-granted as neoliberal ideas – a sense-making characterized by relentless individualism, one that exculpates the institutions of patriarchal capitalism and blames women for their disadvantaged positions, that renders the intense surveillance of women's bodies normal or even desirable, that calls forth endless work on the self and that centres notions of empowerment and choice while enrolling women in ever more intense regimes of 'the perfect' (Gill 2017, 609).

She argues that postfeminism, much like neoliberalism, has become a hegemonic project (Gill 2017). Turning women into aspirational subjects of self-improvement and discipline is also a feature of neoliberal feminism as theorised by Rottenberg (2018) in her book *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. Rottenberg (2018) developed the notion of neoliberal feminism, against the backdrop of

postfeminism as conceptualised by Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2008). The concept was developed during a time where there was a sharp shift in the public consciousness spurred on by high-profile women who were suddenly identifying as feminists. Through studying for example the book Lean In by Sheryl Sandberg, former COO (Chief Operating Officer) of Facebook, Rottenberg shows how in neoliberal feminism, 'happiness, balance and 'lean in' were replacing key terms traditionally inseparable from public feminist discussions and debates, namely, autonomy, rights, liberation and social justice' (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020, 7). Rottenberg (2018), Prügl (2015), Brown (2015) and Larner (2000) all theorise neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism around the Foucauldian notion of governmentality. For instance, Rottenberg (2018, 15-16) conceptualises neoliberal feminism, governmentality, and the idea of futurity as follows:

> neoliberal feminism is producing a new form of neoliberal governmentality for young middle-class and 'aspirational' women, namely, a governmentality structured through futurity and based on careful sequencing and smart self-investments in the present to ensure enhanced returns in the future.

Thus, neoliberal feminism produces feminist subjects that are promised certain futures, constricted by and contingent on certain neoliberal requirements (Rottenberg 2018). Rottenberg (2018) identifies the notion of balance as a recurring feature of neoliberal feminism, and argues that neoliberal feminism 'presents *balance* as its normative frame and ultimate ideal' (Rottenberg 2018, 83; emphasis in original). The balance discourse produces future imaginaries for aspirational women that can be reached if their cards are played right. For instance, Rottenberg argues that 'upwardly mobile middle-class women are increasingly being encouraged to invest in themselves and their professions first and to postpone maternity until some later point', as made evident by the surge in egg-freezing services offered by corporations to their employees, packaged as a gender equality measure (Rottenberg 2018, 83). In some ways, the social media industry has ensured a sphere in which young aspirational women are interpellated into a line of work which allows them to make a career while espousing and upholding traditionally gendered care-related roles. This is true both in the sense that a majority of influencer marketing relates to postfeminist themes such as consumption, self-improvement, and women's bodies, and in the sense that social media labour, which tends to involve a freelance schedule and working from home, may ensure the continuation of women being

disproportionately burdened by care work in the family. While neoliberal feminism makes it seem as though women can finally 'have it all' (a career, a balanced life, a family), indeed,

> women's traditional responsibility for childrearing helps shape labor markets that disadvantage women, resulting in unequal power in the economic marketplace, which in turn reinforces, and exacerbates, unequal power in the family. Such market-mediated processes of subordination are the very lifeblood of neoliberal capitalism (Fraser 2013, 255).

Here, Fraser explains how at once neoliberalism manages to continue the structural subordination of women and make women believe that they now have, or are close to, reaching gender equality. The concept of futurity as discussed by Rottenberg (2018) is something I also identify in the analyses of influencer marketing, whereby women and girls are interpellated as consumers who are promised a future better self, if they buy the narratives and products being marketed to them. Prügl (2015, 614) looks specifically at what she calls the 'process of neoliberalisation of feminism'. Through examples of corporate empowerment programmes, she shows how the language of feminism is used by such initiatives while simultaneously emptying it of the notion of collective struggle, and reformulating it as an entrepreneurial, market-oriented imaginary.

According to her, the neoliberalisation of feminism

> encompasses a discourse, which generates individuals as entrepreneurs of the self and favours the creation of external environments that lead individuals to self-monitor so that they conduct themselves in ways that respond to market principles (Prügl 2015, 620).

This is the essence of the Foucauldian governmentality argument that Prügl follows. As we will see in chapter six of this thesis, this process of neoliberalisation of feminism is also apparent within fashion advertisement and empowerment initiatives that fashion brands are involved in. In Nancy Fraser's seminal book *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, she explains how and why feminism and neoliberalism coincided with each other, and what implications this has had for the feminist movement. Not only did second-wave feminism coincide with 'a historical shift in the character of capitalism, from the state-organized variant…to neoliberalism', but neoliberalism managed to 'resignify feminist ideals', where the emancipatory hopes and aspirations of

second-wave feminism took on a 'far more ambiguous meaning in the neoliberal era' (Fraser 2013, 218). As the three dimensions of injustice that second-wave feminists had been focusing on (economic, cultural and political) became separated from each other and from a broader anti-capitalist criticism, 'second-wave hopes were conscripted in the service of a project that was deeply at odds with our larger, holistic vision of a just society' (Fraser 2013, 211).

With Fraser's analysis of the shift from state-organized capitalism to neoliberalism as a backdrop, it is no surprise that the ensuing era of postfeminist ideals and neoliberal 'lean-in' feminism was imminent. The rise of neoliberalism and the increased focus on identity and recognition over redistribution created the perfect storm for postfeminist sensibilities to develop. In chapter seven, I have focused on the notions of intimacy and authenticity as two important features of a postfeminist sensibility and social media labour. The commodification of intimacy has been studied by Berlant (2008) within the context of chick-lit and self-help authorship. More recently, a similar tendency of commodifying intimacy has been identified in the social media context, where studies show that social media producers (bloggers and influencers) receive praise and more followers or traction when they reveal more intimate parts of their lives (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020; Petersson McIntyre 2021; Duffy 2017). There is a complexity of power relations at play where some influencers are able to make a lot of money by doing traditionally female coded activities that are otherwise unpaid – decorating, cooking, household and childcare – through corporate sponsorships, while the corporations turn profit and benefit from the 'authenticity' created through this relatively new form of outsourced advertisement. The reason why this is relevant to my research is because a significant portion of fashion advertisement today is through influencer marketing where individual influencers are paid by brands to advertise their products on their social media channels. Genz (2015) argues that authenticity is so sellable because people become infatuated with the assumed realness of others. She argues that 'the currency of 'realness' is harnessed to neoliberal and postfeminist expressions of self-branding, entrepreneurship and feminine agency' (Genz 2015, 547). She writes,

> Authenticity labour can be discussed as an integral element of the neoliberal reflexive 'project of the self' where in 'post-traditional' society individuals are reconceptualised as entrepreneurial actors defined by their capacity for autonomy and self-care (Genz 2015, 548).

This quote brings us back to the importance of individual entrepreneurialism in neoliberal discourse. Both authenticity labour like social media work and manual labour like garment work may be framed as 'empowering'. Expectations of authenticity, intimacy, and the subsequent requirement of self-disclosure, affects consumers and consumption, interpellating and creating consumer subjects who aspire to become successful neoliberal subjects. Taking this analysis a step further, Kanai and Gill (2020) argue for an affective-discursive approach, which also pays attention to the psychological aspects of neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism. In their criticism of 'woke capitalism', they point out that the trend of woke and feel-good messaging in media culture and advertising is happening in tandem with the closures of essential public goods such as 'public libraries, youth clubs, LGBT venues, women's centres and refuges, and the cutting of resources for organisations supporting Black people' (Kanai and Gill 2020, 20). Inspired by Stuart Hall's argument that 'discourses hail concrete individuals into a social imaginary', they argue that this is done specifically through 'affective attachments to particular identities' (Kanai and Gill 2020, 14; 15). It is those affective attachments to certain identities which produce a social imaginary that in turn helps to conceal the power relations at play. I argue that the notion of femininity, which is closely attached to the affective, then also plays a significant role in the realm of postfeminist sensibilities in media, advertising, and social media.

As Duffy (2017) shows in her book *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender and Aspirational Labor in the Social Media Economy*, scholar Kathy Peiss has historicised the exploitation of femininity as a successful sales strategy. Namely she mentions the way in which the female sales team of Avon was so successful as male salesmen in the 1930s had already garnered a negative reputation about being dishonest and pushy. Women, on the other hand, were reliable and relatable, which turned out to be hugely successful for Avon. Similarly, what we see on social media is the success of reliable and relatable women who are 'just like us', who curate and help us refashion ourselves through the clothes and products that they advertise on their social media channels. Duffy explains that many of her respondents relied on discourses of 'ordinariness' and 'relatability'; however, that these discourses 'unravel when examined through the lens of class relations' (Duffy 2017, 113). Influencers are constructed as peers to their followers, rather than purely authoritative figures. It is this 'peer'-ness which helps build trust and intimacy in the relation between consumer and producer (in this case the advertiser, the influencer).

Applying the writings of the scholars discussed above to the questions of this thesis helps us to make visible the conditions under which female empowerment and sustainability marketing are produced, and allows us to conceptualise how it is that discourses of female empowerment and environmentally just futures in fashion are so effective in creating consumer subjects, and how those discourses persist despite growing knowledge of the ills of the fashion industry.

3.5 Green Consumption and the Making of the Essentialised Consumer Subject

According to Hall, a part of the 'function of a signification' can be to 'construct a subject to which the discourse applies' (Hall 2006, 65). We see this in my empirical material, for instance, in the frequent use by fashion brands of the pronoun 'we' which at once creates a sense of togetherness as well as constructing the consumer and the brand together as collaborating subjects in the discourse of green consumerism. Green consumption can thus be seen as an example of a discourse which produces green consumers.

Research on green governmentality (or environmentality, environmental governmentality) has grown since the 1992 United Nations World Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, with a growing number of scholars looking at the ways in which environmental subjectivities are shaped and performed, as well as how the concept of governmentality becomes significant in environmental politics, discourse and behaviour (Fletcher and Cortes-Vazquez 2020; Hobson 2013; Rutherford 2007; Soneryd and Uggla 2015). Rutherford (2007) argues that green governmentality can serve as a useful analytical tool for examining the nexus between power, nature, and society. By 'environmental subjects' I refer to 'people who care about the environment' as iterated by Agrawal (2005, p.162). He writes that 'for these people the environment is a conceptual category that organizes some of their thinking and a domain in conscious relation to which they perform some of their actions' (Agrawal 2005, p.162). Important to note is also the fact that the term 'subject' is used purposefully by Agrawal (2005) over other terms such as citizens or objects because he understands them as being subjected and therefore also subordinated. Following this conceptualisation and adding to it, I see a possibility of a subjectivation process

by which environmental, feminist and woke consumer subjects are shaped into being through the discourses of sustainable fashion.

In *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate,* Naomi Klein writes about the increasing global awareness of climate change in 2006-2007 in conjunction with Al Gore releasing the documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth,* and subsequently being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize together with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Klein 2014). Klein (2014, 212) points out that the notion of sustainable consumption began to gain traction around the same time, thus regular people were 'called upon to exercise their consumer power – not by shopping less but by discovering new and exciting ways to consume more.' Large environmental organisations like the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council in the USA played a significant role in promoting this green consumption as a legitimate form of climate activism (Szasz 2011). More specifically relating to the fashion industry, it can be said that the early 2010s is marked by an 'ethical turn' in fashion, which brought about 'a new arena of aesthetic politics, where designers and labels seem to compete as activists demonstrating and struggling against climate change, the ecological crisis, overconsumption, and exploitation of labor' (Gaugele 2014, 205). The idea of green consumption thus became increasingly popular and seen as an adequate way of exercising care for the environment.

I have previously written about the feminisation and individualisation of green consumption, for instance in 'Selling the green dream to women'. In that paper, we argued that 'there is a danger of depoliticization when feminist and environmentalist issues become internalized into private household issues', something that Sandilands also argued in the early 1990s (Takedomi Karlsson and Ramasar 2020, 338). The whole idea of sustainable consumption suggests that the act of buying things can lead to a more sustainable world if we just buy the 'right' things. As this dissertation will show, this is reflected in corporate discourse and advertisements as well, where consumers are encouraged to consume in a different way rather than to actually consume less. I argue that environmental responsibility is individualised and feminised through different mechanisms that reinforce one another. One of these mechanisms may be a process of governmentality through which individuals self-govern their consumer behaviour in an attempt to do the 'right' thing, which in this context would be making ethical environmentally friendly choices that contribute to sustainability, female

empowerment and social equality and justice. Our article shows that some consumers try to make the most conscious decision they can based on the information they have, but that they also expect brands to take responsibility through honest communication (Takedomi Karlsson and Ramasar 2020). As I have argued previously, brands tap into assumptions about the nature of women as nurturing and caring, which helps reinforce the construction of female consumers as ethically and environmentally conscious. The assumptions of women's innate closeness to nature are illustrated well in the following quote:

> Women's subjection is supported by an old belief that they are 'closer to nature' than men… by colonial times, cultural allusions such as these gendered and racialized metaphors would come to be used interchangeably by ruling elites: just as women were unclean, so were natives… these deeply rooted attitudes have served to construct the inferiority of 'others' and to justify the exploitation of their bodies alongside the resourcing of nature at large (Salleh 2009, 3-4).

The sexist yet common misconception that women are inherently more caring and more connected to nature, which has subsequently made women (especially of the global South) more vulnerable to exploitation, is thus not only evident through production and manufacturing but also in the way fast fashion brands appeal to female consumers in the global North. This shows that the way capitalism attempts to include women can be disingenuous: as Nayak (2009, 109) points out, 'the new wisdom is that women's labour should be marketed and marketable no matter what it consists in'. Dualism thus manifests environmental responsibility and burdens in gendered ways. On the one hand, women in the global South are expected to be sustainable stewards of the land and its resources, on the other, women in the global North are expected to internalise environmental issues through consumption in the private household.

3.6 Final Remarks

In this theory chapter I hope to have shown, through the various scholars I have drawn inspiration from, how I view discourses of gender, sustainability, fashion and consumption and their forms of circulation, and how representations within those discourses are produced, disseminated, and understood by their audiences. Through an exploration of ideology, interpellation, and aspirational

interpellation, I have aimed to understand and explain the role of power in discourse, representation and ideology – and *how* certain discourses gain power over others. When ideologies become powerful, for instance through the process of aspirational interpellation, we accept certain discourses and representations of reality to be true. When we consume, we (consumers) agree to and accept the discourses we are fed through marketing, even when we know that buying a pair of jeans from a giant capitalist multinational firm most likely will not improve the living conditions of women in the global South or lead us to an ecologically sustainable future. I have also shown how gender, through notions such as care, is inextricably linked to consumption and advertising, both historically and today. Thus, through an exploration of neoliberal feminism and postfeminism, we may better understand the ways in which gender is often implicated in the advertising industry and consumer culture.

Chapter 4

Methodology

In this chapter I will outline the methodological choices I have made in taking on this project, and what methods I chose to use for collecting and analysing empirical material. This will be done through discussing different thinkers and schools of thought I have been inspired by. The chapter is divided into seven sections. I introduce the chapter with a short section on how I view my positionality and reflexivity in doing research. This forms a bridge to an overarching text on digital ethnography, which has helped in framing the research design. The third section covers the methods I used for collecting data, namely through collecting images on the internet and social media and conducting in-depth interviews. Section four dives into the data analysis step of the research, with sub-sections on transcription, thematic selection, discourse, representation, and Stuart Hall's theory on encoding/decoding. In section five I consider the ethical aspects of my research project, and in the sixth, I lay out the limitations to my study. The seventh and final section concludes this chapter.

4.1 Positionality and Reflexivity

I am inspired by Narayan (2012)'s writing on storytelling and auto-biography, and the question about how much of oneself one wants to share in their academic work. In the beginning of my project, I did not see my research as being ethnographic per se; however, the further I got along, I realized there were elements of ethnographic research (like digital ethnography) that applied to my research. Throughout the project, I came to understand that my personal positionality, situatedness and reflexivity are extremely important for the research I conduct and the arguments I make. This is in line with feminist standpoint research which calls particular attention to the positionality and situatedness of

the researcher (Linabary and Hamel 2017). To give an example, the fact that I am looking at content on social media means that I need to be acutely aware of my positionality. As a millennial, I have been active on social media platforms for over fifteen years, which means that a significant part of my taste, opinions and belief systems have been shaped by and fed into the algorithmic machine of the social media sphere. For instance, my personal feminist journey and the transformation of my views within that journey have been facilitated by and through social media. Narayan (2012) stresses the importance of creating distance from oneself in the research and writing process, by turning oneself into a character that is part of the narrative. She writes: 'placing yourself as an experiencing presence within a text can still be a supple means for linking different moments in time and different steps in your thinking' (Narayan 2012, 97). My situatedness affects how I interpret and analyse phenomena and material, and as a feminist researcher, this is something that I want to be candid about.

4.2 Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography can encompass many types of studies that are concerned with doing research on, or about, or with the internet. Although a relatively new field, scholars have written extensively about digital ethnography (Hjorth et al. 2017; Pink et al. 2016), cultural production and labour on and with digital platforms (Jarrett 2022; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2021; Fuchs 2021), Instagram cultures (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020), internet celebrities (Abidin 2020, 2018), and influencers and social media labour (Abidin 2016; Duffy 2017; Banet-Weiser 2021, 2012), in the last decade. Digital ethnography can be understood as a 'methodological common ground for scholars doing ethnographic research on, through and about digital media' (Abidin and de Seta 2020, 8). This entire dissertation is not a digital ethnography – it is more heavily based on non-participatory content and discourse analyses. However, I have been inspired by, and borrowed aspects of digital ethnography throughout the project, particularly in chapter seven, which has a larger theoretical and methodological focus on the digital sphere than the other empirical chapters.

Sometime after I had started this project, it became clear to me that I wanted to include a digital and social media element to my study – so much of the fashion

advertising and content I was seeing existed on social media apps that seemed to have become ecosystems of their own; ignoring this and only looking at traditional advertising for the purposes of a contemporary study on fashion advertising seemed unwise. As I wanted to focus on visual material, I decided to begin making observations on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok; this shaped the beginning of my digital ethnography. The digital nature of the field of my research added layers to my research that enriched my understanding of consumer society and fashion advertising. On social media, influencers have the ability and power to encourage consumption through sharing intimate moments of their lives, storytelling, or prompting others to take their advice on a strew of topics. By posting images and videos on social media apps, users are also inviting other users to engage directly with them and their social media pasts, through acts of liking, commenting, and sharing.

As a woman who has been using social media consistently for about 14 years (Facebook and YouTube since about 2008, Instagram since 2011, TikTok since 2020), I am in a way part of and enmeshed in this field that I am studying. When I reflect upon my situatedness, my position as an individual and social media user and me as a researcher also become blurred, as my social media interactions have been made from a young age when I did not yet have research interest in the social media sphere. During my research I made sure to not only look at social media content that appealed to me aesthetically and that was already being suggested to me by the algorithm, but rather widened the scope by following accounts and looking at content that were not necessarily what I would personally choose to follow.

The digital ethnography has consisted of observations on social media over the course of five years. After observing over a thousand images, this resulted in a selection of specific images and texts that were used for analysis in the empirical chapters, as well as more general understandings of social media and platform cultures, which informs my dissertation. Conducting interviews with social media influencers has also been an important part of the research. There are many different approaches to conducting digital ethnographic research, for example, the 'walkthrough method' whereby the researcher 'walks through' an app step by step as a user, making observations along each step (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018). Another method in conducting digital ethnography is exploring a hashtag, (Abidin 2017) – this was something I considered doing, but soon realised that the

use of hashtags has evolved since the 2010s and do not hold the same significance as they once did and therefore would not serve the purpose of my research. While hashtags are used more for spreading information and organising content on Twitter, it is no longer used as much on Instagram. On Instagram and TikTok, hashtags are still being used, and sometimes they go viral, but increasingly, algorithms are ensuring that users find what type of content they are looking for and cater content to each user without the need for hashtags. In my digital ethnography, the main steps were making observations on social media, strategically searching out specific content, and collecting visual material by taking screenshots. The main social media platforms I observed were Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. What follows is a brief description of the three platforms.

Instagram

Instagram is a photo and video sharing app launched in 2010 and founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger; the company is now owned by the American social media conglomerate Meta Platforms (which also owns Facebook and WhatsApp). In the twelve years since launching, Instagram has evolved dramatically. In the early days, only simple 1:1 ratio still photos could be shared. Today on Instagram you can post still photos, videos, 'reels' (another video format where the video fills the screen of the smartphone and loops in a similar manner to videos on TikTok), live streamed videos, and 'stories' (photos and videos that are shown for 24 hours before being archived, but that can also be saved on one's profile as a 'highlight'). Instagram shows all its users targeted advertisements both in the 'stories' function and in the regular feed. Instagram has applied and developed new features as a way to compete with other social media platforms, for example, the stories function was a way to compete with Snapchat and the reels function was a strategy to compete with the video sharing app TikTok. Instagram has remained a large and successful social media platform; however, in later years, as Instagram has leaned heavily into advertising, and as it has become a major platform for influencers to post paid advertising content, some argue that it has lost its original essence of people sharing pictures of their days and lives to their friends (Shroeder 2022).

TikTok

TikTok, or Douyin (抖音) is a video sharing app created and launched by the Chinese company Bytedance in 2016. Today it is the largest video sharing app in

the world and has grown immensely since its launch. TikTok allows users to post videos that are up to three minutes long, and also live-streamed videos. The main feature that separated TikTok from other social media platforms was its algorithm and infinite app design, whereby the algorithm caters content to each individual user based on their personal data, and the feed provides an infinite stream of videos.

YouTube

YouTube is a video sharing social media platform founded by Steve Chen, Chad Hurley and Jawed Karim that launched in 2005; today it is owned by Google. On YouTube, users can post short and long videos (YouTube recently launched a 'shorts' function which is similar to Instagram's 'reels', as a way to compete with TikTok). YouTube also facilitates live streams; it is free to use (although it has a paid premium subscription option) and like Instagram and TikTok it makes its money on advertising revenue.

Throughout this dissertation, I will discuss the cultures on these apps in greater detail, and in the next section I describe more thoroughly how I went about observing and collecting material from these platforms.

4.3 Data Collection

In this section I will describe the specific methods that I chose to use for collecting data in this project, and how they were used. In the beginning phase of the project, I did a few exploratory studies, before settling on which methods I wanted to use and what kind of data I wanted to collect. For instance, I did a pilot wardrobe study, where I conducted a digital video interview with a person. In the interview we talked about sustainability and consumption, through looking at and talking about specific items of clothing that the interviewee had taken out of her wardrobe to show me. This was a very interesting experiment, which I did not ultimately land on as a method for the project, but which may be interesting to test again in the future. I also observed several live shopping events on Instagram, where I made observations and took 'field notes' that I later analysed. Although I did not end up using the methods in these pilot studies for data collection, they did add to my understanding of the field overall.

For this project, I decided to focus mostly on the Swedish ready-made garment scene, hence I wanted to interview Swedish influencers and sustainability workers at Swedish fashion companies. When it came to interviewing researchers and NGO workers, I expanded the field to the international sphere as I wanted to bring in other perspectives that reflect elements of the fast fashion world that are not only connected to Swedish companies.

4.3.1 Collecting Data Online

I knew from the beginning of this project that I wanted to collect and analyse visual material of advertisements and other fashion content, as this was the origin of my interest in the thesis topic, and as I believe the discourses and symbolism in advertisements are incredibly interesting and important to try to understand. I collected images in the form of screenshots from Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and websites between 2018-2023 (and some before that period). Some of the data collection was carried out purposefully, where I sat down during a designated time and searched specifically for interesting data by searching different brands names and influencers on social media platforms and looking at many advertisements and brand deals/collaborations. However, a large part of the data was also collected organically and sporadically during these years as I came across material naturally. Every time a sponsored ad that seemed relevant to my research popped up on my screen while I was using social media, or I saw an ad or a product in store or on a website, or scrolled past a post on social media that was relevant, I would take a screenshot or photo of it. I also followed fashion brands' accounts on Instagram to see if that would change the amount of targeted advertising I would get. From 2022 I have been following Monki, NA-KD, Nelly, Chiquelle, H&M, Kappahl, Lindex, & Other Stories, Weekday, and Gina Tricot on Instagram. I also followed an array of Swedish influencers on Instagram as a way of attracting more sponsored content and targeted advertisements (although each social media user will get targeted advertisements regardless of whether they only follow friends and family, or if they also follow influencers and brands). Over the years, I have spent hundreds of hours online and on social media observing fashion and influencer content, viewed around ten live shopping events, observed and viewed over a thousand advertisements in image and video format, and collected around eight hundred images that were relevant to my topic. Many of these I did not end up using for analysis, but it helped to become accustomed to the themes

that are used in fashion advertising and social media advertising. Through several culling processes, I only chose to include the images that I thought were most relevant and possessed the most explanatory power for me to use in my analysis. However, the vast number of images collected during the years contributed greatly to my understandings of different phenomena; it also contributed to the way I was able to organise my thoughts and develop my arguments and conceptualisations. Observing and thinking about these images and coming across such images almost every day over the past five years has, in the back of my mind, kept me thinking about concepts such as visibility, authenticity, co-optation, commodification of the self, advertising culture, fast fashion, sustainability communication and consumerism. Being inundated with consumerist imagery day after day has often felt exhausting and discouraging, yet it has aided my analyses in more ways than one.

Sampling criteria

The sampling criteria for the visual material I collected was quite broad as I wanted to gain a wide variety of content to observe and analyse. The sampling criteria was not set in stone before I began collecting data, rather I collected everything that seemed relevant and interesting, and later in the process I went through several culling processes where I removed data that was for example not relevant enough to the research topic or too similar to other data. I decided to be quite free with the sampling criteria to begin with, as I started noticing that collecting certain data sparked new ideas that I wanted to explore, even if I did not end up using that specific data for analysis. Thus, I decided to collect screenshots from Swedish clothing brand websites and their sustainability reports, advertisements posted by clothing companies on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok, sponsored posts posted by influencers on Instagram and TikTok, as well as non-advertorial content posted by influencers. If I wanted to explore a particular topic, for example the 'clean girl trend', I searched those terms in the search bar of TikTok and observed and collected material from videos generated by that search. Some examples of terms I searched were 'morning routine', 'get ready with me', 'haul', and 'cottagecore'.

4.3.2 Interviews

In the fall of 2021 and spring of 2022, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with different actors in or adjacent to the garment sector such as sustainability managers of clothing brands, legal experts from NGOs that work with garment worker rights, sustainable fashion researchers, and social media influencers. I was interested in collecting material via interviews as I wanted to gain perspectives from people who operate at some point within the discourse of the fashion industry and see how their understandings and reflections fit into the wider official narratives that are fronted by corporations. I wanted to interview influencers as well in order to gain a more in-depth view on how they personally relate to influencer capitalism and social media labour, and how they negotiate their role as influencers. The interviews were conducted in Swedish or English and lasted between 60-90 minutes each, and they were all conducted online. All the interviews that were held in Swedish were later translated by myself when transcribing so that I could use the citations directly in English in the dissertation. The interviews provided me with deeper understanding and contextualisation of the fashion industry in Sweden. The way that sustainability workers understand and handle problems relating to sustainability and ethics in the industry is something that is not communicated through advertisements in the same way, this is where interviewing them directly gave clarity on some aspects of how companies view sustainability and some of the more strategic elements. The interviews with the social media influencers provided important insights on the more affective and emotional aspects of working with social media advertising and using images of oneself to advertise products and services. These insights proved to be an important complement to the visual material collected and analysed.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was the main sampling method I used for finding and contacting people that I wanted to interview. Purposive sampling is a strategic sampling method, where research participants are chosen for the relevance they may have in connection to the research questions (Bryman 2012). When I had decided that I wanted to interview sustainability managers, I found two main routes for finding potential interviewees. Firstly, I browsed through clothing company websites to see if their sustainability workers were listed, and if they were I emailed them directly. In cases where that information was not available, I emailed the company directly and asked if it would be possible to get in touch

with their sustainability manager. Another method that I found worked well was to browse for sustainability managers on LinkedIn. I would search different brand names or brand names + 'sustainability' to find potential research participants. Then I emailed them directly to ask if they wanted to participate in an interview. Some, although a minority, of my interviewees were found through a snowballing sampling method, which is a subset of purposive sampling (Bryman 2012). In these cases, it was an interviewee, who after our interview suggested a couple of other people for me to interview. The interviewee contacted those people separately for me, and then introduced me to them via e-mail; they then agreed to be interviewed.

The sampling method for influencers looked slightly different. In this case, I would find them on Instagram or TikTok, either because I knew of them already, or because they had popped up on my social media pages, or because I had found them through other accounts that I had been observing. Influencers handle their communications in different ways: some only communicate through their agents who handle all their professional contacts, some reply to emails and DMs (direct message on Instagram) themselves. I decided to contact through as many different ways as possible. I emailed influencers directly when they had their email address in their profile description, I DM'd them on Instagram and TikTok, and in cases where they had an agent or assistant, I emailed them with my interview requests. Accessing influencers proved to be more difficult than I initially anticipated. A large proportion of the influencers I contacted did not respond at all, while some responded and said they did not have time to be interviewed. Two potential people agreed enthusiastically at first but ended up rescheduling several times to eventually cancel. This is an interesting contrast to the sustainability managers, who in the vast majority of cases responded to my request, and most of them also agreed to be interviewed (although also here there were a few who never responded and a few who did not want to be interviewed). In the end, I carried out four in-depth interviews with influencers for the project. Although I would have liked to conduct more influencer interviews, I felt that I was able to gain very rich material from the ones I did conduct.

Apart from influencers and sustainability managers, I also wanted to interview other actors with expertise on different aspects of the fashion industry and sustainability. The data from these interviews did not end up being used as material for analysis in the thesis. However, they provided expertise knowledge

and first-hand experiences, which was very valuable for me in navigating the world of fashion and furthering my understanding of the industry. In total, I conducted seven of these interviews: one with a prominent researcher in sustainable fashion from the UK, a researcher in Sweden who has written about the circular economy and fashion, a legal and human rights expert from a Swedish NGO which focuses on garment workers' rights, two coordinators from a global garment workers' rights network, the founder of an NGO operating between the US and Ghana, focusing on the exporting and trade of fashion waste, a lawyer at an Indian labour rights organisation, and a factory auditor predominantly working in Indonesia. The point of these interviews was to gain more insight into their perspectives on sustainability, the fashion industry, and the problems at hand. It was also very interesting to hear their takes on how the fashion industry is currently tackling issues surrounding sustainability.

Sampling criteria

The sampling criteria for influencers was that they were Swedish influencers. By this I do not mean that they were to be a Swedish citizen or born in Sweden, but simply an influencer who lives and works in Sweden. I decided to look at the age span of 18-35, as I was particularly interested in the subjectivities of young aspiring and established influencers. I wanted to interview influencers who were active on either Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok (or any combination of them), and who made money posting on social media in some capacity. As I was interested in the aspirational aspect of the influencer industry, I wanted to look both at influencers with less followers (micro-influencers) as well as more established influencers who could live solely off their influencing income. This I was able to achieve as the interview respondents ranged from a micro-influencer who worked part time in the care sector, to a full-time influencer with over 65k followers. The sampling criteria for sustainability workers was people who worked with sustainability in Swedish fashion companies.

Interview guide

Before conducting the interviews, I wrote down interview guides with questions I wanted to ask. Some questions were asked in almost all interviews, while other questions were specifically tailored to some interviews depending on the profession and position of the interviewee. The questions were roughly grouped according to themes that I wanted to cover. I informed my interviewees that I had

a list of questions I wanted to ask them, but that I was also happy for the interview to go into different directions, should they want to focus on a topic or mention things that I had not asked them. This way the interviewees were able to bring up topics they thought were important and the interviews allowed room for the conversation to spill outside the specific questions I had written down.[8] Below is a list of the interviews (interviewees pseudonymised) that are analysed in this thesis.

Table 1. Overview of interviews with influencers (pseudonymised)

Name	Occupation	Age	Platform and number of followers/-subscribers	Country	Type of content
Emma	Influencer	26	Instagram (64,7k), YouTube (29,1k)	Sweden	Lifestyle
Josefine	Influencer, self-employed in social media marketing	32	TikTok (101,5k), Instagram (24,5k)	Sweden	Beauty and lifestyle
Sarah	Influencer, stylist, creative agent	33	Instagram (36,5k)	Sweden	Fashion
Hanna	Influencer, part-time employee in care sector	19	TikTok (87,4k), Instagram (3,5k)	Sweden	Fashion

Table 2. Overview of interviewees with sustainability employees (pseudonymised)

Name	Occupation	Company/organisation	Sector	Country
Elsa	Production and sustainability manager	Fashion company	Apparel	Sweden
Michaela	CSR and sourcing coordinator	Online retailer	Apparel and interior	Sweden
Victoria	Sustainability manager	Fashion company	Apparel	Sweden
Paul	Sustainability coordinator	Online retailer	Apparel	Sweden
Sofia	Sustainability manager	Fashion company	Apparel	Sweden
Olivia	Sustainability expert	Trade association	Textile industry	Sweden
Hilda	Sustainability manager	Fashion company	Apparel	Sweden

[8] Interview guide of questions is in the appendix.

4.4 Data Analysis

In this portion of the chapter, I lay out the analytical choices that were made in this project, and the processes I followed in analysing the different sets of data that were collected. The main types of data as discussed throughout this chapter are visual discursive materials and interview material. Although interview material is quite different from visual material, there were some similarities in the way that I analysed the data sets. In both cases, the concept of themes was imperative. As described earlier in this chapter, I categorised images by themes that appeared upon observation of all the screenshots I had gathered, such as 'female empowerment', 'techno-optimism', 'sustainable materials', 'aspiration', 'authenticity'. Likewise, in my interview material, I organised citations according to themes that I created. In terms of writing out my analyses, most of the interview material in the empirical chapters as well as visual content have been analysed using 'excerpt commentary units', where 'an excerpt from the material is placed at the centre and is then surrounded by an analytical point and orientation (before) and an analytical comment (after)' (Rennstam, Wästerfors, and Ehnsiö 2018, 100). I have found this to be a straightforward method that provides clarity in understanding the interview excerpts and their relevance to the text and its arguments.

A note on language

A large part of the visual material analysed in this thesis include texts as part of the image. In all instances where Swedish text has been translated into English, I, the author, have made those translations (therefore this will not be reiterated in each instance).

4.4.1 Transcription and Thematic Selection

I transcribed almost all interviews myself using the video or audio recordings of the interviews. When transcribing, I played the recording at a slower speed so that it would be easier to transcribe without having to pause the recording too often. In the few interviews I recorded with Microsoft Teams, I had activated an automatic voice-to-text function during the meeting which meant an automated transcription was made. The quality and accuracy of these transcriptions were very high, although not perfect, so in this case instead of transcribing the whole

interview from scratch, I read the automated transcription and edited it while listening to the recordings. Although I had to listen to the recordings carefully in order to catch all the mistakes and edit the document, this required much less energy and time than typing out a whole interview word for word.

After transcribing all the interviews, I translated the ones that were conducted in Swedish into English. Once the transcriptions had been made, I read through them several times, then I began to do a thematic analysis. Some themes related clearly to the questions I had asked which made it rather straightforward to group citations under those themes. Other more unexpected themes also emerged during the interviews, themes that developed through our conversations, but that were not necessarily directly correlating to a research question I had or to something I was expecting to see in the interview. The unexpectedness made these themes particularly interesting to follow. Riessman (2012) argues for the importance of useful digressions in interviews; this is also in line with my feminist ambitions of conducting what Riessman (2012) refers to as more relational interviews. In all my interviews I let my participants know that they did not have to stay strictly close to the questions I had asked, as I was equally interested in observing where our conversation could go, and to listen to things they wanted to say which they deemed important. When I have been analysing citations from my interviews, I am not only interested in what the interview participant has said, but also in trying to understand in which other groups of narratives or discourses in our society and culture (for example narratives of global development or female empowerment) they fit.

4.4.2 Interviews and Corporate Discourse

One of the concerns with interviewing sustainability employees at fashion companies was the fact that it might be difficult to discern to what degree they may be enmeshed in the production or reproduction of particular corporate discourses. Therefore, I paid particular attention to this when analysing those interviews. In a sense I do believe they are part of the corporate sustainability discourse since that is their line of work and they represent their companies. However, there were also some interesting deviations that came up during the interviews. For instance, one of my interviewees sometimes prefaced an answer with the role through which she was answering. Sometimes she would specify that a statement was her personal opinion which might not align with the company

view. Other interviewees stuck very close to the corporate logic and discourse of sustainability and ethical fashion. Since sustainability managers do not typically work with marketing and advertising, their professional roles are not as directly tied to reproducing ideological messages and discourses, as for instance advertisers. However, based on the compatibility between the interview respondents' responses and corporations' official discourses, it is fair to say that sustainability managers are also to a large degree enmeshed in corporate discourses. Keeping this in mind, as a researcher I needed to remind myself to keep a critical distance from the data that I analysed.

4.4.3 Discourse, Representation, Encoding/Decoding

As discussed in this chapter, the main sets of visual and discursive data that was collected in this project were screenshots of different types of advertisements, images and videos of social media content, and images and texts from fashion company websites and sustainability reports. I take a constructionist approach to representation in this dissertation, whereby meaning is constructed through discourse. More specifically, Stuart Hall's work on representation and discourse, and particularly his theory of encoding/decoding inspired the analysis in this dissertation.

By studying for instance the idea that garment work is empowering, we are able to discern which discourses enable this view of garment work. For example, the dominance of global North hegemony which states that 'development' through export-oriented markets is to be preferred, portrayals of subjects that come to represent the figure of the empowered garment worker (such as in fashion advertising and in clothing companies' website communications and sustainability reporting), neoliberal assumptions around the idea that women entering the workforce (regardless of the conditions) is by definition empowering. This is why I argue that it is important to pay close attention to the discourses that are produced and spread within and by the fashion industry. Because discourses (and narratives) are not just words or images but co-constitutive of our social identities and the social world in which we all live.

In the thesis I analyse static texts (images), dynamic texts (video) and multimodal texts (where images, audio and video are embedded) (Hall, Evans, and Nixon 2013). According to Hall, images on their own do not carry meaning, however

'they accumulate meanings, or play off their meanings against one another, across a variety of texts and media.' (Hall, Evans, and Nixon 2013, 222). Each image has a denotative meaning and a connotative meaning, where the denotation is what is seen on the screen, and the connotation is the subjective interpretation of a given image. Meaning for Hall is not fixed but ambiguous and changes across time and space. The connotative meaning will thus change depending on the receiver of the image and may or may not match the intended or preferred reading of that image. Therefore, it is interesting to figure out what meaning is privileged and preferred in a given image or text and build an analysis upon that. For instance, Hall writes that the reading of an image can be categorized as dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. A dominant reading would match the preferred reading, whereas an oppositional reading would resist the preferred meaning of the image. The way that meaning is built into images by the producer and then observed and understood by a receiver is what Hall (1980) theorised in his seminar text as encoding/decoding, which we defined and discussed in the previous chapter. The theory of encoding/decoding can thus also be used methodologically. Throughout the empirical chapters of this dissertation, there will be such instances where the different analyses do not operate within the dominant or preferred codes of meaning.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

This section will cover the ethical considerations I made during the project, and the measures that were implemented to ensure that I could carry out my research as ethically as possible.

Social media and ethics

Social media is a fast- and ever-growing realm, thus the ethics surrounding doing social media research can be murky. The sheer amount of data and the richness in data that is available on social media presents its own ethical questions (Townsend and Wallace 2017).

Rooke (2013) divides social media research (or web 2.0 research as it is named in this article from 2013 which may be a dated term today) into passive research, which includes methods such as voyeurism, data mining, or interacting with

people without stating your intent as a researcher, and active research, whereby the researcher contacts research participants and gain their informed consent before collecting data. My interviews with social media influencers classify as active research by this definition as they were all active and consenting research participants. When it comes to visual data that I have collected on Instagram and TikTok, this can be classified as more passive research, as I have collected publicly shared images on those social media apps, without interacting with the image producers. I only collected screenshots of publicly shared posts that were either advertisements or in other ways clearly intended for a wide audience, as I did not want to collect or share images that were intended to be seen only by a select group of people. One of the key concerns when collecting research data on social media that Townsend and Wallace (2017) raise is the blurred line between private and public. Oftentimes, what social media users post on social media is technically public content; however, this does not mean that it is always ethical to use that data. For instance, if users on Facebook write in a closed or secret group, they may have an expectation that the information they share in that group will not be shared with people outside of it. With this knowledge in mind, I made the decision to only collect data that was clearly shared publicly with the intent of having a broad reach. Furthermore, I did not collect any such images if they included more personal views or sensitive information.

Voluntary participation and informed consent

In order to ensure that the data collection was as ethically sound as possible, it was important to gain informed consent from all the interview participants. When I approached people whom I wanted to interview, I explained that participating in my project of course would be completely voluntary. I explained that I would send them a consent form that they would have time to read ahead of the interview, and that they could participate with or without their real names and job titles. In the consent form I also noted that should they want to opt out of the study at any point, that would be respected. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I decided to conduct all interviews digitally. Consent was collected verbally, recorded on video or audio on Zoom or Teams. This solution made most sense as all interviews were done digitally. I sent the information and consent forms to the interviewee before the interview so they would have time to read it prior to us meeting. Then, once the meeting had started, I asked if it was ok to record the meeting; once they said yes, I would start recording, then I would ask them to

give their verbal informed consent so that I could have it on file. Although this process proved to be more cumbersome than simply signing a piece of paper, it worked well enough for the purpose of collecting consent.

Pseudonymisation

In this study I have processed personal data, such as the names of all my interview participants, their workplaces, and recordings of our interviews by video or audio, as well as people's faces and usernames in screenshots of social media posts. Sensitive personal data has not been collected in this project. As there was no intention of collecting sensitive personal data, an ethics review was not necessary, as per the Swedish Ethical Review Authority's guidelines (Etikprövningsmyndigheten 2023).

Almost all interview participants were happy to be cited with their full names and job titles. However, after careful consideration, I decided to pseudonymise all interviewees whom I cite in this dissertation. The reason for pseudonymising all the interviewees despite having consent to use their names is that it is overall less risky for the participants to be pseudonymised, as a reader would not be able to identify who they are. The sustainability managers answered questions from their professional as well as their personal perspectives, and overall, the best way to mitigate potential risks in the workplace was to pseudonymise them all. Regarding the influencers, similarly, I decided that it would be a safer option to pseudonymise them so that they are not identifiable. This way, there is less risk that their work or privacy may be affected in any way as a consequence of participating in this project.

My project is more concerned with the attitudes and discourses that are produced and reproduced in the realm of fashion in Sweden, and less so with what specific people working in the industry say. Hence, I concluded that the value of this study would not be diminished by pseudonymising my research participants.

Data minimisation

In this study, the principal of data minimisation was applied, which in this context means that only data that served explanatory and analytical value to my study was collected. When it comes to the visual material I have used, identifying factors such as faces and usernames were not blurred out. I have taken screenshots only from public Instagram accounts, public TikTok accounts and public YouTube

accounts, which include photos and videos that are used for advertising purposes. Those accounts belong to clothing brands and influencers who use their accounts as a business, and the screenshots are used in this thesis in accordance with the Swedish 'right to quote' ('citaträtten'). Screenshots were only taken from public influencer or company accounts, where the author deemed that there was a clear intention for the image to be widely spread and seen publicly. In the instances where these screenshots include personal data, the data has been processed and stored securely for the purposes of this thesis according to GDPR. The images that are not screenshots from social media material but taken directly from companies' websites have been published with explicit permission from those companies.

4.6 Limitations

One way in which the empirical analysis could have been enriched is a larger and more diverse sample size of interviewees. Out of all the interviews I conducted, all but one interviewee identifies as a woman. In the social media chapter, I was particularly interested in the subjectivities inhabited by women, which led to my decision from the beginning to interview female-identifying influencers (whereas most of the other interviewees just happened to be women). However, as I see gender as a non-binary structure, and as performances and embodiments of femininity are not necessarily connected to a person's gender, it would be valuable to also expand this research to encompass varied gender identities and expressions.

Regarding the interviews with sustainability managers, it became clear during the interviews that there tends to be very little or no communication between sustainability teams and marketing teams in these fashion companies. In order to gain an even more nuanced view of the workings behind sustainability advertising campaigns, it would have been useful to complement the data that was collected with interviews with marketing managers.

In terms of the field of social media, the visual and discursive content I have collected and analysed in this dissertation are all coming from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. These are of course not the only relevant social media platforms to investigate, and valuable data could be collected from other platforms as well such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Tumblr and Discord. However, when it comes

to social media shopping, fashion marketing and influencer brand deals, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are still the most relevant platforms. Important to note then, is that the arguments made in this dissertation should not be generalised for all of social media, but rather seen as observations and arguments that relate to parts of social media cultures, especially the parts that pertain to consumer society (there are many other aspects of social media; political engagement, community building, civil engagement, educational material, which are not the focus in my chapter on social media).

4.7 Final Remarks

In this chapter I have covered the methodological considerations and decisions that went into this PhD project and the writing of the dissertation. Thinking about methodology throughout the project also made me think more consciously about my position as a researcher, and what that means when collecting data. A lot of the data I have worked with concerns affects and displays of emotions; thus, at times it has been important for me to have an internal reminder to keep a critical distance from the data I am analysing.

In the following three empirical chapters, I present my analysis of the different types of visual material and interview material that was discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 5

Sustainability Narratives in Fashion

When the Climate Impact Lead of H&M was asked by the Swedish national radio in March 2023 about the progress of the company's climate goals, he said that the recent trend of oversized fashion was one of the reasons why its emissions had increased since 2019 (as these clothes require more fabric) (Öhman 2023). If this sounds to you like an extremely reductive excuse for increased emissions, you would be correct. The current trends in textile production and consumption have led to millions of tonnes of fibres that are manufactured and disposed annually. Global fibre production has almost doubled in only the last 20 years, from 58 million tonnes in 2000 to 113 million tonnes in 2021 (Textile Exchange 2022). At the same time, it has also been estimated that the textile industry generates more than 92 million tonnes of textile waste per year (Niinimäki et al. 2020). Oversize or not, the fashion industry is undeniably entangled with the global ecological crisis.

In this first empirical chapter of the thesis, different aspects of sustainability and environmental impacts of the fashion industry will be discussed through an analysis of interview material and visual material. While chapter six and seven will have a focus on gender and social media respectively in relation to the fashion industry and sustainability in fashion communication, this chapter aims to set the scene of sustainability in fashion and how the many environmental challenges of the fashion industry are understood within the industry and communicated to consumers through marketing and advertising. The term 'sustainable fashion' will be used in this chapter not in a normative way which suggests that the clothing or companies in question are sustainable, but in reference to how fashion companies themselves use the term.

The aim of this chapter is to present, analyse and understand green discourses and representations of sustainability and environmental friendliness within fashion

communication and advertising. By mapping out some of the main problems in the industry pertaining to the environment, we are able to examine whether there are discrepancies between the narratives that are reproduced in the fashion industry (for example in marketing campaigns), and the social and environmental effects the industry has around the globe. The fashion industry is ever-growing despite being in an identity crisis of sorts, and in order to understand why, it is necessary to analyse the discourses that are reproduced and echoed across it. This chapter contains analyses of visual material in the form of advertisements, website material and social media posts. It also presents and analyses the empirical findings from seven interviews conducted in 2021. The interviewees consist of four sustainability managers from Swedish fashion companies, one sustainability coordinator from a Swedish fashion retailer, one CSR and sourcing manager from a Swedish online retailer and one sustainability manager at a Swedish textiles trade association.

The environmental and sustainability challenges of the fashion industry are vast, severe, and global. They cannot all be discussed in this chapter in detail. The topics that will be discussed in depth have been chosen based on themes that have been particularly prominent in fashion marketing and discourse. The chapter is structured as follows. The first section is an overview of some of the major environmental consequences of the production process in the garment industry – this serves to provide context for the subsequent sections. The second is a presentation of the sustainability narratives in the fashion industry that I have identified through my interviews and observations of digital visual material. This covers sub-sections on the concept of the circular economy, different types of materials and the second-hand market. In the third section I focus on the concept of green consumption and the creation of an eco-conscious consumer subject. This also includes a discussion on environmental responsibility. The fourth section covers greenwashing, over-production, and the contradictions laden within fashion communication. The chapter ends with some final remarks.

5.1 Fashion's Ecological Footprint

The environmental problems caused by the different stages in the fashion industry value chain are rampant. The fashion industry is a large emitter of carbon dioxide, polluter of water and air, and is heavily tied to fossil fuel use and extraction. The apparel and footwear industries represent about two to eight per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Of all the clothes that are bought, about three fifths end up in landfills or in incinerators within a year of being produced, and about a fourth of chemical compounds produced globally are used in the textile-finishing industry (Friedman 2018). In December of 2022, Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* published an exposé on garment manufacturing in Bangladesh, from which Swedish brands source a large proportion of their products. The reporting revealed extreme water pollution in towns where garment factories reside, causing toxic pollution and an extreme stench which makes living conditions for the inhabitants dangerous. Older citizens of the town could still recall a time where the water was drinkable; now it causes eye and skin irritation and worse (Lindberg 2022). The reporters visited eleven factories in Bangladesh that produce garments for H&M and found that four of them discharge polluted water (Lindberg 2022). Also in 2022, Swedish magazine *Dagens Arbete*, which covers industry and labour issues, published an exposé revealing the dangers and effects of viscose production in India (Lygner 2022). In 2023, researchers found that a large proportion of online returns of apparel are destroyed or discarded because this is cheaper for companies than processing returns for resale (Roberts et al. 2023), and in 2022 a *Quartz* investigation found that H&M was putting misleading sustainability claims on the 'score cards' of clothes that were supposed to show a sustainability score based on the Higgs sustainability index (Shendruk 2022).

While environmental problems stemming from the production of clothes spread, so do sustainability claims made by fashion companies. Green claims[9] have rapidly increased since 2015 across industries in Sweden (Konsumentverket 2021). According to this report, in 2015 the electricity sector made the largest number of green claims in its different communication channels, and today the fashion industry is on par. This supports my hypothesis that green claims and sustainability marketing have experienced an upward trend since 2017 when I

[9] According to the OECD, a green claim is an assertion 'made by firms about the environmentally beneficial qualities or characteristics of their goods and services.'

began investigating this issue. Scholars interested in fashion and sustainability argue for a deceleration of the fashion industry, involving a lowering of consumption and lengthening of garment life (Niinimäki et al. 2020). They call for wide systematic changes in our economic systems over a reliance on techno-optimistic magic bullet solutions (Brooks et al. 2017; Takedomi Karlsson and Ramasar 2020; Hoskins 2022; Klepp et al. 2023). Although many fashion companies have built strategies for making their business more sustainable, a deceleration of production is seldom part of it. The rise of green claims also ties into the geographic specificity of Sweden in relation to sustainability and the fashion industry. 'The Swedish fashion miracle' ('det svenska modeundret'), which is a term that has been used to describe the success and rapid growth of Swedish fashion brands from the early 2000s, has in more recent years shifted towards a discourse that focuses on sustainability and the environmental impacts of the fashion industry (Falk 2011). Sweet and Wennberg (2021) named this phenomenon the 'Swedish sustainable fashion miracle'. The Swedish government explicitly states its ambitions to become a global leader in sustainable production and consumption, which makes Sweden a particularly interesting case to look at (Regeringen 2017).

On March 22, 2023, the European Commission published a proposal for a Green Claims Directive[10], which builds upon their proposal made in 2022 to update EU consumer law to protect consumers from greenwashing and 'empower them to contribute actively to the green transition' (Directorate-General for Environment 2023, 1). The 2023 proposal aims to:

> Increase the level of environmental protection and contribute to accelerating the green transition towards a circular, clean and climate neutral economy in the EU.
>
> Protect consumers and companies from greenwashing and enable consumers to contribute to accelerating the green transition by making informed purchasing decisions based on credible environmental claims and labels.
>
> Improve the legal certainty as regards environmental claims and the level playing fields on the internal market, boost the competitiveness of economic operators that make efforts to increase the environmental sustainability of their products and

[10] Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the council on substantiation and communication of explicit environmental claims (Green Claims Directive).

> activities, and create cost saving opportunities for such operators that are trading across borders (Directorate-General for Environment 2023, 7).

Although this is the first large directive of this kind, it has not gone uncriticised. While such a directive is a necessary intervention, Klepp et al. (2023) argue that it does not put enough emphasis on the responsibilities of the producers in the garment industry. The directive's current focus on empowering the consumer to make more sustainable consumption choices may have unintended negative consequences in the form of increased consumption leading to increased environmental impacts (Klepp et al. 2023). Rather than focusing on consumption choices, Klepp et al. (2023) argue that focusing on encouraging consumers to extend the use of the garments that they already own would be preferable as this will lead to the least amount of environmental impact. In order to understand how sustainability is understood and communicated by the fashion industry, we need to examine the narratives that exist in marketing and communication, and the representations that are produced within those narratives. That will be the focus of the next section.

5.2 The Narratives of Sustainability in Fashion

A study on sustainability in the fashion industry found that understandings of sustainability in the industry vary greatly, and that this variation is especially apparent when comparing how business managers and designers understand sustainability (Thomas 2020). When I asked my informants in interviews what sustainable fashion means to them, there was no real consensus; however, generally there was a tendency to refer to the three pillars of sustainable development: social, environmental and economic. Below are some interview excerpts pertaining to defining sustainable fashion. For instance, Hilda mentions that garment production should keep within planetary boundaries, however she also brings in many other aspects into her definition of sustainable fashion, such as female empowerment and religious belonging:

> Making sure we can deliver the basic human need of clothing to a growing population, within planetary boundaries. For me, sustainable fashion is the idea that all humans need clothing, and that fashion is something more than just textiles that keep us warm and dry, we need to dress ourselves and be able to express

> ourselves, it can be about women's liberation, it can be about religion, all different kinds of needs for belonging. (Hilda)

What stands out in this excerpt is the understanding that clothing is about much more than protecting bodies from the outside environment. The definition of sustainability thus becomes very broad, encompassing many different ideas. Another respondent, Paul, defined sustainable fashion as requiring production that is fair to garment workers as well as the natural environment.

He also emphasised the importance of transparency in garment production:

> Just production that is going to be respectful towards the workers, so the people that are all along the supply chain that are going to produce the garment, like if you go back to tier four [the raw material source], the people who grow the cotton or make the material. It's also about respecting the environment from tier four to tier one so making sure that everything is optimised whether it's energy use or water use or chemical use. It's also about consumer or on the consumption side so, once the product is on the market, making sure consumers have the right information, that its traceable and transparent, and that people have the ability to go back and check for themselves or maybe for a researcher or media to be able to trace back, that it can be audited and verified. (Paul)

Echoing the EU directive mentioned earlier in this chapter, Paul, included in his understanding of sustainable fashion the role of the consumer. To him, it is important that companies are transparent about their production so that consumers can make informed consumption choices. Sofia also mentioned the social aspect on the one hand, and the environmental aspect on the other, commenting that sometimes those two intersect and sometimes they are separate entities. Similar to Hilda, Sofia nudged on aspects that seem to be more in related to representation and image in communication:

> Sustainable fashion for me is about both social and environmental aspects, one cannot exist without the other. We talk about a 'people and planet perspective' …for example as a big actor in this industry, lifting non-normative bodies and non-normative ways to consume fashion, so sometimes people and planet cross over and sometimes they are more separate. We talk about wanting to lower our carbon emissions, so that humans can survive on this planet. The planet will remain, but it is human existence, which is threatened, so when we make environmental efforts, it is for the planet's sake but also for the humans on the planet. (Sofia)

In Sofia's definition of sustainable fashion, the idea of diversity in representation is included, defined as 'non-normative bodies'. Elsa spoke more in detail about what sustainable fashion means to her in terms of the material and design of garments:

> There are many perspectives. The design should be long lasting, classic designs, sustainable materials that are durable. It can also be about garments that are produced in a better way, which I would define as having a lower carbon footprint. And of course, the social aspect of production.
>
> The fibres should be more sustainable, the production should be more sustainable and the value chain should be more sustainable…it is difficult for us to say today how this will pan out since the industry is developing very quickly, but I would say that it is not impossible that we will soon head towards circular goals, but it can be difficult to produce without any carbon emissions, but we will try to be circular and have as little impact as possible. (Elsa)

The concept of circularity (which will be discussed further down in this chapter) is introduced in the excerpt above, emphasising the importance of reducing the environmental impacts in clothing production. Victoria made a distinction between sustainable and 'climate-smart' fashion, where the former needs to also incorporate social aspects of production:

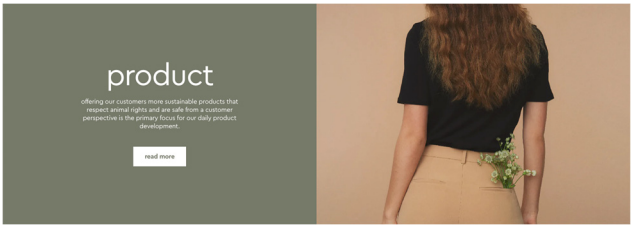
> If you stick to the climate, it is easier to describe, but sustainability is so much more. Climate-smart fashion I would say is as little carbon emissions per use as possible. The social aspect is extremely important. I cannot put a sustainability stamp on anything if I do not know what it's like at the factory for example. That does not feel right to me. (Victoria)

To summarise, most of the respondents, when describing what sustainable fashion means to them, mentioned the social aspect of garment production, that is the working conditions of the garment workers, as well as the carbon emissions related to clothing production and the quality and durability of materials. Hilda and Sofia also focused on fashion as a means of expressing oneself, and the importance of representation in advertisement. In these cases, the definition of sustainable fashion became quite broad and all-encompassing.

The narrative of sustainability does not only exist within the corporations and their employees, but is also presented outwardly in marketing, advertisements and other forms of communication. Since 2017, when I began taking notice of fashion

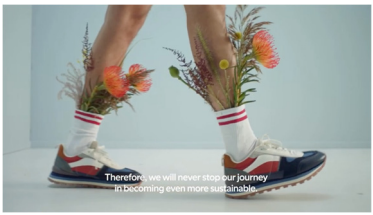
companies' sustainability marketing, the amount of communication and advertising on the topic of sustainability has grown exponentially across the industry. In this section I have collected a selection of images that show how the narrative around sustainability broadly speaking tends to be represented by fashion companies. Many common themes can be observed across the images used by the different companies. The first image is from H&M and depicts two people putting one hand each in each other's pockets, with a text that reads '65% of our material are recycled, organic or more sustainably sourced. In 2023 it will be 100%. Read more about our sustainable materials and how we work to achieve our goals.' The second image, from Gina Tricot depicts a woman from behind wearing a black T-shirt, beige trousers and flowers sticking out of one of her back pockets. Next to the image is a textbox which reads 'product: offering our customers more sustainable products that respect animal rights and are safe from a customer perspective is the primary focus for our daily product development.' The third image, from Bik Bok, is of pair of jeans with flowers sticking out of one of the pockets, with a text that reads 'A better fashion future'. The next two screenshots are from a Lindex YouTube video, the left one depicting two hands holding each other with the text 'Want to join our journey?' and the second image depicting two feet walking with flowers sticking out from the socks, with the text 'Therefore we will never stop our journey in becoming even more sustainable.' The fifth image is a screenshot from Gina Tricot's Instagram story of an image of a woman holding flowers up in front of her face, with a text that reads 'As part of our sustainability efforts, we have now taken an important step in making our business more circular. We now present Upcycle'. Finally, the sixth image is from NA-KD and depicts a woman holding a large green leaf in front of her face. On the image there is a stamp that says 'NA-KD cares, and next to the woman there is text that reads 'A journey to a less negative impact on our planet and its inhabitants.' And 'Recycled materials: hang tags printed on recycled biodegradable paper using a vegetable-based soy ink. Care labels manufactured using 100% recycled polyester fabric. We only use 100% recyclable shopping bags.'

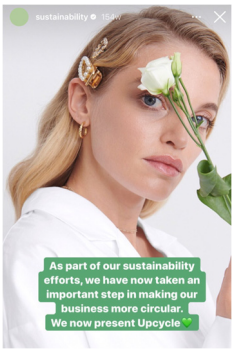

65% av våra material är återvunna, ekologiska eller mer hållbart framtagna.
2030 ska det vara 100%. Här kan du läsa mer om våra hållbara material och hur vi arbetar för att nå vårt mål.
Läs mer


product
offering our customers more sustainable products that respect animal rights and are safe from a customer perspective is the primary focus for our daily product development.
read more


A BETTER FASHION FUTURE


Want to join our journey?


Therefore, we will never stop our journey in becoming even more sustainable.


sustainability
As part of our sustainability efforts, we have now taken an important step in making our business more circular. We now present Upcycle


A JOURNEY TO A LESS NEGATIVE IMPACT ON OUR PLANET AND ITS INHABITANTS
RECYCLED MATERIALS
HANG TAGS PRINTED ON RECYCLED BIODEGRADABLE PAPER USING A VEGETABLE BASED SOY INK
CARE LABELS MANUFACTURED USING 100% RECYCLED POLYESTER FABRIC
WE ONLY USE 100% RECYCLABLE SHOPPING BAGS
NA-KD CARES

Figure 2. Visual representations of sustainability in fashion communication

1. Screenshot from H&M's website. Source: www.hm.com, February 2022. Copyright H&M Hennes & Mauritz AB.
2. Screenshot from Gina Tricot's website. Source: www.ginatricot.com, September 2022. Copyright Gina Tricot AB.
3. Screenshot from Bik Bok's website. Source: www.bikbok.com, September 2023. Copyright Bik Bok AB.
4. Screenshot from a Lindex promotional video on YouTube entitled 'Lindex Employee Promise'. Source: Lindex YouTube account, October 2021.
5. Screenshot from Gina Tricot's Instagram story highlight entitled 'sustainability'. Source: Gina Tricot's Instagram account, September 2019.
6. Screenshot from NA-KD's website. Source: www.na-kd.com, September 2022. Copyright Nakdcom One World AB.

There are many commonalities in the imagery within sustainability discourse and communication in the Swedish fashion industry, as seen through these examples. The images often feature elements of nature in its most explicit form – represented by flowers, plants and greenery. The clothes featured are often in neutral or earthy tones like warm shades of browns and mossy greens. The idea of nature or naturalness is something we see in *how* the people in advertisements are depicted as well; it is often mediated through depictions of flowy long hair and minimal make-up. The example image from NA-KD stands out as an outlier with a heavier make-up look, bright yellow shiny shirt and a leaf that almost looks artificial due to its high shine. Hands and flowers are recurring symbols in these sustainability advertisements; we often see hands holding flowers, hands holding other hands, and flowers coming out from pockets on garments or other parts of garments. The image of hands carefully holding flowers or holding another hand reflects the idea of togetherness that is so often utilised in the discourse of sustainable consumption. In the last screenshot from the 'Lindex Employee Promise' video, this connection between narrative togetherness and metaphorical togetherness is made explicit: two people hold each other's arms while the narrator says 'want to join our journey? [towards becoming more sustainable]'l. Through such statements, companies suggest that the consumer has an important role to play in the company's 'journey' in sustainability. Although perhaps overly literal in its representations, the use of earthy tones and incorporation of plants and flowers in images helps shrink the distance between fashion and nature, suggesting that the industry works in a symbiosis with our natural environment. Such images stand in stark contrast to images of polluted waters near garment factories or landfills entirely consisting of discarded clothes.

Going beyond the broad sustainability narratives in fashion and moving to the specific themes within them, the next sub-section will look closer at the ways which different materials are marketed and talked about.

5.2.1 Sustainable Materials

It can be argued that there are two distinct categories of representation in regard to materials and sustainability in fashion advertising and communication. On one end of the spectrum the idea of being close to nature and naturalness is emphasised through depictions of pristine nature and natural materials, and on the other, innovative, often synthetic materials are portrayed through futuristic representations of technology. The next figure exemplifies the former category, where materials like cotton and linens are used in combination with language and imagery that allude to pristine nature. The advertisement is entitled 'Homage to natural beauty' and the text on the image to the left reads 'that can live in your closet forever' and the text on the right image reads 'this collection is an homage to natural beauty.'

Figure 3. & Other Stories advertisement
Screenshots from & Other Stories advertisement on YouTube entitled 'Homage to Natural Beauty'. Source: & Other Stories's YouTube account, April 2020.

In this video advertisement, the narrator says:

> This collection is an homage to natural beauty. Our starting point was wanting to create timeless garments that can live in your closet forever. All of the cotton in this collection is 100 per cent organic. It felt really important making more sustainable choices. (& Other Stories 2020)

In this case, organic cotton is used as a placeholder for sustainability. The combination of the beautiful and flourishing nature in the background, with the flowy white cotton dress, the model's flowy natural hair and not heavily made-up face allude to a symbiotic relationship between the clothes and the natural environment. These visual techniques help produce a narrative where the production of fashion co-exists with clean and pristine nature. The preferred meaning of an advertisement of this ilk is that natural fibres such as cotton and linen are sustainable or environmentally friendly. Even if those words are not uttered in the advertisement, the imagery and words produce that assumption.

However, advertisements that promote certain materials as a sustainable consumption choice can be problematic as the material of a garment alone does not tell us enough about the sustainability of that garment. Sweet and Wennberg (2021) refer to the Mistra Future Fashion Fiber Bible when arguing that a garment cannot be considered sustainable solely based on its fibre content; they explain that the environmental impact can vary more between different producers of textiles rather than between different types of materials. The dichotomy between natural materials and synthetic materials is apparent in the imagery of fashion advertisements, where natural materials, due to their connotations, tend to automatically be ascribed positive values and supposed sustainability. Of course, the idea of naturalness is constructed and cannot be assumed to be superior in all cases. For instance, nylon was once touted as a natural material by the fashion industry (Thanhauser 2022). In today's context, viscose and other cellulose-based materials like bamboo are often marketed as natural and sustainable, which can be misleading as viscose production can both be polluting, toxic and requires a lot of energy (Blanc 2016; Thanhauser 2022; Hoskins 2022).

Currently, one of the most pressing issues regarding synthetic materials is microplastics. Microplastics are tiny pieces of plastic ranging from 5mm to microscopic in size, that are shed from fossil fuel-based garments (such as polyester), mainly through the process of washing (Weis, De Falco, and Cocca 2022; Brooks et al. 2017). They have varying environmental impacts, the main one being that they flow into waterways (through wastewater treatment plants) where they end up polluting and being ingested by animals including 'mammals, birds, fishes, macroinvertebrates and plankton' (Weis, De Falco, and Cocca 2022, 2). The Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017) stated in their seminal 2017 report that the main way to reduce microplastic pollution is for companies to change

how they are currently producing and finding alternative materials. While the production process is the most carbon-intense part of the value chain of fossil fuel-based garments, regular laundry in the user phase of the value chain is where polyester garments cause most environmental problems in the form of microplastic shedding. The discard phase poses yet another problem, whether polyester garments are incinerated or dumped in landfills this causes both carbon dioxide emissions and toxic pollution to air, waterways and soil.

Despite all the known environmental problems related to synthetic materials, brands continue to produce massive amounts of trend-based garments in polyester. For instance, towards the end of each calendar year, many fashion brands release seasonal holiday clothing collections for Christmas, New Year's celebrations and other end-of-year festivities. These collections are typically characterised by a lot of glitter, sequins, shiny materials and velvet. Sequinned dresses, handbags and trousers in silver and gold, black velvet dresses and shiny satin blazers adorn every shopping window, poster ad and Instagram advertisement every winter. Curious to know what the majority material composition of these types of garments would be, I had a look at two Swedish clothing brands: H&M and Gina Tricot at the end of 2022. On H&M's website, I had a look at their 'A/W Holiday 2022' collection fronted by actor Chloë Sevigny and artist Anderson .Paak (Brandon Paak Anderson's artist name), as well as model Paloma Elsesser. The collection consisted of 33 items (11 dresses, two pairs of heels, three blazers, one purse, three sweaters, three pairs of trousers, one cardigan and four skirts). All of these products were produced from synthetic materials, mostly polyester, and some of them recycled polyester. By typing 'sequin' into the search bar on the H&M website (also at the end of 2022), over 100 unique items were displayed. Again, almost every item here is made from polyester or other synthetic materials. On Gina Tricot's website, the holiday collection was named 'Midnight Moments'. It consisted of 35 products, and also here every item was made partially or fully from synthetic materials, mostly polyester. On some of the products, it says that at least 50 per cent of the material in the garment is derived from recycled polyester. Recycled polyester is most of the time derived from PET-bottles, not from old polyester garments as might be assumed. PET-bottle-to-fibre recycling can be done mechanically or chemically. Both of these methods are more environmentally friendly than producing virgin PET fibres, as that requires extracting new oil (Shen, Worrell, and Patel 2010). However, this does not mean it is problem free. PET bottle recycling, where PET

bottles are recycled and made into new PET bottles, is an already established system that is used extensively. This means that when old PET bottles are bought in order to transform them into polyester garments, they are being removed from a relatively closed-loop system, and turned into fast fashion garments that will likely not be used for a long duration and likely cannot be recycled again. The recycled polyester garments that are marketed as a sustainable option for consumers, is thus most often made from PET bottles that otherwise would have continued to be recycled into new PET bottles. This also illustrates the problem Klepp et al. (2023) identified in their analysis of the EU Green Claims Directive, namely that green marketing can inadvertently cause increased consumption. Recycled polyester or not, the fact remains that seasonal items as these reflect some of the worst aspects of fast fashion, namely the fact that they will be worn very few times before being discarded or donated. Research that surveyed around 2000 women in the UK aged 18-55 in 2019 estimated that 33 million sequined garments and accessories would be purchased in the festive season of 2019 in the UK alone (Oxfam 2019). They concluded that *1.7 million* sequined garments or accessories would be discarded after the season (5 per cent of the respondents said they would throw away their sequined clothes after wearing them for the end of year occasions) (Oxfam 2019). Another survey conducted in the UK in 2019 by the charity Hubbub, estimated that 12 million new Christmas jumpers would be purchased in the UK in 2019. It revealed that one in three people under the age of 35 buys a new Christmas jumper each year and that 40 per cent of those jumpers will only be worn once (Hubbub 2019).

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017) stated that between 2012 and 2017 clothing production doubled globally and that roughly half of all fast fashion produced is disposed within a year of purchase. According to them, there is a link between the growth of fast fashion and the sharp decline of the number of times garments are worn before being discarded. Seasonal collections are a direct representation of this key problem, pushing consumers to buy something they might only wear once, as laid out by the Ellen MacArthur foundation. The recycled polyester in this case acts as a band-aid for a much wider problem. Although The Ellen MacArthur foundation is partnered with H&M Group, the facts and arguments laid out in the Ellen MacArthur report is only implemented in some parts of the business and discourse, not all.

Below are screenshots from a video advertisement from the Swedish brand Monki (owned by H&M) that speaks specifically to recycled polyester derived from PET bottles. The advertisement is produced in the style of a music video, with song lyrics and narration playing in the background. The first image depicts two people on electric scooters, wearing faux fur coats and holding blue plastic bags. The text on the image reads 'c ya later plastic'. The second image depicts a woman laying down on a pile of empty PET bottles with a text that reads 'plastic one day', and the third image depicts a woman sitting on the floor with clothes laid out in a circle shape around her on the floor, the text on the image reads 'old clothes can be turned into new'.

Figure 4. Monki YouTube advertisement 'Enter the lazy loop – Monki Cares'
Three screenshots from a Monki advertisement on YouTube. Source: Monki's YouTube account, October 2018.

The video description of this Monki advertisement from 2018 states:

> Enter the lazy loop: easy ways to be more sustainable, inspired by real life. From what we are working on at Monki (100 per cent sustainably sourced cotton! Finally!), to things you can do as a fashion lover, and the things we can do together. Let's make fashion circular! (Monki 2018).

The advertisement is produced as a music video, and has an accompanying song voiced over the video. An excerpt of those lyrics reads:

> Wash less, much less. Break up with your dryer (Say what?). Line dry instead. Just doing my recycling. Plastic one day. New fabric another. C ya later plastic. Old clothes can be turned into new. Recycle yours in any Monki store. Eat sleep recycle repeat. Eat sleep recycle repeat. That's it that's the lazy loop (Monki 2018).

As discussed in the previous section, this advertisement exemplifies PET bottle-to-fibre recycling and is an example of how that is used in sustainability advertisement in a glorifying manner. Apart from plastic recycling, the ad focuses on organic cotton, and actions the consumer can take to become more sustainable, by imploring the consumer to wash their clothes less, stop using a dryer, and turning in their unwanted clothes through Monki's take-back scheme. The environmental impact (such as energy-use in washing or shedding of microplastics) stemming from the user-phase of clothes is significant; however, it is small in contrast to the production of clothes. A lifecycle analysis of Swedish clothes consumption revealed that about 80 per cent of a garment's carbon footprint (mainly from fossil fuels) comes from its production process, 11 per cent stems from consumer transport to and from the store, while only three per cent can be attributed to use phase of the garment (including emissions from laundry) (Sweet and Wennberg 2021). Monki frames this advertisement around the concept of laziness – arguing that achieving sustainability does not need to be a difficult quest. In this case, laziness is tied to consumers lowering their environmental impact in the user-phase of their clothes' lifecycle by doing less with them, like washing and drying.

The narration in the video says 'plastic one day, new fabric another' as one of the actors in the video makes a snow-angel, but with empty plastic bottles instead of snow. The lyrics continue: 'old clothes can be turned into new. Recycle yours in any Monki store'. There are two components to this short snippet of lyrics that are worth analysing. The first sentence invokes a techno-optimistic and almost

magical way of thinking about how clothes are made. By simplifying and mystifying the production process of a garment, the process itself is made to seem magical and removed from the environmental problems of the fashion industry. Plastic bottles can become new clothes just like that. Moving on to the latter part of the lyrics, by telling the consumer to recycle their clothes in any Monki store, right after saying that old clothes can be turned into new, the logical conclusion to be made would be that clothes that are handed into Monki stores are recycled into new garments. However, take-back schemes mainly involve donating all the clothes that have been collected to third parties that will sort and again donate the clothes to charity shops or export to other countries. The lyrics seem simple at face value, because the way (and the order in which) they are conveyed in combination with the visual material produces a narrative where the consumer is made to believe that the clothes they hand in at a store will be literally recycled into new garments. As tedious as it may seem to dissect such a small section of a text, this goes to show how this mystification process works discursively, in order to produce a simplified image.

Discursively, the idea of laziness is combined with the magical thinking and technological optimism surrounding plastic recycling, to make sustainability in the fashion industry seem like an easily achievable destination, which may require consumers to treat the clothes they buy slightly differently, but which ultimately does not put any bigger demands on the consumer. There are two sides of the coin here: on the one hand, environmental responsibility is put on the consumer – they are given tips on how to care for their clothes in a less environmentally impactful way, and they are called upon to 'recycle' their clothes at Monki's own stores. On the other, consumers are not asked to change their lifestyles in terms of *consumption habits.* Of course, it would not make sense for an advertisement to tell consumers to stop consuming (although the brand Patagonia did make such an ad, which instead made their sales soar), but it is interesting to note that consumers are interpellated by companies to do their part and govern themselves in a certain way – however, only if it does not threaten the company's sales. Individual responsibility is placed on consumers, but those responsibilities must be aligned with the profit-making aims of the companies in order for the advertisements to make sense.

5.2.2 Circularity and the Circular Economy

The concept of circularity appears often in sustainability narratives of the fashion industry. Recycled polyester for instance is often used by fashion companies as a way of contributing to what they call the circular economy or circularity. Although there is no exact definition of circularity, the concept focuses on a shift away from a linear system of production to a circular one, where all by-products of production are funnelled back into a circular system and virgin materials are not extracted from the environment. The idea is that anything that is produced should be designed and created in a way in which they can later be recycled and put back into the closed-loop system of a circular economy. The term is used so widely by different actors that the definitions and understandings are not always in agreement. The core of the concept is a closed-loop system where nothing is wasted, and that everything produced is put back into the system is key. According to Du Rietz (2019), scholars agree that the circular economy is more of an umbrella concept than a specific business model. Boulding (1966), who is often cited as the pioneer in economic theorising of the circular economy, called the linear economy the 'cowboy economy' and what became known as the circular economy the 'spaceship economy'. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation defines a circular economy as being 'restorative and regenerative by design and provides benefits for business, society, and the environment' (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017, 22). The idea of circularity – the way that it is used within the fashion industry today – has been used since 2013, but it was the 2017 report from Ellen MacArthur foundation that catalysed the circularity narrative in the fashion industry, resulting in almost all large fashion companies today using the term in their sustainability strategies and communication (Tuladhar, Iatridis, and Dimov 2022). As Du Rietz (2019, 43) explains, however, the circular economy is not a novel idea, rather it can be described as a classic criticism of the linear value chain.

Despite the extreme popularity of circularity in the business world, including in the fashion industry, the concept has not avoided critical scrutiny in academia (Levänen et al. 2021; Corvellec, Stowell, and Johansson 2022). In a study analysing over 100 articles on the circular economy, Corvellec, Stowell, and Johansson (2022) argue that the concept of circularity is not as promising as it is often claimed to be. They criticise the concept of the circular economy on the basis that there is no consensus on the definition, the practical feasibility of circular solutions is still unclear, the contribution of circularity to environmental

and social sustainability is unclear, it is a corporate model that promises 'win-win growth', and it is often techno-optimistic in nature, which can result in depoliticising sustainable growth (Corvellec, Stowell, and Johansson 2022). These criticisms are relevant also when looking specifically at how the term is used in the discourses of the fashion industry. In the context of fashion, circularity is discussed in two main ways: 1) products and product design (where recycled materials often have a focus), and 2) business models (such as rental services, the second-hand market, and take-back schemes). These two categories will be discussed in the next sub-sections.

Circularity in products and design

This is an H&M advertisement for a 'micro-collection' of clothes made out of old garments, fronted by Swedish model Erika Linder. The jackets in picture feature a painted design including the Mobius loop recycling symbol. The clothes are made in collaboration with the New Cotton Project, of which H&M is a member, which is a project that collects old garments, and regenerates them into a man-made cellulosic fibre (viscose) that has a cotton look and feel. This is an example where the concept of circularity is embedded into the actual product and product design that is being advertised. The material itself is produced from old garments; however, it is not clear whether the advertised collection of garments can be recycled once more, to 'close the loop'. The image to the left depicts two people wearing the collection, with the text 'New cotton project. Brings new life to old garments', with a direct link to H&M's website. The image to the right depicts model Erika Linder also wearing the collection. The text reads 'New cotton project. A unisex micro-collection.'

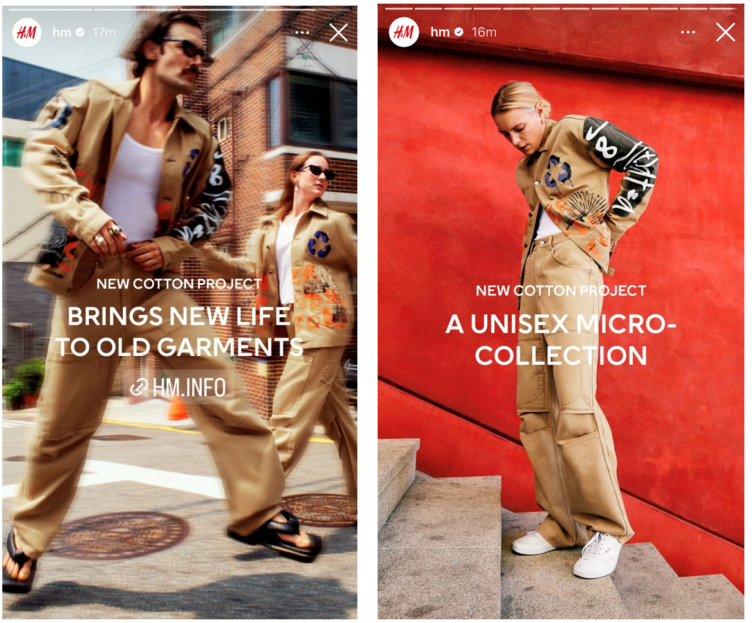


Figure 5. New Cotton Project
Screenshots from H&M's Instagram story. Source: H&M's Instagram account, October 2022.

The next examples are paid Instagram ads for an H&M collection entitled 'Circular design story'. The H&M website states that the collection is 'designed with circularity in mind, using innovative fabrics and ground-breaking materials – this is a party collection like no other!' (H&M SE 2021).

Further, it states:

> The collection is designed to be treasured, shared, repaired and recycled. A tribute to a fearless contemporary spirit and self-expression. We celebrate the fun and eclectic nature of fashion while moving the industry closer towards a more circular future (H&M SE 2021)

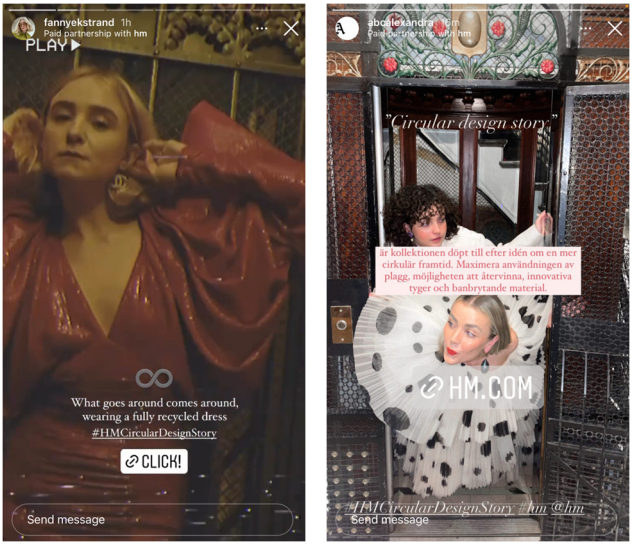


Figure 6. H&M Circular Design Story
Screenshots from @fannyekstrand (left) and @abcalexandra (right) Instagram stories (both paid advertisements). Source: @fannyekstrand Instagram account, December 2021, @abcalexandra Instagram account, December 2021.

In the image on the left, the text reads 'What goes around comes around, wearing a fully recycled dress #HMCircularDesignStory', with a direct shopping link. The second image reads '" Circular design story": the collection is named after the idea of a more circular future. Maximise the use of garments, possibility to recycle, innovative fabrics and pioneering materials.' This Instagram story also includes a direct shopping link. As in the previous example, it is the product and design specifically that is in focus here in regard to the idea of circularity. For instance, some of the dresses are made from polyester derived from plastic bottles collected from oceans and beaches (H&M SE 2021).

If the marketing of natural materials like cotton and linen are often coupled with earthy tones and natural environments as backdrops as seen in the previous section on sustainable materials, innovative materials or new technology in product design are often coupled with futuristic imagery, such as in this science fiction-themed H&M advertisement from YouTube as pictured (H&M 2021). The video is advertising 'Looop', an in-store recycling system that was launched by

H&M in 2020, whereby a machine mechanically shreds old garments into fibres that can then be knitted into new garments (H&M SE 2020).

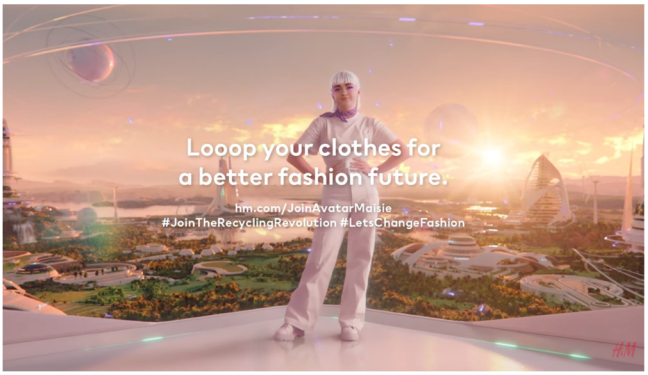


Figure 7. Maisie Williams x H&M
Screenshot from YouTube ad for H&M. Source: H&M's YouTube account, April 2021.

This advertisement features actress Maisie Williams, famous from the Game of Thrones series, and often seen as a young, brave, hopeful figure. Using a young actress with those positive associations, combined with the sci-fi imagery creates an air of futurism, hope and techno-optimism. The text on the screenshot reads 'Looop your clothes for a better fashion future. hm.com/JoinAvatarMaisie #JoinTheRecyclingRevolution #LetsChangeFashion.' The hashtags #JoinTheRecyclingRevolution and #LetsChangeFashion reflect discourse of togetherness that is often used in sustainability marketing in the fashion industry. They suggest that consumers can change the world of fashion together with companies like H&M by, in this case, recycling their old clothes. Using terms like 'recycling revolution' in the context of a sustainability advertisement featuring a young promising figure alludes to the global youth movements like Fridays for Future. This advertisement thus combines themes of futurity and technology, with the idea of togetherness and revolution, in order to create a meaning. The next subsection addresses the second main way that circularity is presented and discussed in the fashion industry; through business model aspects of circularity, the main strains of this being take-back schemes, the second-hand market, and renting.

The rental model

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency lists renting as an environmentally conscious alternative to buying clothes for special occasions (Naturskyddsföreningen 2021). Although rental services for special occasions or costumes have existed for a long time, renting everyday wear is a newer concept, which was and is often being touted as a new hopeful solution for sustainable consumption of fashion (Åkerlund 2018). Some Swedish companies such as H&M, Houdini and Gina Tricot have offered a rental service as part of their business. In my interview with Elsa, she explained that the rental model is one of several strategies her company implements when it comes to circular business solutions. As is evident in the excerpt below, renting in this case is seen as a more sustainable way of consuming clothes, and the respondent sees it as the company's role to educate consumers and accustom them to the idea of wearing clothes that are rented or second hand:

> We don't want to just shift to a rental model on all of our garments, we want to have different circular business models within our business, so we want to have new garments that are produced in a better way, with better materials, we want to be able to offer rentals; it's also about making the consumer accustomed to something new. It's a new way to consume, a new way to own a garment. We also sell vintage, that's very circular, and we offer that in 10 of our stores. So, we want to have several business models and try to find new ways, new processes, new flows…I think it is very good to show the way to the consumer…Of course, we're not 100 per cent a rental company or vintage company, but we can do something, that's better than nothing. It makes a difference in in the bigger picture, it does.
>
> Perhaps it's not one way that's the right way forward, but a merge of many, because there will also be a need for new garments that we need to produce. For example, you might buy your favourite pair of jeans that you can use for a very long time, then you might buy a new fresh white t shirt, because some things are difficult to buy second hand. Then you can complement that by renting a dress for a wedding or buying vintage. (Elsa)

This interview excerpt shows how rental services are seen as an add-on circular solution that is partly meant to make a business more environmentally sustainable and partly designed to change the mindset and consumption patterns of consumers. The overall message in the excerpt is that rather than an overhaul of the system of fast fashion, the right way to go is many small sustainability strategies

working in tandem, renting being one of them. Another interviewee, Victoria, expressed the difficulty with implementing a rental model, which is that newly produced clothes are so cheap these days that it is difficult to convince consumers that they should spend money on just renting a garment. She said: 'it's difficult to beat the price of newly produced clothes. Why would a consumer rent a garment if they could buy one for the same price?' She touches upon an important question, namely that for a rental service to make economic sense (for instance it needs to include delivery transport and laundry or dry-cleaning service), the price point may oftentimes exceed the cost of buying new clothes, at least in the case of fast fashion. In Elsa's case, she is referring to adding a small rental service within an already existing brand. Another form of rental service is companies that rent out clothes from many different brands to consumers, based on a subscription model. Several such companies were up and coming in the Swedish market, including Gemme Collective, Hack your closet, Something borrowed, Sabina & Friends, Rent Routine, and It's Re:leased. Now, in 2023, all of these companies have filed for bankruptcy.

While there were, and to some extent still is, sustainability hopes attached to the rental model, the environmental benefits of renting are not always clear (Levänen et al. 2021). In their lifecycle study conducted in 2021, Levänen et al. (2021) found that reducing (avoiding shopping) and reusing (continuing to wear what you already own) were by far the most sustainable strategies, and that renting had the potential of having a larger negative environmental impact, due for example to heightened need for transport and cleaning.

Take-back schemes

Another way that the concept of circularity is promoted through business model means is the take-back scheme. Take-back schemes have become extremely popular in the Swedish fashion industry, with H&M starting their garment collection program a decade ago in 2013 (H&M 2018). Through this take-back scheme, customers can donate old clothes to any physical H&M store (the clothes do not have to be from H&M) in exchange for a discount voucher for their next purchase. The following screenshots are advertisement for H&M's take-back scheme that came up as a sponsored ad on my Instagram.

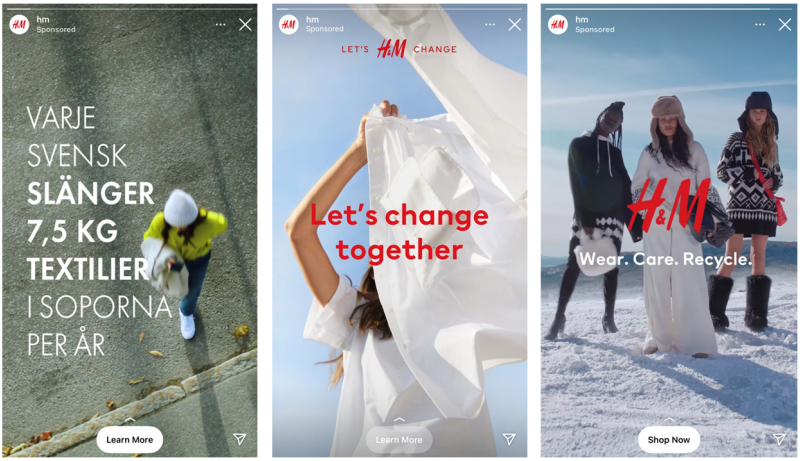


Figure 8. H&M sponsored Instagram ads
Screenshots of sponsored H&M ads on Insagram. Source: H&M's Instagram account, November 2021 (left), November 2020 (centre), November 2021 (right).

The first image depicts a person walking across a street, the shot is taken from above. The person is wearing white sneakers, blue jeans and a bright neon yellow-coloured top, and a grey/white beanie. The text superimposed on the image in white capital letters reads 'every Swede throws out 7.5kg textiles per year in the trash'. The second image depicts a person in a white T-shirt mid-movement throwing on a white cotton button up shirt. The background of the image comprises of a blue sky with some thin clouds. In the centre of the image is a text in bold red font, that says 'Let's change together'. The third image depicts three women standing in a snowy environment, with mountains and a blue sky in the background. The woman in the middle is wearing long wide white pants, a knitted sweater and a furry winter hat. The woman to the right is wearing knee-high furry boots, a long Aztec-style printed knitted sweater, a red cross-body bag and a winter hat. The woman to the left is wearing a knitted sweater with a hoodie underneath, a black and white checked skirt, high heeled boots and a white furry handbag. In the centre of the image is the red H&M logo, and underneath, a text in white that says 'Wear. Care. Recycle.'

The following three screenshots are from Kappahl's Instagram page, also promoting a similar take-back scheme. The first image reads: 'Bring your bags to one of our stores and put them in the recycling bin.' The second reads: 'More

than half of what we collect can be reused on the global second-hand market, which benefits the environment the most.'

The third image reads: 'As a thank-you, you will receive a gift voucher to spend on new clothes. The voucher's value is: 50SEK/50NOK/5€/20PLN.'

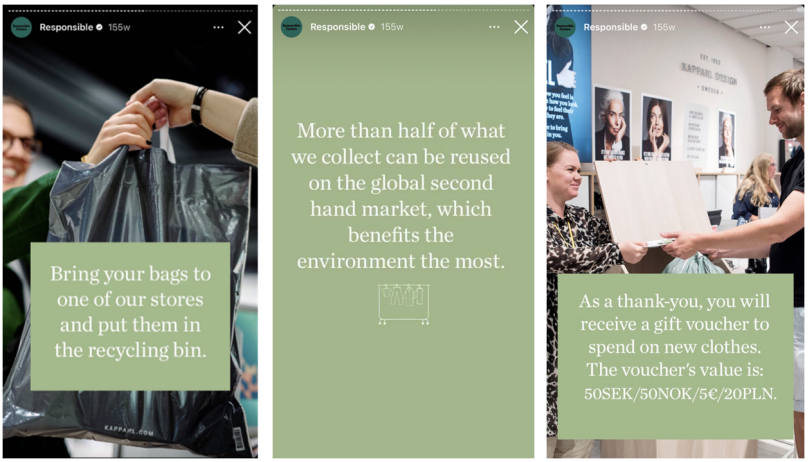


Figure 9. Kappahl Instagram Story 'Responsible'
Screenshots from Kappahl's Instagram story highlight entitled 'Responsible'. Source: Kappahl's instagram account, August 2019.

In both of these cases, customers receive a voucher to spend on new clothes when they hand in their old ones. Effectively, the promotion of take-back schemes gives consumers a reason to consume more rather than less. The problem with this is that donating clothes becomes an easy solution that makes consumers feel like they have acted sustainably. In reality, this may have unintended consequences; for instance, if a consumer donates a large number of garments that they no longer want, this will free up space and may even justify the consumption of more new clothes. This may be related to the Jevons paradox and the 'rebound effect'. In 1865, when many thought that the energy efficiency gains made through the use of coal would lead to an overall decrease in energy use, William Stanley Jevons showed that the opposite was true (Alcott 2005). This phenomenon encompasses two concepts: the 'rebound effect' and the Jevons paradox. The rebound effect 'refers to any circumstance where efficiency improves by x%, but resource consumption declines by something less than x% or increases (York and McGee

2016, 78). The Jevons paradox 'occurs when the rebound effect exceeds 100%, meaning that there was an actual increase in resource consumption, not just the loss of some of the potential benefit (York and McGee 2016, 78). There is not always a causal link between the energy efficiency made and the increase in energy consumption, however. York and McGee (2016) argue that a causal link is implicit in the term 'effect' and propose that 'the rebound association' and 'Jevons association' are used instead, reserving 'rebound effect' for cases in which a causal link can be empirically established. In this case, it can be argued that the distribution of gift vouchers represents an intention to create a causal link between donating old clothes and buying new ones.

In the Kappahl example, a claim is made that it is environmentally beneficial for old clothes to be reused on the global second-hand market. This statement needs to be unpacked as it is an oversimplification which absolves consumers from needing to reflect upon how much they consume, since old clothes can always be donated.

In June 2023, Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet published a series of articles after conducting an investigation using Bluetooth trackers to track where clothes that are handed in through these take-back schemes end up. As part of this investigation, they bought ten items of clothes from H&M in second hand stores around Stockholm, Sweden, placed small Bluetooth trackers called 'air tags' on all garments, then handed them in at eight different H&M stores in and around Stockholm. After three weeks all items were located at clothing export sorting facilities in Germany. After roughly four months of tracking these ten items around the world, three garments stopped giving signals and were thought to be out at sea, two garments ended up in a town on the outskirts of Bucharest, where a second-hand wholesaler exists. One jacket ended up in Panipat, India. One winter coat ended up in Benoni, South Africa, where Overcoats, a company which imports bales of second-hand jackets to resell is located. A hoodie ended up in Gronau, Germany, where a textile recycling company, Altex resides. A jacket ends up in Cotonou, Benin, a few kilometres from the city port, and lastly another hoodie ends up in Trzebień, Poland, where Irpol, a company which turn old clothes into cleaning rags resides (Lindberg and Wennman 2023). In a response to this investigation, the CEO of H&M, Helena Helmersson, argued that H&M tracks all the clothes they recycle, and that none of them are dumped, directly contradicting the evidence Aftonbladet's journalists found (Lindberg 2023). In

an update of the investigation that was published in October 2023, after some of the signals that had disappeared reactivated, the journalists revealed that five out of ten of the clothes they initially tagged and handed in to H&M's take-back scheme ended up in Benin, Togo, South Africa and Uganda, in places with no proper waste handling systems. Collectively all items travelled a total of 88280 kilometres, more than twice around the Earth (Lindberg 2023).

The global second-hand market is laden with many social and environmental problems, and it can be argued that the system of the global second-hand trade contributes to what some call 'waste colonialism', whereby huge amounts of unwanted, and often un-sellable, clothes from western countries are exported and sold to brokers in countries in the global South (Manieson and Ferrero-Regis 2023; Brooks 2015). The sub-Saharan African region began large scale imports of second-hand clothes in the 1980s, and now have several hubs for second-hand clothes, including the Kantamanto market in Ghana – the world's largest second-hand market (Brooks 2015). A large proportion of the vast exports of clothes that are sent to countries such as Ghana are unwanted and unsellable clothes, however brokers still need to buy bales of clothes and sort them to find the few pieces that might be sellable. Consequently, many clothes end up in landfill, where they can cause toxic pollution in the air and nearby waterways or oceans, especially since a majority of the clothes are synthetic. In the Atacama desert, in northern Chile, similarly giant landfills of old clothes imported from Western countries are growing (Bartlett 2023).

The way that take-back schemes are discursively communicated – suggesting that consumers are, through an act of care, aiding the environment and people in more need by donating their unwanted clothes – reproduces a narrative which stands in stark contrast to the reality. This type of narrative acts to render invisible the consequences of toxic clothing landfills, to which take-back schemes are a significant contributing factor. This type of visual communication which encourages consumers to use take-back schemes thus deflects responsibility in three ways: on the global scale, the clothes are exported geographically from western countries to countries primarily in the global South, where they cause environmental degradation. Spatially, consumers are able, through take-back schemes, to move clothes out of their homes in a convenient way, making their space cleaner and clearer. Lastly, on the psychological and emotional front, through the act of clearing out clothes and donating them, we as consumers are

able to clear our physical spaces, effectively erasing any signs of overconsumption, which can then be turned into a justification for consuming more clothes again, thus continuing the cycle of consumption and reinforcing a rebound effect.

The second-hand market

The previous sub-section concentrated on the topic of take-back schemes, which of course are intimately tied to the second-hand market, since the purpose of take-back schemes is for the clothes to be donated or resold and worn again. The second-hand market is growing more than ever and is used increasingly in sustainability discourse in the fashion industry. In 2019, the sales of Sweden's five largest second-hand chains increased by fifteen per cent (Åström 2019). While the second-hand market has always existed alongside the 'regular' market, in the past few years more and more companies have also started selling second-hand clothes as part of their business, and second-hand e-commerce platforms have proliferated through the market. A whole dissertation could be written about the second-hand market of clothes alone, but for the purposes of this chapter, the story of second hand will not be all-encompassing. Shopping second-hand is often romanticised, and terms with positive connotations, like 'pre-loved', have become popular in the discourse of second-hand fashion. However, the global second-hand market also faces huge problems, as discussed in the previous sub-section. Myrorna, Sweden's oldest thrift store company, owned by the Swedish Salvation Army, alone collects over ten tonnes of used clothes and goods *every day*. About 80 per cent of the clothes collected are deemed unviable for the Swedish market and are thus exported to the global second-hand market (Myrorna 2023). The dominant view of second hand is thus warped. While many think that unwanted clothes that are donated in charity shops go to those in need or those who cannot afford to buy new clothes, the vast majority in fact is exported, and enter a secondary market of importers, brokers, and sellers.

There are a few different ways in which clothing companies engage in second hand apart from the traditional charity shop or thrift store:

1. Online resell platforms and apps: companies that act as platforms where private people sell their own things (such as Tradera or Blocket in Sweden, or fashion-specific platforms like Plick, Tise, and Depop). Through these platforms, sold items are shipped directly from the seller to the buyer.

2. Online second-hand shops: companies like Sellpy, which collect clothes from private people, do all the logistical work including sorting, packaging, photographing, pricing, posting on their website, selling, and sending to the buyer.
3. Take-back schemes whereby clothing companies have collection bins where customers can donate unwanted clothes (often in exchange for a discount voucher) that are then further donated (depending on the company). In Sweden, for instance H&M, Lindex, Kappahl, and MQ offer this service.
4. Clothing companies' own second-hand market exclusively for their brand: H&M, Filippa K, and NA-KD are some of the companies in Sweden that currently offer this. In this case, the company has a page on its website where it sells second-hand clothes of its own brand from private people, who receive a cut of each sold item. The company also takes a cut, meaning it is able to make a profit more than once per garment.

In the next example, the Swedish fashion brand NA-KD advertises their second-hand business model through their Instagram story, and through their website respectively. In the Instagram stories, the text reads: 'We're proud to present our biggest sustainability initiative to date: NA-KD Circle', 'Easy to sell and earn store credit. Prolong the life of your clothes: sell them at NA-KD.com', and 'NA-KD Circle. The best way to lower your fashion footprint'. In the screenshots from their website, the text reads 'Fashion for the future. We want the fashion of the future to be built on equality, diversity and a deep respect for nature. Read about our sustainability commitments' and: 'Circle: Buy and sell second-hand fashion from NA-KD in just a few seconds. Lower your fashion footprint now.'

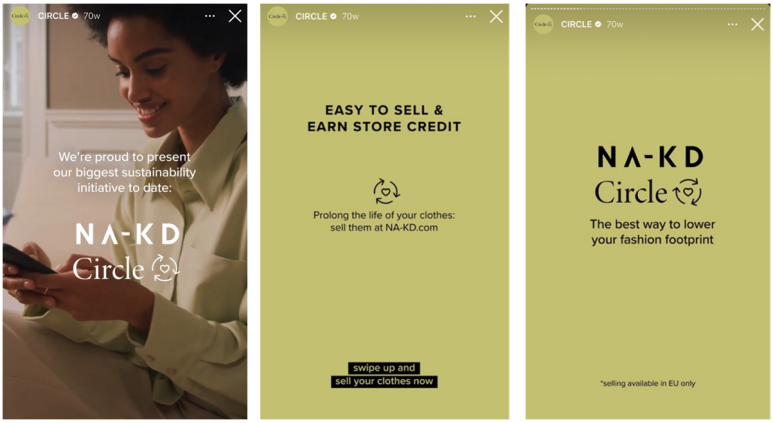


Figure 10. NA-KD Instagram story
Screenshots from NA-KD's Instagram story highlight entitled 'CIRCLE'. Source: NA-KD's Instagram account, May 2021.

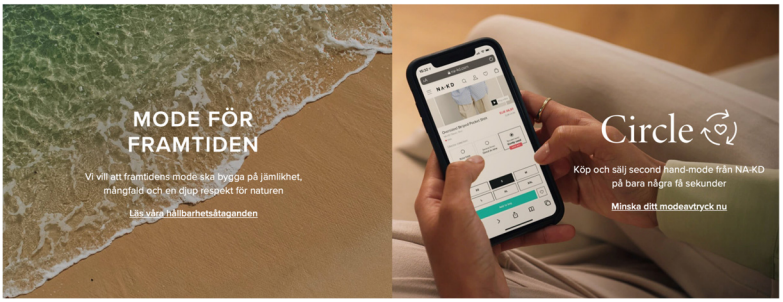


Figure 11. NA-KD Fashion for the future
Screenshot from NA-KD's website. Source: www.na-kd.com, September 2021. Copyright Nakdcom One World AB.

In these examples, reselling clothes is explicitly presented as the best way to act sustainably. Presumably, when it comes to trend-based fast fashion such as NA-KD's clothes, the clothes re-sold as second-hand have not been worn for a long time. While prolonging the life of a garment is positive, what is concealed in this type of narrative is the possibility that consumers may feel even more encouraged to buy new clothes, because it is easy to resell them once they get sick of them. The marketing for a so-called circular solution as this second-hand business initiative thus may have unintended negative environmental consequences.

Similar to the take-back schemes discussed, this initiative also involves earning store credit, further encouraging consumers to buy more new clothes.

Sellpy is an online clothing resale company that was founded in 2014 by Michael Arnor, Oskar Nielsen, and Philip Gunnstam in Sweden, and was later bought by H&M in 2019. H&M now owns 74 per cent of Sellpy, and announced their consolidation in 2023, which contributed to H&M's growing sales results in the first quarter of 2023 (Österberg 2023). On Sellpy's platform, consumers can shop mainly used clothes (but also other items such as used interior pieces). Influencers also sell their old clothes through a paid partnership with Sellpy, so that consumers can buy influencers and celebrities' used clothes. Sellpy takes a cut of each sale, and the seller receives forty per cent of the selling price minus a fee.

The image in the next figure is a screenshot from a sponsored Sellpy advertisement on Instagram. It depicts a woman with a high and long braided ponytail, wearing a white suit comprised of wide trousers and a blazer, walking, and looking towards the camera. The white suit is clean and exudes a sleek look. The text superimposed on the image says: 'With 21x less emissions on average, our pre-owned pieces are superior to new.' The advertisement suggests that through shopping on Sellpy instead of consuming newly produced clothes, one can contribute to lowering carbon emissions, while still achieving a cool and desirable outfit and look. On the image to the right which depicts a pink handbag handing on a frame on top of a stool, the text reads '*I'm dreaming of a*…habitable planet (*and a handbag*) [emphases in original]'. This was also a sponsored Instagram story advertisement by Sellpy, and part of their Christmas campaign in 2021. The text is a play on words based on the Christmas song 'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas'.

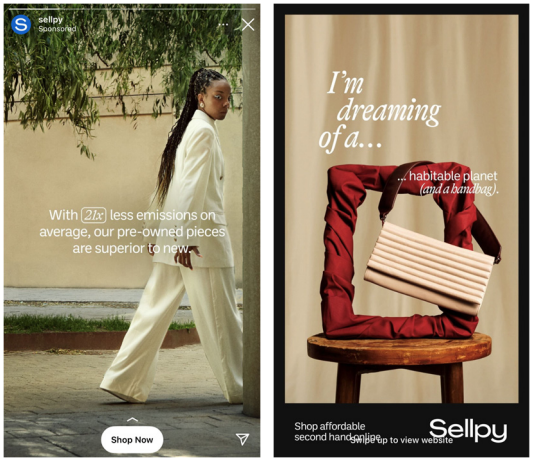


Figure 12. Sellpy sponsored ads
Screenshots of sponsored ads from Sellpy on Instagram. Source: Sellpy's Instagram account, September 2021 (left), November 2021 (right).

The play on words in this advertisement is doing two things here: firstly, a suggestion is made that fashion consumption desires can co-exist with 'a habitable planet' – a sustainable future. Secondly, by juxtaposing a serious term (habitable planet) with something more frivolous as a handbag, the message may be decoded as light, positive and humorous; however, an oppositional or critical reading could decode this message as a grim reflection of a society which does not take the climate crisis seriously. Second-hand e-commerce platforms are often spoken of in relation to younger generations' increased concern for the environment and climate change. However, research by Armstrong and Park (2020) shows that among young women, this relationship is overstated, and that in fact second-hand e-commerce platforms should be seen as an extension of the current marketplace rather than an alternative form of consumption. This suggests a gap in the way that various second-hand platforms are marketed (as a sustainability solution) and the way that they are in fact being used by consumers. Throughout my research, I have come across many influencers on Instagram posting photos and videos of many huge Sellpy bags they have just packed, ready to be resold. It is not uncommon to see influencers doing sponsored ads for a particular brand, and a couple of months later seeing the same exact garments on Sellpy's website.

In one of my interviews, Sofia pointed out an important issue, which is that although second-hand consumption may be better than buying new from an environmental perspective, it is still intimately tied to the reward system we have for shopping:

> I think there is a clear desire to consume, even if it is second hand, a desire to have something new, I think people feel more guilt free doing it second hand or if it's something more sustainable, and that's definitely better. If you're going to buy it, you should try to do it as responsibly as possible, but the psychology behind, the desire to renew ourselves all the time and have new things, whether it's a new or old item, we cannot get away from the fact that we are living in an era where we want that renewal, and I think people get a kick out of that. (Sofia)

Online second-hand shops such as Sellpy is playing directly to this desire, for instance by having influencer partnerships as part of their business – where the marketing and communication is based on the premise that as long as consumers buy second-hand, they can and should buy as much as possible. The second-hand market is touted as sustainable; however, because such vast amounts of clothing are being donated every single day, there is far more second-hand clothes currently on the planet than can possibly be processed and used, and many end up in landfills. In my interview with Hilda, she stated that landfills are not an issue in Sweden since there is a law against them:

> we only operate within the EU, and in the EU there is a law against discarding clothes into landfills, so that's not an issue here. (Hilda)

It is worth noting here that although landfills are not a direct problem on Swedish soil, Swedish clothes do end up in landfills in other countries, as discussed in the previous sub-section. In the following citation Hilda talks further on the topic of the second-hand market in Kenya as an example, referring to deficient infrastructure as a problem:

> I just read an article about the second-hand market in Kenya, that things work really well there, it creates work opportunities, it's a low burden on the environment, and it's something we've seen in many African countries that second-hand textiles from the EU actually don't outcompete local production, but actually instead it outcompetes cheap textiles from China…there's pros and cons to this export industry, but of course I would wish for these developing countries to gain the infrastructure to do proper waste management, for hygiene reasons as well as

> landfill issues… it's such a shame to not have effective waste management systems that we have in Europe. (Hilda)

The image communicated in this excerpt stands in stark contrast to the reporting by Lindberg and Wennman (2023) regarding the issue. The line of reasoning puts the blame on ineffective waste management systems in developing countries – it does not take into account the fact that many countries are receiving more used clothes from the global North than they could possibly process effectively, not to mention the fact that the clothes that are exported from Sweden are usually clothes that have already gone through a selection process and have been deemed not up to the standard of sale in Sweden. Although there is a consideration of the problems of clothing ending up in landfill in this citation, the situation does not seem to be analysed from a systematic perspective where the problem of fashion landfills in the global South is directly linked to overconsumption in the global North. There seems also to be an assumption built into the argument that clothes from the EU are more welcome in developing countries than 'cheap textiles from China'. As a large proportion of garments made for European and Western brands are made in China, it is unclear what is meant by this comment, however it seems to reflect the commonly held but false assumption that European clothes are by definition of higher quality as discussed by Phạm (2022). Victoria similarly argues that landfills are not a problem in Sweden or in Nordic countries:

> Up until recently we have only had business in the Nordic countries, where landfills are not a problem, but that also depends on what customers do with their clothes. So, it's a huge problem. It's not the product's fault, it's humans. A lot of this is about behaviour and education. Companies and politicians need to help informing people. (Victoria)

Saying that landfills are not a problem in Sweden ignores the relationship of unequal ecological exchange between the global North and South, whereby environments can be kept clean in the global North, often at the direct expense of the environment in the global South (Hornborg 2011).

Generally, throughout all the interviews with sustainability managers, I observed a high level of faith in the concept of circularity and its place in fashion businesses. Sofia argued that circularity will play a major role in making their company sustainable:

> The biggest systematic change that needs to happen is that currently we're working with a linear model where we produce something and don't take care of it at end of life… we need to work circularly. We cannot exploit the earth's resources the way we do today by using virgin materials, there won't be enough resources left for us to take if we don't take care of it and give it back, so to speak. We also have a growing population globally, who might need to grow crops for example where cotton is currently grown. A huge part of what is produced is refined…and we need to take that back into our value chain. So, we need to bring back everything we produce to our value chain; I see closing that loop as our first, biggest, most important change that we need to make to make sure we reach our biodiversity goals; we need to become our own feedstock and lower our emissions. We need to decrease our climate impact. We have a goal to be climate positive by 2040, and climate neutral by 2030, so huge changes need to be made, and circularity is one of the most important tools for reaching the biodiversity goals and emission goals, and to not rely on virgin materials. (Sofia)

In this excerpt, it becomes clear how much the concept of circularity is expected to cover and carry. Communicatively in marketing and advertising, it is an effective concept; however, when it comes to reaching the multiple climate and environment related goals fashion companies have, as just described, there seem to be extremely high expectations as to what this one concept can achieve. Michaela mentioned circularity as being mostly about recycling and reusing garments: 'we talk a lot about circularity, again it's about being able to recycle and reuse'. On the other hand, she acknowledged the potential difficulty in implementing circular solutions:

> I have faith in circularity, but to be circular everything has to work in real life, not just in a diagram. The whole value chain needs to be involved, it's not enough that we sit in the office and create a strategy. (Michaela)

This concern aligns with Corvellec, Stowell, and Johansson (2022)'s problematising of circularity and the lack of feasibility that has been witnessed so far in the business world. For instance, Sofia mentioned many different aspects of technological advancements that need to work in order for a business to truly have a chance to become circular:

> We need to create products that can circulate and are made from high levels of recycled materials, but that are also free from toxic chemicals, make sure that we create products that will last a long life and that can be circulated many times, and

> then we need to ensure that it will be easy for the consumer – this is where circular models such as rental, re-sell, subscription model, come in. There are different ways to continue that loop, like repairing, and making sure nothing ever ends up in a landfill. That's the end goal: when it's impossible to do anything else with it, we bring back the fibres and put it back into the supply chain. That supply chain needs to be prepared to take back materials and also needs to be run by renewable energy, so we don't rely on coal. So, we need to work on all of these aspects: product, the consumer journey and also bringing products back in. Right now, there are very few textiles that can be recycled, so we invest a lot of money into finding innovative solutions so that materials can be recycled to a larger degree than they are today. (Sofia)

Similarly, Olivia said that although Sweden is at the forefront of developments in circularity, more resources and effort needs to be put into that field:

> On the EU level there are a lot of discussions around definitions, what is circular fashion, at the end of the day there should be no waste, and we are far from that today…this is interesting for Swedish companies to work with. Generally, we are ahead, and we have a lot of research and testing underway, so Sweden is competitive in that sense, but a lot of resources and effort is still needed (Olivia).

Elsa also acknowledges the difficulties in implementing circularity into the fashion industry, yet has hope for a circular fashion future:

> It is not the solution for the whole fashion industry's problems, but it is definitely a big goal. We don't have an exact goal for when to be circular because it's a very complex supply chain and we're currently looking at many solutions where parts of that supply chain can be circular. We trust that a lot of the solutions that exist today will be more scalable in the future, because the possibility to scale does not exist today.
>
> It's a big puzzle that needs to be solved in a short time period so I would say that we are focusing on the products because this is where we can make the biggest difference. That's where we put our resources to look at more circular solutions. The material, production, logistics, those are the biggest aspects of a product. Apart from that you might have circular stores for example, but we put our focus on the product. (Elsa)

Olivia also pointed out that the lack of clarity in laws and definitions makes it harder for companies to shift to a circular business model:

> The Swedish brands that we work with are very serious and well informed, but you can only do so much, and we need laws and clear definitions. No one wants to work in a dirty industry, and it is clear that Swedish companies want to do more, they want to do better, but they don't always know how (Olivia)

The way the fashion industry currently looks, circularity or circular solutions that are *actually* circular seem to be a pipedream. Perhaps what needs to be brought into question is whether all the faith and investment that is put into circular business solutions is less about the urgency to lower emissions and find sustainable solutions, and more about a stubbornness in latching on to the status quo of mass consumption? The analysis of the interviews and advertisements in this section supports the argument made by Brydges (2021, 7): 'brands are selectively and strategically implementing CE [circular economy] interventions at different stages of their (still quite linear) supply chains rather than overhauling the practices that make the industry so unsustainable in the first place'. The problem of still not addressing overconsumption, through second hand, a lot of shopping can be done with a good conscience. While buying second-hand is undoubtedly better than buying new from a carbon emissions and resource use perspective, the way that the second-hand market looks globally today, it is far from a magic bullet.

5.3 Green Consumption

So far, we have discussed and analysed some of the main themes observed in sustainability narratives in fashion advertisements and communication. What all of these narratives have in common is that the encouragement to consume remains intact. It is the *how* and the *what* of consumption that are addressed in these narratives, not the *why* and *if*. The concept of green consumption can encompass many things, but in its essence, for the purposes of this thesis, 'a green consumer is someone who is aware of his or her obligation to protect the environment by selectively purchasing green products or services' (Roy 2011, 194). What I am particularly interested in is understanding how fashion companies, through their marketing and communication, encourage green consumption. This section will firstly examine the way in which companies place environmental responsibility on consumers by turning consumers into eco-conscious subjects. Furthermore, it will discuss how concepts from anti-capitalist sustainable fashion discourse are co-

opted into mainstream fashion marketing as a means of interpellating the eco-conscious subject.

5.3.1 Environmental Responsibility and the Eco-conscious Subject

Connolly and Prothero (2008, 118) write that 'marketers have been interested in identifying and profiling environmentally conscious consumers' since the 1970s. Green marketing has evolved since the 70s, and today it has proliferated through the fashion industry. Referring to Giddens's (1991) concept of life politics, Connolly and Prothero (2008) argue that the green consumption has become increasingly enmeshed with the idea of sustainability, and that individuals have started seeing systemic issues like that of sustainability and internalising them as a part of themselves. The individualising language in sustainability marketing discourse directly prompts the consumer to internalise systemic issues, and then act upon the issue through the market.

Below is an advertisement I came across on the subway on a winter day in 2023. The advertisement is for a clothing re-sell app called 'plick' and the image depicts a young man sitting on a couch or bed wearing a beige sweatshirt, beige cap, tinted glasses and black pants, holding a smartphone in his left hand. The text on the image says: 'Become an activist. Sell your clothes on plick. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. Together with 996.852* other heroes you can make cash and make a difference – straight from the couch.'

Figure 13. Plick advertisement on Stockholm subway train.
Copyright Mariko Takedomi Karlsson.

The concept of laziness as being conducive to sustainability is indicated through the illustration of the man sitting with his phone, in combination with the text urging us to become activists by selling our used clothes online from the couch. Similarities can be drawn to the advertisements from Monki analysed previously in this chapter, where the message conveyed was that we can become sustainable by being lazy (for example by washing our clothes less). A dominant reading of this image may interpret the message of easy activism as empowering and encouraging to the individual: acting sustainably can be easy and effortless. An oppositional reading may on the other hand argue that the discourse in this advertisement reduces environmental or climate activism to something simple and individualistic, as easy as selling your old clothes on an app. The image also alludes to activism as something that can be done with no effort or connection to community or other people – it can be done by sitting at home alone. The idea of togetherness in this context is more an amalgamation of individuals acting from their own rooms, rather than togetherness as in a community or group of people consciously acting together for a common cause. Like a lot of sustainability communication, this advertisement employs the idea of togetherness and individuality simultaneously. It is at once telling us that as individuals the best we can do is act sustainably through green consumption, and if we all engage in that together, we can solve the ecological crisis.

The idea of togetherness is utilised in two main ways in sustainability marketing and communication: firstly, in the way that the masses are encouraged to 'together' (but separately) consume in a certain way, and secondly, in the way that consumers are seen as working together with the company producing the advertisement, towards a common goal of a more sustainable fashion industry. Below is another example of communication from a clothing company, this time Lindex, that is specifically encouraging green consumption. Recall the themes of nature and care symbolised by photographing in nature, and handholding as discussed earlier in this chapter on the narratives of sustainable fashion.

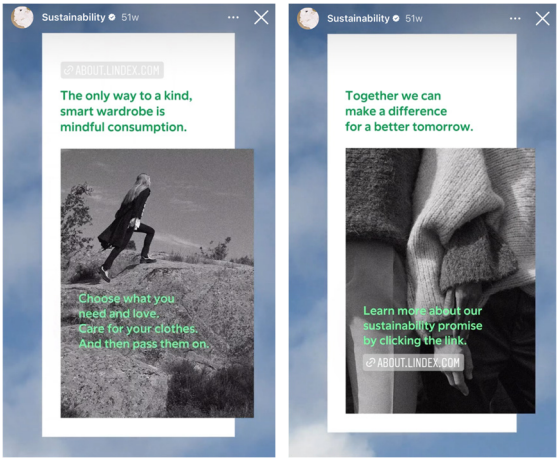


Figure 14. Lindex Instagram story
Screenshots from Lindex's Instagram story highlight entitled 'Sustainability'. Source: Lindex's Instagram account, September 2021.

The screenshots are from Lindex's Instagram story highlight entitled 'Sustainability'. The first image reads 'The only way to a kind smart wardrobe is mindful consumption. Choose what you need and love. Care for your clothes. And then pass them on.' The text on the second image reads 'Together we can make a difference for a better tomorrow. Learn more about our sustainability promise by clicking the link.'

By now we have come across the concept of togetherness a few times in advertisements. Togetherness is used a lot in sustainability communication and part of its effect is in interpellating the environmentally conscious subject. The narrative in the images position companies and consumers as partners in creating a sustainable future, where the consumer's role is to consume 'mindfully' and care for the clothes they already own. Through utilising the notion of care in the language ('mindful consumption', 'care for your clothes'), the narrative's effect is placing environmental responsibility on the individual consumer. Effectively, this type of discourse recruits subjects and turn them into eco-conscious consumers who want to do the right thing, through buying the rights things. Michaela understood the role of companies to be to educate consumers:

> Overall, I wouldn't say that the consumer is most responsible…I think it's a lot about how we as a company educate our consumers, that we should raise awareness, that's our responsibility…Consumers are aware. So, I definitely think you can steer the customer through marketing well. (Michaela)

In this line of reasoning, marketing is seen as a tool to educate consumers and steer them to make better or more sustainable consumption choices – marketing clearly has an important role from her perspective in how to influence consumers. The following excerpts reveal more in depth what the sustainability managers I interviewed think about responsibility and how it should be shared in the fashion industry. Hilda perceives there to be a lot of finger-pointing and blaming in different directions when it comes to who should take most responsibility for sustainability in the fashion industry:

> When you do surveys, people always point their fingers at someone else. So, consumers think the responsibility should be on companies and politicians, politicians say it's on the consumers and companies, and the companies say it's the politicians and consumers. But that's the tragedy of the commons, it's everyone's responsibility, and we are a company where the directors and leadership are really signalling to me as sustainability manager that we should take our responsibility, so we will take our responsibility and we are doing that for the long term, and for that to work we also need to continue being profitable, because otherwise we won't exist in six months if we cannot pay wages to our employees. (Hilda)

Hilda pointed out that sustainability goals need to be long-term and that they as a company need to continue to be profitable in order to exist as such. There is a sense of frustration that fashion companies get a lot of the blame when it comes to sustainability challenges. Hilda built on her argument as follows:

> Environmental organisations can just spit out all sorts of arguments with no substance, that are just hearsay. Researchers need to be peer-reviewed, companies need to follow marketing laws, but environmental organisations and influencers and others can just blurt out a bunch of myths and incorrect facts and rumours without any factual basis so…that's why we land on plastic straw bans and taxes on plastic bags, which are measures that are completely irrelevant for the environment, but environmental organisations are driving forces in those questions. (Hilda)

According to her, environmental organisations and their campaigning is not always based on truth because what they say is not regulated in the way that for

example academic research is peer-reviewed. Sofia had a different take on the issue and believes the companies should carry the heaviest burden when it comes to environmental responsibility:

> I think the responsibility should be on the companies since we're the ones who need to do the work to become sustainable. You cannot put too much responsibility on the consumer because it's a difficult issue. It's super complicated and there are many aspects that make it more complicated; there are even a lot of sustainability things that I don't know or understand. I want to be able to walk into a supermarket and not need to make a bunch of choices, that's too difficult. I want to walk into a store where the selection has already been made, so I don't need to worry about dangerous chemicals or poor working conditions for producers. I want fashion to be the same way, I want to walk into a store and not have to compare carbon emissions or read about different materials or figure out what the carbon emission is for a factory, that's too much. That responsibility should be on the company, they should do that work for me so I can just walk in and choose what I like and what I need, that's my opinion. (Sofia)

Her focus lies in transparency of production and environmental impact of garments; she believes this type of information needs to be published and made available by brands in order to make it easier for consumers to make better choices when shopping clothes. Elsa also believes it is the brands' responsibility to provide more sustainable products for their consumers:

> The majority of people don't choose a product because it's more sustainable, so I think it's our responsibility as companies, and then we can also offer the consumer the very best on the market… For example, the cotton we use today is 100 per cent more sustainable cotton so it's either BCI cotton or organic cotton or recycled cotton, so that's an example of how we have taken responsibility so that the consumer does not have to make choices because we don't have any conventional cotton at all.
>
> It's us as a company who needs to take responsibility. Our customer is spot on, and she cares about sustainability. But it's also for the sake of our employees. I think we carry the heaviest responsibility, but it's also important to team up with our customers in order to find the coolest and most innovative solutions and that we can offer that even if it's not 100 per cent of our products, since those solutions are not scalable for now.' (Elsa)

On the one hand, Elsa argues that most people do not consume clothes based on how sustainable they are, on the other she says that her company's customers do care about sustainability. In her example, the material is in focus and cotton is used as an example to illustrate that they make the choice easier for consumers by only using organic, recycled or BCI (Better Cotton Initiative) certified cotton. In most of the previous excerpts, the focus is placed on the materials and production of specific products, and how this should be presented in a transparent way so that consumers can make good choices. The question of overconsumption or the inherently unsustainable nature of fast fashion was not mentioned. Victoria argued that while companies need to take responsibility, many other factors play into the issue:

> 'Companies should take responsibility since they are the ones who make sure clothes are being produced. But the consumer is part of the life cycle too and I think this is definitely a society-level question. It concerns the politicians too. Stop subsidising oil and petrol. (Victoria)

Victoria mentioned the role of politics and politicians as well, saying they need to stop subsidising the extraction of oil. While the narratives of green consumption in advertisements tend to place more responsibility on the consumer, most sustainability managers I interviewed saw their companies as carrying a heavy burden of environmental responsibility.

5.3.2 Co-optation as a Means of Interpellating the Eco-conscious Subject

In the previous subsection we discussed ways in which companies utilise concepts such as care and togetherness in order to interpellate eco-conscious consumers through marketing and communication. I argue that another way through which companies interpellate eco-conscious subjects is through a process of co-optation. Specifically, I refer to the co-optation of three examples: 1) preloved, 2) capsule wardrobes; and 3) mending.

Preloved

The term 'preloved' has become popularised when describing second-hand clothes. The term has positive connotations and suggests that the item in question has been chosen carefully, worn, cared for with nurture, and of course loved,

before being passed on when no longer serving its purpose. The popularisation of the term can be interpreted as a reflection of the changing attitudes regarding wearing second-hand clothes. The following image is an example of the term being used in an advertorial context.

Figure 15. Paid Instagram advertisement for H&M
Screenshot from @englalof Instagram story. Source: @englalof Instagram account, November 2022.

The screenshot is from an Instagram story paid partnership with H&M, and the text reads '@hm has a preloved page with hand-picked second-hand products'. Not only does this become a way for companies like H&M in this case to showcase that they care about and want to engage in the second-hand market, but it also gives them a new income stream where they can make a profit from selling the same products more than once. This is an example of the meaning of a term being used in a way that does not correspond to its original intention. Now any type of second-hand may be described as 'preloved' fashion because the term has positive connotations and marketing value.

Capsule wardrobes

A capsule wardrobe is the idea of having a wardrobe with essential items of high-quality stylish clothing that you wear often, and that match each other in several different combinations. The idea is to work with a small number of clothes, and to avoid owning or buying excessively. The origins of the capsule wardrobe as a concept are usually credited to Susie Faux who had a store in London in the 1970s

called Wardrobe, which was based on the idea of the capsule wardrobe. The term was later popularised by American fashion designer Donna Karan in 1985 (Bardey et al. 2022). Recently, as the fashion industry faces a sustainability crisis, the idea of a capsule wardrobe has had a resurgence and appears in a lot of fashion advertising, as depicted in the following two examples. The first screenshot is a sponsored Instagram advertisement from the Norwegian brand Pierre Robert – the image depicts a woman with blonde hair wearing a knitted polo sweater; the text on the image reads 'NEW COLLECTION: KAPSEL AW2022'. The second screenshot is from the Swedish brand Bubbleroom's Instagram story. The image depicts influencer Lovisa Barkman sitting on a couch. The text reads 'capsule collection: STARRING LOVISA BARKMAN. COMING SOON. 26 SEPTEMBER'.

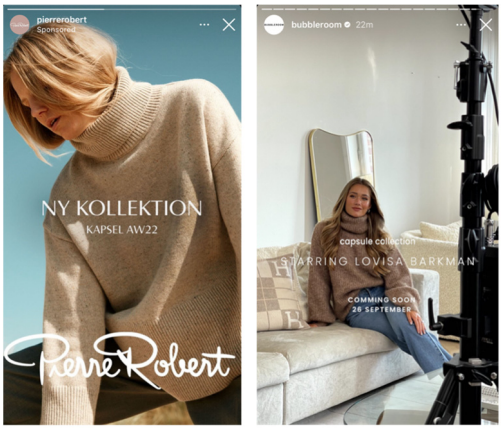


Figure 16. Capsule collections
Screenshots from Pierre Robert sponsored Instagram ad (left), Bubbleroom Instagram story (right). Source: Pierre Robert's Instagram account, September 2022, Bubbleroom's Instagram account, September 2022.

A capsule wardrobe is meant to counteract over-consumption, but through its corporate co-optation it may instead encourage consumers to go out and shop entirely new wardrobes full of basic pieces in different colours, thereby defeating its purpose altogether. The advertisements depicted here do not include explicit environmental claims; however, the connotations associated with a capsule wardrobe is suggestive of the fact that the collection is meant to be thought of as being sustainable. When the idea of a capsule wardrobe is co-opted by brands and

marketed as a 'capsule collection', it becomes a reappropriation of the term. This marketing technique may be interpreted as a form of greenwashing, as the utilisation of the concept of a capsule becomes a way of interpellating eco-conscious consumer subjects.

The point of having a capsule wardrobe becomes conflated with simply encouraging people to buy a lot of basics in neutral colours. In these examples, companies that are not based on the idea of capsule wardrobes have released 'capsule' collections, adding this concept on to their already existing business. There are other companies that have the idea of capsule collection more embedded into their business model from the start, such as Asket, A Day's March and Djerf Avenue. The problem with those types of brands is that often, after a few years or seasons – if the business is going well – the collections expand to include many more different styles, products and colours, thereby undermining the initial selling point of sustainable capsule wardrobes.

Mending

The practice of mending clothes through methods such as stitching, patching, invisible mending or darning can be an act of activism that falls under the umbrella of *craftivism* (Barnes and McGovern 2022; Middleton 2014). While mending was not originally a form of activism but rather a part of everyday life, the practice is nowhere near as common today. Middleton (2014) argues this is due to four deterrents which she lists in the following four categories: '*Consumerism has made mending obsolete', 'There is nothing to mend', 'Fast fashion is not worth mending', and 'There's no need to mend'* (Middleton 2014, 226-227; emphases in original). Due to the fact that fast fashion is often not made for longevity, it has lower quality and is designed, both from a quality perspective and a trend perspective, to be replaced frequently. This built-in obsolescence has aided in the phase-out of mending as a common practice. Therefore, in today's context, mending carries different meanings; for instance, it can be used as an act of anti-capitalist resistance.

When it comes to sustainable fashion, while there is no consensus on for instance what material is most sustainable, there actually is absolute consensus on the fact that the most sustainable garment to wear is the one you already own. Taking care of one's clothes and avoiding buying new is by far the most environmentally friendly option. One way of lengthening the life of an existing garment is

mending. Mending and repurposing of clothes is often encouraged by slow-fashion activists and designers, and anyone who is critical to the fast-fashion model. Garment mending is an ancient practice and there are many different styles and techniques.

One style of visible mending that has become popular is 'sashiko stitching', an ancient stitching technique from northern Japan using white cotton thread – this practice was developed by poor people who could not afford to buy new textiles regularly (Shaver 1992). In 2022, Spanish company Zara did a design collaboration with Korean brand Ader Error, which included jeans with large sashiko stitching patchwork designs. The practice of sashiko stitching is something that was mainly done by women in the home, for a non-commercial purposes (Shaver 1992). The way that Zara has used the technique can be interpreted as a form of greenwashing and co-optation as there is no logical reason to mend something that is newly produced and not broken. This is an example of how even the small individual actions that people and cultures have been partaking in for centuries such as mending can get co-opted by large companies. In this instance, the purpose of mending is stretched, hollowing out its practical purpose and leaving only the aesthetic element of the practice. However, the aesthetic element still invites connotations of the original purpose, of mending and the caretaking of clothes, and this connotation is afforded to consumers who buy the product. Co-opting a practice such as mending in the production of new clothes becomes a vehicle for interpellating consumers as eco-conscious subjects, or at least as consumer subjects who like the aesthetic of eco-consciousness.

Co-opting these concepts (mending, capsule wardrobe, preloved), which in cases like mending come from more subversive ideas in the context of fast fashion (of course mending clothes is an ancient and common practice which would not be described as subversive in a larger historical context of garments) is part of interpellating eco-conscious subjects who want to do the right thing. 'Eco-conscious' becomes more about its aesthetic than its true production or material make-up.

5.4 Greenwashing

In the previous section, during the discussion on co-optation, I alluded to some of the marketing techniques as being forms of greenwashing. The term greenwashing was coined by environmentalists who argued that some corporations want to present an environmentally responsible public image by misleading consumers regarding their environmental practices or the benefits of their products or services. (Hostovsky 2011, 233-234). Indeed, many of the advertisements that have thus far been looked at in this chapter could be classified as forms of greenwashing – communication that gives people an inaccurate or misleading depiction of the environmental performance of a particular company, product or service. According to Lyon and Montgomery (2015), sustainability advertising in Canada and the US grew by almost three hundred per cent between 2006-2009. They categorised greenwashing into different forms of misleading, for instance the 'halo effect' whereby the overall positive impression of a company misleads consumers into thinking all aspects of their business is sustainable, selective disclosure (choosing to highlight positive information while withholding negative information) or 'cheap talk' (claims not backed up by evidence).

Jones (2019) analysed and compared green advertising from top-ranked and bottom-ranked companies and found that both categories rely on narratives of consumer empowerment narratives, meaning having green advertising need not reflect the actual performance of a company when it comes to sustainability. They write that 'commercial advertising is the primary way that companies attempt to convey social and environmental responsibility to consumers' (Jones 2019, 2). In Sweden, green communication and green claims have also continued to grow, a majority of industries having increased the amount and frequency of the former since 2015 (Konsumentverket 2021). A report published on the behalf of the Swedish Consumer Protection Agency revealed that the majority of green claims made were general and vague (Konsumentverket 2021). It also found that the industries that engaged most in environmental claims and sustainability communication, next to the electricity sector, which was highest on the list in 2015, were apparel and shoes, dairy, new cars, and the restaurant sector (Konsumentverket 2021). Market research conducted in the UK by the Changing Markets Foundation found that '59 per cent of green claims made by brands were misleading or unsubstantiated, according to guidelines released by the UK's

Competition and Markets Authority' (Changing Markets Foundation 2022, 26). Suffice it to say, greenwashing is a growing and serious problem in the fashion sector.

As green communication and the prevalence of green claims have continued to grow, regulations and policies have tried to keep up. In Sweden, the marketing law states that environmental claims made in advertisements need to be 1) substantiated and 2) verified, otherwise the advertisement risks being taken down by the Consumer Protection Agency (Konsumentverket 2017). In a study conducted by The European Commission in 2020, it was found that 53.3 per cent of environmental claims for a wide range of products were misleading, vague, or unfounded, and that 40 per cent of green claims made were unsubstantiated (European Commission 2022). So, what is a 'green claim'? The EU Commission states that an environmental claim is:

> any message or representation, which is not mandatory under Union law or national law, including text, pictorial, graphic or symbolic representation, in any form, including labels, brand names, company names or product names, in the context of a commercial communication, which states or implies that a product or trader has a positive or no impact on the environment or is less damaging to the environment than other products or traders, respectively, or has improved their impact over time (European Commission 2022, 24).

The 2023 'Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on substantiation and communication of explicit environmental claims (Green Claims Directive)' thus acts a step in the EU's crackdown on greenwashing.

In my interviews with sustainability managers, there were mixed understandings and opinions on the topic of greenwashing. Some of the interviewees argued that their companies do not engage in any form of greenwashing, and that the real problem rather resides in a lack of knowledge in consumers. Others were more self-critical, pointing out the risk of greenwashing in sustainability marketing. In the following excerpt, Hilda explains the strict consumer laws in Sweden:

> I think clothes and fashion are very harshly scrutinised, and I think in other industries you can get away with shallow sustainability arguments. The Swedish Consumer Agency has laws which state that you need to specify how something is good for the environment, it is not enough to say that it is. So perhaps the fashion industry was early with these issues, and in the beginning, companies said that

> things were environmentally friendly without backing that up. But today, more often than not when a case loses at the consumer agency, it's due to a mistake – a company has said 'sustainable' instead of 'more sustainable' or that a communications officer changed 'climate' to 'environment' because they thought climate would be harder to understand, but in that case, it specifically was about climate, and then there isn't facts to back that up.
>
> So, I think the fashion industry is so much more mature and has taken responsibility and has been given attention in media by environmental organisations for supply chain issues, because it is so clear that there is a cotton farmer at the bottom of the chain, compared to some other consumer products which are not questioned at all. So, the big issue with greenwashing is not in the fashion industry in my opinion. There are many actors who don't take sustainability seriously, but now a days I really think most companies are following the marketing laws. (Hilda)

According to Hilda, the fashion industry gets scrutinised disproportionately compared to other industries when it comes to environmental claims and greenwashing. There is a sense that she believes the industry is unfairly punished or judged because it is more transparent in its communication and marketing. She argued instead that environmental organisations pose a problem:

> Rather, I think that it's a problem which confuses a lot of consumers, when different organisations spread completely baseless things or claims because they have an agenda and want to make money, they want people to donate to their operations and their organisations need to continue to survive, and that's when a bunch of claims that are false come in and make things very difficult.
>
> For example, this idea that natural materials are good. There are some environmental organisations who say that synthetics are bad, but in fact it's not true at all that something is good just because it's made of natural fibres, there are plenty of toxic natural fibres and often they require much more energy to refine those materials into textiles compared to creating materials from oil from the start. They show you pictures of birds stuck in plastic bags and it's awful, and then they say that the textile industry has to stop making polyester clothes. It's such a misconstruction… There's a lot of lack of knowledge and people like easy messages and that's a problem. (Hilda)

According to Hilda, some greenwashing claims against fashion companies are unfounded, and environmental organisations who criticise the fashion industry

do not have enough knowledge to make these criticisms. She argues that such organisations use shock-value imagery such as photos of birds stuck in plastic bags to play on consumers emotions and demonise industries like that of fashion. The problem according to Hilda seems to be more about miscommunication from other parties rather than the fashion industry consciously engaging in greenwashing behaviour. Victoria made a similar argument about misinterpretations:

> A challenge is communication and engagement. internally and externally. if people interpret things wrong due to lack of education this can also lead to greenwashing…I take issue with ads that just mention sustainability because what does that even mean, it's such a wide concept, whether it's about a car or a t shirt or a banana. In the circle that I'm in on Instagram, I can see a lot of people criticizing companies that are trying to do good. If a company releases a capsule collection with recycled polyester from the ocean, they get shit for that, if they've tried a rental model, they get criticized because it's too small a fraction of their business. But you can't transform a business over night. (Victoria)

She acknowledged the problematic nature of sustainability marketing, as sustainability is a wide issue that is difficult to capture in a simple way. However, similarly to Hilda, she also argued that the fashion industry is disproportionately blamed for greenwashing, when it is trying to implement sustainable solutions.

> Greenwashing is absolutely a big problem that we've had for a long time. But it's also about what is sustainable and who gets to decide what can be considered as sustainable? I mean, Better Cotton, that's good cotton, but…what does that say about working conditions in factories? If working conditions are poor, but they use the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), is that then sustainable? And that's the crux of the problem, there are no laws that tell us what we can and can't do in marketing.
>
> I have control over the audits. 100 per cent of our suppliers are audited, but I don't know what it's like at other companies. If their sustainability certifications include social sustainability, I have no idea. And since there is space for interpretation, there is also space for greenwashing, and that's a big problem. Consumers are not so well educated, whereas people like you and I are more interested…customers in general are not so aware. If they see a green leaf, they'll think yes, I'll buy this, I've done a good deed today.

> An aware person knows sustainability is about three things. The economic, the environmental and the social responsibility. But a person who isn't aware might think it's enough with one of those aspects. Or if they just see a green colour on a website, they might think it's enough. (Michaela)

In Michaela's responses, there is a sentiment that greenwashing grows out of misinterpretations on the consumer's behalf due to a lack of awareness or education.

The following excerpts show another side of the narrative and is more self-critical when it comes to green claims made in fashion advertising and communication.

> I think it's misleading to say that you could save the environment by buying something. You can help the environment if you were to buy something either way, and needed a certain product, and then choose a good product; that's good. But the problem with overconsumption remains, which is that if you didn't need anything from the start, you cannot help the environment by consuming things. (Hilda)

Hilda touches upon a topic that is rarely discussed within fashion industry discourse – that of overconsumption. She argues that claiming the purchase of a product to be sustainable is misleading in itself because it does not address the reason behind the purchase or the alternative of not consuming.

> Everyone wants to feel guilt-free. The shame some people feel is not just about the fashion industry, it could be about flying, they buy away their guilt through carbon offsetting and think they've made the responsible choice there. People might not want to refrain from something completely, so the companies help them feel like their purchase wasn't that bad. For companies, it is therefore very important that they don't claim that something is better than it really is. You can state that something is made out of organic cotton if that is a fact, but to say that it's sustainable because it's made from organic cotton becomes a sweeping statement, and that's misleading to make the customer think that it is better than it is. (Sofia)

Sofia criticised systems such as carbon offsetting, arguing that this works to ease consumers' bad conscience without making a real difference. She emphasises the importance of stating facts in marketing without making sweeping green or sustainability claims. The problem with this approach is that a lot of terms, such as capsule wardrobe, organic cotton, or recycled polyester, have accrued meaning and connotations which are decoded by receivers in a way that they translate to

sustainability. Thus, such marketing can also lead to greenwashing, even if sweeping false green claims are not made.

> Greenwashing exists in the fashion industry, there are no guidelines today. We would really welcome some guidelines on what we can and cannot say, they exist in Norway for example. We really welcome guidelines because that would make it a lot easier for us, to have a clear framework. No one wants to do the wrong thing, and at the same time we want to inform the customer and show them when we do something good, but I think it would be really good to have industry-wide praxis. But we are already trying. For instance, if we want to say that a garment is 'more sustainable', at least 50 per cent of the garment needs to be more sustainable, except for cotton garments, where 100 per cent of the material needs to be more sustainable.' (Elsa)

Here, Elsa stated the need for more clearer guidelines for companies on how to do sustainability marketing. She believes greenwashing will not be as much of a problem if industry wide guidelines are devised for what can and cannot be said. While the data from these interviews has been mixed in regard to understandings of greenwashing in the fashion industry, it is also clear that to some extent, sustainability workers are enmeshed in the dominant corporate discourse of the fashion industry. Although a large part of what they said in our interviews did not veer far from the official positions of fashion companies, and what they write in their sustainability reports, it was still valuable to gain an insight into their perspective on the issues of sustainability in marketing, and greenwashing in particular.

5.4.1 The Contradictions in Fast Fashion Communication: A Tell-tale Sign of Greenwashing?

Greenwashing has many different faces. This next example depicts a product that has an environmental message printed on it. The screenshot is of a product from H&M: a white T-shirt with black print across the chest that says 'there is no planet B' in a black handwritten style font.

Figure 18. 'There's no planet B' T-shirt
Source: www.hm.com, 2018. Copyright H&M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

The phrase 'there is no planet B' is the title of Mike Berners-Lee's book and has been popularised as a slogan used in environmental and climate action movements such as the Fridays for Future. According to Berners-Lee (2021), the phrase was coined by former president of Costa Rica, José María Figueres in 2011 and later used by Ban Ki-Moon, UN Secretary General, in 2014. The phrase is a play on words where 'plan B' becomes 'planet B', meaning there is only one planet Earth that humans can currently inhabit and there is no other place humans can live on if the consequences of climate change make this one uninhabitable. This image is an example of social-movement language being incorporated directly into a product, rather than an advertisement. While the T-shirt carries symbolic meaning, for instance, the consumer wearing it may use it to position themselves politically and socially in the climate change debate. However, there is a gap between the message being presented on the T-shirt and the ecological consequences of mass-produced fast fashion.

Most of the advertisements and images that have been analysed and discussed in this chapter have been specifically green advertisements and other forms of sustainability communication. In direct contrast to the aforementioned examples, the same fashion companies that produce sustainability marketing also of course engage in other marketing, such as that for trend-based and seasonal products that are not related to sustainability or eco-consciousness. These advertisements may

be seen as the norm, whereas sustainability advertising usually makes up a smaller fraction of the total of marketing and advertising.

One of the major problems I have encountered through this study is the inescapable tension between the sustainability ambitions of companies and the marketing they produce. In several of my interviews, the sustainability managers expressed that they do not work together with the marketing teams who produce advertisements. Similarly, my interviews with influencers revealed that they never receive sustainability information in the marketing briefs they receive ahead of doing advertising campaigns on social media. There thus seems to be a significant disconnect between the sustainability teams and the marketing teams (or external advertising agencies), contributing to a constant stream of contradictory messages being thrown at consumers. Clothing companies say they want responsible and eco-conscious consumers, but they also want people to consume constantly. Seasonal collections create new needs for singular events (why do we need Valentine's Day-themed clothing?), and three for two campaigns and minimum spending for free shipping are examples of tactics that make consumers buy more than they need. As discussed earlier in the chapter, new needs are created constantly, for instance with the help of holidays and seasons. Clothing companies have marketing campaigns and new collections for Valentine's Day, Easter, Eid, Midsummer, Halloween, Christmas, Thanksgiving, New Year's Eve, and so on.

In the next figure we see some examples of how clothing companies create reasons for consumption through seasonal marketing. From left to right: an Instagram advertisement from Gina Tricot with embedded shopping link for a Valentine's collection (2023), an Instagram advertisement from & Other Stories for their fall collection (2022), and an Instagram advertisement from Monki with embedded shopping link for Christmas sweaters. The Gina Tricot advertisement text reads 'Shop your Valentine's look here', the & Other Stories advertisement text reads 'ALSO STARRING: The noughties angel' and the text on the Monki advertisement reads 'Current crush: xmas prints'.

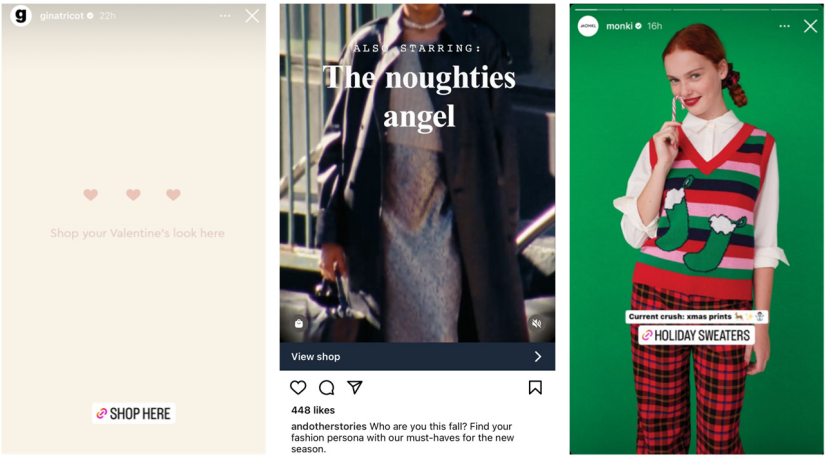


Figure 19. Seasonal collections

Screenshots from Gina Tricot's Instagram story advertisement (left), & Other Stories sponsored ad on Instagram (centre), Monki Instagram story advertisement (right). Source: Gina Tricot's Instagram account, February 2023, & Other Stories's Instagram account, September 2022, Monki's Instagram account, October 2022.

Paying particular attention to the & Other Stories advertisement, the caption to the photo says 'Who are you this fall? Find your fashion persona with our must-haves for the new season'. This was a sentiment that I noticed myself being targeted with in a lot of sponsored ads on Instagram at the end of the summer in 2022. The text is explicitly stating that the newness of fall is a chance and a reason for consumers to rethink and renew their style and refashion themselves into a new identity, through the consumption of fresh clothes. This sentiment of constant refashioning of one's identity and look unavoidably stands in contrast to the encouragements companies make to consume 'consciously'.

In September 2022, 'Matthieu Blazy of Bottega Veneta sent a navy crew neck down his runway paired with only dark hose and heels.' (Friedman 2023). In November of the same year, American celebrity and model Kendall Jenner was photographed wearing a pair of sheer black stocking over a pair of underwear, paired with heels, a sweater and sunglasses. This became a brief pop cultural talking point, and the no-pant trend swiftly spread. In September 2023, many models and guests were seen in different variations of the no-pant look at various fashion shows in London (Marain 2023). In February 2023, H&M replicated

Kendall Jenner's look in an Instagram story advertisement as illustrated in the following figure.

The images say: 'The no pants look', 'revive the look of your classic pieces with the most modern trend' and 'easily combined with a relaxed top for an edgy yet elegant style', complete with clickable direct shopping links.

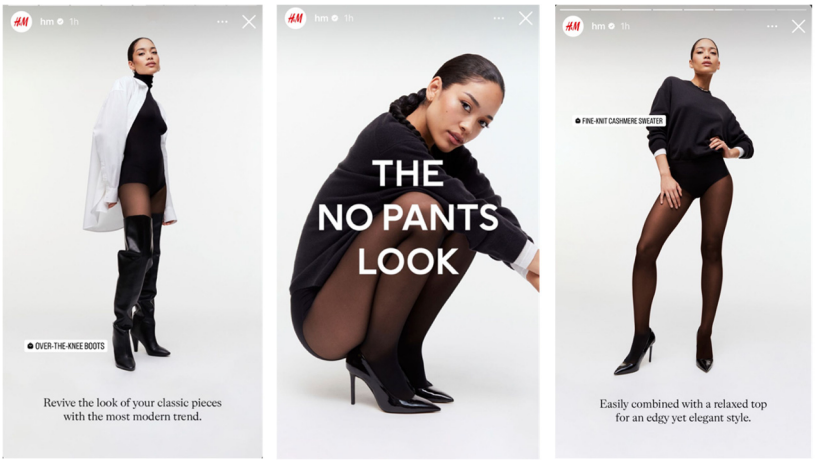


Figure 21. The no pants look
Screenshots from H&M's Instagram story. Source: H&M Instagram account, February 2023.

The examples used in this subsection illustrate the fact that from a marketing perspective, sustainability concerns act more as an add-on rather than being something that permeates the whole business. Sustainability marketing is produced alongside all other forms of advertising: including those for extremely short-lived trends and holiday collections. On the one hand, brands communicate to their customer that she should consume 'consciously', choosing carefully what materials to buy, and taking care of her clothes to be kinder to the environment. On the other, she is told to buy new clothes for every new occasion and internet-trend that arises. Thus, fashion companies' messaging to their customers becomes inherently contradictory, and this contradiction in itself can be interpreted as a form of greenwashing.

Most of the sustainability managers I interviewed believed overconsumption to be a problem. Sofia shared her personal view on the matter:

> My completely personal answer, and this is not the position of my company, but my personal response would be that yes absolutely we have an increasing production, and we absolutely do not need all the things we buy or own today. From a Swedish perspective, I think a lot of people here have a lot more than they need…people don't do a needs-based evaluation before buying. The fashion industry has helped in building that system up and consumers have tagged along, combined with the fact that standards of living have increased and a lot of people are able to buy things if they want to, their personal economy doesn't always say stop…I have two teenage daughters and they browse on Shein, I don't know how much is added there daily but it could be 10,000 products, it's a tempo that I've never seen before. Some might say that we have fast fashion here, but it's nothing compared to Shein so while there is a pull in one direction towards slow fashion and high quality, at the same time there are companies like Shein and Wish which is super cheap, super-fast and are growing explosively for the young consumer, who is the consumer that everyone wants to reach. There are two movements pulling in opposite directions (Sofia)

She problematised the growth of ultra-fast fashion companies such as Shein and points out that although there is a push for making the fashion industry more sustainable from some companies, others are going in the opposite direction. In the following excerpt, Elsa speaks on the topic of production levels:

> I definitely think we need to lower production. Since 2017, we have lowered our production, we want our garments to be filled with more sustainable materials and better materials. We have increased prices as well which means we have lowered production each year by roughly 15 per cent and we still manage to make a higher profit. That might sound strange, but we have produced fewer items and charged more for them because they are filled with more love, and still profitability goes up – then we don't need to produce as much so we win a lot of money that way, and I think that's fantastic. We have made big investments in high technological solutions, and we are open about the fact that we want to produce less garments to make more profit, and that's what we do, and we also want to decrease our carbon footprint. (Elsa)

Elsa explained that at her company, they have raised prices and reduced total production, without compromising on profit-making. She said that their profits have increased despite producing less in total, and that the clothes are now produced with more love and better technology. The purpose of raising the prices of garments seems to be to increase profits and to be able to produce them in a more sustainable way (although this is not specified or explained further).

> As a consumer, I would say yes, we have a problem with over consumption, but as someone who works for a clothing company, of course I want people to consume because that means good business for us. So, I think we need to start changing the way we think. Companies need to change their way of thinking so they can deliver alternatives that are appropriate for this time and that can ensure we can still consume in the future, so we don't need to stop consuming all together, because the way it looks now the resources won't last… It's what we are working on every day, to solve this puzzle (Victoria).

> Of course, there are issues with encouraging consumption, but at the same time we do all need clothes, otherwise we get cold, we will need clothes in the future as well. So, I would also say that marketing is good, and it is good to be clear towards the customer. But of course, marketing shouldn't be too pushy so that the customer feels pushed to consume, that's not good either. I would say that the most important thing is that as a consumer you think carefully through your purchases and that we also think and take our responsibility when it comes to marketing, that's very important (Elsa).

> An extreme number of products are produced but also consumed, the two are coexisting. We have designed the whole industry for everything to be faster and cheaper and often at lower quality. We need to talk about this (Victoria).

Victoria acknowledged that there is tension between having a conviction that overconsumption is a problem that urgently needs to be addressed and working for a profit-making company and therefore wanting the company to have high sales. Despite this tension, her perspective was that overconsumption and overproduction are problems that need to be addressed. Elsa's response shows more reluctance to mention overproduction or overconsumption. Rather, the focus was placed on the fact that consumers need to make conscious choices when shopping. The response is framed around clothing as something humans need to keep their bodies warm, and advertising as justified because humans need clothes. Olivia acknowledged the need to lower consumption, but emphasises that we need to consume differently:

> we need to consume less as well but we also need to consume smarter, and we need to take care of resources in a whole new way, so we look at circular models a lot and are testing our way forward. So far, the transition from a linear to a circular model has not been solved but it is underway. (Olivia)

The core of the problem of overconsumption, however, is precisely that too many people buy far more than they need. Choosing to focus on different smart ways of consuming, or the fact that we need clothing to keep our bodies warm, although this may be true, it also shows a level of deflection from the problems of fast fashion that have been discussed in this chapter.

Through observing and analysing the visual examples and interview excerpts that have been presented in this subsection, we can conclude that in many ways, fashion companies are creating their own contradictions, which is illustrated through the production of marketing and advertising campaigns that carry messages oppositional to each other; at once encouraging mindful *and* mindless consumption. The link between trend-based and identity-based advertising and overconsumption should thus be viewed as an inevitable, causal link.

5.5 Final Remarks

Different narratives of sustainability have proliferated widely across fashion brands in Sweden in the past few years. Across the companies analysed in this chapter, there are many similarities in the themes of sustainability within narratives, corporate discourse and advertisements. Ideas of futurity, togetherness, hope and care are mobilised in advertising and communication in order to interpellate the ethical green consumer. In this chapter I hope to have shed light on the contradictions laden within sustainability discourse in the fashion industry – whereby the existence of an ecological crisis is broadly acknowledged, but the economic growth logic which underpins and exacerbates said crisis goes unquestioned. Greenwashing is evolving and spreading, and in this chapter, I have attempted not only to present what greenwashing can look like, but to come closer to an understanding of how it works and how it remains successful as a mechanism.

While this chapter has not discussed the element of gender in depth, gender and gender norms are a vital cornerstone of how marketing is targeted to some over others. The next chapter will deep-dive into the gendered consumption and production of fashion, and why the intersection of nature and gender is one which should not be overlooked.

Chapter 6

The Green and Empowered Women: Environmental Burden, Global Development, and Consumption

Sustainability, gender equality and female empowerment have become very intertwined concepts used in marketing and communication in general, and by fast-fashion brands in particular. This chapter will take a closer look at the specificities of the intersection between gender and sustainability in fashion industry discourse and narratives. What do representations of female empowerment and ethical consumerism look like in fashion advertisements, and how do they work? How are consumers and producers understood and represented? And what does it mean for women consumers to be the main targets of green consumerism marketing? In this chapter, I hope to come closer to answering those questions. This chapter draws on visual material from fashion advertisements and social media, and interview material from interviews conducted with sustainability managers.

This chapter is divided into two parts: part one on consumption (sections one-three) and part two on production (sections four-six). Part one begins with a section on the democratisation of fashion, followed by section two on the gendering of green consumption. Section three focuses specifically on the representations of female empowerment and feminism in fashion marketing campaigns and communication. Part two begins with section four on the narrative of global development and how this is expressed in fashion industry discourse. Section five focuses on representations of the empowered garment worker, which

often includes racialised representations of difference in relation to garment work in the global South. The chapter ends with final remarks and a discussion on the notion of care which acts as a common thread throughout female empowerment discourse in fashion.

Part I: Consumption

In a lot of fashion advertisements and communication, a dichotomy often appears between women in the global North and women in the global South, where the former is more associated with consumption and the latter with production. For instance, research by Takedomi Karlsson and Ramasar (2020) shows some sustainability advertisements in fast fashion produce images of empowered women in the west who, through their 'conscious consumption', can help garment workers in production countries. This constructed dichotomy is worth investigating. Of course, consumers of fast fashion are not all concentrated in the global North, they exist in every part of the world. However, the majority of garment production *is* located in the global South, as discussed in depth in the background chapter. The distinction can therefore be useful, as long as global North/global South dichotomies represented in advertising and communications are not reproduced.

It is not, however, possible to sever consumption of garments and fashion from their production, as the two processes are intertwined; and the aim of having two parts to this chapter is not to successfully separate the two. Rather, I see the two as helpful analytical categories through which we may analyse the material that I have collected. The dichotomised view of consumers as wealthy people in the West and producers as development-seeking individuals in the global South is too simplistic and needs to be scrutinised. In order to do this, I have categorised the sections of this chapter according to whether they pertain (in the narratives and discourses analysed) more to the side of consumption or production.

6.1 The Democratisation of Fast Fashion

One of the most successful companies in Swedish history, H&M, has built its image and identity on the idea of democratic fashion. That is, fashion that is not exclusive and luxurious, but comfortable, affordable and widely available to the masses (Falk 2011; Palm and Alsgren 2021). H&M was not the first nor the only company to democratise fashion, however. Most famously, Coco Chanel is known for democratising fashion after WWI, by designing comfortable basics such as trousers for women (Falk 2011). Using cheaper materials than were common at the time, less wealthy women were suddenly able to wear high fashion attire, thereby reinforcing the upward mobility function of fashion. According to Falk (2011), there are a few notable Swedish designers and brands who followed in this tradition of democratic fashion. One of them was Katja from Sweden, who was the first Swedish fashion designer to showcase a collection in Paris. Another example is the brand Mah-Jong, which came to define the fashion of the feminist movement in 1970s Sweden. Mah-Jong was well known for producing all their clothes in Sweden, and they had explicit concerns about the rights of seamstresses and workers in the industry (Falk 2011). This came to pave the way for brands such as H&M. Today, many Swedish clothing brands adhere to the idea of democratic fashion, which has become somewhat of a trope in the industry. In the following excerpt, Hilda reflected on her idea of democratic fashion, and refers to H&M as an example of sustainable fashion.

> We would say that we offer democratic fashion… we make clothes at a low price, but we do not make clothes for a short lifetime. We have collections that last over several seasons, and we make sure that the quality should last…Price and sustainability are not correlated, conversely, I would say that H&M is one of the most sustainable companies per product, but they can keep a low price point because their business is so big. (Hilda)

Hilda's view on democratic fashion seems to be largely defined by a low price point. She also argues that a low price point has little to do with whether the clothes are sustainable or not, citing that a large company like H&M can be sustainable and offer cheap products at the same time due to its large company size. This directly reflects H&M's own argumentation: 'we use our size as a positive force in the development towards a more circular, equal and just fashion industry', and simultaneously opposes the view that smaller clothing brands

would be automatically more sustainable or ethical (Palm and Alsgren 2021, 150). Sofia also referred to H&M when we talk about democratic fashion in our interview:

> H&M's idea from the start has been to democratise fashion and to make fashion available to all; that's why they've done all those designer collections, so a regular income earner can afford a Karl Lagerfeld jacket or Stella McCartney. Now the goal is to democratise sustainable fashion. At the moment, if you want to buy something that is sustainable and lasts a very long time, it might be at a price point that many people cannot even consider. We're talking coats for 20,000 SEK, then there would be a very small segment of people who can consume sustainably. So, H&M's idea is to offer this to a low price point so that a big and real change can be made. (Sofia)

The point she brings up about the need for democratising sustainable fashion (not just fashion per se) is in line with H&M's official stance which has evolved from wanting to offer affordable fashion to wanting to offer affordable fashion sustainably (Palm and Alsgren 2021). What is notable in these interview excerpts is that the notion of democracy only refers to availability and affordability of the clothes – the concept of democratic fashion is understood only as a function of consumption, not production. Thus, the positive and progressive connotations of the term 'democratic' affords brands an ethical image even if the term is only being used to describe the price points of the brands' products. The notion of democratic fashion thus also places a higher value on the needs of the consumer than the producer. The idea of democratic fashion is not new, but it has become increasingly popularised in contemporary times by companies such as H&M. Interpreted in its original and rather narrow sense, this is about clothes being cheap and available enough for the average person to afford. However, in today's context where both brands and civil society have become aware of the detrimental environmental effects of the fashion industry, and where the average Swede buys 15,2 kg of textiles per year (in 2022, compared to years 2015-2019 where the average per capita consumption of textiles in Sweden was at a steady 13,5kg), the idea of democratic fashion may not hold the same meaning it once did (Naturvårdsverket 2023). For instance, garment workers' rights should arguably be a priority of democratic fashion. However, research has found that 'social compliance auditors do not always include women's equal rights issues in their audits, and 40 per cent of auditors surveyed do not audit the right to trade union recognition' (Islam et al. 2022, 5). The way that democratic fashion is defined

and framed most commonly, the production side is neglected in visions of democratic fashion.

H&M has fronted its identity as a democratic fashion company since its early years; however, over time its identity has evolved to encompass elements of feminism and sustainability. According to Palm and Alsgren (2021), H&M began fronting a feminist image in the early 2000s. Around the same time that they started presenting itself as a feminist company, they also began displaying posters in their stores advertising the various sustainability projects around the world that they support (Palm and Alsgren 2021). The shift in interest towards sustainability was also reflected in the official statements and website information about the company (Palm and Alsgren 2021). Palm and Alsgren (2021, 150) write that a few years after Stefan Persson became CEO for H&M, the company's motto was selling fashion to a low price. This statement was later adjusted to say, 'fashion and quality for the best price'. Which was altered yet again to 'fashion and quality for the best price and in a sustainable way'. These very important issues have not been part of the company's DNA since the beginning, but rather have been add-ons that have been included over time as the company and the fashion industry in general started facing many scandals regarding labour rights abuses, and later negative environmental consequences. As the H&M example illustrates most explicitly, the prominence of feminism and sustainability in the Swedish fashion sector have thus developed in tandem with each other. H&M being a large Swedish corporation, in many ways has led the way in the global fast fashion industry in terms of investing heavily in marketing with a focus on female empowerment and sustainability. This also goes hand in hand with the Swedish government's image – in 2015, Sweden was the first country in the world to announce a self-defined feminist government and feminist foreign policy (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016).

So, the key tenets of democratic fashion are affordability and availability to consumers. In today's context, where labour concerns and environmental concerns have grown in importance, the idea of democratic fashion (the way that it is currently defined and used) can be interpreted to stand at odds with sustainability and fair wages for garment workers. When it comes to sustainability in fast fashion, we saw in the previous chapter how different green narratives are produced within marketing and communication. In the next section, I focus on how that type of communication also often is gendered.

6.2 The Gendering of Green Consumption

Today, gender equality and female empowerment are two themes which appear often in fast fashion discourse in Sweden. Gender, female empowerment and feminism are mentioned both in official sustainability reporting as well as in advertisement and marketing campaigns. A nuanced analysis and understanding of sustainability discourse within the fashion world therefore requires an analysis of gender. This section is an exploration of thoughts and comments around gender collected throughout my interviews, as well as analyses of green marketing and how they relate to gender in different ways.

In my interview with Hilda, she explained that the customer surveys conducted through her company revealed that women care most about sustainability:

> It is women who are most interested in sustainability and think that this is important. It is a clear trend, and then parents to young children are interested in the clothes not being dangerous for their children. When it comes to working conditions in production countries, it is also women who prioritise this the most. (Hilda)

Hilda explained that there is a clear trend in their customer surveys that women tend to care more about sustainability.

However, she also questioned this idea and points out that many people might be responding in a way that is expected from them, due to gendered norms:

> Even if these surveys are anonymous, you tend to answer in a way that you are expected to…So some men might care about sustainability too, but they are expected to be rational and economical, so they answer that they only care about price point and quality, whereas women are expected to be empathetic, so they answer that they care about the workers. (Hilda)

This suggests that surveys are an imperfect method for understanding what groups care more about the environment or sustainability. However, if we disregard the imperfect nature of surveys for a moment and turn to this reflective comment by Hilda, we may see that it is informed by a feeling about the assumptions made around femininity and masculinity that has significant effects on how people think about environmental issues and sustainability, and how this relates to green consumption. Identity, self-image, and the idea of 'doing good' are intimately tied

to how we understand sustainable consumption. One of the reasons why sustainability marketing targets women disproportionately is because the desire to 'do good' or 'do the right thing' is a feminine-coded act of self-discipline that pairs so well with ethical or sustainable consumption. This can become completely counterproductive when it comes to consumption (buying more of something just because the products are advertised as being sustainable) as we will see further down in this section. Some researchers argue that men are more likely to avoid sustainable behaviours in order to maintain their masculine gender identity (Brough et al. 2016; Bloodhart and Swim 2020). For instance, Brough et al. (2016) found through a study of 400 men in the US that many of them were likely to avoid purchasing green products as a way of maintaining their masculine gender identity. Bloodhart and Swim (2020) argue that sustainable behaviour is linked to gender through status, explaining that barring a few exceptions such as solar panels and organic produce, most sustainable behaviours involve doing and buying less, which is linked to a decrease in status and therefore more likely to be coded as feminine. Women on the other hand are encouraged to solve environmental issues through consumption all the time. Dobscha (1993) made an ecofeminist criticism of environmental marketing already in 1993, arguing that it individualises environmental issues. Similarly, Sandilands (1993) wrote about green marketing and how the individualization of environmental responsibility causes the depoliticization of environmental issues.

Elsa also referred to consumer surveys that her company had conducted pertaining to sustainable consumption – they revealed similar results to the surveys Hilda referred to:

> We have looked at customer surveys, some that we have done ourselves and some that are public, and it is young women who are most conscious and aware today, and that's exactly the consumer that we target. So, we really believe that we need to be aware about sustainability and work on it because otherwise we won't have any customers in the future. (Elsa)

The main sentiment presented here is that female consumers are becoming more aware and conscious about sustainability, and therefore this needs to be a priority for the company, in order to retain future customers and remain an attractive brand. The fact that that women are being disproportionately targeted by sustainability advertising is not problematised; rather she sees the advertising as

the appropriate response to the sustainability concerns that women consumers seem to hold.

In my interview with Victoria, she spoke directly to this issue, bringing up the fact that intentional sustainable consumption may lead to an increase in consumption, which may have unintended negative consequences on the environment:

> I might care a lot about sustainability and only want to shop organic for example, but if I end up buying two organic cotton t-shirts instead of one conventional cotton t-shirt, the environmentally good deed I thought I did in my head gets undone because I bought two items. So, I think caring about something and doing the right thing are two different things. I can care a lot and think I am making the right choice, but that doesn't mean that I actually am. (Victoria)

What Victoria described reflects the criticism of the EU Green Claims Directive presented by Klepp et al. (2023), whereby efforts to empower consumers to make sustainable consumption choices may in fact just continue to accelerate consumption instead. Implicitly, she is criticising the sustainability advertising which does encourage precisely this green consumption behaviour. Compared to the arguments laid out by Hilda and Elsa, Victoria had a more critical attitude towards green consumption, where her personal opinion on the matter deviated from the corporate logic of marketing.

A study conducted by Swedish media conglomerate Aller Media in 2021 found that nine out of ten women in Sweden believe sustainability is important, and seven out of ten women in Sweden have made lifestyle changes in the last year in order to live more sustainably (Aller Media 2021). According to the OECD (2021, 236) women 'tend to be more sustainable consumers and are more sensitive to ecological, environmental and health concerns'. It is often found in studies that women are more willing to adopt sustainable lifestyle choices such as reducing meat consumption, prioritising public transport over driving, consciously lowering energy and water usage in the home, and buying organic food (OECD 2021). Although these patterns have nothing to with the inherent nature of women, they mean that women are often expected to be more caring and nurturing of environmental concerns; thus, they become a logical target for sustainability marketing and advertising, also in the fashion industry. By marketing products or services like take-back schemes for used clothes as

sustainable, a sense of empowerment is afforded to the customers, and from a marketing perspective this is seen as a positive outcome.

However, behind the supposed higher willingness of women to act sustainably lie assumptions about gender that need to be examined and understood. The asymmetrical environmental burden that is placed on women has been studied extensively by feminist scholars and feminist political ecologists and can present itself in many different ways. In the context of the global South, a gendered environmental burden can manifest in women being framed as sexual stewards who become responsible for population control in the name of neo-Malthusian arguments about population growth pushing against the Earth's carrying capacity (Sasser 2017). The way in which women of the global South have been framed as agents of change has many times also caused development and environmental policies to place a heavier burden on women in terms of added care responsibilities and natural resource management responsibilities (Leach 2007; Foster 2017; Resurrección 2017). When it comes to the gendering of environmental responsibility in the global North, it tends to relate more to lifestyle choices, consumption habits and household-related activities. Already in 1991, a German study revealed the unequal gender burden of household waste management (Weller 2017). Scholars such as Sandilands (1993) also argued that an environmental burden related to the responsible purchasing of household products was being both feminised and privatised. Despite research criticising the moralising and privatising of sustainable consumption, marketing encouraging sustainable consumption is thriving. In the Aller Media (2021) report entitled 'The She Report', it is explicitly stated that they want to encourage companies to improve their sustainability communication and gear it specifically to women (who care more about the environment and sustainability) so that they can make better consumption choices. Applying a critical lens to this report's findings, one may argue that this will only perpetuate the already disproportionately heavy environmental burden placed upon women. And if sustainable fashion advertisements lead to women buying more clothes that they don't need, disguised as making sustainable choices, that will inevitably lead to overconsumption.

Green marketing that targets women may present itself in different ways. The example below is a paid Instagram story for Gina Tricot on the influencer Bianca Ingrosso's Instagram account. The text on the story says 'Gina Tricot has chosen to collaborate with EcoTree for biodiversity which I think is amazing! The

initiative means they will grow their own forest, and there they will install beehives 💚'.

Figure 22. Gina Tricot forest
Screenshot of a paid advertisement for Gina Tricot on @biancaingrosso's Instagram's story. Source: @biancaingrosso Instagram account, June 2022.

In this post, the influencer is advertising the brand's clothes by wearing them, while simultaneously advertising a tree-planting organisation that the brand has a partnership with. The organisation being promoted thus is not connected to the clothes that are being advertised. However, the message being produced is that Gina Tricot has a partnership with a sustainability organisation, therefore by proxy, if the consumer buys clothes from this brand, they are also supporting the cause of biodiversity. The consumption of clothes is in this way being conflated with environmental care and responsibility, and the consumer is asked to exercise their environmental responsibility through the act of shopping.

The next example is visual material in the form of an Instagram story from the Swedish clothing company Kappahl, which sells women's clothes, men's clothes, and children's clothes. It is from one of their Instagram story 'highlights' entitled

'Responsible'. The image portrays three women wearing blue jeans and white T-shirts. On the image, in big capital letters the text reads 'DO YOUR PART'. The images that come before this particular one in the same story highlight included text that reads:

> Responsible fashion means caring. We take responsibility for ensuring that our products are as sustainable as possible. Responsible Fashion is about showing concern – together – before, during and after using your garments. Before – it's our mission to inspire and guide you to make sustainable choices. During – we want to help you compose a sustainable wardrobe with garments that feel right. After – when you have used a garment for the last time you can give it to a friend, sell it, or hand it in so that it can be recirculated. Responsible fashion that feels right. For you and the world around us (Kappahl 2019).

Figure 23. Do your part
Screenshot from Kappahl's Instagram story highlight 'Responsible'. Source: Kappahl's Instagram account, 2019.

The phrase 'do your part' is a direct call to action, emphasising the consumer's role in being environmentally responsible. In this sequence of Instagram stories, Kappahl and the consumer are framed as partners who share responsibility, where

Kappah's responsibiltiy is to produce sustainable clothes and the consumer's responsibility, after purchasing those clothes, is to care for them and then make sure that they end up donated through a take-back scheme if not given to a friend or resold. The joyful expressions on the models' faces coupled with the more direct command to 'do your part' indicates that acting sustainably may be achieved with ease and happiness. In this way, emotive and affective elements are used in order to evoke positive connotations and meanings around green consumption.

The last example, is a paid Instagram story advertisement for the activewear brand Röhnisch on Swedish influencer Penny Parnevik's Instagram story from 2020. The story post includes a discount code for 20 per cent which lasts 48 hours, and on the post she has written 'Röhnisch is a Swedish company that design sustainable activewear for women by women.'

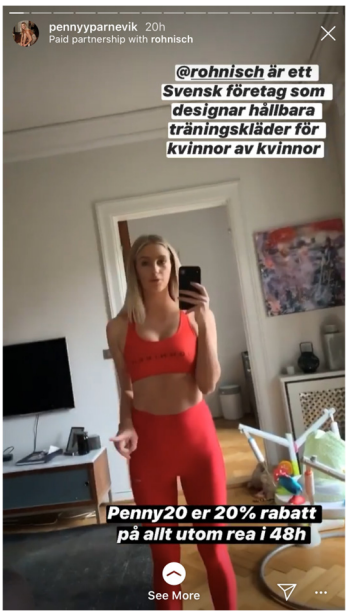


Figure 24. Sponsored ad for Rönisch
Screenshot of an advertisement for Rönisch on @pennyparnevik's Instagram story. Source: @pennyparnevik's Instagram account, April 2020.

In this advertisement for activewear, sustainability and gender are both explicitly used discursively in producing the ad. It is emphasised that the brand in question

is made by women, for women, although it is not specified what 'by women' means in this context – does it mean that the brand is owned by women, that their designers are women, or that their garment workers are women? It is also not specified in which ways the clothes are sustainable. Nevertheless, it is the combination of the concept of sustainability, and the idea that the company is built by women, which is meant to appeal to consumers who want to make consumption choices that *feel* good and right, and more specifically consumption choices which can be emotionally translated into acts of supporting women or the environment.

As mentioned above, women in the global North are often asked to perform their environmental responsibility through individual actions such as lifestyle choices and consumption habits. The advertisements explored in this section exemplify this trope. This phenomenon adheres to the naturalisation of the sexual division of labour which attaches women to the private sphere of household and consumption, while men are associated with production (Rottenberg 2018; Entwistle 2014). In their article on representations of wokeness in corporate discourses, Kanai and Gill (2020) argue that the hailing of individuals by discourses happens through 'affective attachments'. Similarly, in the examples we have seen in this section, green marketing discourses use affective elements in order to hail individuals (consumers) into a self-disciplinary green consumerism. In a reflection of a neoliberal feminist conduct of the self, women are hailed to consume in a manner that can be understood as feminist and environmentally responsible.

6.3 Representations of Female Empowerment in Fashion Discourse

As previously touched upon in this chapter, feminism and the concept of female empowerment have proliferated in fashion brands such as H&M since the 2000s, with a particularly sharp acceleration in the last decade. In this section, I will critically examine the ways in which feminist narratives are represented in fashion marketing and discourse, largely with a focus on narratives that are targeted to consumers of fashion. The following screenshot is taken from a promotional video for the clothing brand Gina Tricot. It consists of black and white interviews

filmed with different women, most of whom are employed by Gina Tricot or have had some type of collaboration with the company. In this image, Anna Appelqvist, the director of purchase and design is being interviewed. She is wearing her hair out, black large-framed glasses, a cardigan or blazer and a white T-shirt underneath with the slogan 'GIRLS MAKE HISTORY' printed across the chest.

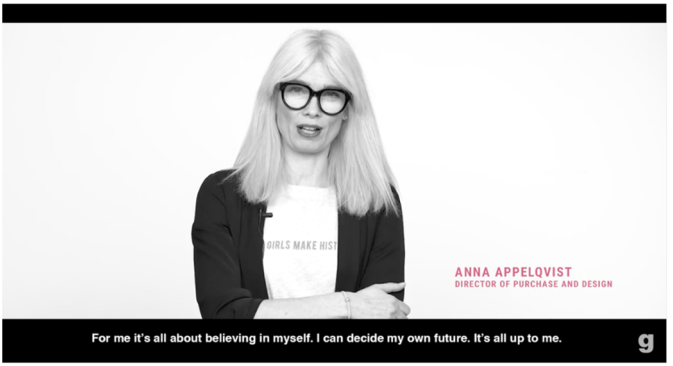


Figure 25. Gina Tricot – Girls make history
Screenshot from 'Gina Tricot- Girls make history' promotional video on YouTube. Source: Gina Tricot's YouTube account, March 2017.

In the video she is asked the question 'what does female empowerment mean to you?', to which she replies: 'For me it's about believing in myself. I can decide my own future. It's all up to me.' The video was made in conjunction with International Women's Day in 2017. The video description on YouTube says:

> March 8 is International Women's Day and in conjunction with that, Gina Tricot will start selling Onebracelet. The bracelet was exclusively designed for UN Women and when you wear Onebracelet, you demonstrate your support for the rights of girls and women. You can purchase the bracelet at any of our stores, or online at ginatricot.com. (Gina Tricot 2017).

According to the Ellos website which also sold the Onebracelet, one third of the profits made from each sold bracelet would go to UN Women's work towards gender equality, more concrete details are not given (Ellos 2023). The bracelets are not mentioned in the video, but as seen in the image, the interviewee is wearing one on her right wrist. Both the T-shirt and the promotional bracelet can be described as forms of commodity activism (Repo 2020; Mukherjee and Banet-

Weiser 2012). Both items have a signalling effect, in this case the T-shirt is easier to interpret, since the 'Onebracelet' is not a widely recognizable symbol or item. An example of an item that is more widely understood is the pink ribbon, which has become the symbol for breast cancer awareness. In this image, the idea of female empowerment is represented as an individualised function that comes from within. Parallels can be drawn to the Lindex WE Women program that will be discussed in part two of this chapter, where the stated goals were tied to confidence, and women's self-identification with success. Both examples reflect a neoliberal global feminism which is anchored in individual attributes of confidence and entrepreneurialism, as discussed for example by Bergman Rosamond and Gregoratti (2021). The female empowerment that is showcased here is individual in its expression, putting emphasis on personal choice and freedom to determine one's own life and future. The person being interviewed in turn becomes a personification of those female empowerment values – a successful woman in a senior position at a successful fashion company. In this way, she also becomes a representation of futurity and a successful empowered female subject as someone who has achieved a high-status position career-wise. In their study on corporate and celebrity endorsed humanitarian partnerships, Bergman Rosamond and Gregoratti (2021, 15) show how corporations, celebrities and humanitarian organisations collectively reinforce a neoliberal discourse of female empowerment whereby refugee women's entrepreneurial 'abilities need to be activated to become closer to a hegemonic model of emancipated womanhood'. Furthermore, they argue that this narrative reinforces a 'saviour/saved humanitarian logic while also obscuring the gender divisions of responsibilities and precarious nature of artisanal labour' (Bergman Rosamond and Gregoratti 2021, 15). In this humanitarian context, they also identify an underlying assumption that empowering women through work will eventually lead to a reduced 'cost of refugee assistance while also contributing to economic growth' (Bergman Rosamond and Gregoratti 2021, 16). This idea of entrepreneurial individualism is also present in Kaplan's (1995) analysis of The Body Shop. She argues that imagery of tourism, travel and indigeneity used in advertising can be interpreted as representing 'a certain kind of feminist project, constructing a Manichaean relationship between a feminist agent (consumer/entrepreneur) and her 'other' (the indigenous female producer/resource), forming a trans/national geographic' (Kaplan 1995, 49-50).

In another iteration of female empowerment, Swedish brand Nelly explains how it views the concept in their 2021 sustainability report:

> Empower Femininity – increase responsibility for the company's target group, young women. Empower Femininity as a new sustainability area must be managed carefully and intelligently to avoid the risk of criticism for so-called 'Femwashing'. Action: in 2022, Nelly will adopt a new sustainability strategy with clear ambitions and activities related to Empower Femininity (Nelly 2021, 7)

In this excerpt, the company presents a new initiative of their sustainability strategy called 'Empower Femininity'. Connotatively, this may be interpreted as a play on words on female empowerment, although grammatically it is a confusing title. The strategy is not developed much further, it is simply stated in the sustainability report that Nelly Group will in 2022 'develop and promote Empower Femininity with measurable activities' (Nelly 2021, 35). The lack of how they define femininity opens up to ambiguity and interpretations of this statement can vary. The statement 'increase responsibility for the company's target group, young women' suggests that the initiative's focus is on consumers rather than garment workers or other parts of the company's supply chain. On the 'about' page of the Nelly Group website the following statement appears:

> Always celebrate the fab you…and empower femininity by celebrating your inner babe! These are our values that permeate everything. With 'Celebrate the fab you' as the core, we are determined to always lift and empower women around us. (Nelly 2022).

The way that Nelly is defining and using the concept of female empowerment in this excerpt is not tied to specific action points, rather they have produced a discourse of celebratory feminism, self-confidence, and positivity, all of which are important tenets of neoliberal feminism. In the sustainability report, there is an explicit concern with respect to the use of female empowerment in marketing and potential accusations of 'Femwashing' (or the co-optation of feminism). While damage control and the avoiding of criticism is usually not explicitly stated for the public to see, in this case the company has chosen to state its risk in their public sustainability report.

While representations of female empowerment are produced and reproduced within fashion communication and marketing, they are also produced as part of commodity products. Language and symbol of political movements are incorporated in the form of prints on clothes as a way for companies to position themselves, as exemplified by the brand Monki's 'sisterhood collection'. This

collection featured garments such as a T-shirts, leggings and a hoodie with the slogan 'salute sisterhood' printed across the garments. The Monki website says the collection will 'inspire you to raise your voice, take up space and salute your sisters!' (Monki 2021b). In an elaboration on the 'salute sisterhood' phrase, the Monki website states the following:

> Be brave, be you, be empowered. In our mission to empower young women we want to strengthen our community and by doing so, also improve the world we live in. Whether we address social sustainability, body rights, mental health, periods – or simply new fashion trends, we want to inspire everyone to express their own unique style and feel worthy just the way they are. Our aim is to offer an alternative, when it comes to our store experience, in our signature style and in our mission to empower. Whatever part we play, have played and will play in that – we won't stop saluting sisterhood (Monki 2023).

In this instance, female empowerment is not simply reconfigured as an individual project, but specifically an individualised project which can be achieved through consumption and through carrying clothes with symbolic slogans. Repo (2020, 215) argues that one of the consequences of feminist commodity activism is 'the commodification of the aesthetic experience of feminist street protest' – the use of these slogans on apparel then become a physical embodiment of the commodification of feminism. Similarities can be drawn between Monki's 'salute sisterhood' slogan and Nelly's 'empower femininity' slogan. In both cases, the intention and preferred meaning of those slogans is for the brand to be associated with feminist values and female empowerment. More specifically, the intention is for consumers who self-identify as feminist to associate the brands with the feminist movement, and thereby feel more loyal to those brands.

Feminism-related advertisements tend to peak each year around International Women's Day (IWD) on 8 March, when brands and corporations release different campaigns in honour of the day. Advertisements with feminist themed products flood the advertising spaces, people on social media post images of women that have inspired them, corporations host International Women's Day brunches and invite successful women to deliver inspiring speeches. In conjunction with International Women's Day in 2021, Monki produced an advertising video entitled 'International Women's Day 2021'. The video description on YouTube says:

> 💔 Happy International Women's Day! 💔 This year (& forever) we're taking a stand for gender equality. Because, when the UN says '…the global gender gap will not close for another 100 years.' We say, 'Won't wait!' (Monki 2021a).

On the next page are four screenshots from the advertisement. The video begins with the camera zooming in on a human eye; a search bar appears in the middle of the eye, where the text 'how long until we reach gender equality?' appears, with the sound of typing in the background. As seen in the second image, then a Google results page appears, with an article from CNN which explains that global gender equality will take another 100 years. The background of this image is pink and glossy, with nerves or veins, and looks like it is the inside of an eye. After this image, music starts playing in the form of percussions and rhythmic beats. On top of the music, we have a narrator who performs a poem-like narration. Visually, we see a montage with a mixture of short scenes, that correlate to what is being said by the narrator.

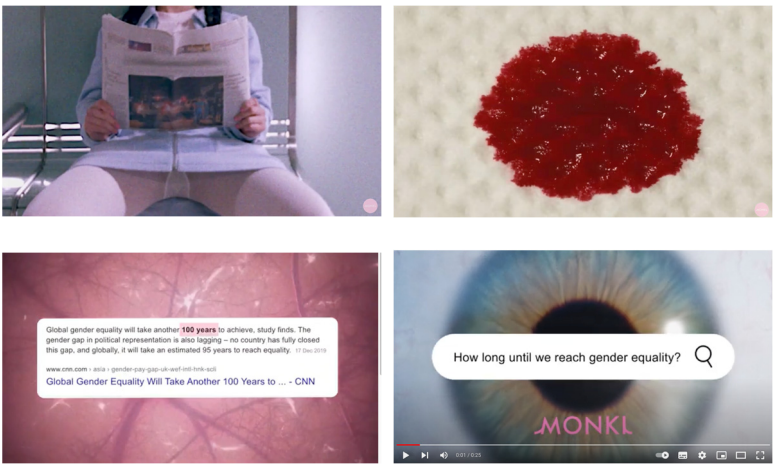


Figure 27. International Women's Day 2021
Screenshots from a Monki promotional video on YouTube. Source: Monki's YouTube account, March 2021

The whole poem reads:

> Won't wait. Stronger together. Leading the way. Take up space. Be the change. Take a seat at the table. Fight like a girl. Not yours. Get paid. Not sorry. Resist.

> Persist. I'm a proud feminist. Fast forward to equality. Just as strong. Just as smart. Just as equal. (Monki 2021a).

The correlation between the images and the narration is sometimes more explicit and at other times more connotative. For instance, as the narrator says, 'stronger together', we see a sea of people at a protest with their arms raised up in the air. When she says, 'get paid', we see a wad of cash. In the third image, we see a person wearing white stockings, a blue miniskirt and a matching jacket sitting down on a bench, holding a newspaper, and spreading their legs. The narration says, 'take a seat at the table'. The connotative meaning of the person sitting down with their legs spread is alluding to the phenomenon of 'manspreading' whereby men tend to take up a lot of public space such as on public transport by spreading their legs and encroaching on other people's personal spaces. When the narration says, 'fight like a girl', the video shows an expanding pool of blood on white textured material that can be interpreted as being a menstrual pad. The phrase 'fight like a girl', or doing anything 'like a girl', has long been used in a derogatory or insulting manner, the insinuation embedded in the statement being, that girls and, by extension, women are weaker and less capable than men. Considering the context of this video however, which has been published as a celebration of International Women's Day, the images represent oppositional connotative meanings. The image of the blood in a menstrual pad in combination with the phrase 'fight like a girl' alludes to the widely popular Always #like a girl campaign from 2014, where the menstrual care brand tried to destigmatize the phrase 'like a girl' by asking girls and boys what that phrase meant to them, and then debunking its negative connotations. Australian feminist writer Clementine Ford later wrote a book entitled *Fight Like a Girl* in 2016 (Ford 2016). In this case of the Monki ad, these oppositional meanings adhere to the preferred meanings of the text. While the 'salute sisterhood' clothes observed rely on the term sisterhood to produce connotative meanings that relate to feminism and female empowerment, this video tells a story and reproduces representations of feminism that are more explicit and effectful as they use imagery and phrases that have become popularised within popular feminism.

Another Swedish company, Ellos, made a video advertisement posted on YouTube in 2016, entitled 'What makes you strong, Ellos #StrongBecause'. While inspirational orchestral music is playing in the background, we see a montage of different scenes, with a narration also in the background. Stylistically,

this video is similar to the Monki International Women's Day video. This video begins with black and white footage of what looks like a civil rights protest in the U.S. After this, the video is a montage of different scenes that relate to the narration in the background. For instance, when the narrator says, 'when men are strong, it's obvious', the video shows a man in a suit walking in a busy city, and a man in climbing gear standing on top of a rock, with his arms held high into the air in a celebratory manner.

The following collage of screenshots are taken from that video:

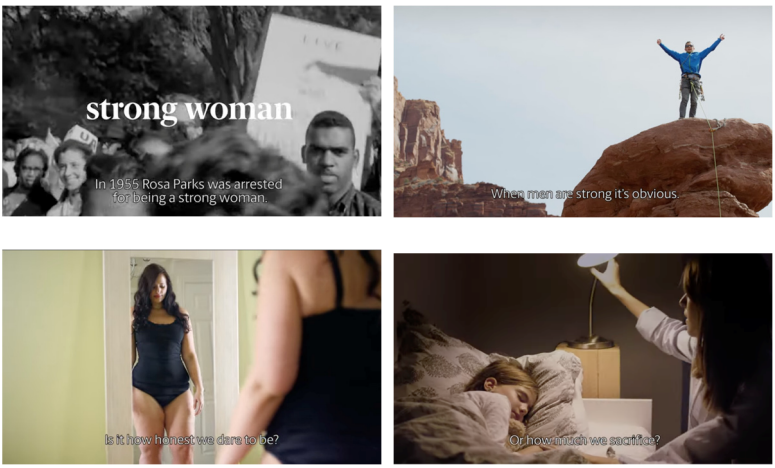


Figure 28. What makes us strong, Ellos
Screenshots from an Ellos promotional video on YouTube. Source: Ellos's YouTube account, October 2016.

The narration to the video goes as follows:

> In 1955 Rosa Parks was arrested for being a strong woman. Because she wouldn't let her skin colour decide where on the bus she should sit. When men are strong it's obvious. But with women it's different, more subtle, unspoken. So, what is it? What makes us strong? Is it how independent we are? Is it the career we choose? Is it the friends we have? Or the clothes we wear? Is it how honest we dare to be? Or the years we've lived? Is it the man we choose? Or the woman we choose? Is it how hard we work? Or how much we sacrifice? We are curious to find out. What makes you strong? (Ellos 2016).

An essentialising narrative and dualistic representation of gender is evident in this text. The phrase 'when men are strong, it's obvious. But with women it's different, more subtle, unspoken' disseminated in conjunction with images of men in stereotypically masculine-coded roles and women in stereotypical feminine-coded roles reflects this narrative. The preferred reading of this is the story of female empowerment, and Ellos as a company self-identifying with feminism through the imagery and symbolism in this video. Viewed with a critical lens, some comments can be made about how this has been executed. In the montage of women performing various roles, the trope of the neoliberal heroine who juggles family, romance and career becomes apparent.

Relating the advertisement to Rosa Parks is significant as Ellos is by association positioning themselves politically, at least symbolically. The aesthetic of the civil rights protest video is commodified in this video, not through the promotion of a particular commodity, but through a branding of Ellos's corporate identity. By taking imagery and language from a real political movement and referring to Rosa Parks, Ellos creates the illusion that the company is somehow making political actions to benefit the feminist movement. In reality, the Swedish company Ellos has very little to do with Rosa Parks of the civil rights movement in the U.S. Parallels may be drawn to woke capitalism, which does not 'intervene in patterns of social oppression, but puts to work certain affects, associations, and forms of subjectivity in reconstructing and reconfiguring social imaginaries in which neoliberalism still 'makes sense' (Kanai and Gill 2020, 21). The Ellos campaign video borrows the emancipatory affects of a political movement and ascribes them to its company image in order to create an identity which seems radical, without needing to in any way change the foundation or operations of the company itself.

In this next example from 2018, Swedish brand Lindex made a video advertisement posted on YouTube with the title 'Lindex sustainable woman'. Again, as with the previous two examples, the advertisement is comprised of a montage with corresponding narration in the background. The video depicts different scenes from what may be interpreted as the everyday lives of women, for example, a woman jogging outside, a woman rushing out the door of her house, commuting to work on a bus, practicing yoga, playing with a baby, making a green smoothie. The narration of the video states:

> Women can do everything. We can run a thousand miles. Look like a million bucks. And love unconditionally. We can grab every opportunity, and be balanced,

or not. Does it matter if you find the time to be everything if you don't find the time to be you? (Lindex 2018).

Figure 29. Lindex sustainable woman
Screenshot from a Lindex promotional video on YouTube. Source: Lindex's Youtube account, April 2018.

The title 'Lindex sustainable woman' does not quite explain what the advertisement is about. However, we can assume that it is somehow related to Lindex's positioning as a company that cares about sustainability and caters to what they see as being empowered women consumers. The representations of the 'sustainable woman' throughout this advertisement are aligned with what Prügl (2015) and Rottenberg (2018) call neoliberal feminism. In the video, women are represented as capable, strong, multi-tasking and efficient, while also empathetic and caring – represented by the quote 'women can do everything'. This may be interpreted as a visual representation of neoliberal feminism, which 'presents *balance* as its normative frame and ultimate ideal' (Rottenberg 2018, 83). The notion of balance is even explicitly stated in the narration of this video. This discourse plays into an essentialised view of gender, albeit a positively intended one. The preferred meaning of this advertisement is likely to paint women as strong and empowered. Through the use of neoliberal tropes of womanhood, the advertisement interpellates the viewer as efficient and empowered neoliberal subjects.

In this section, we have seen a spectrum of representations of female empowerment in fashion advertisement and communication, ranging from vaguely symbolic to more specific. While some statements and representations have referred to female empowerment in an explicitly individualised way with a focus on identity and confidence, others have relied on representations of historical political movements such as the feminist movement and the civil rights movement in order to make claims about female empowerment. This can be

interpreted as part of the neoliberal project of reconfiguring female empowerment and feminism into an individual project by first emptying it of its collective ambitions (Prügl 2015; Banet-Weiser 2018). The common thread across the examples is that the idea of female empowerment is afforded to consumers, through the act of consumption.

Part II: Production

In part one of this chapter, I focused on how gender is used and represented in fashion advertisements and communication predominantly in relation to the consumer. In this next section, the focus will be on the production side of the story, and how the ideas of female empowerment and gender are used and represented in discourses pertaining to garment workers. We will begin with looking closer at the narrative of global development in fashion industry discourse in trying to understand how development language is used in conjunction with gender to tell the story of empowerment for workers.

6.4 The Narrative of Global Development in the Fashion Industry

While the theme of the democratising force of fast fashion is mostly related to consumption and consumer choice as we have seen in the beginning of this chapter, the narrative of global development is often used in relation to production countries, suppliers, and garment workers. Within sustainability communication and reporting, the fashion companies I have studied often argue that they contribute to the development of production countries by providing labour opportunities for poor people. In fashion advertising, Takedomi Karlsson and Ramasar (2020) show how imagery is used to create a narrative where consumption of sustainable fashion is contributing to the company's ability to aid garment workers in their supplier countries. Other researchers have also shown how celebrity advocacy and consumption-oriented programmes are used by corporations in environmental governance and international development contexts (Fletcher 2015; Brockington 2014; Youde 2009; Bergman Rosamond

and Gregoratti 2021). This chapter contributes to the body of literature that criticises the neoliberal logic that underpins for instance celebrity advocacy and consumer solutions to structural and complex world problems.

In the background chapter of this thesis, we discussed how trade liberalisation contributed to the current geographic structure of garment labour, and how gender has also played a crucial role in who performs garment work around the world. Garment work has often been the first type of job that becomes widely available when countries develop export-oriented industries (Kumar 2020; Karim 2022; Thanhauser 2022). From a corporate perspective, garment work is often presented as positive both in terms of individual empowerment as well as a wider poverty alleviation and development perspective. In an interview from 2019, a sustainability manager of H&M Myanmar described working in clothing factories as a fantastic opportunity for young women from rural areas to move to the city, create a better future and send money back to their families (H&M 2019). In 2020, during an H&M-sponsored Instagram live stream [11] a sustainability manager from H&M explained that the choices of sourcing depended on the historical expertise and skills of the given country (H&M 2020). Palm and Alsgren (2021) also demonstrate many instances where H&M CEOs have expressed their role in the development of other countries. The aim of my research is not to poke holes in these arguments or descriptions to vilify a certain company or actor. What is valuable rather, is to show that these discursive pieces, while on their own may not be so meaningful, create a collective narrative when combined over time, adding to a whole greater than the sum of its parts, and this is worth examining. If the narrative that large fashion corporations are benevolently providing jobs in order to 'develop' poor countries continues to be reproduced over time as it has, what consequences may that have on our collective consciousness and understanding of the state and structuring of the world and global labour?

Some of my interviewees expressed this notion that companies like H&M play an important and positive role in developing countries due to their size and influence. The following excerpt from my interview with Elsa is one example:

[11] Instagram live is a function whereby a user can livestream a video on Instagram that is open for anyone to watch and comment.

> It can be empowering for women because the textile industry is often the first industry that comes to a developing country since it is cheap and easy to set up, so that way many women are given jobs who might not have had work before. Having a private income can be empowering and give safety. It is also good when giants set up operations. For example, H&M has a lot of influence in Bangladesh, and they really try to influence on the state level – since they are so big and important for that country, they can make a real difference. But there are problems too. Many jobs are created but often times the craftmanship is lost, which is a shame. (Elsa)

In this excerpt, Elsa expressed the opinion that large corporations setting up business in poor countries is directly related to improvements in the empowerment for the women who end up working in factories for that company. She also argued that such companies may have direct political influence on the production country, which would result in benefits for the workers. She explained that the textile industry is often the first to establish in developing countries due to the low cost and relative ease of setting up. The argument that garment work is empowering because it lifts the rural poor out of poverty and brings them into wage-labour, is a simplified argument based on a linear assumption where wage-labour in factories is either the end destination or a way to higher and better positions within the industry. Mezzadri's (2016, 189) analysis of the sweatshop regime, on the other hand, reveals that 'industrial work and non-industrial work are strongly connected moments in the lives of the working poor', where often 'the factory remains only a transient experience, after which s/he may go back (or indeed move forward) to engage in other types of (often informal) activities.' Indeed, it is argued that 'the extreme complexity and ever-changing temporalities of livelihoods across the sweatshop regime crucially undermine narratives suffering from the 'modernization fetish' (Mezzadri 2016, 189). Similarly, drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism', Karim (2022) shows in her book how women in Bangladesh who are aged out of factory garment work oftentimes do not achieve the economically emancipatory dreams that are so imbued in garment work.

As my conversation with Elsa continued, she placed less focus on the role of cheap labour in the garment industry, and talked instead about the role and importance of cultural craftmanship and expertise:

> If you think of it this way, we can't have all production in Europe, there are things which Bangladesh is very good at, which Europeans aren't good at, so when you

> work with production it's also about knowing who the experts are for each product. For example, silk is made in a Chinese city called Hangzhou, and this has been a silk making town for over 2000 years, so they have that expertise, so as a buyer you need to see where the value drive is for each garment… For example, India is very good at prints, that has been a part of their culture for thousands of years. And I think this is a heritage which we should nurture, so in cases like this I would not advocate to move production to Sweden. We can bring home as much as possible, but we should still nurture the heritage in the textile industry because it is fantastic that it is still alive. (Elsa)

This echoes the argument laid out by H&M's sustainability manager from the Instagram live interview previously mentioned, where the expertise of certain countries was emphasised as an important factor in locating the production of garments. The argument that some countries are experts in the production of certain fabrics or products is true in essence; however, what might be questioned is to what end this narrative is used. Recall the background chapter where I discussed the various protectionist policies that were used in Europe from the eighteenth century that were specifically aimed to stifle the sales of superior Indian calicoes. Historically, the global cotton trade has been shaped to mostly benefit Europe (Riello 2022; Beckert 2015).

However, Riello (2022, 91) provides important nuance to the global history of cotton and textiles trade partly through lifting the importance of demand in the Atlantic, shifting the narrative from its previous eurocentrism:

> Several historians have emphasized the role of British and European demand in shaping the new products of the Industrial Revolution. Yet, too little attention has been paid to demand for Asian and, later, European cotton textiles in West Africa and the Americas. When demand by slave traders, colonists, enslaved and First Nation people is considered, the picture of the types of textile that were central to industrialization is profoundly revised. Plain, checked and striped cloth, and not just printed textiles, appear as key to understanding the path of European industrialization in the cotton textile sector.

Taking this historical context into account, we may re-evaluate the argument from European clothing companies who claim that they play an important role in cultivating and retaining the artisan and cultural heritage of other countries. The global trade of textiles needs to be understood in terms of patterns of consumption and demand. Creating and encouraging a story that emphasises Western fashion

companies' goodwill in this sense may therefore be interpreted as ahistorical. Consumers without knowledge on the history of global fashion manufacturing and the historical origins of the fast fashion industry may understand statements as the one made by Elsa in an uncritical way. Continuing with this interview, Elsa elaborated on her view on the textile industry's role in poverty alleviation and female empowerment in production countries:

> I have lived in Bangladesh and in China, and I can say that the changes I've seen in 10 years are enormous; women have a much higher value and earn a large part of the family income, and it is proven that when women earn money they spend it on education, food and better homes; the family gains a better standard of living, and this is what has happened in Bangladesh. Sure, it happens slowly, but the wages are still three times higher today compared to 10 years ago, so changes are happening. So, I would say that yes absolutely we make a huge difference for women, for poor women in developing countries, and it is the textiles industry we have to thank for that. (Elsa)

The idea that women who make money are more likely to invest the money in their children and their education is an argument that has been used widely in development discourse and for example in relation to microcredit (Radhakrishnan 2022). Seen from a critical perspective, we may see how this type of celebratory discourse puts even more of a care burden on women. Feminist scholars have criticised the ways in which development programs historically have tended to include women and expect empowerment as an outcome, while not acknowledging or addressing the deeper structures of gender inequality that subjugate women in the first place (Karim 2022; Harding 2008; Harcourt and Nelson 2015; Nayak 2009). The interviews I have conducted reveal that within the Swedish fashion industry, the textiles industry and garment work are often seen as leading to female empowerment. This idea did not only appear in the interviews I conducted, but also in various visual and discursive representations. The following screenshot from the NA-KD brand website is an illustration of how the concept of global development, and female empowerment are often enmeshed and used together in fashion industry discourse. This is a static image of a hand with pink nail polish holding onto something that could be a purse or a garment in a wine-red colour. A text is superimposed on the image in white font; the heading reads: 'Inspire girls to become whoever and whatever they want' in capital letters. The text on the image explains that NA-KD donates money to the 'Girl

Effect', which is an international non-profit organisation launched by the Nike Foundation 'that builds media that girls want, trust, and need' (Girl Effect 2022).

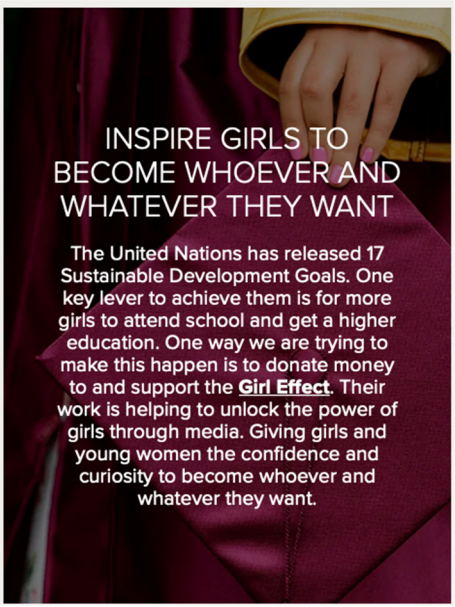


Figure 30. Girl Effect
Source: www.na-kd.com, August 2022. Copyright Nakdcom One World AB.

In this example, the young girl becomes an object of development and saviourism – she is described as harbouring power that needs to be unlocked. This is a narrative which is commonly used in business-to-charity relationships. As explained by Calkin (2016, 2), 'the moralization of the 'Business Case' for gender equality stems from the supposed 'discovery' of girls and women as untapped resources for economic growth'. In her discussion specific to the Girl Effect, Calkin (2015) makes the case that in these types of campaigns, the granting or achieving of female empowerment is contingent on the economic potential of girls. Through what she calls a 'post-feminist spectatorship', she argues that spectators (in our case this is primarily the consumer of fashion) are invited to save the girl – the distant other – by investing in her economic potential (Calkin 2015).

The neoliberal version of female empowerment that is harnessed by fashion companies in their communication and marketing campaigns thus hail consumers in a two-pronged way. Firstly, it does so through representations of strong, confident and successful women in their marketing (as shown in part one of this chapter), thereby creating the sense that the same confidence and empowerment can be afforded to and embodied by the consumers through the act of buying clothes. Secondly, consumers are invited to afford the same female empowerment to girls and women elsewhere (the distant other), also through the act of consuming clothes for oneself. The buying of clothes thus becomes a way to simultaneously empower oneself and others.

6.5 The Empowered Garment Worker

If sustainable consumption is one side of the coin where gender plays a significant role, labour and production is the other. Women make up over 80 per cent of garment workers globally (ILO 2019). During my interviews, we spoke about the gender element in terms of production. I asked amongst other questions, if garment work in itself can be seen as empowering for women, which led to several conversations about how different companies view issues surrounding their suppliers. In the next excerpt, Michaela talks about the emphasis that is placed on women at their company:

> We work very hard for the women and that's included in our priority wheel [here she showed me a graphic of the company's priority areas] and I put a lot of emphasis on that when I read audits. How many women vs men are working at the factory, how many are in management positions? If something looks not right in those numbers, I will ask questions until I get an answer. And right now, we have big campaign for women, so there is a clear sync there. (Michaela)

She explained that her company's marketing campaigns are aligned with the internal workings of the company and their care for women workers. The connection she is drawing here is that the company cares about their target consumer base of women as much as they do about their workers who are majority women. The focus here is on the gender balance in the workforces in factories, and how many women work in supervisory positions. While audits can be an important part of gaining some transparency in fashion companies' supply chains,

some argue that brands tend to rely too heavily on them (Wertholz 2023). According to Wertholz (2023), audits often do not properly cover gender-based violence issues. As evident in the excerpt above, it is important for Michaela to see that there is a connection between focusing on women in the supply chain and women as consumers. This aligns with what we have seen so far, where companies want to simultaneously sell female empowerment directly to their consumers, and also to their workers (through the consumers).

In an example from the brand Lindex's website, we are introduced to a more specific version of how a brand may implement the concept of female empowerment into its organisation. A written text on the left is accompanied by an image on the right side. The image on the right depicts a garment worker in a factory. The woman in the photograph is smiling and looking into the camera while working on a garment. She is wearing a pink patterned wrapped garment, a blue lanyard and a white headscarf, which is worn by the other women workers in the background of the image as well.

The heading of the text says, 'WE Women by Lindex', and the text underneath translates to the following:

> In WE Women by Lindex we educate our suppliers' factory executives in equality and how to integrate equality into the leadership system. The goal is to change the leadership in the factories so that it becomes more inclusive towards women and more aware of equality issues. In the program we also reach out to communities with equality education for both men and women workers. (Lindex Group 2023).

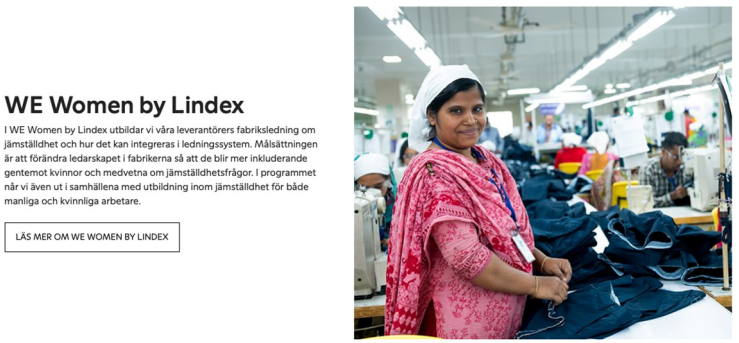


Figure 31. WE Women by Lindex
Screenshot from Lindex's website. Source: www.lindex.com, March 2021. Copyright Lindex Group.

The written text and static image text together form a preferred meaning of the happy and satisfied worker. On the surface level, the image does not tell us much more than showing a factory that seems to be clean and well-lit, concentrated workers sitting at their desks and a worker smiling towards the camera. The connotative meaning is a story about garment work. The image suggests that thanks to Lindex, garment work can be empowering for women. The narrative also acts as a promise of gender equality in garment work and a justification for maintaining the current global division of labour. The woman in the picture is anonymous, and the factory where the photo is taken is not mentioned either. This is perhaps standard practice when corporations use visual media on their websites to accompany their programs and strategies; however, in this context it adds a layer of estrangement. The viewer gets brought into the story by being given a real person but is still held at a distance as we are not provided with any information about the person in the image. The representation of the garment worker in the global South, in this image, is one of the perfect neoliberal subject of development. She is productive, happy and responsible, in other words, the representation of her becomes a personification of the idea of women as untapped resources (Calkin 2016), as well as proof that garment work indeed can be empowering for women.

Looking closer at the Lindex website, they have a toolbox for gender equality strategies. Their webpage on female empowerment states the following:

Empower women – our three goals

Drive the development of fair and equal workplaces for women. We will make sure that women in our entire supply chain have the opportunity to live to their full potential. Here are our goals:

- By 2021 all our business partners shall adopt Lindex's new code of conduct which is progressive in terms of gender equality.
- By 2025, 80 per cent of Lindex's suppliers shall have completed our Women Empowerment program and kept the lessons learnt.
- By 2022 all Lindex employees should feel that Lindex acts in line with our higher purpose 'to empower and inspire women everywhere'

Advocating inclusivity and body positivity: We shall do our part in making women feel inspired and confident, regardless of who they are, what they look like or what paths they have chosen in life.

Support a more sustainable lifestyle: We shall do our part in encouraging and making it possible for women to have a sustainable wardrobe and to live a sustainable life (Lindex Group 2022).

According to NGOs such as the Clean Clothes Campaign and Fair Action whose work is concerned with the textiles industry and garment labour, low wages in the garment sector is one of the most pressing issues. However, raising wages is not something that is mentioned in these gender equality goals from Lindex. Rather, the focus on ideals around gender equality which Lindex wants to spread to their suppliers through a workshop program for female empowerment which they have built. The suggestion is that through completing a women empowerment program, the lives of women garment workers at these suppliers will improve. Looking more closely at some of the documents provided by Lindex, in a package of PDFs for the suppliers, it is stated that workers should have the right to paid maternity leave, opportunity for pumping breastmilk at work, paid sick leave and so on. However, it is also clearly stated that the action points in the PDF package are not auditable, but rather guidelines for how to make the workplace more

equal. There is a disconnect between the viability of the goals of a female empowerment program, and the promise to make sure that 'women in our entire supply chain have the opportunity to live to their full potential', and that 'by 2022 all Lindex employees should feel that Lindex acts in line with our higher purpose 'to empower and inspire women everywhere'' (Lindex Group 2022). This type of narrative of the empowered garment worker, combined with the visual discourses that are used in this context, creates a representation of the global South which is in alignment with the images reproduced by development agencies, where ''positive' visual representations of women in the South produced by development institutions are rooted in a notion of 'agency' consistent with – and necessary for – neoliberal capitalism' (Wilson 2011, 328). The promises of investments made into the potential and capacity of women, acts to calm the conscience of consumers who want to continue shopping from a brand such as Lindex, even if they may be aware that many garment workers in the global South do not earn a living wage.

Lindex also produced a four and a half minutes long promotional video about the WE Women program in Bangladesh, which was developed with the aim of increasing gender equality in the supplier factories that produce garments for Lindex. The video clip combines two formats: a documentary style where individuals are interviewed, and montages with different scenes of people in their homes and traveling to work. The video is accompanied with inspirational and emotive music playing in the background. Next is a screenshot taken from a montage where women come out of houses and doors one by one onto a street, greeting each other and then walking together to work at a garment factory.

Figure 32. WE Women by Lindex promotional video
Screenshot from Lindex promotional video on YouTube. Source: Lindex's YouTube account, March 2021.

The preferred meaning here is representing garment work as a social, cheerful, and even inspiring line of work. The uplifting music is akin to something used in movie soundtracks during montages or trailers, and the scenes only show happy faces and smiles. Angled in this way, the video supports the idea that people who work for Lindex suppliers are happy, and by extension, since the video is about the Lindex WE Women program, that this worker satisfaction is thanks to Lindex. The connotative theme that is prevalent in this text is that factories that supply to Lindex are happy and unproblematic spaces to work in.

Figure 33. WE Women by Lindex promotional video
Screenshot from Lindex promotional video on YouTube. Source: Lindex's YouTube account, March 2021.

This is one of the interview segments from the WE Women by Lindex video. The woman depicted in this interview is Mst. Sonia Akter, Needle detector operator at IRIS Fabrics ltd. in Bangladesh, she says to the interviewer:

> My husband used to stop me from doing many things just because I'm a woman. But after this project he has stopped doing that. My husband used to discriminate against women. But after I had received the training and shared it with him, he helps me a lot (Lindex 2021).

That is the denotative meaning of this scene, a needle detector operator is sharing her experiences with the WE Women program. Connotatively, this image is alluding to the fact that thanks to the company Lindex, sexism and gender-based discrimination can be eradicated in their supplier garment factories and in communities. From what we can gather, Mst. Akter's husband ceased to be discriminatory towards women after his wife had received the gender equality

training from Lindex. The image can carry several meanings. It can be decoded in a positive light and be seen as evidence for the fact that Lindex is improving gender equality in their supply chains as they claim to do. It can also be decoded in a more critical manner; from this perspective it can be argued that the WE Women program is given an inflated amount of credit. The problem with the narrative presented in this video is that it tackles and refers to a hugely complex issue (gender equality) and reduces it to something that can be fixed through a program facilitated by a clothing brand. It does not account for existing gender structures or gender equality laws in Bangladesh – instead the narrative produced in the video, such as the use of the quote just discussed, is built upon the assumption that women in Bangladesh live under some kind of oppression from their partners. The reinforcement of such assumptions creates a scenario where it makes sense for a Swedish company to implement gender-related programs there in order to empower the women garment workers. In the video, other statements about gender are also made; for instance, a manager in the factory says he believes it is better for the factory when women are managers because they are more compassionate, and in another segment, the managing director of the company states that they want to 'support women to improve themselves' (Lindex 2021). These narratives of gender equality are individualistic in nature and focus on the subject of the empowerment-seeking woman who may self-actualise if she is able to tap into her potential. On the We Women webpage, it is stated that the purpose of the program is to 'use women's potential by providing career paths, strengthen the female garment workers' self-esteem and enable them to identify with success.' (Lindex Group 2023). As Prügl (2015, 626) argues, 'empowerment becomes a matter of shaping responsible selves, women that become internally driven to improve themselves.' Female empowerment thus becomes an individualised disciplining project of the self.

6.5.1 Representations of the Racialised Other

So, how exactly are these representations of the empowered garment worker produced, and what are their effects? I argue that they are structured through what Hall (2013, 1992) calls 'regimes of representations' of difference. Here I follow Wilson (2011, 317), who argues that 'rather than challenging the racialised power relationships inherent in development, this focus on agency has decisively shifted attention away from both material structures of power and gendered ideologies'.

Similarly, in the examples I have analysed, the focus is explicitly placed upon the untapped potential of young women as workers. This type of narrative works precisely because it is built upon the assumption that the empowerment women in the global South should seek is one dictated by neoliberalism.

Thanhauser (2022) explains that racial aspects of garment work have existed for a long time, not only along global lines of labour, but also domestically. For instance, in the U.S., long before it was commonplace for women to work, as they were expected to remain in the domestic sphere, Black women and immigrant women were already active participants in the work force. The combination of the 'absence of good jobs for Black men' and 'the prevalence of poverty among the newly emancipated population' compelled Black women to engage in paid labour to support their households, more so than was required by their white counterparts (Thanhauser 2022, 29). Furthermore, Thanhauser (2022) explains that until 1964, 'Black women were broadly excluded from work in textile factories, which was more desirable than work as a domestic servant' (2022, 29). Offering garment factory work to women has never been about female empowerment or emancipation, it has always been about the logic of capital underpinning the garment industry which necessitates cheap labour.

In my interview with Michaela, we spoke about working conditions in garment factories and what strategies the company she works for implements in order to mitigate potential poor working conditions. She pointed out cash payments as being a major problem:

> The biggest thing I'm dealing with now is that our suppliers should shift from cash payments to bank transfers for their employees…There are many risks with that if you are a woman in a factory. If they are paid in cash, we cannot control how much the men take, because that's how it looks in that culture. The money won't go to you as a woman. However, if it is transferred to your bank, we have secured that someone else cannot take that payment. That's as much as we can do. If they are paid in cash, we cannot guarantee anything, since there's discrimination in these countries. How can we know how much of their payment gets taken away before it lands in their hands? That could be both about men and women; if you're paid in cash we cannot follow up and ensure that the employees are paid. However, with bank transfers we can see their accounts, so that would be more secure, and we are working really hard on this. (Michaela)

Michaela is making the argument here that gender discrimination in production countries makes cash payments to garment workers unsafe as it is difficult to ensure that the garment worker will be allowed to keep that money for herself. This sexism is ascribed to cultural differences, something that needs to be controlled from the buyer side in Sweden. The need for control was further emphasised as follows:

> It can be empowering for women if we control the factories, but it's a lot about control. The culture in some of these countries in the far east is not empowering for women. So, it's important that we take responsibility and check these things.

> I work with the social aspects, so that's something very close to my heart. Working conditions need to be fair in the factories, and I always want to feel like I could work there. If I can stand in that factory floor, then it's okay since I'm used to Swedish standards. That's not what it looks like today in the factories, because there are cultural differences, and, well, there is a lot which differs from country and continent to continent. We do not have any factories that lie below legal minimum wage. And that is our priority. But the problem is overtime in these countries, that's the main problem currently. There are big cultural differences about what is okay and what isn't. (Michaela)

Feminist research has shown that colonial attitudes often leave their traces in development work (Mollett 2017). One notable aspect in the previous excerpts is that there is a very present feeling for the need to control factories in order to ensure fair and safe working conditions, however, there seems to be no reflection around the need for raising wages for garment workers. The company in question meets minimum wage for their garment workers; however, according to the Clean Clothes Campaign, and Fair Action Sweden, the minimum wage in most garment production countries is far from a living wage. Michaela explained that raising wages is not a necessary or preferred method for improving garment workers' lives:

> It doesn't always need to be about raising wages or raising costs for factories, the solutions can be simpler, and every little effort helps. For example, overtime is a huge problem and if the factories would have a more strategic production planning like we do here in Sweden, then I think we could prevent enormous amounts of overtime. And it doesn't cost more to hire a woman than a man. So, there are many things that can be done without large financial sacrifices.

> I think that it's about poor planning in many cases. And during corona there has been container situations [referring to global shipping delivery delays], and right now China is turning off their electricity twice a week to reduce their climate impact. That's difficult to plan ahead for, but I think we could reduce overtime this way. When I have to work overtime it's because I haven't planned my time properly. (Michaela)

The issue of low wages is downplayed by stating that consistent overtime due to poor planning is a more pressing issue. In the theory chapter, I discussed the seminal work by Elson and Pearson (1981) and how racialised and essentialising notions of women in the global South helped to ensure their continued subjugation into underpaid labour. Hall (2013, 234) writes about the naturalisation of racial difference and how this is used as a representational strategy in order to 'fix difference' and hinder it from evolving in discourse. The problem with for instance attributing excessive overtime in factories to inefficiencies born from cultural differences – apart from the argument being unfounded, because such excesses have been constitutive of the factory system from the start – is that it contributes to the naturalisation of the notion that workers in the global South are inherently not as efficient or developed as their western counterparts, and it furthers the dichotomy between North and South. Attributing efficiency issues to cultural differences essentially adds to the regimes of representation of the distant other – the racialised garment worker.

Representations of the racial Other can of course also be framed under 'diversity' and 'inclusion', as we will discuss in depth in chapter seven of this thesis. As with representations of female empowerment in fashion discourse, it is important to critically examine the representations of diversity within the fashion world as well, both in advertising campaigns, and on the runway. On 8 October 2023, The Times published an investigation revealing that big international modelling agencies have been recruiting young people from refugee camps in countries in Africa including Kenya, to walk runway shows in Europe, several of whom became indebted to the agencies when they were sent back home (Daniel 2023). This may be seen as a consequence of the fact that ethnic diversity and representation has come to be in demand in the fashion industry. Representations and images are powerful because they lend their associations and connotations to the actors or companies utilising them. The intersection between gender and race is important here because effective representations of female empowerment and diversity may mean that the inner workings of a company or an industry goes unnoticed.

Fashion has always had an element of promised upward mobility, as explained by Thanhauser (2022), and this upward mobility works on more than one level. Karim (2022) describes in her book scenes from her research area in Bangladesh where the town is turned into a sparkly joyful marketplace every Friday evening on the Muslim Friday and workers' weekly day off. She contrasts the euphoric air of the young women shopping and enjoying themselves to their everyday gruelling work as garment workers. This is an invaluable perspective, as so much of research on the fashion industry contrasts buyers as wealthy people in the global North to workers as poor people in the global South. The type of female empowerment discourse we have observed in this chapter, even when it is about garment workers, is intended for the eyes of western consumers. The narratives of female empowerment as mentioned earlier helps alleviate the potential bad conscience of consumers in the global North, however it also works as a distraction from the issue of wages. In the Lindex sustainability report for 2021, there is no mention of what the workers are paid at the supplier factories, other than stating that they require their suppliers to comply with local minimum wage laws (Lindex Group 2021). Their current goal is that the suppliers that provide eighty per cent of Lindex clothes will work with a living wage program (Lindex Group 2021). It is also stated that they 'will take the next step of analysing the gap between the calculated living wage and the actual wages paid for each supplier' in 2022 (Lindex Group 2021, 73). When asked in a newspaper article why they do not pay higher wages for garment workers, Susanne Ehnbåge, CEO of Lindex responded that it is difficult to ensure that the money ends up in the workers' pay checks, and that many factors need to play a part in creating a more controlled system (Oscarsson and Lindstedt 2023). Through observing and analysing the discourses and narratives reproduced in textual and visual content of fashion advertising and communication, it is clear that there is a contradiction between the emphasis placed on the importance of female empowerment on the one hand, and the refusal to take seriously the question of raising wages, on the other.

6.6 Final Remarks: Notions of Care

A common thread we have seen throughout this chapter is the notion of care, which is utilised in different ways in fashion discourse, and especially in discourses of female empowerment.

The notion of care is used in very gendered ways. Whether it is about care for the environment, for children, or for workers, care as a concept and as an act is often used in tandem with targeting women. This has consequences for how we see ourselves as consumers and how we view our responsibilities towards nature, workers, our families. In fashion discourse, some of the main ways in which the notion of care is used is in the context of care for a distant other, mobilised through consumption; care for the environment, solved through green consumption, and care for our clothes (environmental responsibility). In order for the notion of care to be effective in narratives of female empowerment and sustainability, it needs a foundational assumption of women as inherently caring and nurturing – the very same assumption which so often results in added environmental care responsibilities for women (Foster 2017; Resurrección 2017; Leach 2007).

The idea of helping distant others through consumption is not a new concept; Richey (2019) calls this 'brand humanitarianism' and refers to Product RED [a licensed brand by the company Red, which aim was to eradicate HIV/Aids] as an example. She criticises this model by writing that this type of commodity activism leads to a disengagement. She argues that 'in brand aid, CSR is moving from conscious consumption in which consumers grade products in relation to how they are produced' to 'compassionate consumption in which products are 'good' if they contribute to a 'good' cause' (Richey 2019, 79). Barnett et al. (2005) also write about this type of brand humanitarianism and argue that creating the feeling in consumers that they can help an Othered person far away may in fact hinder solidarity.

Based on the examples that have been observed and analysed in this chapter, the concept of female empowerment is mainly used in two ways in fashion marketing: in relation to the consumer and in relation to the producer (the garment worker, or for instance a cotton farmer).

The notion of care, in a sense, ties women together discursively in consumption and production. Consumers are expected to feel empowered through what they consume and wear, while taking care of the environment. Garment workers are expected to gain empowerment simply through having a job, but also through more specific measures such as training programs. Consumers in turn are expected to feel satisfied with the empowerment they supposedly afford women and girls in the global South, simply through the act of consuming clothes. However, while

consumers in wealthy nations like Sweden are asked to care for the environment and garment workers through the act of consumption, actual care responsibilities and labour is asymmetrically placed on women globally, through articulations of class and race. During the Covid-19 pandemic, on a global scale, the care responsibilities for women became even more intensified than before (MacGregor, Arora-Jonsson, and Cohen 2022; Islam et al. 2022). And as Sobande (2020, 1034) has shown, the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic 'commodified notions of connectivity, care and community, in the service of capitalism'. Similarly, fashion brands engage in commodified notions of care in order to interpellate consumers to not only discipline themselves as good neoliberal subjects, but to turn to consumption as the preferred solution to social and ecological problems or crises.

In this chapter, the interviews with sustainability managers have told us explicitly that women are a target audience for both female empowerment and environmental sustainability advertising, and the visual content analysed shows us how and through which mechanisms that targeting happens. In this chapter I have challenged the ways in which the intersection between gender and the environment becomes corporatised and presented as an issue solvable through consumption, instead of a site for collective struggle that could lead to a more ethical and less environmentally destructive garment industry.

Chapter 7

Aspirational Interpellation, Social Media, and the Role of Influencer Marketing

This chapter is an exploration of social media, with a particular focus on Instagram and TikTok, and why social media is a necessary realm to consider when trying to understand consumer culture in contemporary society. The Cambridge Dictionary defines an influencer as either 'someone who affects or changes the way that other people behave', or 'a person who is paid by a company to show and describe its products and services on social media, encouraging other people to buy them' (Cambridge Dictionary 2023). Although influencers have existed for a long time, in its current definition the term entered our vocabulary in the early 2010s when social media influencing started to become a potentially lucrative business. In this chapter I argue that social media is a powerful medium through which influencer capitalism functions, in ways that accelerate hyper consumption in an unsustainable manner. Through my interviews with influencers, I put forth the argument that influencers are also caught up in a capitalist system on social media of exchange value, where they exist in different degrees of precarious positions.

The critical intervention of this text is not about further moralising consumption or female-dominated work such as influencer marketing. Criticism of the influencer industry is often seen as masked misogyny; people don't like seeing women succeeding or becoming rich. That, of course, is not the basis of my criticism of influencer marketing. Rather this is an attempt at understanding the power relations within the industry better, and hopefully shedding light on the precarity of social media work, and the underlying invisible forces of capitalism

that shape the sector. What needs to be examined are the risks associated with the proliferation of influencer marketing; the immense effect it has on consumption (consumption in general, but for the purpose of this thesis, the consumption of fast fashion); its implications for the environment; the emotional and psychological effects it may have on influencers themselves, and the people who follow them, and what it does to society when so many young girls and women aspire to reach the lifestyles, wardrobes, homes, vacations and bodies of influencers.

This chapter begins with an outline of the social media landscape that I am interested in for the purpose of this dissertation. Following this is a section on influencer capitalism and digital labour. In this section I explore the nature of digital work and influencer work, discuss the precarious nature of digital labour, and set the scene for the following two sections. In section three, I discuss the feminisation of influencer capitalism and digital labour and argue that this is important to grasp in order to understand why influencer marketing is so captivating and effective. In order to discuss the feminisation of the influencer industry, I draw on scholarship on postfeminism, aided by postfeminist sensibilities such as appearance, aspiration, and discipline. In the following section, I discuss the concept of aspiration in relation to the dominant consumerist ideology on social media. Here, I develop a concept I call 'aspirational interpellation', whereby users and followers on social media are hailed as aspiring consumerist subjects. I then discuss parasocial relationships as a function of aspirational interpellation. Following this is a shorter section on the idea of shared values and responsibility when it comes to sustainability. I then end the chapter with a concluding section.

7.1 Setting the Social Media Scene

It would be impossible to write about fashion marketing and the consumption of clothes without mentioning online sales and the role of social media marketing. Although brick and mortar retail prevail, online sales are growing rapidly. In March 2021, Americans spent $14 of every $100 on commodities online (Hoskins 2022). In Sweden, where I am writing, consumers spent 133.9 billion Swedish kronor, or roughly US$12 billion on goods bought online in 2022, where

clothing was the largest category (Nets 2022). During 2020, fifty eight per cent of Swedes (ca. 5 million people) had made an online purchase via smartphone or tablet in the past month (Nets 2021). Another large study collecting data from the USA, the UK, France, Spain, Germany, and Sweden in 2016 found that 'a quarter of the responding millennials[12] said they bought a product after seeing it featured in user-generated content' (Fuchs 2021, 190). This was in 2016, before the rise of Instagram shops, TikTok shop, swipe-up links, and direct shopping links in Instagram, which make online shopping even easier and faster. The Swedish environmental protection agency reported that net inflow (import minus export) of new textiles per person in Sweden increased by forty per cent between 2000 and 2022 (Naturvårdsverket 2023).

Online shopping, social media, and influencer marketing are inextricably linked. It is impossible to open Instagram or TikTok without having products and services marketed and targeted at you, whether it be from an account you actually follow or not (sponsored or targeted ads are shown to users of social media all the time, but also to users of simpler websites as well), and whether it is clear that it is marketing or not (I will delve into the concept of hidden marketing on social media later on in the chapter). Indeed, social media apps that are free to use, such as Instagram and TikTok, are free *because* they are used as advertising platforms. Social media is such a large part of many peoples' lives globally that justifying the importance of writing about it in relation to consumption may seem superfluous; however, it bears repeating. A Nordic study from 2018 surveying people aged 18-29 revealed that 22 per cent of young Swedish women and eighteen per cent of young Swedish men had dreams of becoming an influencer (in the study it was phrased as making money on blogging/vlogging/Instagram). For the female respondents this came in second place; below getting permanent employment (24 per cent), and above having children (21 per cent), meeting a partner (20 per cent) and getting their driver's license (20 per cent). For the male respondents, it came in fourth place; below meeting a partner (30 per cent), getting their driver's license (22 per cent), getting permanent employment (21 per cent), and above, backpacking (14 per cent) (Dagens Analys 2018). In the US, 54 per cent of young people wanted to become an influencer (Ehlers 2022), and in the US and the UK in 2019, one third of children aged eight to twelve wanted to become YouTubers (Fuchs 2021). The influencer world is built on a fantasy and a dream that anyone

[12] Millennials are people born between 1982-1996

can become an influencer if they are authentic and genuine and create relatable and aesthetic content. In reality, although many young people aspire to become influencers, a very small fraction of them actually make it to a point where they are able to support themselves by working as a full-time influencer (Fuchs 2021; Duffy 2017; Hoskins 2022; Jarrett 2022). Furthermore, growing research suggests that social media may have negative impacts on the wellbeing of young people. A study conducted by psychologists at the University of Cambridge in 2022 revealed that young girls 'who increased their time on social media between the ages of 11-13 were less satisfied with their lives one year later' (Sample 2022). The study also showed that decreases in life satisfaction, regardless of gender, was related to subsequent increases in social media usage (Orben et al. 2022). This study did not make conclusive statements about social media negatively affecting the wellbeing of people; however, they claim that it did 'suggest distinct developmental windows of sensitivity to social media in adolescence' (Orben et al. 2022, 1). In another UK study from 2018, it was found that high levels of social media use among young girls (age 10) was related to a decrease in mental well-being in the following years of young adolescence (Booker, Yvonne, and Amanda 2018). Although there are undoubtedly many positive aspects of social media, it remains a complicated landscape within which aspiring influencers operate.

Influencer cultures and social media cultures may be understood as being part of the nichification of cultural and media industries (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2021). Unlike the culture industry that appealed to a mass audience before the 1980s, 'platform-dependent cultural production is driven by processes of nichification, defined as the *structuring of production and consumption by narrowly defined interest communities*' (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2021, 140, emphasis in original). Influencers can profile themselves according to many different categories, for example lifestyle, fashion, beauty, skincare, crafting, thrifting, food, finance/investment, sport, art, psychology, yoga, spiritualism, sustainability, activism (climate, body, feminism, LGBTQI+, anti-racism etc.), gym/exercise, health and fitness, veganism, and so on. Oftentimes an influencer will combine some of these categories in their content personas. The following section delves deeper into the specificities of social media labour.

7.2 Influencer Capitalism: Digital Labour, Precarious Work, and Advertising on Social Media

Influencer labour is multi-faceted with many potential income streams and ways to perform the job. But to understand social media marketing better, we need to understand how digital labour works. Jarrett (2022) in her book *Digital Labor* limits her scope to digital media industries, which includes social media companies such as Instagram and YouTube – similarly my focus is also on digital media industries, with a particular focus on Instagram and TikTok. Digital labour can be paid or unpaid. It is the unpaid labour, also called user labour, of all social media users, who constantly feed data into the algorithms of platforms, that uphold the existence of the owner companies (Jarrett 2022). Indeed, social media companies' most important revenue stream comes from 'advertising revenue and the aggregation of marketing data. It is this which makes user data a valuable commodity.' (Jarrett 2022, 12). Influencer marketing is paid labour as the influencers, who Jarrett calls 'platform workers', are paid by the companies they advertise for (Jarrett 2022, 23). However, since almost all influencers are also users of social media, they also provide unpaid user labour. While on Instagram, platform workers are most often called 'influencers', there are different terms for people who make a living on social media. Depending on what their main mode of communication or type of expression is, the term influencer, content creator, creator, vlogger, YouTuber, TikToker, streamer, may be more fitting. In this chapter, the terms influencer and content creator will be used interchangeably as they relate most to the material that I engage with.

As part of influencer marketing, influencers get sent products as gifts; in the Swedish market, PR companies have lists of influencers that they send elaborate and expensive PR packages to – these gifts are everything from baskets full of food, to skincare products, make-up and clothes. Influencers often get invited to various influencer events – for example for the launch of a new product or collection – where gifts are often a part of the event. In terms of fashion more specifically, influencers can make money in the following ways (but there are surely more): through ad links which are links they put on their social media platform, whereby they are paid a small per centage for each purchase made by a person through that link (or sometimes even for each click even if it does not lead to a purchase). Another way is paid partnerships, in which the influencer advertises products on

their social media channels and often provide a discount code. They may be paid a sum for doing the campaign (the sum will vary dependent on how many photos the influencer needs to deliver, whether the client wants the photos or videos as an Instagram story, or in the feed, whether the client wants to be seen on Instagram or TikTok or YouTube (or all three) and so on), and a percentage for the number of purchases made with the discount code. A brand deal can be a one-off job with a package of Instagram posts, or it may be a longer contract where the influencer does advertorial work for the brand consecutively for a longer period of time. Some influencers eventually turn to diversifying their income stream. Successful influencers may get the chance to have their own line or limited collection with a brand, act as brand ambassador, or even start their own brand or company entirely. Many clothing brands regularly have influencer lines where the influencer together with the design team at the brand have developed a collection. For instance, the Swedish influencers Lovisa Wallin, Hanna Friberg, Bianca Ingrosso, Nicole Falciani, Margaux Dietz, Moa Mattsson and Molly Rustas have done influencer collections for the brands Bubbleroom, Gina Tricot, Nelly and NA-KD. Companies that are founded by Swedish influencers tend to be in the realm of beauty and fashion. Some examples include Matilda Djerf's clothing brand Djerf Avenue, Alice Stenlöf's clothing brand A-DSGN, Ida Warg's haircare and fake tan brand Ida Warg Beauty and Bianca Ingrosso's cosmetics brand Caia Cosmetics and jewellery brand Ani (there are plenty more similar examples). Having said this, the main and by far largest income stream for most influencers, including the ones who own companies and sell other products, is still paid advertisements.

Apart from paid advertisements, influencers often get sent home products from brands and PR firms; this is one part of influencer marketing. 'PR unboxing' videos have become popular on Tik-Tok, where influencers show the PR boxes they have been gifted and open them on video. A 'PR unboxing' video may look something like this:

Figure 34. PR unboxing video on TikTok
Screenshot from @victoriaparis's TikTok. Source: @victoriaparis's TikTok account, April 2022.

This screenshot of Victoria Paris unboxing PR gifts from Adidas and Prada is an example of the type of gifts a large influencer may receive (extremely expensive bags and trendy sneakers). An aspiring small influencer may receive gifts as small as a face cream or a crate of energy drinks. In one of my interviews, Emma described how gifts can also be used as a way *not* to pay influencers for their advertising labour:

> I think a lot of exploitation goes on, especially with micro influencers who have around 10-20k followers. And especially those who have around 5000 followers, because they almost get ecstatic when they receive free gifts. The companies are smart and choose many micro-influencers and send their things to a lot of them, and that is worth a lot. (Emma)

Emma describes a tactic used by companies who rely on many smaller influencers labouring for them for free due to feeling grateful for receiving gifts. That way, companies can gain nearly free advertising at a very low cost (sending out products), while simultaneously instilling a sense of gratitude in smaller and less experienced influencers. Social media labour is precarious in many ways, and only a few at the very top can become wealthy, while the rest will 'remain proletarianised platform workers' or 'precarious freelancers' (Fuchs 2021, 177). According to Fuchs (2021), influencer capitalism is an ideology built upon an American-Dream-like fantasy that anyone can become a rich and famous

influencer as long as they try hard enough and spend enough time being visible on social media. In my interview with Emma, she explained that the parts of the influencer job that you are actually paid for are the least difficult, citing that the unpaid emotional labour is much more strenuous:

> I have worked in restaurants and at preschools, schools and on a farm, so I know what hard work is. Being an influencer, I would say doing brand deals is the easy part. The hard part is all the unpaid labour you have to put in. You have to post and be active constantly, think of new ideas, create engagement amongst your followers so they want to stay and don't unfollow you. And there is so much competition, in the end you almost become brainwashed, I have started to feel more and more that this world doesn't fit me. (Emma)

Succeeding as an influencer hinges on being active and visible at all times in an attention and visibility economy where you need to be seen frequently in order to remain relevant. While influencers get paid for doing brand deals for example, they are not paid for all the time they spend on updating their social media channels outside of the brand deals, and without this constant updating, they are less likely to be offered brand deals.

Hanna reflected on this issue:

> I'm working all the time because as an influencer you have to think of new content every day to remain interesting and relevant. The more you post, the more people you reach. (Hanna)

Thus, Hanna emphasises the fact that being an influencer in a sense requires you to work at all times. This means that it can also be difficult to distinguish between work and free time – the following interview excerpt reveals one of the ways in which social media labour also bleeds into influencers' personal lives, blurring the line between private life and work:

> Sometimes I just want to throw away my phone and my computer, I don't want to be part of this world. But sometimes I feel like you can have a positive impact by spreading good messages and not be part of consumerism. But this has been my income, so in order to be able to let go of social media, I would have to find a new income. (Emma)

For Emma, while there are many negative attachments to social media, she also recognizes the dilemma of having to find a traditional job were she to stop using

social media, and the longer one works as an influencer, the more difficult it may become to enter or re-enter the more traditional workforce. The excerpt from our interview reveals that she is not fully comfortable with the fact that her job requires her to actively contribute to consumerism, and although social media can be used for other purposes, for influencers, brand deals are an integral part of making money on social media work.

In the attention economy of influencer capitalism, engagement in the form of likes, comments and shares need to be accrued in order for a career in social media to be lucrative, and this engagement is dependent upon visibility and a constant presence on apps like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok (Fuchs 2021). Parallels can be drawn between social media today, and the culture industry as theorised by Adorno and Horkheimer (2016), whereby culture is commodified through advertising and the replacement of user value with exchange value. According to Adorno and Horkheimer (2016, 103), 'amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work.' Adorno and Horkheimer's reflections on the blurring of the line between leisure and work under late capitalism, where 'the fusion of culture and entertainment that is taking place today leads not only to a depravation of culture, but inevitably to an intellectualization of amusement', are highly relevant in the context of social media and influencer capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 108). As Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 98) write, 'even during their leisure time, consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production.' In today's context, not only are users of social media unable to view content on apps like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube without being fed with advertisements – they are orienting themselves according to the unity of production – but they are also literally working by providing free labour in the form of personal data. Thus, much like in the culture industry as per Adorno and Horkheimer, it is becoming impossible to be on social media without being subjected as consumers. As social media users receive 'free' content in exchange for their personal information, preferences, and data each moment they spend on a social media app, it is virtually impossible to escape the consumer subjectivity. In this context, the consumption of social media content during leisure time is also a prolongation of (unpaid) work, where said work contributes to the accumulation of capital and profit for the social media companies, advertising agencies, corporations and their various brands, and influencers. Leisure time is work for the consumer who is providing data, and what would normally count as

leisurely activities – eating out, going on vacation, shopping, working out, decorating a home; the list goes on – is work for influencers.

The advertisements we are inundated with on social media come in different shapes and forms. If you follow a particular influencer, you will most likely see that person post content (pictures and videos) that are paid advertisements or brand deals; with this type of advertisement the user has the option to unfollow the influencer if they do not want to see their brand deals and paid partnerships. Even if you only follow friends and family on Instagram, sponsored ads will show in your feed and Instagram stories. These ads are based on the user's data continuously fed into the app's algorithm. When it comes to influencer marketing – not ads that are directly distributed by brands but rather through influencers and content creators – it can be difficult to discern what content classifies as advertising and what does not. For instance, sketch comedians will integrate an advertisement into a sketch, dancers will integrate a product or service into a dance, a food creator might make a recipe using an advertised product and a beauty creator might advertise a product by integrating it into a make-up tutorial. As an example, it is much easier to quickly understand that you are viewing an advertisement, if it is a picture of a specific branded product, and that product is the focus of the picture or video. Additional information such as a 'paid partnership' tag on the post, or a caption that says 'AD' makes it easier for the consumer to understand that it is an ad. Even then it can be hard to see if a post is an ad, especially if it is not clearly stated and the branded content is hidden (Fuchs 2021; Abidin 2016). According to Abidin (2016, 239), 'to maintain viewer interest, Influencers appropriate creative strategies to obscure the commerciality of their Instagram posts.' If you have been following a content creator on TikTok who posts sketch comedy, or original choreographed dance routines, and one day they post a sketch video or a dance video of their typical style, and about halfway in they start showing a product or incorporate voice over narration about a service, you may have consumed half of this content before even realising that it was a paid ad. When the advertorial content is baked into content creators' original creative expression, it is much more difficult to discern what it is that you are consuming. This can be understood as an acceleration and proliferation of creative advertising under the culture industry, where 'in the most influential American magazines, Life and Fortune, a quick glance can now scarcely distinguish advertising from editorial picture and text.' (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 122). While this phenomenon could be witnessed in magazines at the time

Adorno and Horkheimer were writing about the culture industry, today it is highly individualised as it is seen on individual influencers' and content creators' platforms and in their personal styles and creative expressions.

The following screenshots are from a video posted by Tinx, a popular content creator with 1.5 million followers on TikTok (as of November 2023). The video is formatted as a response to a comment on a different video, with a Green Screen function which allows you to record yourself with different images as a backdrop. The comment says, 'what is your dream vacation???'; it is unclear whether the comment is a genuine question from one of Tinx's followers, or if it is a comment that has been posted by someone for the purpose of making this reply video. Tinx (and many other creators on TikTok) often uses a miniature mic, and here she is describing a dream vacation she has just been on, with still images as the background. She describes a hotel called 'Hotel Hennes' in France. This is in fact an advertisement for H&M (H&M stands for Hennes and Mauritz, which is common knowledge to Swedes but most likely not to people from outside Sweden). The caption of the video includes a hashtag '#HM', however, it does not have a clear advertisement marking. The comments shown in the second screenshot reveal that some people did not understand this was an advertisement and that the hotel is fake. Due to the fact that the format used in this video is indistinguishable from the influencer's usual content, and that there is no clear advertising marking means that the viewer might watch a large part of, if not the whole video without understanding that it is an advertisement. On social media, advertisements are so integrated with the rest of the content on the given app that it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two.

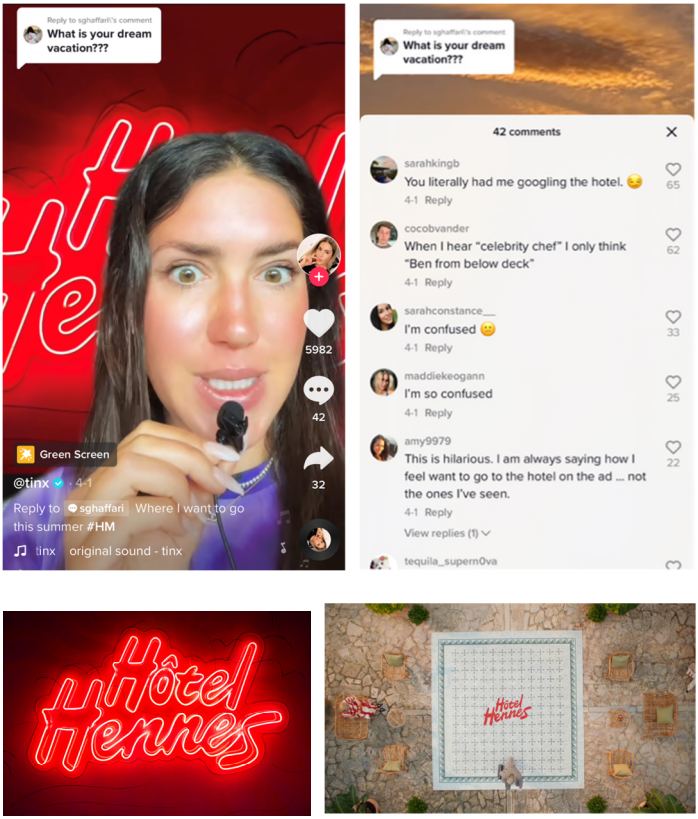


Figure 35 Hotel Hennes

Screenshots from @tinx's TikTok (top left and right) and images from H&M's website. Sources: @tinx's TikTok account, April 2022 (top left and right), www.hm.com, April 2022 (bottom left and right). Copyright H&M Hennes & Mauritz AB.

'Hotel Hennes' was a large advertising campaign, including promotional events in LA and a YouTube advertising video starring Tinx and supermodel Gigi Hadid.

It is easy enough to figure out that Tinx's video was an advertisement for H&M through some digging; however, what is interesting is the split-second moment of confusion and doubt that occurs in the receiver before realising that what you are looking at is an advertisement. That moment draws you in with a different type of attention and curiosity, which works in the advertising company's favour. The format used in Tinx's video, where she is replying to a comment with a new video, is a very popular format on TikTok. Influencers gain their followers' trust by

forming a relationship with them, which leads to their recommendations easily being interpreted as genuine recommendations and advice, and since the format and style of the content may be the same whether the content is an advertisement or not, if an influencer is good at her job, the paid ads will feel as genuine to her followers as all the unpaid content produced. Two other examples of popular video formats on TikTok that often include some form of marketing, either through direct brand sponsorship, or through affiliate marketing, are 'hauls' and 'Get ready with me' videos. Let me describe the two formats.

Example 1: Hauls (popular on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok).

A haul is a video where the content creator has bought (or been gifted) usually a large number of products that they show to the camera one by one. For instance, this could be a clothing try-on haul, where each item of clothing is tried on for the camera, a grocery haul showing everything one has bought from the grocery store or a Christmas gift haul, showing off all the presents one has received. The hashtag '#haul' has 56,2 billion views on TikTok on 14 October 2023.

Here are three examples of what haul videos may look like:

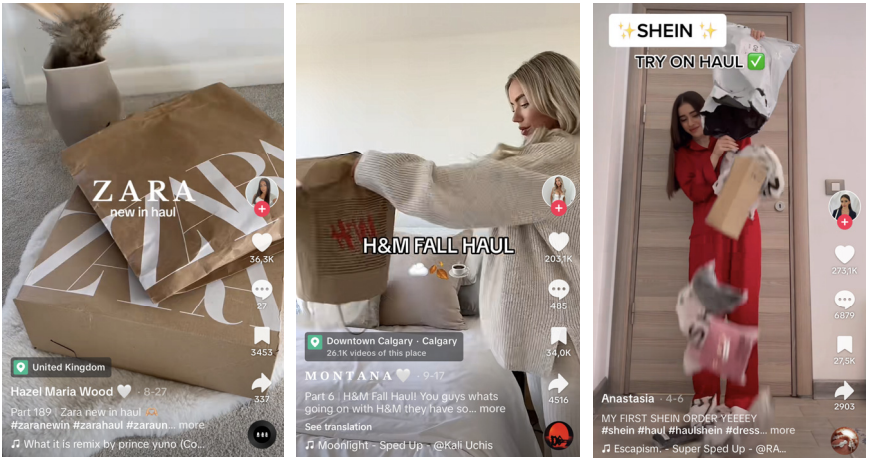


Figure 36 'Hauls' on TikTok

Screenshots from TikTok of a Zara haul (left), H&M haul (centre) and Shein haul (right). Source: @hazelwoodx TikTok account, August 2023 (left), @montanajaynee TikTok account, September 2023 (centre), @talanoova TikTok account, June 2023 (right).

The following interview excerpt gives some insight into how the negotiations of Instagram haul brand deals may play out:

> I usually charge 20.000 SEK for a picture in my feed, 25.000 SEK for a story haul which is usually 5-8 stories, 15 seconds each, and if they want a combination of both I charge 40.000 SEK. It varies a lot. If it's a company that feels really good to work with and if I think my followers will like it, for example Nelly.com or Chiquelle which I work a lot with, I know that my followers like the clothes and like getting a 20 per cent discount so if they only offer 20.000 SEK for a picture in the feed and a haul, it's usually much less than what I charge. So, then it becomes a dilemma of saying no and getting no money and no discount code for my followers or accepting the offer. (Emma)

In this case, Emma is not only concerned about what she will be paid for the job, but also what her followers want to see from her. She expresses that she is willing to adjust her demands from the client for the sake of giving her followers what they want (in this case a discount code from a brand that they like). In this deal negotiation, feelings of loyalty towards her followers affect Emma – where considering how well-received a collaboration will be amongst her followers is to some degree dictating what conditions she is willing to accept in a negotiation. If the followers respond well to a brand deal, the influencer will likely continue to grow in terms of the number of followers they retain and gain, and also in the engagement they have with their followers, which will in turn hopefully lead to more paid brand deals. This shows that working on social media is also an emotional and relational affair. When many people follow an influencer, listen to their recommendations and are loyal to them, the influencer may in turn feel that they owe certain things to their followers, for instance honesty, or in this case, a certain brand deal despite it not paying well enough.

Example 2: GRWM (Get ready with me)

'Get ready with me' videos are videos where the content creator gets ready – does her make-up, hair, skincare routine, or gets dressed – in front of the camera while talking into it. On 14 October 2023, the hashtag #GRWM had 147.2 billion views on TikTok. In GRWM videos, the creator will sometimes simply talk about the products used in the video, but more often they will talk about a completely unrelated topic, while seamlessly integrating the different products they are using into the story. Examples of common videos in this trend are 'get ready with me while I tell you random facts about myself' or 'get ready with me while I do a story

time about x'. These types of videos will often include affiliate links, which are links to the products used or shown in the video that viewers can click to be redirected to a website where said product can be purchased, while the influencer gets paid a certain amount for each click and each purchase. In other cases, the video may be sponsored by a brand whereby the influencer will get paid for posting the video, or the video itself may not be a paid brand deal, but the products used have been gifted by a company. There is thus a wide spectrum of possible income for a video like this. These types of videos are attention-grabbing since they are usually fast-paced, and edited in such a way that something is constantly happening visually. The visual motion in combination with narration or storytelling is highly stimulating as both the visual sense and aural sense are activated simultaneously. Rather than having to pay close attention to a story or to what the content creator is saying, the visual stimuli keep the viewer interested and keeps you from scrolling immediately to the next video. Josefine explained how she makes money off GRWM videos:

> I have a format that I use every day where I do my make up or my hair and I talk about the products I'm using. My followers like it. I talk a lot about dating and self-confidence, as if I'm talking straight to the follower while getting ready and the people watching want to hear what I'm expressing. And at the same time, they see these products that I'm doing brand deals for. It becomes really natural.
>
> It doesn't even have to be a brand deal. They always ask questions about everything I'm wearing. They see every little detail and there's always so many comments which is really fun. (Josefine)

Josefine pointed out an important aspect of these videos when she said 'it becomes really natural' since the video is not formatted as a traditional advertisement. The aesthetics of the video more resembles watching and talking to a friend than watching corporate advertorial content. The next screenshot gives an example of what a GRWM video may look like:

Figure 37. GRWM (get ready with me)
Screenshot from @filippzorz's TikTok. Source: @filippzorz TikTok account, May 2023.

In this example, the video is a paid advertisement, and this is clearly marketed at the bottom of the video with a 'paid partnership' tag. Get-ready-with-me videos are a very effective way of combining a lot of product placement in a short time span with a personalised and sometimes quite intimate video that feels like an interaction. This brings the viewer closer to the creator and helps build trust in the latter, which can be translated to the followers wanting to buy the products used in the videos. I will delve deeper into this creation of intimacy between the influencer and viewer and its implications further down in this chapter.

This section has covered a few of the many different ways in which advertising and influencer marketing works, and the power relations that are at play within influencer capitalism. At risk of stating the obvious, it is worth reflecting upon the sheer number of influencers that exist. Even if only a small per centage of aspiring influencers make it to the top, social media is flooded with influencer content constantly. As a consumer of social media, you are not exposed to one or two influencers and their content, but to hundreds or thousands, and avoiding being exposed to an immense amount of advertisement on apps such as Instagram and TikTok is simply impossible. Thus, existing on social media, and growing up on social media, means being immersed in advertisements at all times. So far, we have discussed different forms of influencer marketing. But the influencer

industry cannot be understood without an analysis of its gendered nature, which is the focus of the next section.

7.3 The Feminisation of Influencer Capitalism: Postfeminism, Emotional Labour, and the Demand for Authenticity

As established in the previous section, much of digital labour tends to be characterised by precarious work. Not all digital labour is female-dominated; for instance, gig work in the delivery-app space is heavily male-dominated (Jarrett 2022). The influencer sector, however, can be said to be female-dominated, and scholars argue that this is partly due to the fact that the most important marketable and monetisable features in the influencer industry are traditionally female-coded; for instance, the creation of intimacy and emotional connection. Because social media labour often happens in more intimate spaces like the home, it is 'readily relegated to the feminized sphere of social reproduction and considered unproductive activity in many orthodox interpretations of labor' (Jarrett 2022, 24). Similarities can be drawn between influencer labour and homework, where working with social media has often been seen as 'not real work'. This relates to Mies's (2012) research on lace-makers where various forms of home-work were constructed as leisure through the concept of 'housewifisation'. Prügl (1996, 144) argued in the 90s that 'global competition has encouraged firms to subcontract with specialized, smaller firms who in turn employ home-based workers to accomplish labor-intensive industrial operations'. This labour flexibilisation is done as a way of saving costs, at the expense of job security, guaranteed pay and pension for the home-workers whose surplus labour power is extracted. While influencer labour is rather different in that it is not industrial or manual labour, and there is real potential for making huge amounts of money, it is still precarious work for most, and companies do not have to take accountability for this in the way that for instance advertising agencies would.

This section thus discusses the feminisation of influencer capitalism, and why this is important in terms of sustainability and gender in the fashion sector. Influencer marketing is so successful because of its feminisation. It reflects the feminisation

of consumption (and sustainable consumption) and aesthetic consumption, and these forces feed each other in a dialectical relationship and lead to what seems like an unstoppable continuation of hyper consumption. Having said this, it is important also not to overstate or essentialise gender differences to fit a certain narrative. What is considered to be women's work has and continues to change across time and space, so theorisations around it will inevitably carry some 'conceptual ambiguity' (Bishop and Duffy 2022, 471). Overarching commonalities for female-dominated work may be elements of care-work, domestic labour and aesthetic labour (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017). More specifically, Bishop and Duffy (2022, 470) formulate four features of feminised labour: 'the demand for emotional and affective expressions', 'the discipline of aesthetics through the fraught ideal of 'visibility'', 'mandates for flexibility and an always-on stance', and 'a deep imbrication with consumer capitalism'. While visibility is necessary for success as an influencer, it also creates vulnerabilities, and opens up for risks such as harassment, digital surveillance and monitoring (Bishop and Duffy 2022). As argued by Bishop and Duffy (2022), this relationship between visibility and vulnerability is a key feature of the feminisation of social media labour.

According to Maclaran and Chatzidakis (2022), while the advertising industry was historically very male-dominated, both the workforce and discourse of marketing have now become feminised. I see the feminisation of influencer capitalism (to a degree) as an extension of this fact. Targeting women consumers in advertising is an age-old tactic that has evolved over time, from the marketing of household products to femvertising, as discussed in chapter three. Femvertising is fraught with neoliberal postfeminist ideations that encourage consumerism as a road to self-betterment – these postfeminist ideals are laden with contradictions.

Gill (2017) brings such contradictions to light, for instance as she wrote about the media landscape in the late 90s and early 2000s, which was at once very celebratory of female empowerment and autonomy, while at the same time being a very hostile space for women. In influencer marketing today, I see a similar problematic, where on the surface a lot of the messaging is supposed to be positive and inspirational, and indeed it is often received positively; however, in reality, influencer marketing often leads to poor self-image, increased consumption, a feeling of scarcity and unhealthy comparisons. Elias, Gill, and Scharff (2017, 76) argue that

> …in this distinctively postfeminist and neoliberal moment, beauty pressures have intensified, extensified and also moved into the realm of subjectivity in new and pernicious ways, facilitated by new technologies and by aggressive consumer capitalism that is colonising women's bodies – and increasingly men's too, though with nothing like equivalent force.

The idea of the commodification of the self through self-branding has been discussed extensively by scholars such as Duffy (2017), Elias, Gill, and Scharff (2017), and Banet-Weiser (2021, 2012), and this process is currently in acceleration. In this section I try to contribute to this scholarship by exploring how influencers see their own position in this mechanism of visibility labour and the advertising world, and how they think and feel about the ways in which influencer marketing works and what effect it has on consumers and consumption at large. The pressure to become a marketable self, and at the same time be authentic to oneself, forms a contradiction that can be difficult to untangle (Lamberg 2021). Some scholars argue that influencers are living under false consciousness when they essentially commodify themselves under the guise of authenticity (Fuchs 2021). Others, such as Jarrett (2022) and (Duffy 2017) believe that it is important not to be reductive and offer a more nuanced picture, I follow their line of argumentation. Jarrett (2022, 158) writes:

> The figure of the 'Young Girl' offers us not an either/or distinction between commodity logics and authentic, dignified life but articulates a both/and scenario where commodification and its productive logics coexist with authentic selfhood and its reproductive dynamics.

What became clear in my interviews with influencers is precisely this 'both/and' scenario, where in their role as influencers they are constantly trying their best to balance being true to themselves, while also acknowledging that their sense of authenticity is also their strongest currency. The next subsection will delve further into the idea of authenticity in social media labour, and the emotional labour involved in the creation of authenticity.

7.3.1 Authenticity Labour and Emotional Labour in Influencer Marketing

The commodification of authenticity is not the same as the total commodification of the self, and this distinction deserves to be considered. So far, we have looked

at the process of commodification of social media trends and aesthetics. As these trends and aesthetics are performed by people on social media, and more specifically people who earn money through that performance, it is valid to consider the issue of the commodification of the self. Jarrett (2022) deems the argument that digital labourers commodify themselves to be overly simplistic and unfair. She argues that certain aspects of the self, like subjectivity and passion, are *inalienable* objects. Thus, subjectivity and selfhood can be *assetised*, but not *commodified* in the way that commodities are (Jarrett 2022). An asset, according to Jarrett (2022, 161), 'refuses total objectification even when it is being subject to abstract valuations.' She writes that 'these assets are still, no matter how constrained, formally available to the digital laborer for their own use' – that is, it does not pass over into the ownership of the purchaser, the way a commodity does. Like subjectivity and selfhood, authenticity can also be assetised, and this is as suggested in this chapter, a core function of influencer marketing. Banet-Weiser (2021, 141) argues that influencer marketing, the way we know it today, is no less corporate than traditional corporate marketing and advertising; it is just mediated through individuals who 'create an intensified version of authenticity in the production of culture'. She argues that 'in many ways, influencers on social media now exemplify the most developed form of brand authenticity (for themselves as brands)' (Banet-Weiser 2021, 141).

The success of influencers is contingent on how authentic they seem and on 'a particular curation of the self, one enhanced by technology' (Banet-Weiser 2021, 142). Banet-Weiser (2021, 143) points out an important problem with this, which is the fact that not everyone can access the right kind of authenticity that is marketable:

> Authenticity on social media, then, is framed by a profound tension: for female influencers on Instagram, being authentic is often about constantly adjusting yourself to correspond with dominant white ideals of femininity. Yet authenticity is also about failure, pressure, depression, tears, vulnerability. This is the labor of authenticity; in the current moment this labor is now more visible and becomes part of the narrative, if not brand, of influencers. The more effort women make in crafting themselves according to a particular version of apparently effortless authenticity, the more authentic their self-presentation. It is an endless feedback loop.

In my interview with Hanna, she spoke to this element of social media work; while authenticity is one of the most important markers for success, often what precedes it is the physical appearance of an influencer:

> I am conventionally attractive and skinny, I think a lot of it has to do with your looks… Creators who have many followers but might not be conventionally beautiful according to society, they invest in other formats like interviews, whereas I can do a bit of everything. But it's essentially enough for me to wear nice clothes or have nice make-up on and my videos will get a lot of views and comments just based on that. (Hanna)

In this rather honest and thoughtful comment, Hanna reflects on the fact that she believes at least some if not a lot of her viewership comes easier to her because she is thin and considered conventionally beautiful. Her take is that as a content creator, if you do not adhere to conventional beauty standards, you are more likely to need a niche or to work harder in order to achieve the same level of engagement from social media users and followers. This puts emphasis on the importance of femininity and beauty in influencer work, and also offers an interesting comment on the notion of visibility. In order to be successful in social media, one must be visible; however, visibility *in and of itself* is not enough, it has to be the *right kind* of visibility. Banet-Weiser (2021) also mentions the proliferation of 'finsta' accounts, private accounts that people make on Instagram where they only let an inner circle of close friends or trusted people see posts, a forum where one can be their true authentic self. This has become popular on TikTok as well, where creators make additional 'spam accounts' where they feel they can be more open or vulnerable with their followers, and where they can post less calculated content without worrying about the lucrativeness of what they post or the algorithms that control their exposure. Indeed, it is an interesting mechanism at play, where influencers and content creators (although 'normal' social media users who do not make an earning from social media also have finstas and spam accounts) who are highly dependent on a constructed authenticity of their selves, need to create new spaces where they can be an even truer and more authentic version of themselves. The followers are then let into a more private, less stylised and less commercialised (brand deals do not tend to be posted on these secondary accounts) version of the influencer/content creator. This can be seen as one of the consequences of the pressure felt from having to monetise and market one's authenticity, which Banet-Weiser (2021, 144) refers to as 'the disciplinary practice of authenticity'.

In the following excerpts, interview respondents talk about personal niche, brand alignment, creative expression, risk of negative reactions, and creating a personal brand that feels genuine. These are some of the elements that influencers consider when strategising and deciding on what types of brand deals to agree to.

For instance, Hanna emphasises the importance of creating a personal brand and niche, in order to maintain integrity:

> As an influencer you can't become a sellout. Something I realized when I started was that you have to choose which companies you do collaborations with, in order to create an image, so I decline a lot of offers to maintain my fashion niche. So, I wouldn't do ads for car tires for example. (Hanna)

Hanna points out an important difference between influencer marketing and more traditional advertising. Since influencer marketing and its effectiveness is built upon the blurred line between individual and brand, and the intimacy and trust felt by influencers' followers, the creation of authenticity is all the more important. Hanna told me that she thinks mostly about the image of the brands she collaborates with and whether their image fits with hers. Thus, one has to pay attention to the image one has curated, and to choose brand deals that do not veer to far from that image, in order to ameliorate the risks of losing engagement or followers. For Sarah, a sense of alignment in brand identity and image is an important factor, but it is also a balancing act with the money that is being offered:

> The aspects I consider first are if the brand aligns with my brand, and if it's something I want to be associated with. But of course, money is important too. So, I would say that the less I want to be associated with the brand, the more they have to pay for a partnership. The less the brand aligns with my brand and my values, the more they have to pay. (Sarah)

Sarah is willing to do advertisements for brands that do not align with her values, but this has to be compensated by a higher payment – the more she is paid for a brand deal, the more she is willing to perhaps compromise her own brand image and personal values. However, doing advertisements that clearly contradict one's image or values may have negative consequences, which is something Sarah and Hanna also talked about in our interviews:

> Consumers are smart and they are exposed to a lot of influencers so you're not alone. Consumers have many 'best friends' and they see you. You won't get away

> with doing that many paid collaborations that don't feel genuine and in line with your brand. You can do maximum two to three sponsored ads like that, then people start reacting negatively. Sometimes you might make an exception if a lot of money is being offered, but a lot of money is not worth as much if it causes me to lose credibility. (Sarah)

> Even if they pay really well, I wouldn't want to do ads for something I don't like. It goes hand in hand with not wanting to sell yourself out. I firstly think about if this is a brand I know – do they make good products – and if it's good for my image. For example, if it was gym clothes, I don't really work out and my content has nothing to do with exercise so it would not make sense for me to advertise that. People will understand, they know what content I post so they will see if I'm doing it just for the money. (Hanna)

Both Sarah and Hanna describe a careful calibration of choices about what to advertise. Hanna explains that followers will know when an influencer is doing something 'just for the money' and identifies this as a risk with advertising products that do not align with one's personality or image. While traditional celebrity-endorsed advertisements do not have the expectation to feel genuine and authentic, influencer marketing does. Content creation can also be interpreted as a part of the influencer's personal creative expression, and this may be extended into advertising content as well. Sarah told me that even with paid ads, 'you try to be creative. You want to be real, it's an extension of your creative expression, but an extension that you get paid for'. In these excerpts, the idea of authenticity is mostly expressed in terms of brand 'image'. There is a constant negotiating between authenticity, brand image, and exchange value. The influencers interviewed realise the importance of authenticity, and at the same time, the more they are paid for a brand deal, the less authentic they are willing to be (under certain circumstances). Authenticity can thus be mediated and compromised in different ways. Josefine described how she has altered her style to make it more compatible with the demographics of her followers on TikTok, and current trends:

> Now I really think about what I'm wearing so I can get links and get paid. That also means my style has changed a bit, so I have one style on social media and a different style in my private life.

> I have younger followers, so my style now is much younger. And not all brands have affiliate links so I usually wear only things that I can get ad links for, and then

> I wear things that I know are trending now, because then I know my followers will be interested in buying those items or they will want to know where they are from and search for them.
>
> It's become part of my daily routine that I have to post something that can generate clicks (Josefine)

In this case, authenticity is more mediated by what the influencer knows her followers to desire from her and what can garner most income. She dresses according to what younger girls like, since they make up the bulk of her followers, and she mostly wears clothes that can generate income for her through affiliate links. Thus, she negotiates parts of herself and her image to adhere to what she understands to be in demand from her audience. So, the influencers I have interviewed pay attention to the curation of their own image and try to work with brands that fit that image. But what does brand image actually mean and does the image have to correspond to the reality? Fashion brands can create a lot of their brand image through visual advertising campaigns, but this does not necessarily mean that those imageries are rooted in how the corporation itself operates. Sarah explained that when she is offered to do brand deals, she is interested in knowing more about the reputation and image of the client's brand before agreeing:

> I base my decisions mostly on soft values. I look at what types of Instagram profiles they work with, or who works for the brand, if they feel like decent people. If I've seen on Instagram that the brand has a sustainability project or that they're working with a minority group for example. I rarely look at specific numbers. (Sarah)

This interview excerpt reveals that the brand image that a corporation puts out can be quite important for what types of influencers and content creators they will attract to want to do brand deals for them. In *What's the Use: On the Uses of Use*, Ahmed (2019, 148) argues that diversity often becomes about 'managing impressions' rather than actually addressing inequalities. Although the context in which she writes is that of diversity work and diversity practitioners in universities, parallels can be drawn to the fashion industry. Many fashion brands are taking diversity of representation in terms of ethnicity, body shapes, and disabilities in their advertising and communication much more seriously today than in the past. While for example H&M's fashion advertisements in the 90s and 2000s were embossed with normative, thin, white models, today their advertisements include

a much more diverse set of people and bodies in terms of gender identity, race, weight and body shape (Palm and Alsgren 2021). But is this addressing diversity within the company of H&M, or is it managing impressions? When too much emphasis is put on representation, the gap between representation in communication and diversity internally to the organisation may become invisible. As Ahmed (2019, 150) writes, 'images are instantly recognizable as images of diversity, those happy smiling colorful faces, because that is how they have been used.' This reflects what Kanai and Gill (2020) argued, as I discussed in chapter three, that diverse representations and increased visibility for historically marginalised bodies and peoples, are likely to mostly benefit the corporation producing the images, without changing the lived conditions for those people.

In my interview with Sarah, she pointed out the importance of representation in communication in regard to how she evaluates the values and ethics of a company. If they seem to have progressive values, this increases her trust in the company.

However, this is not to say that what is represented on the outside is blindly accepted and believed to be a reflection of the inside of the company:

> For me as someone who also works as a stylist representation is important. I often wonder how the casting has been done for a campaign, or I might see a nice advertisement and wonder what the diversity is like within the company. (Sarah)

Again, I draw from Ahmed (2019, 150, emphasis added): 'You can change the image but not change the organization. You can change the image *in order to not* change the organization'. My interview with Sarah revealed that she was very aware of the fact that the decision-makers in clothing companies are usually not very diverse. Perhaps, then, positive representation is often interpreted as being an imperfect measure of a company's values, but 'better than nothing'.

Being authentic on social media is not only about brand image. It is also something content creators want to offer because they believe it fosters more genuine connections between them and their followers. However, being authentic and vulnerable on social media can be utterly exhausting. In Hochschild's (2012, 213) seminal book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling,* in which she coins the notion of emotional labour, she describes how many of the workers she interviewed developed a '"healthy" estrangement' in order to avoid burnout, so that they could perform intimacy from an emotional distance without becoming too involved. Social media is highly emotional labour. The more

personal, private and vulnerable you are, the higher the engagement from followers, but this also has consequences, as Emma explained:

> I have learnt over the years to be careful about what I share. Like my love life or my past eating disorders for example. When I'm going through a hard time, I don't talk too much about it on social media, to protect myself because there are always people with opinions and inappropriate comments. With time I have become more and more private. (Emma)

She talked about how difficult it can be to negotiate between being open and authentic with your followers and needing to protect oneself in order to remain emotionally and mentally stable. The blurred line between brand and self, and between work and leisure, exacerbates this difficulty. What I sensed in this interview was that there was a strong sense of ambivalence towards her job, partly because of the emotional labour involved. Ambivalent feelings came up in my other interviews too, which I will focus on in the next subsection.

7.3.2 Ambivalent Sensibilities

Ambivalence around the implications of working as an influencer was a strong theme that emerged during my interviews, as well as a theme I observed on social media. Fuchs (2021, 188) writes that 'by communicating one-dimensional norms and values of beauty and consumerism as the good life, influencer capitalism deeply alienates humans.' I partly agree with this statement but do not believe it is as one-dimensional as he says. Influencers also share criticisms and ambivalent thoughts about their own industry; however, not all influencers can afford to do this as it may risk losing jobs or engagement. Josefine expressed an ambivalence with identifying as an influencer, stating that she prefers to think of her followers looking to her as an entrepreneur:

> I feel very ambivalent…the community I've been able to create on TikTok is fantastic and I'm shocked each day that people are so engaged in my life. But I see it more as them following me as an entrepreneur, rather than me as a person who shows clothes and make-up sometimes. I do that because I make money on it, but it's not who I am on social media. (Josefine)

While she prefers to be seen as an entrepreneur rather than influencer, a large part of her visible identity on TikTok is related to clothes, trends and beauty products.

Sarah also expressed an ambivalence, but more in relation to the feeling that her work is contributing to consumerism:

> I think that I'm constantly torn between being this person who sees the whole picture and thinks that of course there are a lot of other things I could do than contribute to consumption, and on the other hand enjoying my job, I think it's fun, and it's also easy. I feel that as an individual the responsibility can't all be on me, and then I kind of surrender to being a cog in the wheel. While on the other hand I feel like of course everyone can do something. (Sarah)

She is not completely comfortable with her role in contributing to consumerism through her work as an influencer, however, at the same time it is a fun and easy (and lucrative) job for her, so it is difficult to quit. She continued to explain that doing brand deals feels like a necessary evil to afford the more creatively satisfying jobs that do not pay as well:

> It feels like I'm continuously selling my soul to then buy it back. We do advertising jobs to have money, and then we buy our souls back by doing other jobs that feel genuinely good, but that don't pay well. (Sarah)

It is interesting to see how these influencers mediate feelings of guilt and ambivalence when it comes to their jobs, and how these negotiations still tend to lead to a continuation of their practices. Yet, there were also expressions of a wish to work in different ways that do not entail advertising, were money not an issue:

> I think we live in such a transactional society, and I would have loved if we could live in a different way…but we need to make money in order to survive. I definitely believe there is over consumption. Yet at the same time it's a way to make money… I find it really hard. (Josefine)

> I feel torn and I partly feel like a hypocrite because I'm getting paid through these companies and my paid partnerships and this whole world on the internet, and at the same time I feel more and more that I want to get away from it.

> I feel so torn, I would like to take a step out of being a part of money and being someone who encourages others to consume. You can try to do good paid partnerships and think that this is ecological or sustainable etc. but I think at the same time that so much of it is greenwash and at the end of the day it's still consumption. That makes me sad. (Emma)

We see here a tension between the respondents' subjectivities as influencers and as consumers, or users of social media. These interviews revealed that the influencers are in some ways caught up in a highly commercialised system which on one hand allows them to work with something they enjoy, but which also brings a lot of ambiguities, precarity and sometimes negative feelings. During these interviews, I also got the sense that the longer they worked as influencers, the harder it was for them to quit or envision an alternative way to live, because you become accustomed to the amount of money that can be made, and the relatively easy work (even though it often comes at the cost of one's mental well-being). In expressing her ambivalent feelings, Emma said she did not think many other influencers would share those feelings:

> When it comes to my ambivalence around consumption, I don't think many would agree with me or even think about it…I think people can more relate to being exploited by a company…I think a lot of influencers don't think that they are a part of consumption, that they promote something that isn't sustainable. I think they more think about choosing the 'right company' to partner with. (Emma)

Feelings of ambivalence around one's own work identity is not a positive message to promote on the social media channels that you rely on for income, however. It may be that a large proportion of influencers feel incredibly ambivalent about their work, but it is something they may choose not to disclose.

The morality of consumption is also something that has been historically tied to essentialised notions of the female subject (De Grazia 1996; Petersson McIntyre 2021; Sandilands 1993; Bowden and Offer 1996).

As Fraser (2013, 35) writes, 'the history of consumer goods advertising…has nearly always interpellated its subject, the consumer, as feminine'. Petersson McIntyre (2021, 16) draws on Sarah Ahmed and other scholars in her study of the consumption of clothes and argues that many women feel the need to 'transcend their desire to buy' because they tend to feel guilty about behaving unsustainably. I argue that this morality of consumption is also tied to the gendered aspect of the morality around doing paid advertisements for large fashion companies and is something that came up in my interviews:

> I'm not going to lie; I've worked with H&M and NAKD in the last six months, so I clearly don't think enough about garment workers because otherwise I would've declined. But at the same time, I do think about it, these things give me existential anxiety… but I do it anyway. But I don't think about it in relation to accepting or declining a job. I've asked brands a lot of questions before accepting a job but never questions regarding the production process. (Sarah)

Sarah, who in earlier excerpts emphasised the importance of the diversity and representations of the companies she does brand deals for, explained in the quote above that when it comes to the material conditions of the garment workers who work for fast fashion companies, it is easier to ignore the issue in order to avoid feelings of anxiety and bad conscience. Emma also touched on this topic both from the perspective of both a consumer and an influencer:

> When I buy things, it doesn't cross my mind that there are people in other parts of the world who live in hell for me to wear these clothes. And I think it's very important as an influencer to think about these things and be more conscious. It's definitely something that needs to be talked about more. (Emma)

When I asked Sarah if she believes it is in any way problematic to push consumerism through influencer marketing and brand deals on social media, she laughed nervously and said, 'yes of course, it's super problematic', and then she joked about changing jobs after our interview. These interview excerpts show the complexities around working with advertising and playing a role in encouraging consumption. Emma said that as an influencer you may need to turn off any thoughts or consciousness around how the products you advertise are made or what effect you are having on consumption to make it easier to handle emotionally. Sarah also pointed to this cognitive dissonance that is at play. If she thinks too much about the implications of her work, she feels guilty, so turning those thoughts off becomes an effective defence mechanism.

The fact that the influencer industry is feminised is important in many ways. Not only is it bringing many women into precarious work, when a lot of female-dominated work already is precarious in terms of, for example, part-time contracts and informal work, but it also thrives on aspiration, which means that the precarity in many ways is hidden behind the shiny façade of wealth and success.

7.4 Aspiration on Social Media

Aspiration is a running theme throughout this chapter and throughout the industry of influencing. Without the reproduction of aspiration both amongst the already successful influencers and amongst the aspiring proletarianised social media workers – which in turn encourages a constant striving for self-betterment reliant on consumption – social media marketing would fall apart. The perpetuation of this machinery necessitates a reserve army of labour of aspiring influencers who are trying to emulate 'the good life' on social media through posting on Instagram and TikTok without making money on it, a workforce of influencers who make some income on social media and strive for more, influencers who make a full-time equivalent income from social media, and varying levels of the elite class of influencers at the top who have managed to become extremely rich through influencing. The social media users, or followers, who do not work as influencers, are also providing free labour in the form of precious data they provide to the social media companies every second they are using the social media apps. Aspiration is at work at each of these levels. As argued by Jarrett (2022), Fuchs (2021), and Duffy (2017) amongst others, social media work and influencer capitalism are built on precarious labour which feeds on and survives through aspiration. Duffy (2017, 4) who coined the term 'aspirational labour' in her book *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender and Aspirational Labor in the Social Media Economy,* defines it as:

> a mode of (mostly uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love. As both a practice and a worker ideology, aspirational labor shifts content creators' focus from the present to the future, dangling the prospect of a career where labor and leisure coexist.

Influencers are willing to exchange the safety of a normal 9-5 job for the freedom and lucrative pay checks of social media marketing. But the problem is that very few influencers get to a point where they can support themselves solely on this work. At each level is a group of people, mainly women, who aspire to get to the next level through self-actualising rituals and consumption. This element of aspiration and future promises which characterise social media work is also a corner stone of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2018). In neoliberal feminism, Rottenberg argues, futurity and the promises of success given to young

aspirational women puts them in a constant state of self-discipline and self-betterment (Rottenberg 2018).

Aspiration works on two levels on social media and in influencer marketing. The digital worker aspires to become a successful influencer, and the social media user aspires to become a little more like the influencer through consuming the products she is advertising and adopting the habits the influencer is espousing. The raison d'être of influencer marketing is to influence consumers into buying goods and services, and this is done in large part through creating aspiration. Social media users are supposed to aspire to the influencer lifestyle including the lavish events and dinners, constant supply of new clothes, free PR packages, new skincare and make-up, new furniture, regular overseas trips, but they are also supposed to aspire to the bodies and personhood of influencers. A difficult feat indeed when the image, lifestyle and narrative spread by influencers is one they are paid to display. Aspiring to emulate such a lifestyle is impossible for most people, yet psychologically it seems we think one more eye cream or one more pair of shoes can make us a little bit more like *them,* or at the very least, a better version of ourselves. Much has been written about the end of aspirational social media and the subsequent supposed victory of authentic and transparent social media (Elan 2021). People of Generation Z in particular are thought to dislike overly aspirational content and prefer realistic and authentic content (Elan 2021). This has happened in conjunction with brands leaning increasingly into the segment of micro-influencers (influencers will a following of 5,000-100,000 although there is no real consensus on the exact number of followers that define a micro-influencer) for brand deals, as micro-influencers have tended to adopt authenticity as an important facet to their content (Hoskins 2022). However, authenticity can also be a powerful aesthetic, and images can seem authentic, when in reality they are still aspirational in many ways. I would thus like to expand the definition of aspiration to cover subjectivities, lifestyles and possessions that are in many ways aspirational to people, despite them not necessarily being in the categories of luxury, which is how aspirational content has been largely understood as in the social media realm. Later in this section I will use some examples to explain further what I mean. Before delving into those examples, I would like to present my understanding of how exactly this aspiration comes to be and function on and through social media, and how subjects that uphold the hyper-consumerist influencer industry are created. To do this, I take inspiration from Althusser's theory of interpellation.

7.4.1 Aspirational Interpellation

In chapter three, I discussed Althusser's theory of interpellation, where individuals are turned into subjects through a process of hailing, and the concept of aspirational interpellation, where aspiration acts as the hailing function. In aspirational interpellation, subjects are recruited by social media trends and aesthetics that are personified by or mediated through influencers and social media users. I would like to point out here that influencers are not the only ones who create aspirational aesthetics and contribute to consumption. They may be the only ones who are actually paid by brands to promote certain products, but when certain aesthetics trend on social media, it is influencers as well as other social media users participating in those trends and aesthetics, together creating an accumulation of iterations of the specific trend or aesthetic, and this accumulation ends up having a totalising effect on social media ideology. However, considering power relations, it is still important to remember that the influencer industry holds a particular power position since influencers are paid by companies for showing certain images and promoting certain products, whereas consumers are encouraged to consume, not make money. Thus, the social media user becomes a subject as they consume the various content on a social media platform. Fuchs (2021) explains that the internet in general and social media specifically are indisputably dominated by a capitalist logic: 'Social media do not automatically constitute a public sphere or participatory democratic space in a capitalist world' (Fuchs 2021, 81). In aspirational interpellation, aspiration becomes the vehicle through which individuals are interpellated as consumer subjects who need to consume certain things in order to move closer to becoming a desired identity. I see this identity as being a literal other, i.e., a content creator or an influencer, and simultaneously being an improved future self. The other thus becomes a personification of the fantasy of a future self that is more productive, more beautiful, and superior in other ways.

7.4.2 What can Aspirational Interpellation Look Like?

A trend on social media can be everything from a product that has gained popularity, a sound that is overlaid on videos, a dance, a persona, or a concept. A trend comes to be by accumulating the number of people who participate in it by posting their iteration of a given trend on their social media page. For the purpose of aspirational interpellation, the relevant trends are the more conceptual ones

that are often tied to a persona or a lifestyle. Attached to that persona is often a particular category of products, a certain aesthetic, perhaps a specific taste in music and fashion; thus, consumption very easily gets attached to the trend, even if consumption itself may not be the explicit purpose of spreading the trend. There are always multiple trends and micro-trends circulating on social media. In this subsection I look more closely at some examples of trends or micro-trends[13] on TikTok and relate them to the process of aspirational interpellation. The '5-9 before my 9-5' trend, 'clean girl' trend, 'that girl' trend and 'coastal grandma' trend are illustrated in the following figures.

Trend a) 'My 5-9 before my 9-5'

These videos are made to show what the creator does from 5am to 9am before starting their regular working day.

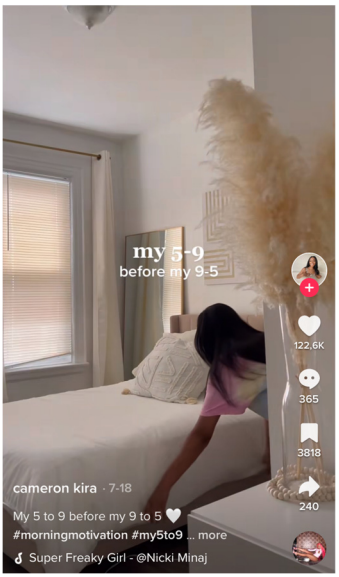


Figure 38. 'my 5-9 before my 9-5' TikTok trend
Screenshot from @cameronkira TikTok. Source: @cameronkira TikTok account, July 2022.

[13] A micro-trend can be understood as a trending phenomenon, item of clothing or particular style/aesthetic that becomes trendy very fast through spreading on social media, and also leaves the trend cycle relatively fast.

These morning routines might include waking up early (at 5am), making a healthy-looking breakfast that often consists of a green smoothie or juice, making the bed, perhaps some light cleaning, exercising, meditation, showering, doing a skin care routine, applying make-up and getting dressed. What partaking in this trend shows is a willingness and a suggested necessity to engage in a number of self-improving habits outside of working hours in order to become a more productive and thus better version of oneself. Here, the neoliberal subject shown in these videos tries to inspire others to adopt the same habits so that they too can work on improving themselves and become more effective and productive. This is a highly self-disciplinary subjectivity that is being put on display for others to aspire to, and becomes a manifestation of neoliberal feminism.

Trend b) 'That girl'

The 'that girl' aesthetic is that of young women who are productive, successful, often thin and conventionally beautiful. 'That girl' is a woman who is in great physical shape, eats healthy, earns a lot of money, lives an independent life, has great confidence and stays busy. In other words, 'that girl' is the perfect postfeminist neoliberal subject.

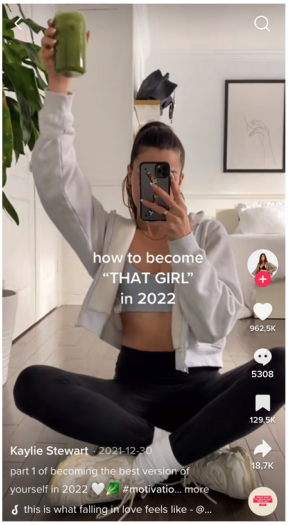


Figure 39. 'That girl' TikTok trend
Screenshot from @kaylieestewart TikTok, Source: @kaylieestewart TikTok account, December 2021.

'That girl' is an aspirational subject, and the purpose of this trend and aesthetic is to recruit subjects who want to emulate that identity and become 'that girl'. Hanna reflected on micro-trends on TikTok and how this can fuel unplanned consumption:

> For example there is a trend called 'that girl' that is meant to be an inspiration to become the girl who gets up at 6 in the morning and drinks a green juice…it's become a big thing with trends where people want a certain image, they want to be her and they want to become like their idols on TikTok…so they buy the things they promote, they think if I buy these things maybe I'll end up on the same track as her. Especially when it's trends that you see over and over. It gets fed to your brain kind of unconsciously until you go and buy something you weren't planning on buying. (Hanna)

Hanna points out the effectiveness of these types of trends, whereby social media users are fed with a certain type of lifestyle in a curated and compact video format continuously, until they subconsciously start buying the products that will supposedly get them a little bit closer to living these aspirational lives.

Trend c) 'Clean girl'

The 'clean girl' has a similar aesthetic to 'that girl', but this trend is more specifically focused on the hair and face, as well as outfits to some extent, rather than the habits and lifestyle.

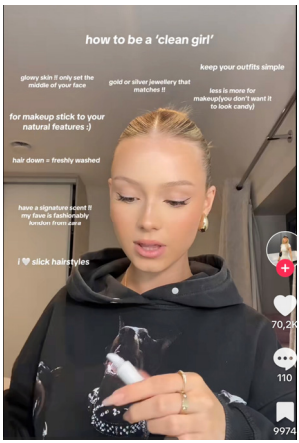


Figure 40. 'Clean girl' TikTok trend
Screenshot from @daisyherriott TikTok. Source: @daisyherriott TikTok account, September 2023.

It promotes a 'no make-up-make-up' look (which make-up artists often say are in fact more time consuming and expensive to achieve than a heavy make-up look (Birch 2020)), perfect blemish free dewy-looking skin, often a slicked back ponytail or bun, simple gold and silver jewellery. Attached to this trending aesthetic are products such as specific concealers, lip balms, lip glosses, perfumes, and so on. The aesthetic of the 'clean girl', much like 'that girl', is that of an individual who is organised, productive, and has their life in order.

Trend d) 'Coastal grandmother'

The 'coastal grandmother' trend became viral on TikTok in 2022. This is the aesthetic of a wealthy, older, refined yet relaxed woman living in the Hamptons, imagine somewhere between a Martha Stewart and a Jane Birkin.

Figure 41. 'Coastal grandmother' TikTok trend
Screenshot from @larissamariellew TikTok. Source: @larissamariellew TikTok account, June 2022.

The clothes that mark this trend are linen shirts and trousers, neutral colours, and nautical colours (blue, red, white, navy), wicker bags and straw hats, but the aesthetic can also include lavish gardens, beautiful homes with spacious kitchens and extremely expensive interiors. The TikTok creator Lex Nicoleta who first coined the term describes the aesthetic in a TikTok video as follows:

> Martha Stewart adjacent, not fully Ina Garten, think Nancy Meyers chic, it's Diane Keaton in 'Something's Gotta Give', it's Meryl Streep in 'It's Complicated', it's the Hamptons, it's my garden is bigger than your first apartment, it's a light white sweater even though it's the middle of summer, and it's a 5-carat diamond ring passed down from your great-great grandmother. That is the vibe. (Nicoleta 2022).

None of these trends are necessarily about showing off expensive hotels, business class flights or designer bags, but what they all have in common is a personification of neoliberal feminism, and the seemingly scaled-down aesthetics are still imbued with difficult-to-reach ideals (regarding body, time, clothes, housing). A myth is created, where productive habits, clean skin, athleisure[14], make-up and the shopping of clothes are used as a means to show that consumption is the route to reaching aesthetically aspirational goals. For any routine or aesthetic on social media, there is almost always a commodification aspect; whether it's convincing followers they need to invest in certain skin-care products or clothes to fit a certain identity, or a whole new set of bedding and home textiles in a certain colour scheme to fit an aesthetic. Beauty, weight, consumption, self-improvement, and productivity are all inextricably linked to the postfeminist articulations of aspirational work on social media. 'Girl-boss', 'that girl', 'clean girl' are all aesthetics that are linked to hard work, wellness, beauty, weight loss, productivity, consumption – *discipline*. The screenshots from TikTok are examples of how ideology on social media works through discourse. Viewers of the content are assumed and recruited as aspirational subjects who want to achieve and emulate the lifestyles and aesthetics that are attached to the categories of, in this case, 'that girl', 'clean girl', 'coastal grandmother' or the girl who has a four-hour long routine before starting her eight-hour working day. The perpetuation of these types of trends relies on the dominance of neoliberal feminist and postfeminist ideals amongst young women.

7.4.3 Parasocial Relationships as a Function of Aspirational Interpellation

Aspirational interpellation is thus mediated through the discourses on social media, through brands, companies, and individuals. The process of interpellation

[14] Athleisure is when activewear or athletic clothing is used as everyday outfits.

can be envisioned as happening directly from person to person; however, what is important is that it happens on a large scale, where the ideology of social media and influencer capitalism interpellates subjects and recruits them into the ideology. Another way in which aspirational interpellation functions is through the concept of parasocial relationships. In this case subjects are hailed through a relationship, which for the subject feels like a real friendship. Aspiration, admiration, and loyalty grow through conditioned conversations between influencers and followers, where the conversation is ultimately controlled by the influencer. A parasocial relationship is an apparent face-to-face relationship between the spectator and the performer; it was first theorised by Horton and Wohl (1956) in the context of the new mass media at the time, namely television, radio and movies.

In this seminal text, Horton and Wohl (1956) describe essentially a one-sided relationship, wherein there may be a sense of intimacy and reciprocity, but in reality the relationship is 'nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development' (Horton and Wohl 1956, 215). The writers focus on television and radio media as per their historical context. In the context of social media, however, there is more space for a dialogical relationship since followers are able to communicate directly with social media influencers in various ways: by commenting on their posts or videos and getting comments back, by asking questions on social media apps in comment sections or through Q&A functions that are later answered in a video, or directly communicating with an influencer through private messaging on social media apps. This partially dialogical relationship may even further obscure the fact that the influencer is still the one who holds the power to control the relationship. They can wield this control by setting boundaries (internally or explicitly to their followers, for instance by telling their followers that they are not interested in receiving unsolicited advice), and by choosing who is and is not allowed to communicate with them (this can be done by blocking accounts that they do not want to interact with). The relationship is dialogical to a certain extent, but where that ends is still at the influencer's discretion.

Influencers create a sense of intimacy partly through para-social relationships, and it is this sense of intimacy that to a large extent which distinguishes the parasocial relationships people have with social media influencers versus more traditional celebrities, whereby the influencer is interpreted more as a friend or peer. One of

the consequences of this could be that advertisements are perceived as genuine advice. Influencers take their followers along in their everyday lives; they show the insides of their homes, their morning and night routines, their skin and make-up and hair routines, their grocery shopping hauls, clothing hauls, home renovations, vacations, children, and so much more. Abidin (2016) coins the term 'perceived interconnectedness' as the way in which influencers create an impression of intimacy – she argues that this perceived interconnectedness can be interactive, reciprocal, commercial or disclosive in nature (Abidin 2016). Although their study was done on celebrities rather than influencers, Chung and Cho (2017) show that self-disclosure is essential for building a parasocial relationship between fans or social media users and celebrities. They write that 'consumers interpret celebrities' self-disclosure as a sign of friendship being offered' (Chung and Cho 2017, 489).

Horton and Wohl (1956, 216-217) describe a skewed perceived reality as one of the consequences of parasocial relationships:

> In time, the devotee – the 'fan' – comes to believe that he 'knows' the persona more intimately and profoundly than other do; that he 'understands' his character and appreciates his values and motives. Such an accumulation of knowledge and intensification of loyalty, however, appears to be a kind of growth without development, for the one-sided nature of the connection precludes a progressive and mutual reformulation of its values and aims.

Avid followers on social media stay updated on their favourite influencers' whereabouts, life updates, family life, traumas, and anything the influencers share on their platforms; this makes them think they know and understand the influencer. The loyalty that many followers feel towards certain influencers reflect the theorisation of parasocial relationships by Horton and Wohl (1956, 220), according to whom 'the audience is entreated to assume a sense of personal obligation to the performer, to help him in his struggle for 'success' if he is 'on the way up', or to maintain his success if he has already won it.' As Emma told me, the more she opens up about her personal struggles, the more unsolicited advice is offered to her by her followers. She said, 'when you are personal, they can come with a lot of unasked opinions, which can be very exhausting, but at the same time I think it's much more fun to be a part of someone's everyday life'. What she is getting at is a sort of tension where on the one hand she wants to create parasocial relationships and be a part of peoples' lives, but on the other, it

is emotionally exhausting to deal with the consequences of giving strangers such access to one's personal life.

Hanna described a sense of not quite understanding why people on social media look up to her, and a level of discomfort at the disconnect between how she sees herself and how she seems to be perceived on social media. She does not see herself as a role model, and there seems to be a sense of having been put on a pedestal that she did not ask to be put on:

> To me, I'm just a teenage girl posting videos. I can't understand why I have become so interesting or desirable on social media. People have come up to me and said they look up to me and 'you're my biggest idol' and I think that's strange, because I think about all the things I've done, and I think if they knew maybe they wouldn't look up to me. I don't see myself as an inspiration to others. And that shows that the image you create of yourself on social media is the one people believe in. I think a lot of people feel that way, a lot of my friends who are influencers don't quite understand how they got there or why people love them or could die for them or cut their hair to have the same hairstyle as them. At the end of the day, I'm just a teenager and a human and I'm not very special except for the fact that I make content. (Hanna)

While she expressed some discomfort at the idea of being idolised, at the same times she expresses the importance of catering to the wants of your followers, thereby a dependency is created between the influencer and her followers:

> On social media they look up to you as a person therefore it's important to be personal with them, to listen to them and answer their questions, to post a make-up routine video if they ask for it, so they feel heard and seen. So, I think you are dependent on your followers…it's important to affirm your followers and to show them that you are who they think you are. (Hanna)

This suggests that perhaps the notion of parasocial relationships is not something that simply occurs on social media, but something that actually necessitates the success and existence of influencers and influencer marketing. Hanna explains in what way she is dependent on her followers:

> I want to post things that my followers think is interesting so that the videos will trend. I'm dependent on them in that way, so sometimes I need to ask them what they want to see, so I can cater to those followers in the right way. Otherwise, there is a risk you might become irrelevant if you suddenly change the category of

> content. I think because you become like an idol and are portrayed as someone interesting, people want to be near you and communicate with you. (Hanna)

The most interesting part about this interview excerpt is the idea that an influencer would become irrelevant if they suddenly changed their type of content. This is interesting as it comments on the fact that once a parasocial relationship is built between a content creator and a follower, the follower may start expecting certain things from the influencer, including how often they post, how open and personal they are in their videos, and what type of content they post. Hanna points out an aspect of the power relations on social media, where the followers have some level of power to withhold support in the form of likes, comments, and shares (the visibility currency of social media) if the content creator veers away from their usual content in a direction that the followers do not appreciate.

So far, we have focused on the ways in which the influencer controls a parasocial relationship, where it is the fan or the follower who has a perceived notion of intimacy and friendship with the influencer. However, a parasocial relationship may also mean that the influencer sees her followers as her loyal friends, as people she can rely on:

> My followers also help me, in one sense I see them as my friends. I post fashion content, so for example if I'm going somewhere I might post different alternative outfits and ask my followers what they think I should wear, and I trust them to give me their honest opinions on what looks best. So, I think they affect you, it's almost like you have to listen to them…because they support you and make you feel good. Social media is addictive and a big reason why I continue is because I'm addicted to that dopamine kick. I'm addicted to the attention; my followers boost my confidence and my self-esteem…you care about what people think at the end of the day so in one way they're my friends and in another they're my biggest enemies. Because oftentimes I have also been disappointed with what people have said or people who have put me down as a person. (Hanna)

This excerpt complicates the picture that the influencer has all the power in these parasocial relationships. In one sense they do, but as explained by this respondent, she also adjusts her behaviour according to what her followers desire and expect from her. Since the survival of an influencer is dependent on the currency of likes, comments, and visibility, it becomes important to appease her followers so that she can uphold her popularity. Connections can be made here to the feminisation

of social media labour – part of this intense desire to satisfy followers has to do with the expectation on women to conform to ideals that are projected onto them. The social acceptance around criticising women's bodies and general appearance also perpetuates this dependency that is built between influencers and their followers. Influencers often dedicate videos or images to tell their followers how thankful they are for them, that they are like a family or a gang of loyal best friends, and that their followers are the only reason why they are able to live the dream life that they have. This actually is aligned with the Marxist-feminist analysis of social media usage as being unpaid labour. What the influencer is saying has the purpose of showing gratitude to their followers who show them love and support, but there is no analysis of the fact that what the followers are doing is in fact digital and aspirational work – which translates into visibility, engagement and profit for the influencer. Josefine takes seriously her interactions with her followers in the form of comments and replies; she sees this as community building and an important aspect of building a successful influencer career:

> It's the influencers who have a community that really have a strong relationship with their followers and that's what I'm trying to create with my followers by answering all the comments I get. I really talk directly to them, and I make sure to answer all their comments and emails. They really see me as their digital best friend or digital big sister, and I really try to create a community. (Josefine)

This excerpt reveals that a parasocial relationship can be that of a friendship but also a sisterhood. The 'digital best friend' and 'digital big sister' character is a form of nichification on social media that is embodied by many popular social media influencers, such as Tinx (Christina Najjar) and Tefi (Estefanía Pessoa) on TikTok (amongst many others). These types of parasocial relationships are very effective at creating a strong sense of trust amongst younger followers, which in its turn can be translated to financial gain for the influencer.

Matilda Djerf is a Swedish influencer who has become extremely famous through social media, at first mostly on Instagram, and now also on TikTok. As of November 2023, she had 1.5 million followers on TikTok and 3.1 million followers on Instagram. This creator balances intimacy and disclosure very carefully with privacy and a high level of personal integrity, and her fans are many and adoring. She owns her own fashion brand, Djerf Avenue, which made over two million US dollars in revenue in its first year (Lundberg Toresson 2022).

Matilda Djerf has created an immense international fanbase on social media, and it is clear that she is very idolised by girls and women on the internet. On TikTok, I began noticing that girls were posting videos, sharing personal stories about their problems with self-image and self-esteem, or sometimes even lamenting over wanting clothes from Djerf Avenue because they want to be like Matilda, but not being able to afford the clothes. They would tag Matilda Djerf or her brand Djerf Avenue in these videos, and some of them would get a personal message from Matilda Djerf, with an empathetic message and sometimes an offer to send them free clothes. This exemplifies a level of parasocial relationships that is highly intimate. When I search 'Matilda Djerf' in the search bar on the TikTok app, countless videos come up posted by people who wear her brand's clothes and people who look up to her – sometimes she is referred to as more like a phenomenon or cultural moment than an influencer or a brand. The first image depicts a TikTok content creator who is doing a 'try on haul' with clothes from Djerf Avenue. The text on the video states 'Open & try my Djerf Avenue package Matilda sent me'. The second screenshot is from a TikTok video where the content creator is wearing a headband from Djerf Avenue, with the text 'Matilda sent me the rainbow headband I was talking about after seeing my vid [video]'. This suggests that Matilda Djerf, or one of her employees keeps a look out for social media users and content creators who mention Matilda or the brand and select some to send out gifts to. This act in itself is not much different from how PR companies send out gifts, but because they are often accompanied by a personalised message from Matilda Djerf herself, it is perceived as much more personal and genuine, reflecting the parasocial relationship Matilda Djerf has managed to create with her followers. The third image depicted is from a TikTok user called Amy, the text on the video says: 'The feminine urge to purchase literally anything from Djerf Avenue' and in the comment section, we see that Matilda Djerf herself has commented saying 'LOVE YOU and this 😭😭😭❤️❤️❤️'. The creator of the video has then replied to Matilda's comment, writing 'TRY ON HAUL! I can't believe matilda commented 😭♡'.

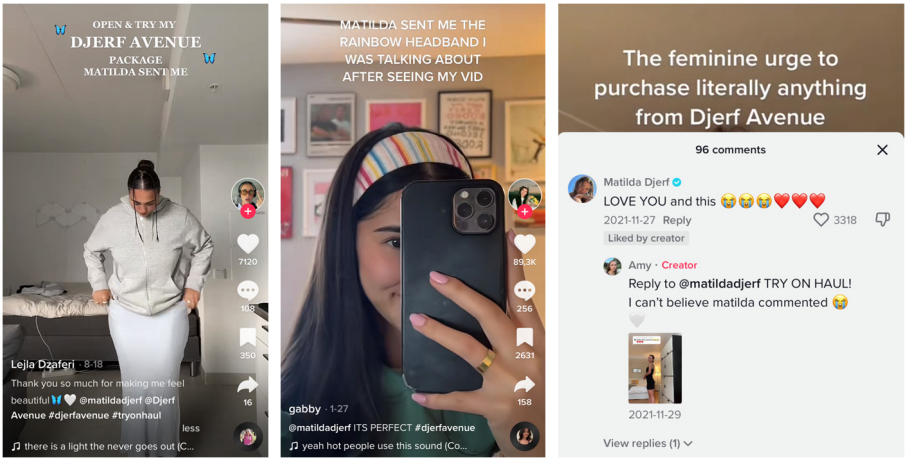


Figure 42. TikTok videos about Djerf Avenue
Screenshots from TikTok. Source: @lejladzaferi TikTok account, August 2022 (left), @dillydallygabby TikTok account, January 2022 (centre), Amy (username unavailable), November 2021 (right).

These examples illustrate how aspirational interpellation actually happens and what it can look like. On one level, content creators are being hailed as aspirational subjects by Djerf Avenue and through Matilda Djerf's personal account, and on another level, social media users who are viewing these videos are in turn also interpellated and hailed as aspirational subjects, who might be able to come closer to becoming someone Matilda Djerf would notice if they played their cards right. As I write my final draft of this chapter in October 2023, I search 'Matilda Djerf' on TikTok to verify something and notice that her account is deactivated. It turns out that her and her brand Djerf Avenue have found themselves in a controversy on social media due to the fact that they had allegedly reported content of content creators recommending 'dupes'[15] (Bloch 2023) of some of Djerf Avenue's pieces such as their fruit print pyjamas. As a response, Matilda Djerf and Djerf Avenue have received immense amounts of critical comments akin to bullying from social media users who ridicule the brand for trying to trademark some of their designs when Djerf herself is known for using and recommending dupe products in her earlier days of influencing. This sudden avalanche of criticism towards Matilda Djerf represents the extreme volatility of parasocial relationships and the

[15] The word 'dupe' is short for duplicate – in the beauty and fashion world it refers to a cheaper but similar copycat version of a luxury product.

influencer industry in general. Someone who is idolised can suddenly become the object of ridicule, criticism and even hatred. Perhaps this also says something about the more extreme parasocial relationships, where influencers are put on a pedestal based on how followers perceive them; the higher that pedestal is, the rougher a potential fall will be.

While it has not been the focus of this chapter, there is plenty of criticism and resistance on social media as well. There are both smaller creators and bigger influencers who talk about the problems with parasocial relationships, who criticises the wild overconsumption that is caused by the influencer culture, and who try to remind their followers that what they see on social media is highly mediated and not a reflection of reality. There is a constant negotiating and dialogue happening in social media discourse, and there are always people in social media who try to push against the dominant neoliberal ideology of self-improvement and hustle culture. Influencers encourage their followers to not compare themselves to others, to prioritise rest, to be proud of themselves for just getting out of bed that day. The object of study for this chapter, however, has been the dominant ideology and discourses on social media, which are informed by neoliberalism and capitalism. The influencer profession cannot survive without comparison and aspiration, and a constant growing reserve labour of army who are ready to step in when given the opportunity. As Kukla (2018, 31) writes, 'interpellation is oddly inescapable; it constitutes identity even among those who explicitly resist or reject the interpellation.' Comparison is necessary for commercialised social media's survival, and although people are complex beings with many sides to them, it is very difficult to resist or reject being interpellated into an aspiring consumerist subject on social media.

7.5 Shared Values and Responsibility

As discussed in the previous sections, in my interviews with influencers, it was clear that an important aspect in their decision making when it comes to accepting brand deal jobs, was whether their perception of the company's brand image matched their personal brand image as an influencer well. At the same time, in some instances, they said that if the brand does not align with their personal brand, but offer to pay a lot for a brand deal, they might still take the deal. These

decisions seemed to be mostly based on outwardly visible aspects of a brand and brand discourse, rather than the inner workings of a company. On the contrary, in my interviews with employees of fashion companies, they tended to privilege the idea of 'shared values' over that of brand image.

Shared values and visions were brought up both in the context of which production facilities and factories the company is willing to work with, and which influencers they would be willing to work with.

> I think you should stand for the product you are advertising, and from the company side we should also choose influencers who share our values, and I know our marketing team works really hard with that. It's a risk for us if we choose influencers who don't share our culture and values, we would not want to associate ourselves with that. (Elsa)

While there may be examples where companies strictly stick to this idea that they only offer brand deals to influencers who share their 'culture' and 'values', this seems to be an unstable measurement since influencers also need to consider the monetary value that is being offered to them. The idea of shared values also lacks clarity. What supposed values a company markets itself as holding does not necessarily need to correspond with the operations and hierarchical structures of that company, and likewise the persona an influencer creates does not always correspond to her inner beliefs. In terms of sustainability claims, the sustainability managers I spoke to believed it was important that influencers are responsible communicators. Hilda said she thinks 'they should follow the marketing laws. Anyone who makes claims in a professional role… if they are spreading a message, they need facts to back that up.' In a similar line of argumentation, Victoria said 'I think some influencers, at least the very big ones should have sustainability requirements, so they have a responsibility towards their followers as well as towards companies.' Sofia also believed influencers carry a responsibility in how they choose to advertise:

> I think influencers are responsible, that's my opinion. They are businesspeople not private people, so of course they have a responsibility. Laws haven't really caught up to this yet. It's often unclear what they recommend and whether it's a paid post…that needs to be made clear… things have shifted so that many people are now critical towards advertising, and when it's an influencer recommending a product, it feels like a friend giving you advice and therefore it must be good.

> I don't think they have less or more responsibility than other companies. But sometimes influencers say they care about sustainability, but at the same time they do a large number of ads, personally that feels a bit hollow. (Sofia)

It is interesting that the onus is placed on the influencer to be responsible for what they advertise since they can be considered a company rather than an individual. Influencers advertise what companies ask them to advertise; they are a vehicle for the product and message of the company in question. The influencers relay information given to them by their clients (the companies), so it may seem paradoxical that they should be responsible for spreading correct information. The last interview excerpt expresses concern around the hypocrisy that some influencers may say they care about sustainability and still do a large number of ads. By this logic, most large clothing companies in Sweden also say they care about sustainability and still create an immense number of advertisements. An influencer's main income is generated from doing ads and brand deals, this is an unavoidable fact. When an influencer has accepted a brand deal from a company, they are sent a brief which details how the campaign should be performed and what they should say or write in their posts, how many photos or videos are required, what aesthetic the client wants, and so on. I asked during my interviews with influencers whether they ever receive information in these briefs pertaining to the sustainability of the product they are being asked to market or the company, or if they get information around garment worker wages and working conditions in the case of fashion companies. None of the influencers had ever received such information as part of a brand deal brief.

7.6 Final Remarks

Social media is an endless universe of all kinds of content, trends, opinions, and discussions. I have chosen to focus on a particular few that are especially relevant for this dissertation. For almost every trend or aesthetic, discussions, backlashes, and hot takes tend to follow. There is plenty of criticism on social media, for example content creators criticising certain trends from a pop cultural perspective or an academic perspective. Social media is a very effective site through which ideology is spread, interpellating subjects and accelerating consumption, regardless of the criticism, cancellations and boycott attempts that are made

against certain brands, companies or influencers. The latter are often assumed to hold a lot of power because they are capable of influencing the thoughts and minds, and behaviours of large groups of people, especially young impressionable people. However, power dynamics play on all different levels of a system, and as Hoskins (2022, 59) writes, 'the power to influence the industry is not the same as the power to control the industry.' While influencers may have the power to make someone want to buy a certain product, they are still caught up in a system where they need to produce advertisements for corporations in order to make an income.

Social media labour in general, and influencing in particular, is in most cases precarious labour that survives and thrives on aspiration, where the winners are the few influencers at the top of the food chain, and the corporations they advertise for. The losers are not only the consumerist subjects who become convinced that they need to better themselves through consumption and the aspiring influencers who will never reach the top, but the environment that is destroyed by overconsumption, and the workers who produce the clothes and other products at low wages so that corporations can continue to make profits, expand their businesses, and have massive budgets for marketing and advertising, thereby reinforcing this spiral. I wanted to interview influencers because they operate in an industry which is presented as a fantasy for (mostly) young women who want to become successful, and to better understand the role of the influencer, not only from an observer's perspective but through first hand conversations with influencers at different stages in their careers. Most of what we see on social media is highly curated and mediated through expectations of behaviour and appearance. What I found in my interviews were honest insights into the inner thoughts and feelings of influencers, things that they may not post on their social media accounts. The fact that social media labour is highly gendered also clarified how important it is to investigate this industry in relation to fashion and sustainability. It is easy to contrast rich influencers to the poor garment workers; however, a more nuanced analysis reveals that both of these female-dominated lines of work are caught up in unfair capitalist systems – and due to the assumptions of femininity on which they are built, both are reformulated as empowering jobs for women in different ways.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

How did the concepts of sustainability and feminism come to be so important for the fast-fashion industry? How can we make sense of the ways in which discourses of sustainability, female empowerment and racial diversity are adopted into corporate communication and advertising strategies? And finally, why is it important that we examine these discourses and narratives? I attempt to answer those questions in this concluding chapter.

In this thesis, I have told the story of how sustainability is envisioned in the Swedish fashion industry, and how notions of female empowerment and environmentalism are represented in the discourses and narratives of fashion advertising and communications. Through collecting and analysing visual material and interview material, I have showed the ways in which meaning production and discourses interpellate consumers as 'conscious', 'green', and 'feminist', and critically analysed their connections to exploitation, consumption and othering. The purpose of this last chapter of the thesis is to tie the three empirical chapters together in order see how sustainability, gender, and social media have become implicated into the socio-ecological crisis that the fashion industry has created.

The first part of the conclusion is a recounting of the overarching story of this thesis. Here I present the main findings of the three different empirical chapters and explain how they are connected in this realm of 'sustainable fashion'. In the second part of this chapter, I situate my research within a wider debate on sustainability, fashion, feminism and consumption, and demonstrate the research contributions of this thesis.

8.1 The Story of Fashion

Swedish fashion companies engage widely in green communication. Discourses of sustainability and environmentally friendly fashion appear in sustainability reports, on brand websites, on brand social media accounts, in marketing and advertising campaigns, and in the words of the brand employees. These narratives vary in essence and delivery: some focus on energy changes in the fashion industry while others may focus on 'conscious consumption'. In the first empirical chapter of the thesis, I presented visual and interview material reflecting the many varied ways in which the concept of sustainability is represented in Swedish fashion industry discourse. For instance, I showed how themes of futurity, technology and pristine nature were used to represent sustainability. Overwhelmingly across the different material analysed, there was a strong faith in technological solutions for making the fashion industry sustainable. More specifically, I was able to establish that the concept of circularity and the circular economy carried a significant amount of this faith. However, I also illustrated the problematic nature of using the concept of circularity as a silver bullet, as the concept is yet to deliver on its promises. I discussed the concept of greenwashing and showed how the corporate co-optation of activist language in advertisements and on products contributed to greenwashing. I also argued that greenwashing may encompass subtler forms of co-optation, for instance by using the concept of mending directly in products (selling newly produced products that look like they have been mended). The representations of sustainability which focused more on consumption tended to premier notions of togetherness, care and environmental responsibility. Through phrases such as 'do your part', fashion brands interpellate consumers into becoming eco-conscious subjects. By using the expectation of individual responsibility, green marketing helps create green consumer subjects who, through their consumption, want to contribute to a more sustainable industry (even though we as consumers may understand that this is fraught).

This aforementioned notion of care was also present in chapter six, and an examination of this concept revealed that it plays an integral role in the intersection of sustainability and gender, as other feminist scholars and feminist political ecologists have shown (Leach 2007; Foster 2017; Resurrección 2017). I argued in this chapter that 'care' is both assumed of and demanded from women. The underlying belief of the nurturing woman is used in order to justify

overconsumption and refashion it as sustainable and ethical. Thus, the intersection of gender and the environment is manifested through different visions of care, whether that be caring for your clothes by washing them correctly, caring for the environment by donating (or 'recycling') your unwanted clothes through take-back schemes (even if they end up in a landfill in Kenya) or caring for a garment worker by consuming from a company that claims to empower their workers (even if they are paid below a living wage).

The idea of a consumer exercising her care for a garment worker through consuming clothes, predicates itself on racialisation and racial othering. In chapter six, I examined how myths of cultural differences (recall the interview where a sustainability manager attributed the issue of overtime in factories in 'the far East' to a cultural problem of inefficiency) leads to the racial othering of garment workers. It is this othering that contributes to the hierarchy and dichotomy of north/south relations. The same othering creates the notion that benevolent consumers from the north can help or save the empowerment-seeking women workers in the south. The logic underpinning discourses of female empowerment in the fashion companies analysed in this dissertation thus reflects a Eurocentric understanding of global labour.

In chapter six, I also demonstrated how gender plays into the environmentally conscious subject, and why it is so often the case that women are hailed as environmentally responsible consumers. The interpellation of consumers has been gendered since the creation of the advertising industry, and in today's context of sustainability in fashion, the interpellation continues to be gendered, thereby turning women into self-disciplining, green consumers.

The role of digital and social media was central to the arguments I made in chapter seven of this thesis. There I discussed the important role social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok play in consumer culture and the spreading of consumerist discourse. In chapters three and seven, I discussed how postfeminist and neoliberal ideals in many ways are necessary components for a commercially successful influencer career (for most women influencers). In a job where a majority of the income comes from advertising, consumption must constantly be encouraged, whether it be explicitly through ads or implicitly through the act of displaying an aspirational lifestyle. Given the historical association of consumption with the household sphere, and thus women, it is no surprise that still to this day women are fed advertisements for consumer products and services

which adhere to expectations of beauty, youth, self-discipline and efficiency. In influencer capitalism, it may then be argued, social reproduction – such as childcare, household work and other forms of affective labour – is monetised. Not in the sense that influencers are literally paid to clean their own homes or take care of their children, but because they are paid to advertise goods and services that facilitate the aspirational image of a perfect postfeminist subject and a perfect home. Fraser (2017) argues that the survival of financialised capitalism and its ability to accumulate endlessly rely on social reproduction; she also argues that capitalism spurs on a 'crisis of care'. Effectively, then, many of the images produced by influencers help reinforce an illusion that this crisis does not in fact exist.

To view influencers simply as powerful entities manipulating 'regular people' is, however, misguided. My interviews with influencers showed that they often carry a deep sense of ambivalence towards their work and the role they play in encouraging consumption. This sense of ambivalence is in some ways tied to the precarious nature of digital labour (specifically influencer work in this case) and the fact that a successful career in influencing builds upon a relentless demand for visibility and authenticity, which in turn require a level of aesthetic and emotional labour that can be exhausting. Therefore, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of the role of the influencer in consumer society, an understanding which recognises that influencers and content creators are caught up in the same capitalist system as consumers.

Lastly, I developed the concept of aspirational interpellation, where I showed how aspiration is an important function through which dominant consumerist ideologies hail aspiring subjects into consumer culture. Through parasocial relations, consumers feel close to influencers and a trust is built between the two – this trust can then be translated into loyalty and by extension, a guarantee of continuous consumption. In this sense, the influencer acts as a vehicle through which the hailing occurs. Visually and discursively, aspirational interpellation can manifest through trends on social media such as the 'that girl' trend. In these trends, aspiration is exercised as a way of convincing people that if they buy certain products, they can become better, more disciplined and effective versions of themselves, thus manifesting a future self that is 'more like her' while also being 'my true self'.

This dissertation has been a story of fashion, but it has also been a story of labour, sustainability, consumption, ideology and gender. Through my research, I have showed that a study of sustainability in fashion advertising and communication is enriched by a detailed analysis which takes into account the role gender and global labour have played in the history of textiles and fashion.

8.2 Clothing Crisis: A Serious Consumption Criticism

Many scholars and writers who have written about fashion and consumption, including Schor (2007, 1999), Fletcher and Tham (2015) Brooks et al. (2017), Hoskins (2022) and Barber (2021) see the growth logic which underpins the mass production and consumption of clothes as a major threat to the possibility of a sustainable future. Schor (2007, 17) explains how consumption scholars of the 1980s, 90s, and 00s, positioned themselves against the classic consumer critics such as 'Veblen, Adorno and Horkheimer, Galbraith, Baudrillard, and Marcuse', arguing that their stance on high versus popular culture was elitist, and their assessment of agency-less and brainwashed consumers reductive. And although this has been a useful intervention, Schor (2007) argues that the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction, leaving us with a depoliticisation and inability to analyse consumerism on systematic grounds. Mapping out the three main strands of consumer criticism, beginning with Veblen's The Theory of the Leisure Class and his concept of conspicuous consumption, followed by Adorno and Horkheimer's theorisation on the culture industries, and ending with 'Galbraith (1958), Packard (1957), Friedan (1964), and Ewen (1988)', Schor (2007, 17) argues that 'the flaws of these models are not necessarily fatal' and that if anything we can learn from and build upon these traditions of critical consumer studies.

Soper (2020) lays out the major contrasting views of consumerism as the liberal model on the one hand, which, to put it simply, views consumers as rational and free agents, and the Marxist model on the other hand, by which consumers are thought to be 'systematically denied access to genuine self-understanding through the manipulations of the market and the culture industry' (Soper 2020, 59). Within the Marxist perspective, there is also an assumption that consumer society makes people want things that they do not truly need, which is a complicated

stance in the sense that it homogenises people's perceived needs. A similar criticism is laid out by Stavrakakis as illustrated below:

> First, the aim that consumerism is founded on the distortion of real/natural human needs and on the creation and proliferation of 'false desires. Second, the claim that these false desires are stimulated and disseminated through advertising discourse, which sustains the false consciousness required for their acceptance (Stavrakakis 2007, 233).

Stavrakakis (2007) argues that the radical leftist criticism of consumerism has either been too essentialist and naturalist or too constructionist and cultural where the focus is solely on the symbolic realm of consumerism.

He questions the way that radical critics 'have often seen advertising as a brainwashing activity, which by stimulating false desires, deepens our enslavement to consumerism and capitalist exploitation' (Stavrakakis 2007, 233). I follow this line of argumentation and believe that this way of understanding consumerism and advertising in terms of false consciousness is too simplistic. Similar to Soper (2020), Stavrakakis makes the case that no criticism of consumerism will be adequate unless it seriously considers the element of jouissance:

> If consumerism has been victorious, it is because it has managed – through the fantasmatic effects of advertising and experiences of partial jouissance – to register and re-shape the logic of desire, and no critique will ever be effective without acknowledging this fact and formulating an alternative administration of enjoyment (Stavrakakis 2007, 235).

In Soper's case this is where she uses the concept of 'alternative hedonism' to argue for a major shift away from consumer society to other forms of fulfilment that can exist in tandem with ecological sustainability. While I am inspired by such a take, the focus of my research has been on understanding the intricate and varies mechanisms which underpin and ensure the continuation of the current status quo. In this dissertation, I have sought to rekindle a systemic anti-capitalist criticism of consumption, while remaining aware of not falling into an analysis built upon moralising or reductive arguments. The basis for my consumer criticism is founded on a conviction that global production and consumption of clothes necessarily must decrease drastically in order to adhere to the sustainability goals stipulated by agenda 2030. It is also founded in the deep desire for the

encouragement of consumerism as a means to address global socio-ecological problems to end.

As seen in my analyses of sustainability advertisements and communication in the Swedish fashion industry, individualism has been harnessed by companies to encourage individual action against climate change – this reflects a wider societal and political discourse. People are continuously told that they can make a difference through recycling, donations and shopping sustainably. It can be a well-intended strategy to prevent people from falling into a spiral of hopeless apathy, and instead feel like they have some agency and control in shaping a more sustainable world. The problem with this approach, however, is that it neglects the importance of organised collective efforts through mobilisation. But even then, you might think, at least it is better if individuals are affecting some sort of small change than doing nothing at all. While that may be true, this individualistic approach becomes particularly problematic when corporations use its rhetoric in order to sell products while making the consumer feel as though they are helping the environment. Capitalism needs high levels of consumption in order to guarantee continuous and accelerated growth, and high levels of consumption necessitate environmental degradation in the current production system of fashion. To encourage people to consume different, slightly more 'eco-friendly' products is thus redundant, and further distracts us from the hard truth that we are simply consuming too much.

This thesis has been a deliberately interdisciplinary endeavour, where I have sought to bring together sustainability, gender, social media, and advertising to better understand how discourses within the fashion industry operate, circulate and gain power. My hope is that by bringing out the articulation of gender and the environment, I have been able to show that an analysis of sustainability in relation to advertising and fashion is not complete without an analysis of gender. Many of the issues and concepts discussed in this dissertation have been areas of inquiry for scholars in different fields such as feminist media studies, critical fashion studies, sustainability studies, and political ecology, and as such I see my research as a contribution to those fields. The gap in the research that I have attempted to contribute to is shedding light on the interconnectedness between these issues, and showing why it is important that we understand them from an interdisciplinary perspective. More broadly, my research has aimed to contribute to truly emancipatory feminist and sustainability efforts.

Neoliberal feminism and its postfeminist ideals have helped to resignify feminist goals (Fraser 2013); in the influencer industry, this manifests in steering women into the fantasies of social media work, while most aspirational influencers' material conditions are unchanged. Influencers thus become implicated in creating a skewed representation of success and perfection. Therefore, I maintain that we shall take seriously the things which are often associated with frivolity, such as influencers and shopping. Advertising today is not only on billboards, but also in our phones, from the moment we wake up until the moment we fall asleep, and today's younger generation grow up inside an ecosystem where they provide free data to advertisers on social media from a very young age. I argue that although it is the giant fossil-fuel corporations and governments that are the biggest perpetrators of climate change and environmental degradation, an analysis of the individual consumer or the individual advertiser can help us understand the ways in which we are all complicit in the status quo of fossil capital. Understanding consumption and fashion is one way to do just that.

It is the dominant, pro-private sector discourse which dominates communication and advertising in the fast fashion industry, even when it comes to EU proposals, while the critical discourses are not as visible. The anti-consumerist voices are marginalised and deemed unrealistic; thus, this thesis acts as a call to take those voices seriously. In my research, I have contributed to a broader understanding of the dynamics of how marketing engages feminist and sustainability narratives and how these narratives are created and distributed to consumers. There is a desperate clinging onto current levels of mass consumption, and in this context, we let the faith in technological fixes be the solution for crises that are complicated and intricate and in need of a more systemic addressing. It is high time that we wake up from the dreamt-up imaginaries of green and clean fashion that do not require us to alter our lifestyles, and instead confront the status quo of eternal economic growth and infinite consumption.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Questions for sustainability managers:

How do you define sustainable fashion?

What's involved in your daily tasks at work and what are the main challenges that you deal with?

Which consumers do you think care most about sustainability or being environmentally friendly in their consumption?

Should consumers buy differently, or should they buy less in general?

Who should carry the responsibility in making the fashion industry more sustainable?

Does the industry empower women? In what ways?

Is there currently a problem with greenwashing in advertising?

Some advertisements give the impression that consumers are creating a more fair and sustainable world by buying clothes, do you find this to be an accurate picture of reality or are there potentially some problems with this type of communication?

Social media has become an important vehicle for sales and marketing. What responsibility do you think influencers have when they do paid partnerships for brands?

Do you think there might be a problem with consumers being fed with advertisements all the time through influencers on social media?

How do you envision sustainability to be achieved while also keeping prices affordable? How can this equation be solved?

Is it possible to simultaneously keep retail prices affordable, while garment worker wages need to increase (living wage), and new technology needs to be implemented? What according to you is the biggest challenge here?

The dilemma of used clothing ending up in landfills is a big challenge. How does your company deal with this challenge? How do we make sense of that in terms of producing large amounts of clothes?

Recycling itself can be really complex yet is often pushed as a solution. Can garments made from recycled polyester be fully recycled again? If not, can this be classified as a circular product?

Do you have faith in the concept of circularity and the circular economy?

Questions for influencers:

What is your occupation?

What type of content do you post?

Which social media platforms do you mainly use? How many followers do you have on these platforms?

Do you get many brand deals? What type of companies reach out to you?

What do you think about before agreeing to an ad campaign?

How much do you typically get paid for an ad campaign?

What type of information are you given from the company ahead of an ad campaign? Have you ever received information about sustainability or how the products are made when it comes to fashion ad campaigns?

What are your thoughts on your role in advertising and pushing people to consume?

Questions for NGOs/researchers:

How do you define sustainable fashion?

What is the biggest problem or challenge according to you with the fashion industry?

Are clothing brands in the ready-made garment sector doing enough sustainability work?

Do you think overproduction and overconsumption is a problem?

Consumption is necessary for clothing companies to survive, yet overconsumption is a challenge. How are those to be reconciled, can they be?

Solutions to problems in the fashion industry are often presented as a combination of technological improvements, to techniques such as recycling, organic cotton and ethical consumption. From your research or experience you have, how do you interpret these solutions?

In your opinion is there anyway the industry could become sustainable and work within planetary boundaries without drastically reducing production globally?

The garment industry is a major contributor to environmental destruction, but also an important global employer for garment workers. What is your perspective on this issue? Can the industry become clean and sustainable while higher wages, rights and safety is ensured for garment workers?

Does the industry empower women, if so, how? Consumers or garment workers.

What would systemic change look like for fashion and the clothing industry?

Who has agency to change the fashion industry and through what means?

What role does social media play in driving a particular type of consumption?

From your perspective, are there any issues with how brands communicate sustainability issues with their consumers?

Do you think there are any issues with greenwashing in the marketing and advertising of sustainable fashion?

Does the fashion industry get more criticized or held to a higher standard than other industries?

Do you think there may be a relationship between the gender of a consumer and ethical, conscious or sustainable consumption?

Do you see femvertising as an issue that leads to over consumption?

Does the industry co-opt social movements (feminism, social justice, climate activism)?

What happens in audits of garment factories?

What type of environmental issues have you come across in your work?

Have you seen any environmentally related health issues amongst garment workers?

What do you think about circularity, do you have faith in it as a solution?

What do you think of the communication brands have around sustainability?

Fashioning the Ecological Crisis

The global fashion industry is one of the most polluting and environmentally damaging industries. Profits from garment production rely on the exploitation of cheap, often female labour, predominantly from the global South. And yet, despite growing public awareness of greenwashing and insufficient ethical standards in the fashion industry, mass consumption of clothing is not slowing down. This dissertation focuses on articulations of the environment, gender, and race through a study of sustainability and feminist discourses in fashion advertising and communication in Sweden – a country that prides itself on being a leader in sustainability and gender equality. Through an analysis of advertisements, social media discourse and interviews with influencers and sustainability managers in Sweden, the thesis deconstructs contemporary fashion imaginaries to reveal how ideology and interpellation play a significant role in maintaining the dreams of sustainable and ethical consumption.

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