

Selling women the green dream: the paradox of feminism and sustainability in fashion marketing

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Abstract

This article explores the paradox of corporations using social and environmental justice concerns to market products that are themselves made in conditions of environmental and social injustice, most often in the Global South. The effects of the fashion industry on people is two-pronged: 1) the unsafe and exploitative conditions under which many garment workers operate, and 2) the severe and harmful water and air pollution caused by fashion industry factories. There are thus contradictions inherent in the manner in which corporations, through their marketing, seek to foster feminism and environmentalism, whilst sourcing their garments from factories that operate in problematic ways. Using case studies of advertising campaigns from three Swedish companies, H&M, Monki and Gina Tricot, we conducted a discourse analysis to understand the messages to consumers as well as the image of the company that is portrayed. Through our political ecology analysis, we suggest that the promotion of feminism and environmentalism is not consistently applied by companies in their own practices and could at worst be labeled green and 'fem washing.' These approaches can also be deeply problematic when they lead to the exotification of others, and cultural appropriation. We further find that the marketing strategies in fashion serve not only to promote the sale of products but also have the effect of placing environmental responsibility onto individual consumers. Ultimately, fashion marketing serves to obfuscate ecologically unequal exchange and the true costs of fashion.

Key words: gender, marketing, consumption, feminism, fashion, textiles, advertising, ecologically unequal exchange, sustainability

Résumé

Cet article explore le paradoxe des entreprises qui utilisent des préoccupations de justice sociale et environnementale pour commercialiser des produits qui sont eux-mêmes fabriqués dans des conditions d'injustice environnementale et sociale, le plus souvent dans les pays du Sud. Les effets de l'industrie de la mode sur les personnes sont doubles: 1) les conditions de travail dangereuses et abusives des travailleurs du vêtement, et 2) la pollution grave et nocive de l'eau et de l'air causée par les usines de l'industrie de la mode. Il y a donc des contradictions inhérentes à la manière dont les entreprises, à travers leur marketing, cherchent à favoriser le féminisme et l'environnementalisme, tout en s'approvisionnant dans des usines qui fonctionnent de manière problématique. À partir d'études de cas sur les campagnes publicitaires de trois sociétés suédoises, H&M, Monki et Gina Tricot, nous avons mené une analyse du discours pour comprendre les messages adressés aux consommateurs ainsi que l'image de l'entreprise qui est représentée. À travers notre analyse de l'écologie politique, nous suggérons que la promotion du féminisme et de l'environnementalisme n'est pas systématiquement appliquée par les entreprises dans leurs propres pratiques et pourrait au pire être qualifiée de verte et de «lavage féministe.» Ces approches peuvent également être profondément problématiques lorsqu'elles conduisent à l'exotification des autres et à l'appropriation culturelle. Nous constatons en outre que les stratégies de commercialisation de la mode servent non seulement à promouvoir la vente de produits, mais ont également pour effet de confier la responsabilité environnementale aux consommateurs individuels. En fin de compte, le marketing de la mode sert à masquer les échanges écologiquement inégaux et les véritables coûts de la mode.

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Mots-clés: genre, marketing, consommation, féminisme, mode, textile, publicité, échange écologiquement inégal, durabilité

Resumen

Este artículo explora la paradoja de las corporaciones que utilizan las preocupaciones de justicia social y ambiental para productos de mercado que son, en sí mismos, fabricados en condiciones de injusticia social y ambiental, frecuentemente en el Sur Global. Los efectos de la industria de la moda en la gente son dobles: 1) las condiciones de inseguridad y explotación en que muchos trabajadores textiles trabajan, y 2) la severa y nociva contaminación de aire y agua causada por las fábricas industriales de ropa. De este modo se pueden encontrar contradicciones inherentes en la manera en que las corporaciones, a través de la mercadotecnia, buscan apoyar al feminismo y ambientalismo, mientras que sus prendas se originan en fábricas que operan en condiciones cuestionables. Con base en los estudios de campañas publicitarias de tres compañías suecas, H&M, Monki y Gina Tricot, llevamos a cabo un análisis discursivo para entender los mensajes a los consumidores. De igual manera hacemos énfasis en cómo la imagen de las compañías son representadas. A través de nuestro análisis desde la ecología política, sugerimos que la promoción del feminismo y el ambientalismo por parte de las compañías, no tiene una aplicación coherente en sus propias prácticas. Incluso, en el peor caso, sus prácticas podrían ser etiquetadas como un “lavado” verde y feminista. Estas prácticas pueden además ser gravemente problemáticas cuando llevan la exotización del otro y la apropiación cultural. Encontramos que las estrategias publicitarias en el campo de la moda sirven, además de para promover la venta de sus productos, para tener el efecto de colocar la responsabilidad ambiental en los consumidores. En última instancia, la mercadotecnia de la industria de la moda se encarga de ocultar el comercio ecológicamente desigual y los verdaderos costos de la moda.

Palabras clave: género, mercadotecnia, marketing, consumo, feminismo, moda, textil, publicidad, comercio ecológicamente desigual, sustentabilidad

1. Introduction

Feminism and environmentalism have in recent years become big topics in the fashion world in their own right. They have become so popular that these days many of the major 'fast fashion'² brands have advertisements or products with feminist messages and sustainable lines of clothing. But exactly how and why did these elements become popular marketing strategies? In the wake of dozens of exposures of poor working conditions, bad environmental impacts and higher scrutiny of factories and supply chain transparency, the fast fashion industry has been facing an enormous public relations challenge for decades (Hoskins 2014). In the 1990s, scandals about the use of sweatshops in the fashion industry began to spread globally, with brands like Nike receiving criticism for exploiting workers offshore. Since then, awareness of poor labor conditions of producers has grown, with the biggest modern scandal of the fashion industry being the Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh seven years ago, where 1,134 garment factory workers were killed (White 2018). Awareness of the environmentally detrimental impacts of the fashion industry has also grown significantly in the last few years, with investigative reports and documentaries like *The True Cost* (2015) and *RiverBlue* (2016) exposing fast fashion as one of the most polluting and resource intensive industries in the world (Siegle 2016). Despite all these hard-hitting criticisms, most companies are not willing to encourage people to consume fewer clothes. For instance, in an interview from January 2019 published in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, the former CEO of H&M Karl-Johan Persson said "we should not stop consuming since it leads to economic growth. I believe innovation is the solution" (Yttergren 2019: 1).

Nevertheless, the scandals have necessitated corporate damage control in order to retain customer trust, and as a consequence many fashion companies now engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) as well as sustainability reporting and green marketing. An even more novel trend in fashion marketing is how companies have attempted to align themselves with feminist and sustainability positions through their marketing strategies and sustainability advertising. Few have written about the connection between this seemingly contradictory

² The Collins English Dictionary defines fast fashion as "the reproduction of highly fashionable clothes at high speed and low cost." Fast fashion is usually made by large corporations that have a short fashion cycle and cheap prices, such as H&M, Zara, and Primark.

green marketing and the perpetuation of environmental degradation by fashion companies, and likewise, few have written about the connection between gender and the environment in fashion marketing (Lyon and Montgomery 2015). This article will present its analyses and findings using a political ecology approach focused on gender and the environment.

The context for the study lies with the discordance between the discourses and materiality of fashion companies. According to the "materiality paradox" as coined and developed by Juliet Schor (2010), the physical and material impacts of consumer goods on the earth intensify as their social value increases and functional value decreases. Many scholars of consumption have argued that the rise of symbolism in consumption leads to dematerialization (Schor 2010). Schor has a different take, namely that because symbolic consumption relies heavily on fashion trends and novelty, people feel the need to update and refashion themselves more frequently, which leads to more consumption and a heavier material burden on the planet. The fashion cycle is much shorter now compared to a few decades ago, meaning an acceleration of consumption and production (Schor 2010). The very blueprint of fast fashion is at odds with ecological sustainability as the built-in obsolescence of fast fashion leads to "the greater use of natural resources to produce larger outputs" and "the disposal of discarded products" (Stilwell 2002: 315). Because even if a product is claimed to be sustainable, companies are still encouraging consumers to buy more and more. According to Naomi Klein, the notion of sustainable consumption began to gain traction around 2006, when people were "called upon to exercise their consumer power—not by shopping less but by discovering new and exciting ways to consume more" (2014: 212). Turning risks into opportunities is a cornerstone of business strategy, and the way that fast fashion brands use their discursive power of shaping public opinion through greenwashing is a direct reflection of that. The risk of climate change is then transformed into an opportunity for companies to sell and market things differently.

The relationship between feminism and the environment is a well-studied area, however this article argues that this relationship is still understudied in the context of marketing and advertising. Likewise, while many feminist scholars have analyzed media and advertising from a feminist perspective, and environmental scholars have analyzed greenwashing and the representation of nature in media and advertising, analysis of the interaction between the two are scarce. With this article we endeavor to contribute to filling this gap.

We hypothesize that fast fashion brands have begun a trend of combining sustainability, environmentalism, feminism and elements of gender diversity in their corporate image and advertising in order to sell products (predominantly to women), so that through our consumption we can feel empowered whilst also "saving the world." The data for this article comes from in-depth discourse and content analyses of three fashion sustainability advertisement videos, as well as 17 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018 with female-identifying consumers on their personal reactions to those same advertisements.

The brands we have analyzed in this article are H&M, Monki, and Gina Tricot. All three companies are Swedish, and H&M owns Monki. H&M is Sweden's largest and most famous clothing brand. Apart from H&M and Monki, The H&M group also owns Weekday, & Other Stories, COS, Arket, Cheap Monday, H&M Home, and Afound. All these brands have different target groups and different price points—H&M, Monki and Weekday being at the lower end and & Other Stories, Arket and COS being at the higher end. At H&M, a basic T shirt can cost US\$3 on sale. Monki is specifically targeted to a younger audience of teens while Gina Tricot is targeted to teens and young women. H&M's clothes are sourced from many different countries across Asia, Europe and Africa; however, Bangladesh and China are still the largest producers. The majority of Gina Tricot's clothes are produced in Turkey, China, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. Thus, countries in the Global South, which have lower environmental and labor standards than Sweden, are responsible for producing the products for these Swedish companies.

The rest of the article is structured beginning with an outline of the theoretical frameworks that were used in this research and in the analysis of the material. Section 3 will then present the methodology and methods of the research, after which the results of the analysis of advertisements is laid out. The following discussion section integrates the analyzed material with the theoretical concepts and frameworks mentioned earlier in order to contextualize the advertisements in a broader political ecology setting. Here, the relevance, contradictions, and meaning of such advertisements will be discussed more at depth.

2. Theoretical framework

As this research is concerned with the intersections between gender, society, the environment, and capitalism, it is guided by a political ecology approach using theories from different disciplines such as consumption studies, political economy and feminist media studies. The interdisciplinarity of the analytical perspectives reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the socio-ecological issues the fashion industry faces. The following analytical concepts and perspectives are thus lenses through which we have investigated the socio-ecological relations embedded within the fast fashion industry as a whole, as well as specific advertisements.

Foremost, we recognize that consumption is tied to a logic of capitalism that requires ever increasing consumption in order to grow profits for firms (Montero 2011). Whilst the biggest expansion in consumption in the US in recent history was between the end of WWII and the 1970s, consumption has continued to grow up until today (Lewis 2013; Schor 2010; Trentmann 2016). One of the aspects in consumption that sets today's context apart from a few decades ago is that the cycles of trends and fashion have become much shorter than they used to be. Schor writes that "the annual fashion cycle has been gradually reduced to a few months, and in some stores the floor life of a garment is measured in weeks" (Schor 2010: 26-27). This allows companies to sell more products and have a higher turn-over and profit. As a result, consumers feel the need to constantly re-fashion themselves in order to remain relevant. This leads to overconsumption and overproduction and ultimately, profound negative impacts on the environment. None of the analyzed fashion advertisements encourage consumers to buy less, rather they encourage consumers to uphold the status quo by buying goods that sound good.

Feminist theory, including feminist political ecology are central to this research. Arora-Jonsson (2011) has shown how women are often depicted as both being virtuous and vulnerable in climate change policy, thereby often being trapped in a North-South dichotomy where women in the Global South are assumed to be inherently vulnerable to climate change and women in the Global North are assumed to be environmentally responsible and virtuous. Similarly, Morales and Harris (2014) argue that in the context of empowerment programs within sustainable development, structural issues are often forgotten, whilst individual actors are presented as both being the problem and the solution to environmental problems. We see connections to both of these studies in our work, for instance in how Western women are depicted as powerful and empowered whilst women of the Global South are depicted as vulnerable and in need of sympathy. More specifically, we consider the feminization of green consumption and feminism in media and advertising as being important lenses through which to analyze these advertisements. We argue that the idea that women are inherently nurturing and closer to nature is an essentialist one that corporations exploit in order to market products to female consumers (Ortner 1972). For instance, historically, eco-friendly household products and baby-related products have been pushed onto women, and particularly to mothers (Sandilands 1993; Smith 2010). In line with Sandilands' argument (1993), we believe there is a danger of depoliticization when feminist and environmentalist issues become internalized into private household issues. Advertising incorporating feminist ideas have gone through several phases throughout history. While the 1990s and 2000s had a strong emphasis on female sexual agency and the celebration of the pleasure in consumerism, today there is a growing focus on the idea of female empowerment (Gill 2008; McRobbie 2008; Prügl 2015). Prügl (2015) discusses the neoliberal ways in which companies such as Levi Strauss and Unilever drive female empowerment projects through their CSR (corporate social responsibility) initiatives. Our research is in line with the argument that corporations' versions of female empowerment is neoliberal, although our focus is on advertising rather than CSR projects.

Ecologically unequal exchange and world-system analysis are used to contextualize the fast fashion industry and problematize fashion marketing by highlighting the material consequences of fast fashion. The removal of restrictions in the global trade of textiles in the 1990s has contributed strongly to the shift of clothing production to the Global South (Bahramitash 2005, Coote 1996, Mair, Druckman and Jackson 2016; Roberts and Parks 2007). As production moved to the Global South where there was generally a labor surplus, wages could be kept very low which led to a decrease in the cost of clothes globally. These cheap prices do not include the cost of the social or environmental impacts that are embedded in the extraction of natural resources or manufacturing of products (Roberts and Parks 2007). Trade liberalization thus perpetuates an unequal world system where workers and the environment in producer nations (the periphery) continue to be exploited with unfair compensation. One of the foci of political ecology studies is often on the people and environment that

are negatively affected by consumption and production of a certain type of commodity - mostly in the Global South (Robbins 2012). While this is important, we argue that it is equally important to investigate the other side of the spectrum, namely the ones with 'environmental privilege', who are mostly identified as consumers (Parks and Pellow 2011). As shown in an article based on interviews conducted in Boulder, Colorado, environmental discourses within privileged groups can also be racialized and othering, and indeed this is something we recognize in our analysis of sustainability advertisements as well (Hickcox 2018). Hickcox (2018: 500) argues that whiteness "must be examined in the context of environmentalism"; we follow this argument and add that *privilege* must be examined in the context of environmentalism. This research is therefore concerned with understanding the structures that allow and encourage consumers to continue behaving in a way that contributes to the perpetuation of the exploitation of workers and the environment.

3. Methodology

As mentioned previously, we conducted a discourse analysis of three different fashion sustainability advertisements; from H&M, Monki, and Gina Tricot. This level of analysis offers an exploration of how companies communicate sustainability issues with their customers. In doing so, we have sought to critically investigate whether there are underlying meanings and structures behind the images they create in line with a political ecology of discourse study (Adger et al. 2001).

The choice of discourse analysis stemmed from a desire to formalize and theorize the exploration of the power dynamics that are at play in the chosen visual texts (videos). Videos may be powerful tools of persuasion which creates a dynamic between companies, labor and consumers that are not always apparent (Cesario and Higgins 2008). The basic elements of each frame that was analyzed reflect Fairclough's three dimensions, namely the text, the processing (interpretation of the text), and the social analysis of the text and its interpretations (Janks 1997). In using discourse analysis, we tried to uncover some dynamics that might have otherwise remained too subtle to recognize, or too taken-for-granted (Gee 2014; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). The discourse analysis was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with 17 female-identifying consumers between the ages of 24-30 from different countries in the Global North. They were shown both advertisements and asked a number of questions about them and their reactions to the videos were incorporated into the analysis of the advertisements. Although these interviews are not generalizable as they are too few and not selected at random, they do offer insight into how real consumers interpret and perceive sustainability advertisements. The two techniques provide different elements to the research, while also complementing each other in order to connect the evidence gathered from three different methods to a broader structural analysis and discussion.

4. Results and analysis

The three advertisements we analyzed are: *The Way* by Gina Tricot, *H&M Conscious: sustainable fashion through recycled clothes* by H&M and *1-800 LAZY ECO* by Monki. The Gina Tricot advertisement is styled and produced as a music video and stars Swedish actress Cissi Forss as the main character and singer. The advertisement promotes Gina Tricot's line of organic cotton jeans and cotton production in India. The H&M video is advertising a recycling program whereby customers can return old clothes in exchange for a voucher, and the Monki advertisement promotes a similar recycling program while also presenting tips on how consumers can become more environmentally friendly.

The video analyses and subsequent interview responses were organized according to six different themes, and these guide the presentation of the empirical material below.

- 1) Cultural appropriation, exotification and the white savior complex
- 2) gender and sexuality
- 3) popular culture and identity
- 4) social justice and activism
- 5) individual responsibility
- 6) greenwashing.

Cultural appropriation, exotification, and the white savior complex

One of the issues that arises in advertising that seeks to speak to a predominantly Western audience but linking to Global South producers is the risks of creating an "othering" and separation between different groups. In sustainability and feminist advertising, artifacts are used to represent the Global South which render both the people and the culture as exotic. This can also be perceived as cultural appropriation by a benevolent white savior. In seeking to connect consumers and producers, the videos still center the gaze on the differences rather than our common humanity and struggle for sustainability and emancipation.

In the video *This Way*, the main actress sings "*we struggle to do better in our bad ass crew, but our success is depending on you...so homies in our fashion industry, let's make cotton production with sympathy.*" As per Gee's (2011) third building block of language, namely identity, it is evident here how language is used in order to create a certain identity. The use of the word "homies" is one way for Gina Tricot to appeal to a young audience. However, the use of American slang³ feels out of place in the context of the Swedish fashion industry or rural India. It could be argued that behind the attempted cool image lies a lack of self-awareness and cultural sensitivity. A visual allusion to hip hop culture then, is the use of the hooded denim shirt (Berlinger 2018). Singing "*we struggle to do better in our bad ass crew*" suggests that the women standing behind the main character are said bad ass crew. The women are leaning on one leg, with their arms crossed (Figure 1). This image is reminiscent of the *Rosie the Riveter* poster by J. Howard Miller, which was used in World War II to depict powerful women working tirelessly, and interpreted by some as a feminist image. Interestingly, in the poster, Rosie also wears a blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a red headscarf. These kinds of visual cues show that Gina Tricot is attempting to embody the image of a cool company for which "bad ass" powerful and independent women work. However, this use of language and visual symbolism again reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of how this type of language should be used.

The lyric "*So homies in our fashion industry, let's make cotton production with sympathy*" creates a juxtaposition between the consumer and the producer, between Sweden and India, and consequently between those who work for Gina Tricot in Sweden, who are described as "*bad ass*", and those who indirectly work for Gina Tricot in the Global South, who are described as needing *sympathy*. Using words like sympathy reveals a paternalistic view on women in the Global South that denies them agency. It is also interesting that the producers of the video have chosen the word sympathy and not empathy, the former creating less of a connection between the two characters than the latter. Through an analysis of the visual and verbal discourse in this music video, a white savior complex as discussed in detail by William Easterly (2006) in his book *The white man's burden* becomes increasingly apparent as underlining a lot of the imagery created in the video.

As depicted in some of the images in Figure 1, the main character is often at the center of attention in this video. One of the interview respondents, in viewing the video, stated that this served to glorify her as the white woman dancing in the middle of a group of people watching her. The scene where she dances with a group of Indian women is depicted as a happy and celebratory one, perhaps suggesting that the company is having a positive impact in India. However, there is no explanation as to why the women in the scene are wearing festive outfits that would likely not be everyday clothing for textile factory workers or farmers (which is essentially what the advertisement is about). The fact that the main character is wearing a turban is another sign of cultural appropriation, and also shows a lack of understanding of Indian culture as women in India do not typically wear turbans. The dancing in costume is reminiscent of Bollywood movies, and choosing to use this in a video about sustainability exotifies Indian culture to some extent and reduces it to song and dance. The out of context use of costume renders the dancing women more as props rather than characters with a story to tell.

³ The word "homie" is a shortening of "homeboy" which is an American slang dating back to the late 1800s and refers to a person who comes from the same city or place as oneself (Dictionary.com 2018). However it has gained prominence in its association with African American culture.



Figure 1: Images from Gina Tricot's advertisement *The Way*. (Gina Tricot 2017)

In this video, the main character and the other (presumably) Swedish women are the only ones seen wearing denim, which the video is advertising, while the others are depicted either wearing festive clothing or simple clothes for farming. This signals to the viewer that the jeans are for wealthy women and not for farmers or workers in India, which seems both ironic and ignorant since jeans production in India exploded in the early 1990s and they have since become a very commonly worn attire in India (Kumar 2020). In addition, one could view the festive clothing as traditional whilst the jeans represent modern dress. The visual cues in these images reflect Hickcox's (2018) argument about how environmental discourses can be both racialized and othering. This form of cultural Othering made many of the interviewees feel uncomfortable. Another respondent made the following comment:

It's just like nice skinny white women dancing in jeans and then it's contrasted with the poor villagers who are actually picking the cotton and using the chemicals and producing the jeans and it's actually quite a contrast...it's trying to make a connection with something that's so disconnected but in a very jovial and white washed way, it just doesn't sit right with me.

One of the above scenes depicts the main character dancing in a cotton field, while a cotton farmer stands in the background, while in another, she is sitting in front of a tree with the sun shining onto her, while a worker sits in the background, under the shade of a tree, working with unknown chemicals (Figure 2). In the first scene, the farmer is out of focus and in the background, while in the second, the worker is wearing a hat and a facemask, rendering most of his face invisible. As a result, the workers are made essentially anonymous. This anonymity is symbolic of the alienation of labor and the problem of disconnection between consumers and producers. Gina Tricot are showing that they care about the health and quality of life of farmers and workers through lyrics such as "*by educating farmers to take their kids to school...using chemicals wisely is more cool.*" However, this presents some deeply problematic dynamics. The line "*using chemicals wisely is more cool*" trivializes the issue of chemical use in the textile production process. It suggests that workers in the textiles industry are unaware of the dangers and harm caused by hazardous chemicals, and need to be taught to use them more wisely because it is more "*cool.*" This is a misunderstanding of the reality of textile production. Production of fast fashion has continuously been shifted to countries with laxer environmental regulations and labor laws meaning clothes can be sourced and manufactured at the cheapest prices possible. To insinuate that chemicals are being used unwisely due to ignorance on the worker's part in the current system of global clothes manufacturing is erroneous. Additionally, it ignores how little control workers have in whether they are exposed to chemicals. With reference to educating farmers to take their kids to school, this is a potentially harmful simplification of this situation, which suggests that farmers don't send their children to school because they themselves lack education. There could in fact be multiple reasons why the children do not go to school including lack of funds, need for the child to support the family livelihoods, or lack of schools. It is unlikely that Gina Tricot intentionally embodied this paternalistic tone while claiming to help farmers in India. Janks (1997: 341) describes this phenomenon as follows:

Ideology is at its most powerful when it is invisible, when discourses have been naturalised and become part of our everyday common sense. This is what results in writers using a discourse of paternalism unconsciously, because it is available.

These lyrics are also problematic in their communication and delivery as the audience are made to believe that Gina Tricot is doing groundwork in India, and that they are directly involved in educating farmers and workers on safe and sustainable practices. This is misleading as Gina Tricot are a signatory of the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), a non-profit organization that focuses on sustainable farming practices and organic cotton. But there is no evidence that any Gina Tricot employees are directly involved in education programs for farmers or garment workers in India.

The white savior complex becomes apparent in this video as we watch a white Swedish singer travelling to India to educate and help farmers and workers. This type of representation may perpetuate the image rampant in voluntourism, that poor people in the Global South need Western women (or people) to "save" them; an image that lacks nuance and context. In 2018, a Swedish woman in her twenties posted a picture on Instagram of herself hugging a child in Nairobi, Kenya, with a long letter written to said child as the caption (Gharib 2018). The letter is a portrayal of the white savior complex with statements such as "one of the most happiest moment in your life was probably when you met me and my friends" and:

In two years you are going to meet a grown up man that you have never met before, you two are going to have a child, and then if you are lucky he's going to stay with you, but he will probably leave you alone with your child in your small homemade of mud and tree's. (Instagram user quoted in Gharib 2018)

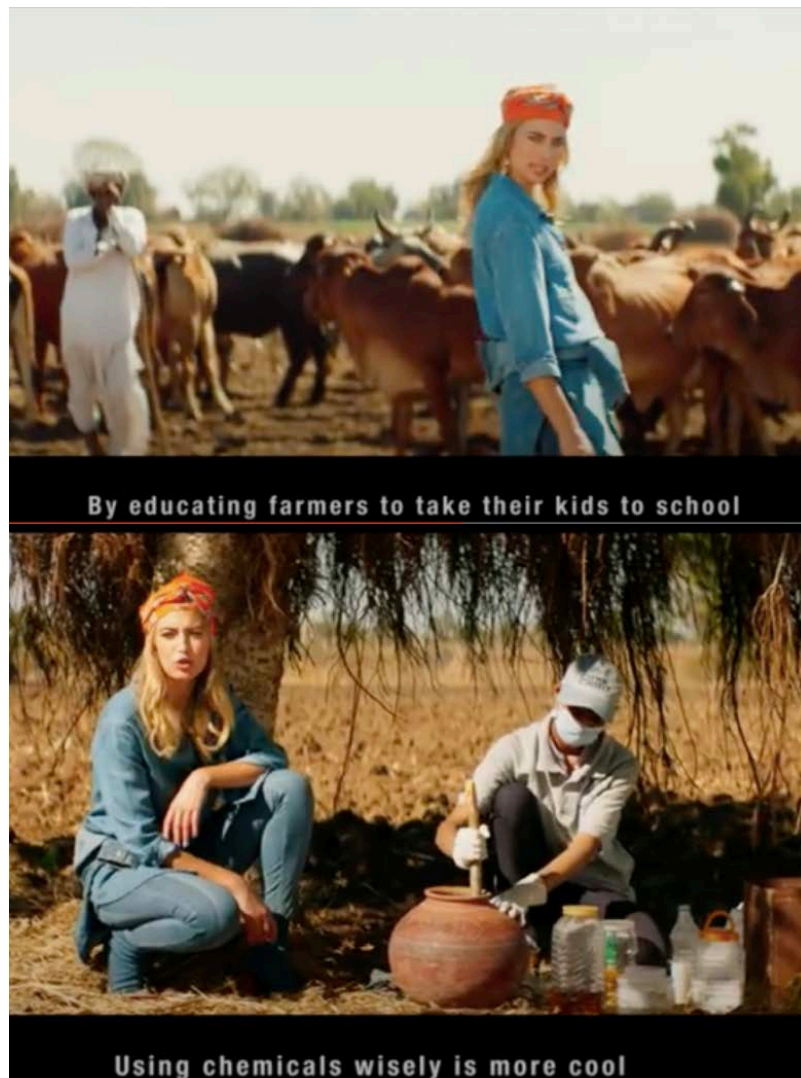


Figure 2: Images from the Gina Tricot advert *The Way* with workers.

The Gina Tricot advert may not be comparable to this portrayal of the assumed helplessness and lack of autonomy of women in the global South. However, there are neo-colonial discourse and images about the Global South that are constructed and perpetuated by the Gina Tricot advertisement. These have real material consequences, one of them being contributing to the social context in which people like this Instagram user believes meeting her would be the happiest moment in an otherwise miserable life for a young girl in Kenya.

Gender and sexuality

The feminization of marketing is most evident in the focus on people's sexual and gendered empowerment. Advertising videos operate to suggest a free and open approach, where clothing can be an important means of expressing oneself.



Figure 3: Image from H&M's advertisement *H&M Conscious: sustainable fashion through recycled clothes*. (H&M 2015)

This frame from the H&M advert depicts a person who has feminine signifiers looking at themselves in a mirror, pulling their hair behind their ear, showing a decorative gold earring and smiling slightly. They are wearing light eye makeup, red lipstick and has wavy brown hair. The narration accompanying the scene is "*be a princess*." The use of a non-gender conforming person who is middle aged positions H&M as a brand that is inclusive of different ages and gender identities. One of the interview respondents problematizes the idea that H&M is as ground-breaking as their advertisement suggests:

Creating a brand outside their clothing, creating an idea or an attitude that you associate H&M with, which is, you know, freedom of identity and dressing however the hell you want even though they still have a male and female section so like "dress like a boy"- "buy from the men's section because that's how gender works" it's a nice message, it's feel good but it isn't really reflected elsewhere in their business.

The video is encouraging people to break heteronormative patterns by wearing whatever you want to wear, and they do this by representing trans people and queer people in the advertisement. But as one of our respondents points out, H&M still has a very distinct male and female section in their store with gendered mannequins wearing gendered clothing, so it seems that their supposed anti-heteronormative image is not actually followed through in their business model. This suggests that non-conformity and gender and sexuality are similar marketing tools to get people to purchase conformist clothing products.

Popular culture and identity

Associated with the ideas of cultural appropriation and connecting to current trends with activism, we also see that advertising is packaged in relation to popular culture trends. This includes drawing on sub-cultures and identities that do not necessarily relate to the company itself but may have a large following, for example hip-hop culture.

The appropriation of parts of hip-hop culture is an appropriation of black American culture. As Johnson (2003, p.5) puts it:

Whites construct linguistic representations of blacks that are grounded in racist stereotypes to maintain the status quo only to then re-appropriate these stereotypes to affect a fetishistic "escape" into the Other to transcend the rigidity of their own whiteness, as well as to feed the capitalist gains of commodified blackness.

As analyzed in the first subsection, although Gina Tricot is seeking to engage consumers with sustainability issues through showing their benevolence and the strength of their employees, ultimately, they reveal paternalistic and culturally insensitive attitudes instead. Monki also uses the mechanism of connecting to pop and hip hop culture in their advertising as seen in the *1-800-LAZY ECO* advert (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Image from Monki's advertisement *1-800-LAZY-ECO*. (Monki 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpalL1XbMN4>)

This frame depicts a woman wearing blue pants sitting on a blue chair in front of a blue wall, only part of the legs and one hand is visible in this particular shot. Her fingernails are painted blue and she is holding a piece of paper that repeats the line "1-800-LAZY-ECO" which is also the name of the video and the catchphrase of the advertisement. The use of monochrome and the '1-800' phrase is reminiscent of Drake's 2015 music video *Hotline Bling*, which came out about a year and a half before the Monki advertisement.



Figure 5: Images taken from Drake's *Hotline Bling* single cover and music video *Hotline Bling*. (Drake 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxpDa-c-4Mc>)

Hotline Bling has over 1.6 billion views on YouTube, achieved the second spot on the Billboard Hot 100 in 2016 in the US and later won two Grammy awards in 2017. Whether or not this similarity between the Monki ad and the *Hotline Bling* music video was intentional in the art direction of the video, it speaks to a certain aesthetic that has been popular in the last few years, and alludes to pop culture icons such as Drake. The video for *Hotline Bling* in its turn has been linked to the aesthetic of James Turrell's artworks, although Turrell denies any collaboration with Drake and the director of the *Hotline Bling* video denies any conscious influence from Turrell's work (Minsker 2015). The connotations to Drake in this Monki video might appeal to a young audience, majority of whom would have seen the *Hotline Bling* video considering its widespread popularity.

This video is selling an idea and an identity more so than a product. It is selling the image of cool, style conscious young women who have a certain aesthetic. Moreover, it is selling the identity of a young woman who is not only cool and stylish, but who is also eco-conscious. In the video, a fictitious telephone hotline is a metaphor for Monki as a company, and they give tips to consumers on how to become more eco-friendly even if you are lazy.

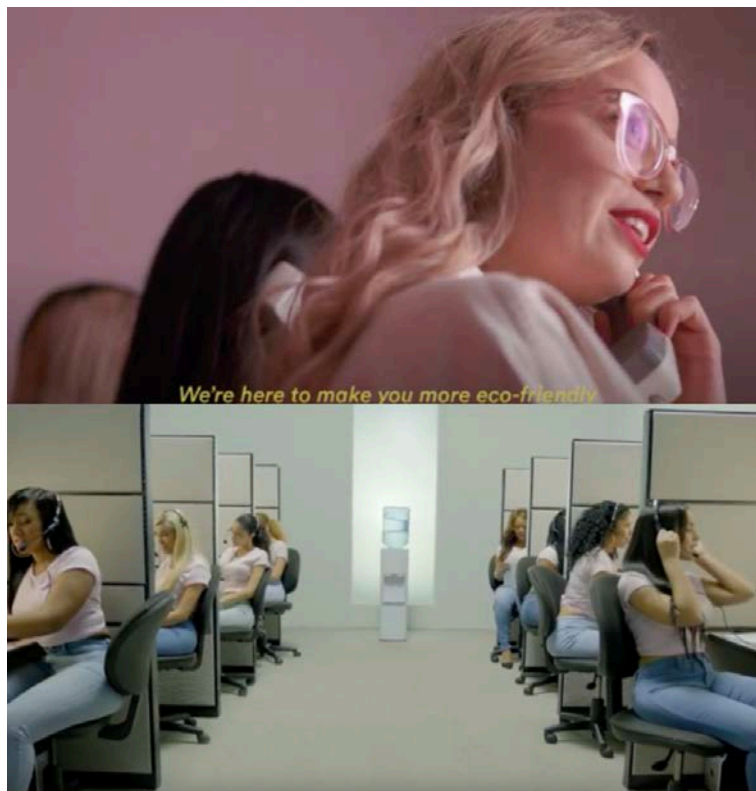


Figure 6: Images from Monki's advertisement *1-800-LAZY-ECO* and Drake's music video *Hotline Bling*. (Drake 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxpDa-c-4Mc>; Monki 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpalL1XbMN4>)

In Figure 6, one of the women on the lazy eco hotline is portrayed picking up the phone and stating "we're here to make you more eco-friendly." The use of the call center and the use of the pink wall with pink lighting is again reminiscent of the video for *Hotline Bling*.

The choice of using a telephone hotline to communicate tips on how to be more eco-friendly is clever, because it sheds a positive light on Monki as a company, and depicts them as an accessible, friendly company that cares about the environment and its customers, and wants to help consumers to become more eco conscious. Thus, using this hotline, Monki manages to simultaneously present themselves as caring and friendly, while also placing the responsibility of sustainability and eco-friendliness onto the consumer.

As stated earlier, this Monki ad is not selling a specific product (although the women in the video are all wearing outfits from Monki) but rather an idea or an identity. For a sustainability ad this is a clever technique as it may lower consumer skepticism, because after all they are not trying to sell anything overtly, they're just giving tips on how to be more eco-friendly! Of course, the purpose of the ad is ultimately to sell products in order to increase profits, but this purpose is implicit and more through association in the communication of the advertisement, while the eco-friendly tips are explicitly stated.

According to Sandilands (1993), selling a lifestyle rather than a product is a common trait in green consumerist advertising. This holds true in the Monki ad which is more concerned with appealing to a certain type of person with its specific aesthetic, rather than advertising any specific products. One of the interview respondents echoed this view:

It made the line between "are you selling your brand" or "are you selling this service you now have which is recycling your fashion" way blurrier, than in the H&M one. The H&M one was riding on this making you feel great, making you feel like "oh I'm empowered to make this decision" whereas Monki was like "are you a Monki girl? Are you a lazy girl? Do you like cute aesthetic? Do you wear hairclips? Well then you should do this."

Social justice and activism

The fourth theme present in fast fashion marketing relates to social justice and activism. In a time where activists such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg are prominent and there is social media activity for social justice, young people are becoming more engaged in issues from climate change to women's rights. We found that fast fashion marketing draws on the tools and symbols of activism to connect to socially active, or to use a colloquial expression, "woke" consumers.



Figure 7: Image from H&M's advertisement *H&M Conscious: sustainable fashion through recycled clothes*. (H&M 2015)

In the H&M advertisement (Figure 7), a man wearing a button-down shirt half tucked into a black knee-length skirt is portrayed. The accompanying narration to the scene is "*wear a short skirt if you're a man*", encouraging the viewer and potential customer to break gender-normative boundaries through the way in which they dress. He is holding up an A4 sheet of paper with the hashtag "#EteġiniGiyTaksimeGel" which is in Turkish and a reference to the protests that spread after Ozcegan Aslan, a 20-year-old woman was murdered in Turkey in early 2015 (Netto 2015). This case was seen as emblematic of the growing violence against women in Turkey and as a public response, a movement where men wore skirts in protest and solidarity with Aslan emerged (Netto 2015).

This text thus has a two-pronged effect. Visually, by depicting a man wearing a skirt, H&M is showing that they support non-conformity and perhaps gender fluidity. A man wearing a skirt shows acceptance of different forms of expressing your identity and gender, and positions H&M as a progressive company. Secondly, the hashtag links the image to a political stance that is critical to violence against women, and also encourages political activism from individuals. This use of intertextuality adds depth to the advertisement but it can also be seen as an instance of corporations co-opting a social justice movement. This is not uncommon in recent brand campaigns, although it is a technique that is criticized by many (Natividad 2018). In 2017 reality TV-star and fashion model Kendall Jenner starred in a Pepsi ad campaign where she was portrayed neutralizing a protest by offering a police officer a Pepsi cola—she was heavily criticized for participating in a campaign that was capitalizing on the #BlackLivesMatter movement, especially seeing as the ad was released on the same day as the 49th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King (Törner 2017). In 2018, high fashion house Gucci made an ad campaign recreating the student protests of 1968 in Paris, which were ironically a sharply anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist movement (Natividad 2018).

The hashtag on a piece of paper speaks to the time in which this type of image would make sense for an audience. The hashtag was invented back in 2007 by Chris Messina for Twitter and has since become an important way of sorting and categorizing information on social media, but also a way for individuals to create collective political and social justice movements over the internet (Messina 2015). An example of this use of hashtags is the 'Bring back our girls' campaign that started in 2014 after more than 300 Nigerian girls were abducted from their school by terrorist group Boko Haram (McVeigh 2014). This movement was backed by many high-profile people including former US First Lady Michelle Obama. The image of a man holding up a sign with a hashtag, although the image itself is quite plain, would only make sense in this contemporary context post 2007. The image itself could not have existed before that time and if it did, it would not be understood or interpreted in the way that it is today. More specifically, this particular hashtag would only make sense after the murder of Aslan in 2015, as it was created to show solidarity with her.

Each frame in this video only lasts for a short moment, most of them between 1-3 seconds. Since this hashtag has a rather long text, and it is written in Turkish, it is unlikely that the majority of viewers would have the time to see what it says or that they would understand it if they did see it. Only Turkish speaking individuals would be able to read the hashtag in such a short scene. Connecting to a case in Turkey allows the company to connect with an international audience, and choosing to have the text in Turkish rather than English suggests solidarity and that H&M is 'with the people.' However, the use of a Turkish reference could mean that it is not the specific hashtag that carries the importance of this scene, but rather the connotations that a person holding up a hashtag on a piece of paper has in contemporary society. The ad is targeted to a person in modern society who uses a smartphone and/or who is familiar with the concept of hashtags. Such a person who has seen political and activist movements harnessing the hashtag as a tool for spreading their message would quite easily interpret this image as being connected to a political or social movement, even if they do not know which one. The visual cue of the man wearing a skirt could furthermore lead the viewer to assume that the hashtag is referring to something progressive or something relating to feminism or gender issues.



Figure 8: Image from H&M's advertisement *H&M Conscious: sustainable fashion through recycled clothes*. (H&M 2015)

The scene in Figure 8 portrays a group of children and young people standing together, all looking into the camera. The accompanying narration is "take a stand." The camera starts zoomed in so only a few of the people are visible, and then zooms out on the shot which expands the width of the viewer's vision and creates a sense of plurality, emphasizing that there are a large number of people standing in unity. Most of the people in the frame are wearing white slogan T-shirts with slogans in black print such as "RECYCLE", "ACT NOW", "STAND UP", "RE-USE" and "CARE FOR WATER"—slogans that reflect the main message of the advertisement which is recycling and saving water. This image conforms to the current trend of fashion brands attempting to combine activism with fashion by creating political T-shirts (Hartman 2017). The fact that there are no middle aged or old people in the frame coupled with the fact that they are wearing T-shirts with political and climate related slogans is interesting. This could be alluding to youth culture, encouraging young people to take political action, with H&M pointing out that young people are the future. In 2018, Swedish school student Greta Thunberg started a school strike for the climate, which has now become an enormous global youth climate movement known as *Fridays for Future* (Watts 2019). This is an example of young people taking collective political action in order to have their voices heard. It is ironic then for a corporation like H&M, whose former CEO believes there is no need to decrease consumption, to usurp political activism-inspired slogans for commercial purposes (Yttergren 2019).

Out of all the scenes in this video, this is the only one which directly relates to the environment. In contrast to most of the other scenes, it also uses nature as a backdrop, which is the most common technique used in green advertising (the other two being nature as the product, and nature as the outcome) according to Cox (2013). By using slogans on T-shirts, H&M is making a statement, namely that it is a company that stands for the environment and sustainability, and wants its customers to care about sustainability issues. While in most other scenes, it is the visual performance which has made the statement (such as a man wearing a skirt or the inclusion of queer models), in this scene the messages are stated in words on the T-shirts, making it more literal and leaving less to the interpretation of the viewer. It should be noted that out of all the messages communicated in the advert, this is perhaps the least revolutionary. Putting it in writing therefore has a low chance of offending a conservative audience. Recycling, for instance, has wide social acceptance whereas feminism or gender non-conformity are controversial in many places. Thus, H&M has created a safe space for itself where it is difficult to be harshly criticized.

Environmental responsibility

In setting the scene of the videos with white saviors and the promotion of social activism, a fifth theme emerges. This is the transference of environmental responsibility to the individual consumer as socially active savior.

When the lyrics "*we struggle to do better in our bad ass crew, but our success is depending on you*" are sung, the onus to act is placed on the individual consumer, assuming that "*you*" is the viewer of the video and a potential customer of Gina Tricot. Through such a statement, Gina Tricot is claiming that they are doing their part towards creating sustainability in the fashion world, and their success is dependent on individual consumers buying their products. The word choice of "*struggle*" is also intriguing as it suggests that Gina Tricot is part of some kind of resistance, rather than part of a global problem.

The question of individual responsibility versus collective responsibility and structural change within the world system is important to explore when speaking about sustainability in the corporate world. Most capitalist corporations promote consumer action as the answer to sustainability issues. The neoclassical economic logic here is that if individuals demand sustainable products over unsustainable ones, the market will adapt accordingly to meet those demands. Most of the women we interviewed challenged this view, arguing that individual action and responsibility is not enough, while some resonated more with the idea of being able to affect change through small individual actions. These varying responses raised interesting perspectives on structure and agency. Some of the women interviewed felt somewhat encouraged by the individualistic discourse that all three companies engage in because it gives them a sense of agency in being able to contribute to a more sustainable or eco-friendly world through small and achievable lifestyle changes. On the other hand, other interviewees were uncomfortable with this discourse because they felt either that the companies were distracting the consumer from more serious issues, or that they were oversimplifying complex situations. The thoughts of some of the interviewees are reflected in Table 1, using their direct quotes.

Critical	Moderate support
<p>Respondent 1: It's basically saying like you can fix the problem yourself if you just buy sustainable fashion. But I think it's a wider issue than just what you buy. So I think it's oversimplifying quite a big problem.</p>	<p>Respondent 2: Of course you can do a lot...it's better to do something than nothing but I feel that it needs some more change in the structure...</p>
<p>Respondent 3 (on why H&M has such a big focus on recycling): Well, it's a good way for them not to have to address how their products are being made and in what conditions they're being made.</p>	<p>Respondent 4: They're all like good things that an individual can do. But again it's like moving the responsibility of some big issues from the company to the individual.</p>

Table 1: interview quotes on individual responsibility.

As presented above, although most interviewees agree that there are good things individuals can do, not one interviewee was convinced that individual action would have a wide enough impact on society as a whole. One of the interviewees believes individual action may have positive impacts on society in the way that it can make people feel better about themselves and that could raise the morale of the general population, but that this

is the extent of that impact. The statements reflect the conflicts among people wanting to take individual action but wary of corporations shirking responsibility, and doubtful of the impact that individual action can have.

In the Monki advertisement, "laziness" is used as a key concept to encourage eco-friendly behavior. The entire advertisement is built upon the idea that being lazy need not stop you from being eco-friendly; on the contrary, laziness can in fact make you *more* eco-friendly. The notion of laziness is omnipresent in the Monki advertisement, most notably in the title *1-800-Lazy-Eco*. Some of the women we interviewed thought it was smart to use the "*lazy eco*" phrase, because it made the information presented more accessible and relatable, which again gives agency to the consumer. To quote one interview respondent, "Those little lazy tricks... I can see how they can work... it just brought up a lot of like what can I do at home to reduce my footprint, so yeah I guess it did make an impact." The above interviewee was not necessarily convinced that these lazy tricks were *their* desired solution to sustainability issues, but simply that they thought it was a message that they resonated with positively. The notion of laziness however allows people to maintain the status quo without having to change their lifestyles too much and while still feeling like they are making a difference, which also speaks to their environmental privilege (Park and Pellow 2011; Sandilands 1993). This concern was addressed by an interview respondent:

They reiterated the message nicely but also short and succinct and each message had a really clear like "I'll do this!" "And you can do this!" "And you can do this" and then you've made a difference and you haven't done anything.

This advertisement may thus be interpreted as an exemplification of Sandilands' (1993) argument that green consumerism depoliticizes environmental issues through a process of reducing them to the household level, and therefore privatizing them. It can also serve to trivialize the issue through notions such as laziness so that it is not perceived as an urgent political concern.

Greenwashing

The five themes presented above tell a story of how fast fashion marketing builds on cultural and social references in order to persuade consumers to purchase their items. Given the contentious issues associated with labor and environment in the production of fast fashion, this raises the question of greenwashing. In this section, we discuss how greenwashing might take place when considering the material products of fast fashion. We draw from interviews with consumers to show their perceptions of greenwashing in the ads and the personal tension this causes for consumers.

Greenwashing⁴ is widespread and varied. It appears not only in the form of advertising, but also through means such as CSR reporting, affiliations with environmental groups or through donations to charities (Pulver 2012). Moving beyond greenwashing as a general concept, this article is concerned with the fact that some industries push greenwashing consumerism disproportionately onto female consumers. Lyon and Montgomery (2015) describe different iterations of greenwashing, some of which are evident in the advertisements we have analyzed. For instance, through what is called the 'Halo effect', it becomes difficult for consumers to differentiate between the overall impression of a company and individual product attributes (Lyon and Montgomery 2015). An example using the Gina Tricot ad would be that, because Gina Tricot claims to make jeans with sustainable organic cotton, consumers may assume that all their products are also sourced and produced ethically. Another example from the Gina Tricot advertisement is the repetition of buzzwords like "*organic*": the term is thrown around but never explained. The focus on organic cotton also means that the advertisement is ignoring many other aspects of production. Some of our interviewees noted the repetition of catch phrases such as organic but were also aware that using organic materials does not ensure sustainability of the product when considering the whole production lifecycle. For instance:

⁴ The term "greenwashing" was coined in 1986 by Jay Westerveld (Watson 2016). It refers to the attempt by corporations to present themselves as environmentally friendly, while simultaneously making profits from engaging in environmentally unfriendly activities.

You can use the word organic, that means it's just sourced organically but doesn't really mean anything after that – they can talk about how the way that it's sourced is the label that it gets but then nothing about how that little puff of white turns into denim.

Another interviewee spoke to other resources required for cotton farming that need to be considered but go unmentioned in the advertisement, such as land use:

If everyone uses organic cotton you're still exploiting land using it. It's sure better maybe than conventional but that doesn't mean it's... Fixes the problem.

Emphasizing the entire lifecycle and the scale of production, it was further noted that the number of units produced and transportation of finished garments is another issue as brought up by an interviewee:

You're sourcing this cotton but you're like making a massive number of units and then how are you transporting that? You're using cars, using boats and then what do they run on? If you are really going to be thinking about an ethical sustainable thing you'd be thinking about things that didn't take a lot of transport because that uses petrol...

Similarly, H&M uses the catch phrase "*close the loop*"⁵ as the title for their advertising campaign. They never really explain what they mean by this, and out of the 17 women I interviewed, only 8 had heard this phrase before and knew what it was referring to.

Another form of greenwashing is selective disclosure, whereby companies choose to disclose positive information whilst withholding negative information (Lyon and Montgomery 2015). This may also be applied to the advertisements discussed in this article—for example H&M champions their recycling program through their *Close the Loop* ad, while in 2017 it was revealed that H&M sources viscose from factories in China and Indonesia that are causing heavy pollution and toxic contamination of waters (Changing Markets 2017). The point to be made here is that through green communication or greenwashing, companies can mislead consumers in many ways in order for them to only associate the companies with positive traits. Such greenwashing can also confuse consumers. The interviewee responses show that in some cases consumers are left so confused by certain messages or advertisements that they do not know whether the company in question is environmentally friendly and sustainable or not. One of our respondents expressed such confusion:

Now I've watched two ads about being able to recycle your clothes at stores and I still don't know what it's being recycled into or what difference it actually makes.

Another respondent said "they say that things are good to do but you don't really know why" and yet another said "I'm not sure what they are implying by recycling, what they are doing with the old clothes." This type of confusion can lead to consumers not knowing what to do, which may easily lead to the upholding of the status quo. One respondent expressed that despite her skepticism of corporate green claims, she has certain expectations on companies:

I do to some extent expect companies or places that provide me with these things... to do it in ways that I trust. Because it's true that I probably won't be making my own clothes ever.

⁵ By "close the loop" we assume H&M is making a reference to the circular economy, which is a system in which waste is eliminated from the lifecycle of products and resource use is decreased. Circularity has become a buzzword in the fashion industry and many brands refer to it, especially when they promote recycling programs and clothing partially made from recycled materials.

5. Discussion

In the empirical material, we found and analyzed the following themes: (1) cultural appropriation, exotification and the white savior complex, (2) gender and sexuality, (3) popular culture and identity (4) social justice and activism, (5) environmental responsibility, and (6) greenwashing. In this discussion we move from the deconstruction of the videos and their reception, to locating the videos and the thematic elements in relation to each other as well as in relation to the theoretical perspectives we outlined in this article.

For instance, through the perspective of ecologically unequal exchange, it is evident that the globalization of markets has helped to create a social distance between consumers and producers. This social distance within an environmentally unjust world creates and enables the notion of environmental privilege, which we will discuss in this section from the perspective of consumers. On the producer side, we look at the ways greenwashing and feminism-washing are being mobilized by corporations. We argue that production and consumption are not two separate processes. Rather we suggest viewing the two as intertwined and existing under the same system of ecologically unequal exchange, where environmental privilege is created on one side, and environmental and social injustice on the other. In the analysis, we raised the issue of placing the environmental burden on individual consumers, which is an effect of consumption-based sustainability strategies. This relates to the feminization of consumption, since women are often expected or assumed to behave more environmentally, especially through their consumption. This is all to say that clothes and the processes within the fashion industry are reflections of broader trends in society, and the nature of a capitalist system. Through a political ecology lens, the intersection of environmental privilege and environmental injustice through ecologically unequal exchange highlight the political nature of fashion and fashion marketing rather than it being an apolitical endeavor (Forsyth 2008). These processes create both discursive and material consequences for power relationships, as well as the distribution of the environmental burden onto women, consumers, the poor and the Global South.

The evolving nature of feminization in advertising

There are many ways in which women have become a major target market for environmentally friendly commodities. We would like to argue that the essentialist notion that women are inherently more nurturing and closer to nature, informs many green advertisements that are geared to women. The traditional division of labor, with women historically taking most responsibility for housework and family budgeting, has meant that green consumerism has also been pushed onto women through eco-friendly household products (Sandilands 1993; Smith 2010). These advertisements are almost always saturated with moral messages on how mothers should take care of their families without the use of harsh chemicals.

In the 90s and 2000s, some of the focus began to shift away from motherhood as being a woman's most important role, towards women as being independent wage-earners. This made women an even more important market segment, and led to what Goldman coined as "commodity feminism" in 1992 (Gill 2008). Female pleasure started becoming a major trope of media and advertisement, and was embraced by many women including feminist scholars (Maclaran 2012; McRobbie 2008; Thwaites 2017). *Sex and the City* was pioneering in explicitly celebrating women's sexual freedom on television, and was in turn celebrated by viewers and critics alike. However, the show also celebrated superfluous consumption and capitalism – not the least through its main character Carrie who is known for her ever-changing fashion style, and her love for buying shoes. This version of consumerist female empowerment also became a trend in advertising in the 2000s (Gill 2008).

The advertising world, while still very gendered, has evolved into much more sophisticated ways of selling products to women rather than just sending out the message that consumption will make us happy. As society becomes more aware, and feminism becomes increasingly popular outside academia, advertising and marketing also tries to mirror that awareness – this is why it is becoming more and more difficult to see the faults instantly in advertisements that seem positive, without delving into a deeper analysis and examining corporate business structures. Now, companies have "woke" advertisements, they are starting to be much more inclusive in terms of gender, race and sexuality when it comes to model representation, and through their feminist messages both implicit and explicit (such as on slogan T-shirts), they are claiming to be part of the camp resisting patriarchy.

Both Maclaran (2012) and McRobbie (2008) criticize the "reconciliation of feminism and consumption, a reconciliation that links empowerment to sexual expressiveness and purchasing power" (Maclaran 2012: 466). McRobbie (2008) argues that the consequence of not critically examining the power structures that enable and encourage a seemingly feminist celebration is that those same power structures remain invisible. Nina Power (2009: 69) sees this kind of feminism as problematic because when we celebrate "individual identity above all else", we ignore the overarching structure and our feminism becomes "one-dimensional." Indeed, the focus on individual choice as a source of empowerment "becomes a part of maintaining the neoliberal status quo" (Thwaites 2017: 57).

Environmental privilege and the construction of denial

Park and Pellow (2011) argue that when there is environmental injustice, there must also be environmental privilege, which they describe as resulting from "the exercise of economic, political, and cultural power that some groups enjoy, which enables them exclusive access to coveted environmental amenities" (Park and Pellow 2011: 15). Their research is focused on Aspen, an affluent holiday and ski destination in the USA. They argue that places such as Aspen foster a culture in which it is believed that capitalism and environmentalism can coexist in perfect harmony. Through this so-called "Aspen logic", green consumers can maintain their high-status lifestyle while supporting environmental causes" (Park and Pellow 2011: 37). Using clever marketing and advertisements, the fashion industry echoes this theme, where consumers are able to maintain their consumption habits while simultaneously convincing themselves they are doing something good for the environment by buying "eco-friendly" or "sustainable" fashion. Park and Pellow (2011) argue that environmental privilege is "rarely questioned because of the social distance between those who receive them and those who suffer the consequences." The same could be argued for the case of the fashion industry, where consumers in the Global North have become so alienated and distanced from sites and the labor involved in production that it is hard to imagine the embodied environmental injustice of the products they purchase (although of course these relations of alienation from production are not exclusive to a North-South dichotomy). According to Norgaard (2012), emotions and the construction of denial can also cause this type of alienation.

In normalizing the status quo, the construction of denial and innocence work to silence the needs and voices of women and people of color in the Global South, and thus reproduce global inequality along the lines of gender, race and class (Norgaard 2012: 18).

Kari Norgaard's fieldwork in Norway found that it is not in fact true that people are unconcerned with the reality of climate change, rather their awareness and concern makes them so uncomfortable that they end up pushing it away and dealing with more manageable everyday life issues instead (Norgaard 2011). This could also be true for how some consumers feel, although our research cannot explicitly confirm this. It could be that consumers feel concerned with the state of the fashion industry and the pollution it causes, but it's an uncomfortable fact to deal with. It is thus easier to purchase something that is *said* to be good for the environment, or be more eco-friendly with the clothes you own, as these tasks are all manageable within the realms of everyday life. Companies push us into this direction so that we continue to uphold the status quo whilst feeling like "at least we are trying." It may be true that just as in Norgaard's fieldwork, cognitive dissonance plays a role in how consumers act on sustainability issues. According to Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (1957), in order to resolve this inconsistency, one of the cognitions needs to be changed (Norgaard 2012). Norgaard argues that if people feel a sense of guilt or responsibility, they use avoidance and denial as a strategy to escape from that cognitive dissonance (2011, 2012). In our case, the cognitive dissonance may be caused by inconsistent thoughts such as 1) "the fast fashion industry is unsustainable" and 2) "H&M's recycling initiative makes the fashion world more sustainable."

Ecologically unequal exchange and social distance in the fashion sector

Following on from the construction of denial, the unequal exchange and offshoring of labor and production in the ready-made garment industry alienate the consumer from production (Hornborg 2011, Nixon

2011). The distance between the consumer and the producer creates a disconnect so strong that the workers may become anonymous in the consumers' eyes. In the Gina Tricot ad, an Indian cotton worker is rendered invisible and anonymous, reflecting the reality of the fashion industry. Such an abstraction of labor creates a distance between us and our possessions, reflecting the physical distance between markets and production loci. This distance prevents us from exercising our moral judgement properly, because the distance can be reconfigured into individuality. Disassociation with the mode of production means the product becomes part of us in a different way: shaped by the moment of purchase (choosing it because "it is so me") as opposed to the moment of production or indeed the person(s) involved in production. This very disassociation between consumption and production is what makes the kind of marketing analyzed in this article possible. Ecologically unequal exchange then becomes a precondition for the existence and success of greenwashed advertising campaigns.

This social distance is a direct result of the globalization of industries and trade liberalization, whereby the majority of garment manufacturing has been shifted to the Global South (Blanc 2016; Schor 2010). This shift in the political economy can also be seen as an example of environmental load displacement and ecologically unequal exchange (Hornborg 2011; Roberts and Parks 2007; Stilwell 2002). From cotton farming, to leather tanning, to viscose production, to garment dyeing, the fashion industry exploits and severely harms the water, air and land in the Global South (Changing Markets 2017; Hoskins 2014; Regeringen 2018; The True Cost 2015). As opposed to the structural or global focus of ecologically unequal exchange and world system analysis, the neoliberal response to the environmental issues of the fashion industry have been largely concerned with individual consumer power and technological fixes (Hoskins 2014; Webber 2018). By overlooking structural conditions and by favoring individual agency, journalists, academics and sustainability professionals alike continuously present the same solutions for sustainable fashion, most of them based on a combination of technological advancements in clothing production (and product innovation), and consumer awareness. Even a documentary like *RiverBlue* (2016), which heavily criticizes the fashion industry for its environmental impacts, suggests that the combination of technological advancements and consumer education is the solution to the problem (Webber 2018). These types of solutions and visions have been presented for over 20 years, yet very little has changed in the wider scope of the fashion industry (Hoskins 2014).

Some of the largest fast fashion brands, such as Zara, H&M, Forever 21 and Urban Outfitters have been reporting losses for several consecutive years, and Forever 21 even filed for bankruptcy in October 2019 (Paton 2018; Debter 2019). Some interpret this to mean that consumers indeed have enough power to change the market considerably, and as an extension of this, that if consumers stop buying poorly made cheap products, companies will stop producing them. For instance, Segran (2018) wrote an article on this very topic entitled 'Stop buying crap, and companies will stop making crap.' However, without specific evidence, it is misleading to suggest that the profit losses among big fast fashion brands are due to increased consumer awareness and the rise of conscious and ethical shopping. The 'stop buying crap and companies will stop making crap' discourse justifies the belief that individual consumer choice has ultimate power in changing the market, while other significant factors are being ignored. Such factors include the rise of cheap online retailers, and the fact that traditional fast fashion brands like Zara and H&M may not be as trendy and attractive to young people as they were ten years ago. While consumer awareness has some merits, this article has sought to demystify the faith in individual agency, and concentrate instead on the structural issues embedded in global consumption and production patterns.

6. Conclusion

In this article we have argued that the discourses present in sustainability marketing in the fashion industry can work powerfully to reshape people's relationship to consumption. The discursive can also act as a mechanism for hiding the harsh material realities of the industry, especially in the relations operating within the global political economy, and this creates a worrying discord between marketing and practice. We criticize the way in which sustainably branded clothing is being pushed onto consumers, entangled with vague suggestions that more consumption can lead to female empowerment or environmental sustainability. We see the case of fashion as being a means for discussing the larger context of a capitalist system, where corporations have managed to turn their disadvantages (environmental degradation, labor rights and human rights issues) into

positive selling points. As a study in political ecology this article shows the clash of individual interests and the potential for collusion by companies that lie at the heart of the political economy. It raises concerns with the fashion industries' representation and use of the biological and physical environment, as well as important justice struggles – including feminism. Ultimately, we seek to emphasize a holistic analysis that connects fashion marketing with the more power-centered field of political ecology.

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