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# Images of Responsible Consumers

Organizing the marketing of sustainability

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to examine and explain what organizes the marketing of retail sustainability.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** Theoretically, this paper takes a marketing-as-practice approach and makes use of practice theory to conceptualize the marketing of sustainability. Methodologically, an ethnographic study of three Swedish retail chains and their marketing work has been conducted. Interviews with management, observations made at the stores of these three retailers and various marketing texts and images produced by these retailers form the material analysed.

**Findings:** This paper illustrates three different ways of marketing and enacting sustainability. It shows that sustainability is framed differently and, indeed, enacted differently in order to fit various ideas about who are the responsible consumers. The argument is that rather than consumer demand, supply pressure or media scandals, the marketing of sustainability is in each of the cases studied configured around a specific notion of the responsible consumer. What sustainability work is marketed, through which devices it is marketed, and how it is framed is guided by an idea of whom the retailers' responsible consumers are, what their lifestyles are, and what they will be interested in. Images of responsible consumers work as configuring agents around which retailing activities and devices are organized.

**Keywords:** Sustainable, marketing, qualitative method, consumer, images, practice theory, marketing-as-practice

# Images of Responsible Consumers

## Organizing the marketing of sustainability

Christian Fuentes

### Introduction

There is a consensus among academics and practitioners that the marketing of sustainability is crucial for the success of sustainable retailing strategies and programs. The argument is that by marketing sustainable products and sustainability initiatives, retailers can construct customer value, build a favourable brand image, and increase demand for sustainable products (Anselmsson and Johansson 2007, Cacho-Elizondo and Loussaïef 2010, Girod and Bryane 2003, Jones et al. 2005b).

In spite this importance, the marketing of sustainability has received scant attention in the field of retail studies. Instead, other issues seem to draw the attention of scholars focusing on sustainable retail. Some studies deal with general and strategic sustainability issues. Studies in this vein have examined and discussed how supply chain pressure can influence retailers to go green (Ytterhus et al. 1999), argued the need for food retailers to develop accountability systems required to carry out and follow up on sustainability efforts (Iles 2007), advised retailers about how to reduce their carbon footprint and energy use (Thompson 2007), examined and discussed the green roles that retailers play and should have (Lai et al. 2010), attempted to determine whether being green also leads to better financial performance (Tang et al. 2010), and explored and discussed the strategy of choice editing as a tool for the promotion of sustainable consumption (Gunn and Mont 2014, Sadowski and Buckingham 2007).

Other studies focus more closely on the description and conceptualization of specific sustainable retail initiatives and programs. Studies in this vein have described and discussed the sustainable development agendas pursued by leading UK retailers (Jones et al. 2005d, Jones et al. 2005c, Jones et al. 2005a), offered an in-depth examination of Tesco's new food safety/animal welfare program (Lindgreen and Hingley 2003), and analysed the sustainability approach taken by People Tree, a small-to-medium-sized UK-based fashion retailer that sells Fair Trade and organic cotton clothing (Goworek 2011). What these and other studies in this area have in common is that they describe and analyse existing sustainable retailing approaches and initiatives as a way of learning something about the potential of sustainable retailing.

Finally, there are sustainable retailing studies that address the effects that retailers' sustainability efforts have on consumers. These studies examine the impact of CSR activities on store image (Gupta and Pirsch 2008), how retailers' social CSR activities construct legitimacy among their local consumers (Kim et al. 2014), whether CSR activities influence the attractiveness of in-town shopping centres in the UK (Oppewal et al. 2006), and many other consumer-related issues. These studies do not examine sustainable retailing initiatives and programs as such but instead the effects that these have on consumers' understandings and actions.

While all these studies have produced valuable knowledge regarding sustainable retailing, they offer little insight regarding the marketing of

sustainability. In the first and second stream of research, marketing activities are seldom included, and when they are, they receive only cursory attention. In the third research stream, marketing activities *per se* are not studied; rather, the consequences and impacts of these activities on consumers are examined. What this literature review indicates is that the marketing of sustainability remains in large part an under-researched subject (For a more comprehensive review see, Wiese et al. 2012).

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to examine, describe, and conceptualize the marketing of retail sustainability, and to explain what it is that organises various ways of marketing sustainability. Studies suggest that the marketing of sustainability varies among retailers in regard to issues addressed and level of commitment (Jones et al. 2005a, Jones et al. 2007). However, little is known about the ways in which these marketing approaches vary. Likewise, while scholars have shown that the development of sustainability programs is, at least in part, driven by media scares and public concern (Lindgreen and Hingley 2003), supplier pressure (Ytterhus et al. 1999), and industry (Frostenson et al. 2010, Wanderley et al. 2008) and consumer demand (Nicholls 2002, Piacentini et al. 2000), not much is known about what it is that influences how these programs are marketed to consumers. If the marketing of sustainability is indeed as crucial as indicated in previous research, we need to understand the marketing practices involved and what it is that organizes them. Central questions in this paper are: In what various ways is sustainability marketed to consumers? In what different ways is sustainability framed and made meaningful to consumers? What determines which marketing approach retailers take?

Theoretically, this paper takes a marketing-as-practice approach (Skålén and Hackley 2011) and makes use of practice theory (Reckwitz 2002, Schatzki et al. 2001) to conceptualize the marketing of sustainability. Practice theory advocates argue that the social consists of a nexus of practices (Schatzki 2001) and that it is by thinking and studying practices – arrays of doings and sayings involving and depending on understandings, know-how, feelings, and material artefacts – that the continuous making of social entities can be traced (Reckwitz 2002).

Practice theory informed studies have shown that marketing involves more than mere technique. Marketing practices are complex and performative (Araujo 2007, Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006, Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007). The marketing of any product or service involves a range of different elements, such as knowledge, artefacts, a specific understanding of the world, and so on, and transforms these elements (Araujo 2007, Cochoy 1998).

From this perspective, the marketing of sustainability is a practical accomplishment involving a variety of doings and saying – practices – and a set of heterogeneous elements. Marketing sustainability becomes, from this vantage point, also a matter of enacting sustainability. Through marketing practices, a specific version of sustainability is enacted/performed (Fuentes 2014a, Fuentes 2014b).

Empirically, the paper draws on an ethnographic study of three Swedish retail chains (Åhléns, Boomerang, and Myrorna) and their sustainability efforts. Interviews with management, observations made at the stores of these three different retailers, and various marketing texts and images produced by the retailers comprise the material analysed. Following the practice approach, particular attention is given to the doing and sayings involved in the marketing of sustainability and what is performed through these practices.

The practice analysis carried out shows mainly two things. First, it illustrates three different ways of marketing and enacting sustainability. It shows that sustainability is framed differently and, indeed, enacted differently in order to fit various ideas about who the responsible or green consumers are. In doing so, the paper also offers a different explanation about what guides the marketing of sustainability. The argument is that, rather than consumer demand, supply pressure, or media scandals, the marketing of sustainability is, in each case studied, configured around a specific notion of the responsible consumer. That is to say, what sustainability work is marketed, through which devices it is marketed, and how it is framed are guided by ideas about who the retailers' responsible consumers are, what their lifestyles are like, and what they will be interested in. In each of these cases, the marketing of sustainability is configured to be meaningful to the retailers' imagined responsible consumer and intended to resonate with this consumer's concerns, lifestyle, and situation. The consumers these retailers are targeting are not flesh-and-blood consumers but rather *consumer images*. Images of responsible consumers thus work as configuring agents around which retailing activities and devices are organized.

### **Marketing as practice: a theoretical perspective**

Practice theory is one of the theoretical resources used within the emergent field of marketing as practice (Skålén and Hackley 2011) and has been used to analyse how marketing constructs markets (Araujo 2007, Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006, Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007), how value is formed and re-formed in and through service marketing/consumption practices (Echeverri and Skålén 2011, Korkman 2006), and to reconceptualise different forms of marketing work such as corporate branding (Järventie-Thesleff et al. 2011). According to Schatzki, a practice approach involves analyses that “develop an account of practices” and/or “treat the field of practices as the place to study the nature and transformation of their subject matter” (Schatzki 2001: 2).

More specifically, in this paper practice theory is used to conceptualize the marketing of sustainability as a series of enactments and an unfolding of practices that are socio-material in nature and performative.

First, to take a practice theory perspective on marketing is to put emphasis on the practical accomplishment of marketing work (rather than strategies and models, for example). Although not all practice theory analyses need include accounts of practices, they all should focus on the enactment/unfolding of marketing.

Second, taking a practice theory perspective often means taking a socio-material perspective. Practices, Reckwitz tells us, involve and depend on understandings, know-how, feelings, and material artefacts:

A practice – a way of cooking, of consuming, of working, of investigating, of taking care of oneself or of others, etc. – forms so to speak a ‘block’ whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements. (Reckwitz, 2002: 249–50)

Taking a socio-material approach means acknowledging that things “play an active part in the generation, stabilization, and reproduction of social order” (Preda 1999: 349) and can also be carriers of practices (Hagberg and Kjellberg

2010). This, however, also goes for what are generally considered “immaterial” elements such as ideas, concepts, and understandings. From a socio-material perspective, all elements of a market practice are interlinked and can, as part of this assemblage, have agency.

Third, and crucial for the argument made in this paper, taking a practice theory perspective means putting emphasis on the performative aspects of marketing practice. Every practice is both dependent upon and a producer of a set of elements, a socio-material assemblage. A practice as an entity, that is, as a recognizable conjunction of elements, is held together (and transformed) by multiple performances – the doings of the practice (Shove et al. 2012).

Departing then from this theoretical vantage point, the analysis in this paper will focus on marketing activities and devices and address both how sustainability is enacted and what it in turn performs. In what different ways do retailers market sustainability? What activities and devices are involved in these enactments? In what different ways is sustainability enacted? What determines which marketing approach retailers take?

### **Method and materials: an ethnographic study**

The marketing of sustainable retailing is here explored through an ethnographic study of three Swedish retail chains: Åhléns, Boomerang, and Myrorna.

In the selection of these cases, four factors were deemed crucial. First, the retailers had to engage in sustainable retailing. Second, they had to do so in different ways. That is, different examples of sustainable retailing were sought. Third, retail chains were selected rather than smaller, independent shops. Due to their size, retail chains are easier to study. There are more stores to observe; it is easier to find consumers who shop there; and more marketing and media materials are available. Finally, the retailers had to be willing to grant access to the researchers and participate in the study.

These three retail organizations are thus used as (different) examples of sustainable retail. Åhléns is Sweden’s largest chain of department stores and one of Sweden’s most well-known brands. Åhléns has 77 department stores in Sweden (and 32 stores in Norway) ([www.ahlens.se](http://www.ahlens.se), 21 October 2014). Åhléns focuses on female consumers and the areas of fashion, beauty, and home décor. While larger department stores carry a wide assortment of goods, many carry only products within these categories. Boomerang is also a larger chain. At the time of this writing, the Boomerang Company has more than 30 stores and operates in four countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark). Boomerang has traditionally sold menswear but over the years has added a women’s collection and now sells children’s apparel as well. Myrorna is Sweden’s largest secondhand retailer with 35 stores spread across the country. Myrorna sells secondhand clothes, furniture, cutlery, books, and home décor items. In contrast to the other two cases, Myrorna is not a corporation but an NGO owned by the Salvation Army.

Like many ethnographies, this study combines multiple data-gathering techniques and has an emergent design (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, Elliot and Jankel-Elliott 2003, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). And like most ethnographies, this one takes a particular interest in what people do and why (Czarniawska 2007, Fangen 2005, Crang and Cook 2007). More specifically, the

analysis presented below draws on four types of materials generated by the author and a research assistant working on the project.

First, media material was collected using the “Mediearkivet” database (a Nordic media database). The search focused on retailers’ names and keywords connected to sustainability such as “ecological”, “green”, “environment”, and “fair trade”. This yielded approximately 200 pages of transcripts. Second, six in-depth interviews with sustainability strategists and other staff in leading positions were conducted. These interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were transcribed in full, and generated approximately 60 pages of transcribed material. Third, marketing material was collected from the stores (brochures and catalogues, for example) and from the retailers’ websites and web pages (printed and saved digitally). This produced approximately 100 pages of different types of printed documents (e.g. sustainability reports available online, printouts of the retailers websites and web pages, and more). Fourth and finally, observations of the stores were carried out. The store observations focused on the cities of Malmö, Lund, Helsingborg, Göteborg, and Stockholm. Approximately 30 observations lasting between 15 and 90 minutes were conducted during 2012 and 2013, generating approximately 150 pages of field notes.

The analytical categories were developed through close readings of the material (e.g. interview transcripts, field notes, brochures, and websites) and the use of common coding techniques and the constant comparative method (for an introduction to the constant comparative method, see Strauss and Corbin 1998, Crang and Cook 2007, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Categories were constructed and relationships between them were formulated by closely reading the material to identify themes and particularities.

## **Marketing sustainabilities: results and analysis**

The three retailers – Åhléns, Boomerang, and Myrorna – and their marketing practices are described and analysed below. The analysis shows that, although the marketing activities carried out are similar, the way that sustainability is framed varies. These differences can be traced to varying images of consumers held by the organizations and reinforced through their marketing work. Guided by different ideas about the characteristics of an ideal responsible consumer, these retailers work to enable sustainable consumption in various ways. For the sake of clarity, the cases are presented and analysed sequentially.

### **Åhléns’s marketing activities**

Åhléns markets itself as a caring company that is concerned with the environment and “social” issues. This retailer’s sustainability work touches upon various issues such as diversity and equality among the staff, staff education, environmental concerns, animal rights, labour rights, and child labour. Much of the sustainability work done by Åhléns is aimed at providing sustainable products to its customers. Åhléns carries environmentally friendly and fair-trade products and is continuously working to expand and improve its range of sustainable products within its three core areas: fashion, beauty, and interior design.

A selection of these products – those that are deemed to meet the high environmental and social standards of the company – are also labelled with Åhléns own responsible-choice label called ‘Å, wow’.



Åhléns also excludes products that do not align with its “company values”, acting thus as a “choice editor” (Gunn and Mont 2014):

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Antibacterial substances* – Åhléns does not permit the use of antibacterial substances that can lead to resistance to antibiotics or products treated with such substances. ([www.ahlens.se](http://www.ahlens.se), 24 February 2012)

Like many other organizations (Frostenson et al. 2010, Wanderley et al. 2008), Åhléns relies heavily on its website as a communicator of its sustainability work. On the website, consumers can read about Åhléns’s sustainable label, ‘Å, wow!’ and its sustainability projects, the company’s values, its sustainability strategy, and more. In addition, Facebook is used to communicate elements of the company’s sustainability work. Åhléns’s Facebook page has, for example, been utilized to launch a new ecological skin care brand ([www.facebook.com/#!/ahlens](http://www.facebook.com/#!/ahlens), 28 February 2012). This interactive platform also allows consumers to communicate directly with Åhléns and to be part of the company’s sustainability work.

Åhléns also uses the media skilfully to get attention for its sustainability work. Press releases are written to comment on “hot” topics, such as the practices of mulesing and using feathers from live birds, and to inform the public about the sustainability activities undertaken by the corporation, such as the launching of their eco-label or their recycling project with Myrorna.

Finally, its department stores are important marketing devices through which Åhléns makes its sustainability work known to consumers. As mentioned, much of the sustainability work carried out by this retailer focuses on making environmentally friendly and fair-trade products available. At its department stores, these products are highlighted and clearly marked using signs and labels. Consumers can easily find the ecological and fair-trade products marked as “Good choice” at the department stores. Consumers can also read about ecologically grown and harvested cotton, what the different eco-certifications stand for, and more by reading the tags attached to products. For example, the tag on a cotton sweatshirt observed at one of the department stores read:

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

The tags on the products also direct interested consumers to the corporate website for more information regarding Åhléns’s sustainability work. The Åhléns department stores are thus arranged to work as promoters of sustainable consumption. At these sites, different marketing devices, such as window displays, signs, tags, shelves, different decorative items, and the products themselves, are organized to form a socio-material assemblage that works toward

promoting specific forms of consumption (for a similar argument see, du Gay 2004a, du Gay 2004b, Fuentes 2011).

In summary, Åhléns enlists a range of different marketing devices, including its corporate website, Facebook, its marketing materials, and the retail space in its department stores, to market its diverse sustainability work.

### Sustainable products for the active woman

What is it that organizes this marketing work? Examining the corporate website, its Facebook page, press releases, members' magazine, TV commercials, and the department stores, my argument is that what organizes this marketing work is an idea of who the Åhléns consumer is. The argument is that the marketing work – issues addressed, messages produced, and devices used – are organized around a specific idea of who the responsible Åhléns consumer is. Åhléns frames “active women” as their main customers:

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

Åhléns's goal is to be first on *her* shopping trip and a one-stop store for fashion, beauty products, and home décor. This retailer wants to be “women's favourite”. In the world according to Åhléns, women have active lives and many choices. It is a consumer society in which shopping can be both fun and a time-consuming task, both play and work (Babin et al. 1994, Bäckström 2006, Bäckström 2011).

Underlying the idea of the Åhléns active woman is the notion of lifestyle (see also Fredriksson and Fuentes 2014). That is the idea that consumers have, or rather construct, specific styles of living, and these are mainly expressed through consumers' choices (Featherstone 1991, Firat and Venkatesh 1995, Holt 1997). But what is seen here is not simply a celebration of consumer society and consumer lifestyles. In formulating its business idea and sustainability strategy, Åhléns is drawing on more critical perspectives of the choosing society and stressful consumer life (see, e.g., Bauman 2001, Goss 2006, Mick et al. 2004). More specifically, Åhléns is targeting the specific situations of women in modern society where women have entered the job market but are still, due to traditional gender constructions, responsible for managing the household (Thompson 1996). This, along with other demands to stay “in shape” and “in fashion” (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), produces a demanding situation that involves multiple consumer choices. In this context, the call to consume sustainably becomes an additional demand for already-stressed women that has to be “managed” somehow.

### Enabling sustainable consumption practices in a complex world

In this world, women need assistance to consume sustainably. According to Åhléns, women are conscious about these issues and care about them:

I believe this target group is very aware of these issues. They get very involved; they care deeply about sustainability both in terms of the contents of the products purely ... well, organic and such, that the products should be

organic, as well as all the fair-trade aspects.... (Interview with Karin Hanses, Åhléns, 25 May 2011)

Thus, it is not a matter of lacking compassion but of lacking time. According to Åhléns, today's active women do not have the time or the resources to manage the complexities involved in sustainable consumption (this is also something expressed by green consumers when interviewed, see e.g., Cherrier and Murray 2007, Connolly and Prothero 2008, Fuentes 2011). Against this background, the task that Åhléns takes upon itself is to serve as a complexity manager and choice editor (Gunn and Mont 2014, Sadowski and Buckingham 2007). The company works to make sustainable shopping easier by including sustainable items in their product lines, clearly marking them, and providing information about these products. Furthermore, it makes sustainable shopping easier by excluding certain products and by choosing the issues addressed and to what extent they are addressed (Fredriksson and Fuentes 2014). Åhléns wants to be a department store where sustainable shopping practices are effortless:

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

Being responsible and offering an assortment of sustainable products is an extension of Åhléns's self-defined role as enablers of women's active lifestyles. Through the marketing work done by Åhléns, sustainable consumption is defined as purchasing sustainable products, and a specific version of the responsible consumer is enacted. Thus, the way to consume sustainably is by purchasing the right (Åhléns) products.

### Boomerang's marketing activities

Compared to Åhléns, Boomerang's sustainability work is less diverse. While this retailer also markets itself as a caring company concerned with environmental and social issues, the sustainability work they carry out and market is more limited. More specifically, the focus for Boomerang's sustainability work has been recycling. On its website, visitors can read the following statement:

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

As this text indicates, Boomerang's sustainability work aims at encouraging recycling. The company resells old products, labelling them as "vintage". Products deemed unsuitable for resale are recycled into furniture and marketed as

part of the company's "Boomerang Home" product line and waste products from the manufacturing processes of Boomerang products are used to make the "Effect Collection". Boomerang works thus with both recycling and upcycling.

Boomerang promotes its sustainability work through various digital channels. On Boomerang's web pages, consumers can read about the company's efforts to recycle garments, the Vintage, and Boomerang Effect and Boomerang Home collections, and also the company's code of conduct policy and general sustainability philosophy. Similarly, Boomerang's other digital channels such as its Facebook page, its Instagram account and YouTube channel are also used to market the company's sustainability work and sustainable products lines.

Like Åhléns, Boomerang has been skilful in getting attention for its sustainability efforts in the media. One can find numerous articles on Boomerang and its sustainability work. Boomerang also showcases its sustainability products at events such as Stockholm Fashion Week and the EcoNow Fair and does some advertising for these products.

The Boomerang stores, however, leave something to be desired. While the Boomerang Effect product line is marketed at Boomerang stores and some stores also carry the "vintage" collection, the sustainability work of this retailer is not as visible as one might expect. The Boomerang Effect collection is difficult to distinguish from the regular collection.

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

### Recyclable and reusable products for "Scandinavian preppies"

Also in this case it is a specific image of the responsible consumer that organizes the marketing activities carried out. Boomerang's responsible consumer is, however, not a caring active woman with too many choices but instead a design-interested and nature-loving consumer who appreciates quality (see also Fuentes 2014a). With this consumer in mind, Boomerang has developed its "Scandinavian preppy" style:

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

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

"Scandinavian preppy" is the marketing of Boomerang framed as an attractive consumer identity made up of several components.

First, a Scandinavian Preppy consumer, Boomerang makes clear in its marketing material, is design interested. Interested in design is here used to refer to sophisticated taste. By writing about Scandinavian design or Scandinavian simplicity Boomerang connects this ethnic identity to a particular (and sophisticated) aesthetic. In the same way, writing and talking about Boomerang

products as well-made “quality products” is not only a way of saying that these products are properly manufactured but also a way to signify “expensive high-end products”.

Second, a Scandinavian Preppy consumer is also nature interested. According to the marketing of Boomerang, being Scandinavian means being connected to nature in a special (even natural) way. Boomerang use of images of young (Scandinavian) models wearing Boomerang clothes while standing on rocky shores with the ocean behind them or standing in front of picturesque wooden cabins to market its products. In this marketing material a traditional and romanticized image of Sweden and Swedes (Scandinavian and Scandinavians) similar to ones found in tourism advertisements (Gössling and Hultman 2006, Hultman and Cederholm 2008) is reproduced.

Also underlying this marketing work is the now widespread notion that consumers have lifestyles and that these are acted out in the field of consumption.

### Enabling sustainable consumption practices in a throw-away society

With the Scandinavian Preppy consumer in mind, Boomerang develops a certain way of promoting sustainable consumption practices. Like Åhléns, Boomerang reproduces the notion that ours is a consumer society, but the problem enacted here is not one that has to do with the complexities of choosing sustainable products. Instead, Boomerang focuses on the environmental problems of the throwaway consumer society. In today’s consumer society, we purchase too many easily discarded products, Boomerang claims. The solution however is not stop consuming but instead purchasing quality that are durable and recycling them when they become obsolete.

Ever since we started Boomerang in 1976, nature has been our great source of inspiration. The sea, the rocks and the waves which never abate. The ice and snow that freezes and melts, and freezes again. A never-ending cycle. Exactly the way we want our clothes to be. That is why we have created The Boomerang Effect. ([www.boomerang.com](http://www.boomerang.com), 7 March 2012)

In its marketing Boomerang connects its products and the company behind them to nature and the natural. Boomerang, we are told, want to be part of natural cycle. To make this a reality, Boomerang offers solutions to material and symbolic obsolescence (on design and obsolescence, see e.g., Tham 2008). Items that are materially worn out are used to make new products (as explained above). Items that are symbolically worn out – previous owners may want to change style or want something new – items are resold and revalorized by for example being marketed as “vintage”.

Boomerang approach to sustainability is then not about offering eco-labelled products but rather about offering products that will last and, when products are for some reason no longer wanted, offering consumers the opportunity to put them back into circulation as new products or as second hand products. Boomerang offers consumers the possibility to continue their consumption of Boomerang products while simultaneously being sustainable. Consumers can be Green Scandinavian Preppies.

## Myrorna's marketing activities

Finally, similar to Åhléns, Myrorna has a diversified sustainability profile. Through its secondhand shops, Myrorna works to promote the reselling of goods and thus, the retailer argues, also contributes to the development of a more environmentally sustainable society. In addition, the proceeds generated from this activity funds social work carried out by the Salvation Army:

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

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

In this text, which can be found at the stores and on this retailer's website, Myrorna works to interweave environmental concern and social work. On its website, visitors can read that while the retailer's main focus is the promotion of reuse through the selling of secondhand goods, it also aims to be 'a way into the job market for people who are unemployed for various reasons' and to contribute to the development of third-world countries.

Myrorna's sustainability work is ambitious, and the surplus generated is used to fund rehab centres and supportive housing for addicts, drop-in care centres for homeless people, supportive housing for socially at-risk teenagers, and various other social services for people in at-risk groups ([www.myrorna.se](http://www.myrorna.se), 29 February 2012).

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

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

Myrorna is also active when it comes to fairs and other events. This retailer is regularly represented at Christmas fairs, eco-fairs, furniture and interior décor fairs, and vintage and other fairs in an effort to market itself and its sustainability work.

At its stores, consumers can find multiple references to Myrorna's sustainability work. At some stores one can find a large sign stating the

environmental benefits of shopping at Myrorna as well as the societal good that the organization does. Signs thanking donors for their gifts and Myrorna's "reuse" bags are also commonly found at the stores and serve as reminders of the organization's environmental and social work. At some of its stores consumers can find large colourful Myrorna posters with the text 'Reuse saves the Earth's resources' in large print, and below in much smaller print, 'Your gift also helps people in need in Sweden', followed by the organization's logo and the text 'Love reuse'.

In summary, Myrorna carries out numerous marketing activities and enlists multiple marketing devices to market its sustainability work. Although this is a non-profit organization, its marketing strategy does not seem to differ in any significant way from the two other retailers discussed.

### Secondhand goods for the fashionable conscious consumer

Like the other two retailers, Myrorna directs its marketing to a specific type of consumer: the fashion consumer (see also Fredriksson 2013). While surely there are many other types of consumers that visit and purchase items at the stores, and while these consumers almost certainly have different motives for doing so (financial, for example), Myrorna focuses on the fashion aspect of secondhand items when marketing its products.

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

Myrorna also strives to follow and adapt to trends and the seasons, attends fashion events and vintage fairs, and collaborates with fashion retailers such as Lindex and Åhléns. Focus here is on creativity and individuality. The marketing work of Myrorna is organized around an image of the consumer as a creative individualist in search of her own style. In doing so, Myrorna is reproducing the all too common idea that consumers are identity seekers (Gabriel and Lang 2006). However, this retailer is also emphasising another of the characteristics often attributed to the modern consumer in consumer culture literature: creativity. The postmodern consumer, it is often said, is creative, resourceful, aesthetically competent, and continually in search of new identities (Campbell 2005, Featherstone 1991, Firat and Venkatesh 1995, Gabriel and Lang 2006). Consumption, it is argued, can be a form of creative expression, a field in which to enact oneself as an artist, and a set of practices in which one can develop skills, knowledge, and know-how to become not simply a consumer of mass-produced (and mass-marketed) commodities but a skilful prosumer (i.e. a producer-consumer hybrid) (Cova and Cova 2012). Consumers then are believed to "construct" new products by (skilfully) putting together mass-produced products into new sets of products such as a clothing outfit (Campbell 2005).

### Enabling reflexive fashion consumption in a problematic consumer society

Being a creative consumer can thus be about constructing a style through consumer choices. Myrorna seems to agree and, guided by this image of the consumer, this retailer markets itself as a solution to two sustainability problems.

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

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

The solution marketed by Myrorna is to consume the company's secondhand products. By doing so at Myrorna, consumers can simultaneously contribute to environmental and social sustainability. Myrorna makes an effort to enlist consumers to contribute to its central mission:

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

However, Myrorna is not simply a charity organization – at least it does not want to be seen as only that. What Myrorna offers consumers is the opportunity to be fashionable, to be individuals, to "develop their own style" as they phrase it, *while at the same time* contributing to environmental sustainability and important social work. Thus, Myrorna offers consumers the discursive and material resources required to add "sustainability" to their style constructions.

### **The enactment of sustainabilities and images of responsible consumers as configuring agents**

This analysis has demonstrated that retailers enact sustainability in various ways. While the activities carried out and the devices enlisted in the marketing work of these retailers are similar, the way sustainability is framed and presented as meaningful to consumers varies among the three cases. In each case, retail sustainability and sustainable consumption becomes something different. In each case, a specific set of problems is emphasised and a retailer-specific sustainability "solution" is offered.

In addition, the analysis shows that how retailers market sustainability to consumers is dependent on the conception they have of the sustainable/responsible consumer. In each of the cases discussed, it was apparent that sustainability issues were reformulated to align with an imagined consumer lifestyle: Åhléns's active woman, Boomerang's Scandinavian preppy, and



Myrorna's fashion-interested creative consumer looking to construct a personal style. These retailers framed themselves as enablers that offer consumers the opportunity to act in a sustainable manner – in different ways – while at the same time constructing a desirable lifestyle.

As explained in the marketing-as-practice section, the elements of a practice – ideas, artefacts, know-how – are not merely passive props but active agents that, when enlisted in activities and connected to other actants, have the capacity to perform realities (cf. Latour 2005). Following this notion of heterogeneous performativity (Callon et al. 2007), one can argue that these specific images of the consumer work as *configuring agents*. The concept of configuring agent is here used to denote an arranging entity around which activities and devices are organized but also an entity that works to organize. These consumer images – materialized in different forms – work as actants. Thus, it is when an idea, for some reason, becomes central to the organizing of activities that it becomes a configuring agent and gains power.

In this case, these configuring agents (the consumer images) were, at least in part, constructed by drawing on marketing theory. But rather than conventional marketing theory or economics (Cochoy 1998, Cova and Cova 2012), the theories implicated here are more closely connected to the field of sociocultural marketing theory. That is to say, the consumer images performed by these retailers have much in common with how consumers are viewed by sociocultural marketing theory.

In the sociocultural literature, consumers are commonly seen as identity seekers who use products, and their consumption is seen as a communication device to signal all kinds of identity markers (see, e.g., Aldridge 2003, Arnould and Thompson 2005, Friend and Thompson 2003, Goulding et al. 2002, Holt 1997). This literature also stresses the active and often creative role that consumers have. It shows that, rather than being passive dupes, consumers are active producers of meaning who appropriate consumer products for their own purposes (Arnould and Thompson 2005, Campbell 2005, Featherstone 1991, Holt 1995, Kozinets et al. 2004, Kozinets et al. 2002). It is, then, this cultural notion of the consumer that these three specific notions draw on to a high degree. The Åhléns–Boomerang–Myrorna sustainable consumer is an identity seeker, an active chooser, and a meaning maker, all at the same time. And while the specific consumer constructs may emphasise different aspects of the sociocultural consumer, they are also closely interlinked. The responsible consumer envisioned by these retailers is a sociocultural being, a chooser, an identity seeker, and a creative prosumer. The many faces of the consumer become here components in the creation of these specific consumer constructs. And, in turn, these constructs work to organize the marketing programs of these retailers. Consumer images are thus enacted both through marketing activities and work to organize these activities and hold them in place.

## **Conclusions and contributions**

How can this analysis contribute to the emergent field of sustainable retailing?

First, the analysis shows that, indeed, sustainability is marketed and enacted differently by different retailers. What sustainability is about, what problems are important, and how these should be solved varies among the three retailers examined. This confirms and expands on previous research that has stated that

sustainability (or CSR) is defined by different retail organizations in various ways and adapted to fit the goals and purposes of the specific company (Cerne 2008, Frostenson et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2005d, Jones et al. 2008). In relation to previous research, this study offers a more in-depth and marketing-practice-focused analysis and illustrates a number of ways in which sustainability is marketed and enacted.

Second, this analysis offers a tentative explanation as to what it is that organizes the marketing of sustainability among retailers. The analysis presented in this paper suggests that the marketing of sustainability is not primarily guided by media scares (Lindgreen and Hingley 2003), supplier pressure (Ytterhus et al. 1999), or consumer demand (Piacentini et al. 2000, Nicholls 2002). Nor is it directly related to the industry in which the retailer operates or the retailer's core business (Frostenson et al. 2010, Wanderley et al. 2008). While these factors often explain why sustainability programs are initiated and what issues are addressed within such programs, *how sustainability is marketed to consumers* is instead organized by ideas of who the responsible consumer is.

### **Managerial implications**

This analysis has several implications for retail practitioners.

First, the fact that sustainability is enacted and framed differently indicates that retailers need to think critically about how to design their own sustainability approach: what issues to focus on, what sustainability problems to emphasise, and how to frame these to consumers. For retailers aiming to develop a sustainability profile, this means they must be aware of the fact that there is no standard approach and that the approach taken should align with or relate to their general profile and resonate with their customers. For those retailers already involved in sustainability, this indicates that re-examining the appropriateness of their sustainability approach and how it is marketed can be worthwhile measure.

Second, the fact that the marketing of sustainability seems to be guided by images of responsible consumers (rather than consumer demand or other factors) suggests that retailers need to reflect critically on what consumer model(s) guides their sustainability work, how well this model aligns with their customer base and what version of sustainable consumption this aims at promoting. While a clear image of the responsible consumer may be practical and effective as an organizing principle, it can quickly become a problem if it fails to speak to the retailer's consumers.

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