Ethics in fast fashion marketing

The role of ethics in marketing fast fashion and marketing's capacity for social and environmental progress

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In this paper I investigate the marketing of fast fashion and the industry’s way of responding to and solving ethical issues. A number of issues are immediately apparent: the industry has an enormous impact on the environment; the nature of fast fashion and its short lead times demand large amounts of garments but also labor; the drive for efficiency incentivizes companies to outsource manufacturing to developing nations in which wages are much lower; and the safety and dignity of laborers in developing nations are questionable. Focusing on H&M as a case study, the paper delves into the seeming dichotomy of fast fashion and sustainability. First, a survey was conducted to provide insight on consumer perceptions of fast fashion and sustainability; this information is then used to paint a picture of the cultural context of fast fashion operations. Next, the annual reports of five of the largest fast fashion companies were analyzed to determine the level of transparency in corporate communications with a focus on companies’ social and environmental impact. Lastly, the communication between corporations and stakeholders was inserted into the framework of critical theory to determine the manner in which fast fashion as an industry conformed to cultural expectations or, inversely, conformed cultural expectations to their way of operating. From the analyses I conclude that the communications of corporate sustainability are used to satisfy stakeholder demands without sacrificing the profitability of their operations. While steps are taken towards improving social and natural environments, such improvements are only made insofar as it benefits the corporations. Moreover, it is shown that corporate behavior is reactive to demands; measures are only taken when the status quo is challenged by external actors, be they social outrage or legislative changes. In conclusion, the current operations of H&M and similar corporations, and the desire to ensure sustainability through the market, are insufficient. Governmental intervention is recommended as a means to ensure corrective change, but no conclusive solution is found.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Ethics in the marketing of fashion

Today, fashion as an industry is undergoing development in the way the practice of manufacturing and marketing clothes are perceived. This development coincides and correlates with the rise of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a marketing tool and a new means of achieving social progress, but also as an expectation from society towards companies (Deloitte, 2019; Chong, 2017). This creates an interesting agenda: in a time of commoditization, where differentiation often comes down to price or customization of the selling process (Cravens, LeMeunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2011), companies are given the opportunity to differentiate themselves through socially conscious and mostly voluntary initiatives. In other words, utilizing initiatives that benefit society may also benefit companies. But can the demand from consumers facilitate actual change?

The fashion industry is part of what Adorno and Horkheimer calls the *culture industry,* viz. the creation of culture and cultural phenomena serving the interest of corporate elites. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Culture Industry has effected a programming of consumers to accept the status quo and mythologize the world as it is presented in mass media; this state of affairs, they argue, is what prevents social and societal progress. If that is the case, then changing this behavior, thereby causing people to deprioritize the consumption of goods, seems to lead to a conflict of interests: fashion companies are asked to facilitate change through their art, using the opportunity to better their marketing, while also avoiding the changes they effect becoming an obstacle to selling fashion. What, then, are the factors underlying these conditions? This is the point of departure of this paper.

1.2. Research question

My research is both theoretical and case specific; while my theoretical interests revolve around ethical considerations in the fashion industry, the case I use is fast fashion giant Hennes & Mauritz AB (H&M). The research questions the investigation will be based upon are:

RQ: What are ethico-philosophical issues that the fashion industry must address?

Sub-RQ: How are current ethical problematics reflected in the marketing of H&M?

This investigation of ethics in fashion delves into the role ethics play in the marketing of fashion, how ethics become a tool to improve performance, and also whether fashion can be a facilitator of progress in regard to the ethical considerations that become part of companies' marketing efforts. Thus, the study is normative, as I aim at finding the means to achieve progress in the morality of the fashion industry. In order to investigate the morality of fashion companies, ethics as a concept and different ways to interpret the meaning of the concept will be outlined, in the context of the research done by scholars within critical theory. Furthermore, the relation between company and stakeholders will be mapped out in an effort to determine how different groups of people are affected by the way fashion companies operate and market their operations. Their marketing efforts will be explained through schools of marketing. If possible, the paper will eventually paint a picture of the effects the demand for ethical practices has on fashion companies and, conversely, the effect the implementation of ethical practices may have on consumers and society in general.

In addition to aforementioned normative intention, this thesis is also ethico-philosophical; it examines the ethics and justice of practices within the industry of fast fashion. H&M was chosen as an illustrative case due to their outwards focus on sustainability and the transparence of their operations through H&M's thorough CSR reports. These circumstances make possible the investigation of both the effort H&M put into marketing their products as ethically conscious and the effort put into living up to the standards they promote.

1.3. Outline of the thesis

The thesis is structured as follows: chapter two of the paper will provide a thorough description and explanation of relevant theoretical frameworks which will be used to shed light on the mechanisms and actors of the fashion industry and ethics in general. Next, the methodology on which the thesis will be built is presented, with justification of the choices made. After detailing the methodological circumstances of the thesis, the data gathered will be presented and examined, upon which an analysis, based on the chosen theory, will be carried out. Lastly, the findings of the analysis and the implications they have for the field of research and the fashion industry as a whole will be evaluated, eventually resulting in a response or conclusion to the questions asked initially.

2. Literary review

2.1. Philosophical threads on ethics

Ever since Socrates brought it up, philosophers have weighed in with their own version of ethical frameworks and systems to ensure they would be followed. Jeremy Bentham and his understudy and godson, John Stuart Mill, introduced the idea of morality being acting in a manner that led to the state of affairs that caused the most pleasure in relation to pain; in short, the average pleasure added to the individual's life minus the pain it inflicted became the recipe for deciding on the most morally good action.

Kant added to the repertoire of moral theory by arguing for a universal set of rules: do not act in a way that would be unsustainable if made into a universal law, and do not treat any individual as a means to an end. A huge breakthrough arrived with the Industrial Revolution and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Aside from countering the capitalism of the industrialized world, Marx and Engels' works argued for a new approach to looking at change in societies, while also framing the state of moral theory through the conditions of the working class. Their materialistic dialectics argued that the clash of an oppressed working class and their oppressors, the antithesis and thesis, would unavoidably lead to revolution and progress, the synthesis.

In the first half of the 20th century, Marx's texts led a group of scholars, notably Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School to develop the theory of the Culture Industry, i.e. the imposition of culture and mass media on consumer culture and social psychology in general (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Aside from explaining consumer behavior, it also highlighted the relationship between art and ethics, as art was highlighted as an agent of change within moral theory. The Culture Industry became one part in a wider field of scholarly interest called critical theory, a philosophy aimed at changing culture, politics, and philosophy as a whole for the better. Central to the idea of critical theory is the belief that society, culture, and politics are the result of structures we may not be aware of, and, equally important, human subjectivity is the result of exposure to all facets of said society, culture, and politics.

In effect, the way we perceive the world, and the structures that world is filled with, is socially constructed and changeable. Why, then, is the history of philosophy and the development of ethics relevant? If subjectivity is the result of impressions from the world around us, and the world is filled with structure, then it follows that those structures, and the subjectivities they are formed by, are also the result of a former set of subjectivities and structures, evolving through time. In short, the development of ethical standards and perceptions of the world can be traced back to Ancient Greece, meanwhile helping us understand the circumstances that caused those philosophies to develop, as well as helping us interpret and understand current tendencies.

2.2. Culture and marketing

According to McCracken (1986), culture has long been a major focus of marketing departments and scholars alike, with the on-going globalization of the world adding to the interest of doing research on the interrelatedness of culture, marketing, and consumer goods. Culture is both a frame of reference through which the meaning of consumer goods is constructed and interpreted, but also constitutes a framework marketing people can use to plan and structure the marketing of consumer goods. Conversely, how society reacts to and adopts consumer goods and marketing campaigns has garnered significant interest, influenced in part by the rise of corporate social responsibility.

2.2.1. The Enlightenment, or the conflict between culture and the individual

According to Kant, Enlightenment thinking provided the individual the tools to stray from religious beliefs and the thoughts that were imposed on the individual by authorities, which had been the constructive forces in western culture for time immemorial. By relying solely on one's own reasoning, the individual was now able to reach unbiased truths, which Kant believed to be universal through the uniformity of the thought faculties of all human beings. Weber (Weber & Kalberg, 2013) later argued that the uniformity and universality of pure reasoning were restrictive and totalitarian, as the focus on reasoning as the basis of all decision-making meant that all thinkers, manufacturers, and developers of technology moved towards the same ideals, unavoidably resulting in all creative construction becoming uniform and bound to efficiency.

The drive towards efficiency would further lead to bureaucracy, placing every individual within the machine that is the organization, state, or society in general, effectively reducing mobility and individual freedom. Weber called this process and the effects thereof an *Iron Cage*. Another contemporary of Weber, Karl Marx, made similar arguments against Enlightenment thinking and, in turn, capitalism. Based on, but also in opposition to, Hegelian dialectics, he developed the concept of dialectical materialism, wherein the individual was placed into a machine to optimize the manufacturing of consumer goods (Thomas, 2008). Marx believed the estrangement of the individual from what they produce, in exchange for monetary compensation, removed all meaning of the labor from the laborer.

This, in turn, led to the dichotomy of laborer and owner of the means of production, or the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in Marx' own terms. The dialectic in this case is the conflict between the proletarian class and the bourgeoisie, which Marx foresaw ending in violent revolt, eventually moving power from the bourgeoisie towards to the proletariat; or, in dialectical terms, the meeting of thesis, which is the status quo, with antithesis, i.e. the opposing force, and the resulting synthesis or reconstitution of a new status quo. With a more individualistic focus, Nietzsche developed his theory of man's three metamorphoses (1885), wherein the individual, as characterized by the camel, would carry the burden imposed on him by culture. This burden represented the norms and ways of thinking determined by the majority and integrated into any one culture. Through freeing oneself from the ways of one's culture and general circumstances, one would be metamorphosized, first into a lion and eventually to a baby, who joyfully followed its own ways and played freely.

2.2.1.1. Marxism and dialectic materialism

Despite the idea that the Enlightenment was supposed to grant freedom by breaking with tradition, as per Kant (2018), Marx identified what he believed to be inherent flaws in culture and the political and economic systems that naturally evolved from the Enlightenment, namely capitalism. Particularly, he critiqued the role of the laborer in manufacturing goods, and also the role of goods as *commodities.* Commodities and commoditization became a particular item of great import and the symbol of laborers' new roles and their consequent status quo. To Marx, commodities are objects of culture, that is whatever material object was manufactured for sale in capitalist systems, but also the true nature or cultural meaning of the object itself, insofar as they are produced in a capitalist society and within a system of monetary exchange. Most importantly, however, they are the direct result and representative of human labor (Woodward, 2007).

Commodities are manufactured to meet the needs and wants of consumers, be they the result of hunger, desire, or practicality (Marx, 1990/1867). The objects themselves and consumers' appreciation of them are not the main interest for Marx. Instead, they are representative of the system he criticizes, specifically the processes of alienation, exploitation, and estrangement, but also function as diversions which cause laborers to forget the exploitative nature of capitalism and instead engage in the pursuit of materialistic goods (Woodward, 2007). While Marx's analysis of commodities as symbols of flaws in capitalism does not regard consumption and consumer culture, it does shed light on the view of labor and laborers in modernity. To Marx, the laborer themself is commoditized as well, becoming something owned by the capitalists:

> "His economic bondage is both brought about and concealed by the periodic sale of himself, by his change of masters, and by the oscillation in the market price of labor power." (Marx, 1990/1867)

The fact that wage-earners transfer *masters*, i.e. whoever pays the wage, and the fact that their labor is priced differently based on certain internal and external circumstances, makes the laborer the equivalent of the product of their labor, that is a commodity. This becomes relevant when examining the processes effected by capitalistic systems.

Furthermore, Marx argues that the laborer who meets the objective world of consumption objects is alienated from what is the product of his own labor, and that this alienation is only magnified by further laboring, eventually making the objects themselves hostile to the laborer (Woodward, 2007). Three further forms of alienation define them: alienation from other workers at his site of work, from whom he is separated and denied necessary communication; from the activity of labor, as he plays no role in determining processes, designing the product or sourcing the materials; and from himself and his humanity, as he gains no sense of identity from the labor (Marx, 1932/1959). The result is a laborer who finds no meaning in his work and who gains no meaning from the products of his laboring, ultimately reduced to a commodity under ownership of capitalists, with no creative outlet. Marx introduces the concept of *commodity fetishism* in *Das Kapital* (1867), i.e. the concept of value being inhered in the commodities themselves instead of being a reflection of the amount of labor put into producing it (Marx, 1990).

Exploitation, in Marx's theory, stems from the price then reflecting a surplus, i.e. being higher than the cost of the labor, which leads to a profit that is gleaned by the capitalist. As soon as the product is exchanged for money, the universal equivalent for exchange, it is severed from the laborer. Meanwhile, the laborer becomes invisible to the consumer, since the consumer only relates to the commodity through the exchange of money, thus hiding the labor and laborer under the veil of social movements of commodities. Further, as capitalist organization naturally strives toward efficiency and thus the lowest cost of production, laborers no longer had the resources to consume the product of their own laboring, necessitating the pursuit of new markets and consequently the intertwining of capitalism and imperialism.

This tendency was seen as a direct result of the drive for efficacy through industrialization and the simplicity of the activities performed in the manufacturing; laborers became increasingly *expendable*, which would eventually reduce the value added from any one laborer, thereby further reducing the need for and value of laborers while simultaneously adding to the capitalists' wealth. In effect, the poor would grow poorer while the rich would be richer (Marx, 1990/1867). The uniformity of the laborers despite geographical, practical, and socio-cultural differences internationally meant, for Marx, that the proletariat had an identity to gather around and fight back with, which he predicted would lead to violent revolutions and, eventually, a new political system with laborers owning means of production.

Class revolution as envisioned by Marx never came; half a century after Marx's *Das Capital* (1867; 1885; 1894), capitalism remained relevant. György Lukács of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School turned to cultural studies to investigate the lack of response from the exploited class, moving the focus from labor conditions and a use-value/exchange-value perspective on commodities to the way commodities were consumed by society. Furthermore, Lukács emphasized the role of *reification* in maintaining suppressive praxes. Reification in Marxist theory is the concretization of abstracts, specifically the universalization or naturalization of social conditions, including but not limited to the praxes involved in producing commodities (Lukács, 1923). When abstracts are reified into socially constructed concretes, they are made "…real, external to and independent of, individuals" (Blaug, 2007, p. 14), thereby becoming embedded into culture. As social processes or praxes are seen as natural and thereby necessary and unchangeable, they are taken for granted, effectively removing them from society's consciousness and eliminating any drive for change. As a result, consumers are not forced to consider the inherent oppression involved in the production of goods in a capitalist system. The exploitation of the proletariat, then, is hidden from consumers.

2.2.1.2. The Culture Industry

Building on Marx's critique of capitalism and Lukács concept of *reification,* among others, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972) is a critique of culture and its influence on the individual and society. The main focus of the text was the role of culture in determining the processes the individual goes through on a day-to-day basis. Adorno and Horkheimer believes culture to be commoditizing everything; art became uniform and catering to the masses who themselves were given their sense of meaning by the culture that determined the form and style of art. In that sense, a cycle was constructed and imposed on society from the top-down. That detail is important to Adorno and Horkheimer: Their Culture Industry was entirely constructed by an oligarchy comprised of those in control of the media, the manufacturing forces, and the political elite.

In accordance with Weber's thoughts on the totalitarian nature of Enlightenment thinking, the result of the Culture Industry is a society living, working, and consuming by the cultural rules imposed on them. Cultural phenomena, too, were reduced to a tool for the Culture Industry; in fact, they are "…no longer *also* commodities, but commodities through and through" (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975). While the Enlightenment had as its primary focus the emancipation of humanity from nature, they argue that society now has become a *second nature* which people both conform to and slowly develop; by turning society into a deterministic force, it is *reified* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Adorno and Horkheimer, along with the rest of the Frankfurt School, were categorized as neo-Marxists, which is reflected in their perception of the worker-consumer duality of human identity. The individual in the Culture Industry is a cog in the bureaucratic capitalistic machine of manufacturing, separated from the goods they partake in producing, only to obtain the means to purchase those same goods. No identity or value is gained from this work, and in order to escape it the individual spends their time off work consuming media which does not necessitate any contemplation or reflection; rather, it discourages active contemplation. In that sense, media becomes a similar but separated world wherein the individual can place themselves, absorbing the ideals and philosophies presented in said media.

As stated earlier, the media only portrays the values prioritized by the oligarchy, resulting in media that glorifies the pursuit of status, wealth, and technological process. Commodities are produced to be exchanged for money or more abstractly to be exchanged for the embedding of ideology into consumers (Woodward, 2007). Not only is the consumption of goods glorified, but the contemplation of the consumer's situation is disincentivized, leading to consumers being gratified only by their achieving higher status and technological progress (Woodward, 2007).

Technological progress is another key point in the Culture Industry. Adorno explains, in his essay *Culture Industry Reconsidered* (1975), how Enlightenment leads to a need for efficacy and a striving for technological progress in order to disenchant and dominate nature, including human nature. Technological progress should theoretically allow society to achieve social progress, but instead technology becomes a symbol of progress in place of actual progress. As manufacturers seek the most efficient means of producing consumer goods, the laborer is reduced to a tool or a cog in a machine with no identity other than the labor they do. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that there is within Enlightenment thought a mythology promising, through technological advancement, utopian liberation; this mythology instead leads to "…domination, ossification, and (…) psychopathology" (Woodward, 2007). Technology in this context is not necessarily smartphones and televisions, but instead any object developed to progress society.

Adorno and Horkheimer further argue that all individuals are catered to by the manufacturers of culture, and that the uniformity is only broken up by small but emphasized and exaggerated differences. Thus, the message and the ideology of the commodities is the same, but consumers get the perception that the cultural products they consume are unique. If culture is commoditized and created by the manufacturers of cultural artifacts, i.e. television and producers of clothes, technology etc., how do we account for sub-cultures and segments of the population calling for social change? Adorno and Horkheimer explain that these groups are taken into account by those manufacturing culture. Culture caters to everyone by way of small changes to existing products: in the case of the socially progressive consumer, manufacturers of culture change the commodity-based lenses through which consumers perceive the world, effectively creating grand narratives controlled from the top that fit their specific version of the ideal (Woodward, 2007). Whether it be the change of colors, the addition of one inessential function, or the object being reshaped to distinguish it from others, the essence of the cultural object remains the same, only outwardly different.

Erich Fromm, another neo-Marxian member of the Frankfurt School of thought, calls the Adorno and Horkheimer's *pathology* a *socially patterned defect* and argues that, while capitalist society provides what humans want, it does not give the individual what they need in terms of deeper needs, i.e. the search for meaning, the creation of identity, and serving a purpose (Fromm, 1955). However, as in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Culture Industry,* people are provided the means for their own escapism through entertainment, whose content and thus meaning is created by the same people who cause the psychopathology to begin with. In turn, the consumption of culture and its objects form a vicious circle with no apparent end.

2.2.1.3. Culture and mythology

One significant cultural change effected by the Enlightenment is the departure from religion as a moral compass, a framework to structure lives, and a way to explain the circumstances of the world. It is not necessarily the death of the Christian god alone that Nietzsche touches upon. “God”, in this specific context, may as well be the immaterial and metaphysical system of ideas, concepts, morals, and constructive forces laid out by religions and philosophers throughout human history. Like a child who turns 18 and is pushed out into the world on their own, suddenly people were left without any authority on what is the good life and the moral right. This, Nietzsche argues, is the source of existential angst (Nietzsche, 1882). Faced with a clean slate, man can then build something new based on rationality or succumb to nihilism, that is the belief that the world lacks any meaning whatsoever. Meanwhile, mass media has replaced religion or mythology, and the people being promoted in the media have become the new idols (Adorno, 1993).

Adorno and Horkheimer, as part of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School, agree with the idea that the conceptual god is dead, but in their view, god has been intentionally replaced with something else. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) Adorno and Horkheimer shine a light on the uniformity of culture and all branches of society, which they claim to be the result of capitalism and monopolization of culture as a whole. The demand for formalized production based on initial consumer needs and wants, distributed to a wide array of geographical locations, with high demand for uniformity in the products, is the explanation Adorno and Horkheimer hear from people within relevant industries. In other words, the logistics of distribution and uniform production necessitates a central body to organize and orchestrate the entire process. Every cultural activity is centrally organized, and those that fall outside the perimeter of what is deemed acceptable, those that operate dissimilarly to the standardized, are deemed amateurs (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1975). Adorno and Horkheimer add that:

> “…this is the agreement, or at least the common determination, of the executive powers to produce or let pass nothing which does not conform to their tables, to their concept of the consumer, or, above all, to themselves” (1975).

2.2.2. The cultural approach to marketing

For the company doing the marketing getting consumers to associate the brand with the idea they promote becomes imperative. Conversely, being a company with a brand that has become a cultural phenomenon and changed the world, viz. one whose name and icons are widely known and part of popular culture, exposes the company and the brand to critique from society; their place in popular culture makes them a target for the people promoting social change (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2009). While Starbucks, for one, have been hugely successful with thousands of stores, they do not avoid criticism for being disinterested or homogenizing local cultures; this duality is central to the cultural approach to brand management (Thompson & Arsel, 2004; Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2009). Thus, the cultural approach perceives the brand as both a reaction to cultural norms and demands and a contributor to culture.

According to Heding, Knudtzen, and Bjerre (2009), the cultural approach to brand management entails looking at the reciprocal relationship between consumers and companies at the macro-level. The relationship is analyzed collectively, and the significance of the cultural meaning carried and imposed by brands on culture is seen in the collective adoption thereof more so than in individual identity building projects. A brand's success is more dependent on quality communication than the quality of its products, distribution, or any other marketing activity. This role as producers of vehicles carrying meaning to cultures makes brands central actors in the globalization of the world and the shaping of economic and cultural activities (Askegaard, 2006). Man is not an island, but necessarily part of a context, a market man or, as Askegaard puts it, *homo mercans*. For the marketer and the brand, the importance of this perspective is reflected in their imperative to follow culture, interpret it, and adopt it into the brand as to create the proper associations which the consumer can use to create or conform to the identity they desire; the consumer, in turn, is influenced by the powers that dictate what cultural phenomena are adopted, the marketers and their interpretation of said phenomena, and the self which allows them to fit it all together (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2009).

Culture is analyzed on three levels: sub-national, national, and global. The individual is part of the context of all three, and all three influence how the individual creates their identity or has their identity created, which influences how the individual achieve life goals (McCracken, 1986). Culture is a system, and the meaning of cultural artifacts flow systematically from the culturally constituted world through consumer goods, with the fashion and advertising industries administrating the choosing of cultural meanings, to the individual consumer. The consumer then interprets the meaning from signs, i.e. not from the pictures in advertisements or the utility of products themselves, intertextually and thereby as a result of the individual's context (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2009). This system of signs and intertextuality is endless and necessitates the individual to become culturally literate and encultured. Heding, Knudtzen and Bjerre (2009) point to four commonalities of iconic brands: targeting cultural contradictions; acting as cultural activists; creating original expressive cultures as an artist; and creating authentic populist voices.

Cultural contradictions are the result of society's attitude towards products or operations versus the meaning marketers communicate through the marketing of products. Successful brands are able to create 'myths' that bridge the gap between consumers' expectation and the product marketers offer. Acting as cultural icons entails the brand being associated with a cause to such a degree that they become activist leaders. Creating original expressive culture demands of brands that they take charge and become trendsetters instead of followers. Lastly, by becoming the populist voice of a 'populist epicenter', brands come to represent a sub-culture or group of consumers not centered around any commercial activity; this voice is necessarily credible and representative of the demands and expectations of said populist epicenter. What complicates it further for the brand is the fast pace of change. They must be flexible and adapt to the new contradictions that arise as society progresses; as such, the brand is never finished but always evolving.

2.2.2.1. Cultural authority theory

Companies' branding and way of marketing consumer goods play a part in structuring how people consume, while consumer culture provides a framework for companies to inscribe meaning into and provide the services and goods the people demand, want, or need (Holt, 2002). Maintaining this symbiotic relationship between companies and consumers reinforces support for the system and aids companies in expanding markets and increasing profits. However, another, later member of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas (1985), describes the exchange of meaning between consumers and marketers as *distorted*. The information communicated between parties is asymmetric, as marketers are solely responsible for deciding what to communicate. Ideally, he explains, both parties have the same standards to live up to in terms of truthfulness and freedom from authority. The values imposed on commodities in a given culture make up the *consumption code* (Baudrillard, 2019), and this code is constructed by the market and forced upon consumers.

The consumer culture that results from granting companies the authority to shape market systems and create demand is a culture of *obeisance*, where consumers look to companies to determine their taste. Furthermore, manufacturers are provided a way to both arm and defang consumer demands in regard to political and social change: By commoditizing culture, consumers are given the means to construct their own social identity through said commodities while also fulfilling consumer demands for participation in constructing and restructuring economic and political systems. Ultimately, this allows manufacturers to increase profits and reshape consumer culture to ensure less hostility toward profitable business praxes. Through marketing research, companies can then utilize segmentation, targeting, and mass advertising to sell different ideas to different consumers, even if the products are largely similar, effectively eliminating idiosyncrasies in individual consumers (Holt, 2002).

Holt outlines two approaches to emancipate people from this oppressive system: reactive and creative resistance. Reactive resistance entails the individual being or becoming aware of the system they are part of and the part they play within it. By distancing themselves from the product and the meaning imposed upon it, consumers are asked to rationally reflect on the system of marketing as constructors of value (Ozanne & Murray, 1995). Furthermore, Ozanne and Murray suggest that consumers can seek out creative spaces in which they can create their own, oppositional meaning. In these spaces, consumers escape the imposition of marketers, but in order to maintain idiosyncrasies they must continually readjust their own creation of meaning to stay oppositional to the marketers and their attempt to appropriate the meaning constructed and inscribed by consumers within these creative spaces. This process fragments and decentralizes the construction of meaning in a manner characteristic of postmodern approaches to social studies. The concept of reappropriating products with another meaning than that intended by marketers is central to creative resistance as well.

With a similarly postmodern, deconstructivist approach to liberation, Firat, Venkatesh, and Dholakia (1995) and Firat and Dholakia (1998) propose that the structuring forces, i.e. marketers and manufacturers of products are equally responsible for emancipating consumers. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) further suggest that the market is structured like Bentham's (1787) panopticon prison: consumers are located peripherally around a watchtower from which they are observed by another party whom they cannot see. The idea is that the prisoners in Bentham's example cannot know if they are currently being watched by the guard, and thus will act as if they are being observed at all times.

2.3. Ethics and corporate social responsibility

As this paper seeks to examine the state of morality in the marketing of fashion the nature of moral philosophies, their differences, and their practical applications must first be established.

2.3.1. Kant's categorical imperative

The faculty of reason is central to Kant's interpretation of morality. Kant believed the noumenon to be the domain of perfect ideas, noumena, each corresponding with a physical phenomenon or appearance in the phenomenal world; all human beings, then, have privileged but limited access to said domain, which enables reasoning. Furthermore, in the noumenon exists a free will which is the moral law; it follows, then, that we cannot experience or know the moral law per se, but we can access it through pure reason (Kant, 2005/1797). Ultimately, Kant argues for a coalescence of rational and empirical thinking to impose the laws of the noumenon on the phenomenal world. The free will or moral law of the noumenon possesses free will, and its actions, which are always morally right, are divisible into good and evil; our own sensible experiences cannot be good or evil themselves. In order for us to act morally right, we have to use our reasoning to determine how this free will would act.

As the noumenon exists outside and free from experience, our own experiences have no bearing on what is good and evil, and so it follows that we must be entirely disinterested to fathom what is good according to the moral law; in effect, what is good will not necessarily make us feel pleasure or pain, and we must disregard any personal preference we may have to the outcome of our decisions. What it all boils down to is a deontological morality based on the duty inherent in the action rather than the consequences that follow. This moral philosophy is outlined in Kant's categorical imperatives; the categorical imperative is how we must necessarily act to be considered morally righteous. As a framework to determine what is right according to the moral law, Kant laid out three formulations, which together comprise the categorical imperative.

2.3.1.1. Universalism, or maxims as natural laws

> "Act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature."

With this first formulation, also called a practical imperative (Kant, 2005/1797), Kant lays the groundwork for the rest of his moral philosophy: it is a principle of universalization, making Kantian ethics absolutist. In practical terms, one should not act in a way that would be practically or logically impossible if turned into a natural law, that is if everyone was forced by nature to act in a similar way. If pondering whether one should lie, the decision is to be based upon whether a society where everyone necessarily lied all the time would be logically possible. In this example, lying would undermine the purpose of communication, as all meaning would be lost when both parties necessarily lie and thus do not communicate what needs communicated. Lying, then, is never justified and holds no moral value under any circumstances, regardless of the consequences telling the truth would have for the individual or society as a whole. In other words, any motive must yield to duty.

Kant further divides this duty into two: perfect duties and imperfect duties. Perfect duties are those that would effect logical contradictions if not upheld; telling the truth, then, is a perfect duty. Imperfect duties are those that the individual is not expected to perform but performing them is commendable. Living up to one's potential or developing one's talents is an imperfect duty, as performing them is praiseworthy but not performing them is not contradictory to moral law.

2.3.1.2. The rational being as an end, not a means

> "Act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means."

The reasoning behind the argument is that the good will is an end in itself and that rational thinking is an end in itself. The individual, as a rational being and the bridge between the phenomenal world and the noumenon, regards itself as an end due to their rationality, wherefore the facticity as human beings as ends becomes universal (Kant, 2005/1797). This practical imperative necessitates treating all rational beings as to preserve their dignity. In more practical terms, one cannot act in a way that makes another rational being a tool to reach a certain end. Accepting this imperative, slavery is demonstrably immoral; treating people like slaves not only removes their dignity, but it does not consider the will of the slave, instead only using them as an object. In the context of fashion, those working in the manufacturing of clothes cannot be treated merely as tools to produce consumer goods but should be perceived of as human beings with dignity and ends of their own. The utilization of cheap labor in foreign countries, then, seems to contradict Kant's categorical imperative.

2.3.1.3. Autonomy

> "From this we now derive the third practical principle of the will (. . .) namely, the idea of the will of every rational being as a will laying down universal law."

One major priority of Kant's is the will's autonomy, which logically extends to the individual's autonomy. Kant, then, proposes a society of autonomous action, viz. a world where the individual is tasked with respecting the moral law out of their own volition as to not reduce one's freedom to uplift another's. Practically speaking, this principle eliminates the possibility for maxims being made universal laws despite being incompatible with the necessary autonomy of others. The result, Kant argues, is a world where every individual is responsible for enforcing moral laws upon themselves as to not reduce their own or any other's autonomy; self-governance or autonomy is preferable to the governance of others, heteronomy. The individual, then, is expected to self-legislate

2.3.2. Utilitarianism

"Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure."
To Jeremy Bentham, as stated in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1780), the morally right is the maximization of pleasure in relation to pain, or happiness as opposed to unhappiness. When deciding a course of action, one is to choose whatever action causes the most pleasure; it is not morally right to act in a manner that causes some pleasure if another action could produce more (Dimmock & Fisher, 2017). Bentham argues that pain and pleasure are what motivate the individual to act, and that the effect of any action is to be measured in the total happiness caused or, if unhappiness is also caused, the surplus of happiness (Goldworth, 1987).

Measuring morality by way of the amount of happiness caused makes Bentham's moral philosophy *consequentialist:* The moral value of any action is not inherent in the action itself but instead in the consequences of the action. An important caveat here is that Bentham believes moral value is found in the expected consequences of any action and not the actual consequences; one might act in a way that results in the causation of happiness by happenstance, but the action only has moral value insofar as it was meant to cause said consequences. J. J. C. Smart argued that the way of measuring happiness in terms of foreseeable consequences as opposed to actual consequences are significant: saving a drowning person seems to be a desirable consequence of an action, but if the saved person turns out to be the cause of immeasurable unhappiness, then the consequences of saving them are undesirable (Smart, 1956). This example highlights one seeming problem with utilitarianism: when can one be said to have acted morally wrong if their intentions were good? How much effort must one have put into considering the consequences of one's actions to not be labelled unethical?

Another critical distinction between utilitarian ways of thought is between rule and act-utilitarianism. Where one uses the act itself as the sole basis on which moral right or wrong is determined, the other takes into account the use of rules as a means to ensure morality. According to Richard Brandt's rule-utilitarianism, an action is morally justified if it is performed according to any justifiable moral rule, and a rule is justified if it adds to the overall happiness when introduced into our moral code (Decew, 1983). In John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism, this is how legislation ought to be enforced: one should, if faced with conflicting rules, follow the rule that yields maximum happiness (Mill, 1861). Lastly, Peter Singer argues for a distinction between preference and welfare, viz. what one would prefer happens in contrast to welfare or what would objectively be the best course of action for oneself (Ng & Singer, 1981).

With this distinction, Singer highlights the difference between what is good for any individual, i.e. happiness, and preference, and emphasizes that individual *A* may not prefer what is best for themselves from a utilitarian point of view. Voting for a particular political party may effect individual *A* paying higher taxes, decreasing their individual happiness, but increasing happiness in others. In this case, individual *A* may prefer voting against their own maximization of welfare. Similarly, they may prefer to vote for said political party due to a mistaken belief that they would maximize individual *A*'s happiness, when in reality their welfare would be higher if they had decided on another course of action. Lastly, individual *A* may be irrational, viz. acting against what they know to maximize their own welfare. This may occur on the basis of demandingness; considering every decision is tiring, while sticking to rules is easy. If sticking to said rules sometimes decreases welfare, so be it. It may also occur when the short-term pleasure or absence of pain outweighs those same conditions long-term. Individual *A* may be experiencing toothaches which will only increase with time. By going to the dentist, they could reduce the pain greatly long-term, while failing to do so would cause the tooth to further deteriorate. Individual *A* may feel *excessive fear of pain* or *excessive temptation of pleasure*, causing them to disregard their own rationality in favor of short-term benefits (Ng & Singer, 1981).

2.3.2.1. Equal consideration of interests

Bentham's utilitarianism is impartial in the sense that no one individual's happiness is privileged; it does not matter who gains happiness, but only whether the highest possible total amount of happiness is caused (Dimmock & Fisher, 2017). Further, Bentham argues for "…everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one*"* (Mill, 1861). This *impartiality* has also come to be known as the *principle of equal consideration of interests* (Singer, 1993), which can be interpreted to extend to animals, lending utilitarianism well to the argument for animal rights. In fact, Bentham's original ethical concern, later used by Singer as well, extends to all beings capable of suffering: *"*The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk?, but Can they suffer?*"* (Bentham, 1780).

Singer further argues that human beings do not have perfect sensibilities, i.e. we cannot necessarily perceive miniscule, incremental changes. The difference, then, becomes less noticeable the closer a value *n* gets to the preferred value *x.* This means, in relation to preferences, that individual *A*, who prefers scenario *x* over *y*, may not perceive the difference *z* between their preferred value and a close value *n,* meaning they will not suffer any unhappiness if they are given value *n* instead of value *x.* According to Singer, the higher value *x* is, the larger the difference *z* can be without being perceivable. It follows that someone possessing the lower value *x-1* would perceive the same difference to a higher degree. If value *n* is perceived similarly to *x* by individual *A*, but the difference *z* it noticeable to individual *B*, then utilitarianism would dictate that the greatest total happiness is achieved by redistribution in individual *B*'s favor. In practice, this allows for the redistribution of wealth between higher and lower-salaried people according to Singer's *Weak Majority Principle* (Ng & Singer, 1981).

The impartiality of utilitarianism ideally and theoretically removes any proximity bias. To illustrate his point, Singer set up a scenario in which a man comes across a pond in which a small girl is drowning, but the man is wearing expensive clothes and needs to decide if he is morally obligated to sacrifice his own material possessions to save a life. From Singer's students, an overwhelming majority believed the morally right course of action to be disregarding the expensive clothes to save the girl. Singer then asks the same question, but instead of a girl drowning in the immediate vicinity, the man can save a child somewhere far away by giving up his material wealth in the form of donations. He argues that the scenario is the same, but the reaction is not; far fewer people believed the man was morally obligated to donate to save the life of the child (Singer, 1997). Here, Singer shines a light on the continual exploitation of underpaid workers in foreign markets while also giving his critique of the application of utilitarianism when people are physically distanced from one another.

2.4. Stakeholders and responsibilities

This paper investigates the consequences of moral behavior by companies, including the effect they may have on stakeholders and society as a whole. Thus, the nature of CSR as a practice and stakeholders as a group need to be defined. According to Bucholtz and Carroll (2014) and Donaldson and Preston (1995), stakeholder theory as a field of study covers three approaches to the relationship between organization and stakeholder and provides three different types of theory: it is descriptive, as it describes the network of stakeholders and the relations that exists between the organization and the various and diverse types of stakeholders, as well as actions carried out by actors within the organization; it is instrumental, as it provides methods to achieve business goals and the means to test the relation between connections to stakeholders and reaching business goals; and it is normative, as it lays out how stakeholders ought to be valued and to what degree stakeholders have a legitimate stake in the organization (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). However, the theory is based on the premise that stakeholders have intrinsic value, and that organizations have an inherent responsibility towards their stakeholders; this notion is not consensual.

2.4.1. Stakeholders and communication

In 1995, T. M. Jones produced an instrumental stakeholder theory, that is an investigation of how actions effect higher probabilities of specific results; what happens when you do *x*, and what can firms do to reach target *y*? The theory is contingent, which means action *a* do not necessarily cause result *b*; while the probability of *b* is increased, it is also dependent on the circumstances of its surroundings. Within this instrumental theory, the organization is regarded as a *nexus of contracts* and the concept of contracting is utilized to explain the relationship between stakeholder and organization. The *contracting agents* either directly or through *agents*, such as employees, enter into metaphorical or actual contractual relationships with stakeholders through legal contracts, transactions, or other actions where stakeholders are directly involved or affected by the organization's actions. Contracts are different in structure and content depending on the stakeholder; stakeholders in neighboring communities, for instance, go into vaguely defined, informal contracts whereas formal contracts with strict definitions are used for transactions, partnerships etc. The longer the duration of the relations between organization and stakeholder, the more the contract is adjusted through sequences of it being *reaffirmed/honored* or *reinterpreted/broken*; thus, the relationship between the parties tends toward equilibrium in terms of power distance and efficiency in contracting (Jones, 1995). In this paper, and to some degree in Jones' instrumental theory, the concept of *social* or *relational contracts* (Macneil, 1978; Williamson, 1985) will be included to allow stakeholders as a concept to also contain external entities that are affected by the organization's actions through their effect on the environment, be it social or physical.

One of three approaches (Jones, 1995), agency theory is based on the principal-agent dichotomy where work is delegated by one party, the principal, to the other, the agents. The individual terms can be ascribed to different parties depending on perspective and the structure of the relations that are investigated. While it is easily applicable to a manager-employee relationship, in this paper it will also be used about the relations that exist between firms and shareholders, but also consumers as principals and service providers as agents. Working with CSR, an obvious example of the difference in interests can be found between the principal, here the shareholders, and the agents, that is the firm's managers. While shareholders' interest is for the firm to be as profitable as possible to maximize their own investments, managers may be more interested in improving their own situation in regard to prestige, salary, or any other incentive an individual may have. Thus, their motivation and goals may differ, which then may effect differences in their approaches.

Similarly, shareholders may be more hesitant towards initiatives that are aimed at environmental and social consciousness if there is a perceived risk of them being unprofitable. Managers, on the other hand, may be interested in utilizing said initiatives to improve their own image; they may, for instance, be motivated to carry out such initiatives in order to be credited for the good the firm does for environment and society. To avoid agents taking action that are contrary to the principal's interest certain costs become unavoidable: *monitoring costs* from watching the agent and ensuring their compliance with principal interests; and *bonding costs* from encouraging the agent to not want to act in a way contrary to principal interests. Contracting, then, attempts to resolve issues stemming from either *moral hazards* or *adverse selection*; that is, a lack of effort or from agents misrepresenting the principal's interests respectively.

Similar to agency theory, theories centered around *transaction costs* also focus on the costs necessitated by having to monitor, negotiate, and enforce contracts between parties efficiently. Williamson (1975) argues that parties possess *bounded rationality* and thus cannot reliably forecast outcomes, making contingent contracts a necessity. Further, he states that complexed or uncertain markets, with a small number of firms, leads to the risk of *opportunism;* firms may take advantage of the asymmetric levels of information they hold or the degree to which other firms are dependent upon them. These need to be resolved through contracting, either externally through the market or internally, within the firm. Opportunism gives rise to two sets of problems: asymmetric information, specifically in favor of the seller, may cause dishonesty from managers about the quality of the product sold or of the labor producing it; and *hold-ups* may occur. Hold-ups develop when transaction costs are sought to be decreased through specialization increasing productivity; specialization, however, limits the usability of the product and gains buyers the benefit of leverage in negotiating with the seller who now has fewer potential buyers. Thus, productivity will either remain inefficient or the firm will have to make costly investments in preventing hold-ups from occurring, both solutions being expensive to the seller.

One solution offered by Williamson (1975) is merging consumer and producer since aligning interests is easier within companies than without. Aside from the costs mentioned so far, both theories also accept that residual losses occur due to failure to totally align parties. It follows that firms doing efficient contracting benefit from the lower transaction costs while less efficient contracting increases transaction; contracting, then, can be utilized to gain a competitive advantage (Jones, 1995).

2.4.1.1. Legitimacy and maintaining trustworthiness

Legitimacy as defined by Suchman (1995) is the approval of organizations' behavior by social groups based on the conformance to cultural, moral, or traditional societal social codes; an organization is legitimated when they are perceived, by the public, to follow desired or appropriate rules of conduct, often defined as a *social contract*. The rules by which any organization must act to be legitimate and thereby deserving of the resources it spends and that consumers allocate towards the organization are both implicit and explicit: implicit rules are determined culturally by stakeholders collectively; and explicit rules are legislation. As culture is more reactive and rapidly changing than legislation, the two are often in conflict with each other; further, a company may lose legitimacy without changing its behavior or actions as publics' expectations change, resulting in a *legitimacy gap* (Deegan, 2006).

As a *positive theory,* legitimacy theory is descriptive in contrast to normative; that is, it only explains the action and effects thereof of corporate behavior in the pursuit of legitimacy. Three approaches to assess legitimacy are highlighted: *pragmatic legitimacy,* or whether an organization's conduct benefits the evaluator; *moral legitimacy,* or whether an organization does what is right and acts in accordance with socially constructed systems of beliefs about what constitutes improvements to societal welfare; and *cognitive legitimacy,* which entails *comprehensibility vs taken-for-grantedness*. Moral legitimacy is further divided into four categories, all sharing the traits of being evaluative and normative. First is *consequential legitimacy*. Here, organizations are evaluated on the outcome of their actions; a car manufacturer is legitimated by reducing emissions while a hospital is legitimated by having high rates of success when treating patients (Scott & Meyer, 1991).

An organization may also attain *procedural legitimacy* by performing acts that are deemed morally beneficial to society. When the consequences of actions are not immediately measurable empirically, audiences may instead look to the procedures involved in producing a product (Scott, 1992); paying fair wages and offering benefits may be legitimating based on socially constructed value systems, while producing a perfect product using slave labor will instead be delegitimating.

Structural legitimacy is, like procedural legitimacy, the product of the measures taken by organizations to comply with socially accepted standards. Structures, then, are the collective account of procedures and a reflection of an organization's desire to comply with social expectations (Meyer, 1977). Having a sustainability department within the organization showcases a desire to be socially beneficial, granting the organization structural legitimacy. Lastly, an organization may attain *personal legitimacy* when the organization's legitimacy is gained through public perceptions of individuals within the organization. Such figures are likely to be idiosyncratic, impermanent, and capable of disposing of traditional institutions (Weber, 1978) and instating new ones (DiMaggio, 1988). By having the organization's legitimacy directly tied to one individual, the organization also gains a scapegoat that can be blamed in case of mishaps, effectively transiting the blame away from the organization.

Suchman emphasizes that legitimacy is not affected by what an organization does and does not do; instead, it relies solely on what is observable to the public and how behavior is interpreted by relevant social groups and how they react. What is desirable, appropriate, and proper is in turn determined by socially constructed norms, beliefs, values, and definitions. Legitimacy is an evaluation of the organization's behavioral history, effectively reducing the capacity for any unique act or event to determine an organization's legitimacy. In short, it is collectively created, objectively possessed, unaffected by any individual's personal beliefs or reactions, and independent of any reactions they may receive if more of the organization's behavior was observable.

According to Suchman, the agency of managers in attaining legitimacy has traditionally created a schism between *strategic* and *institutional legitimacy* researchers: on one side, researchers perceive managers as deciding on the values and symbolism they project based on the effect they wish to cause; while on the other side, researchers believe both managers and constituents are part of the same system of beliefs, morals, and norms which are institutionalized, effectively reducing manager agency and autonomy. Suchman (1995) decided on a middle road where managers do have agency but are also largely the result of institutionalized beliefs; in this paper, the same middle-road approach will be used. Thus, what awakens interest is the clash between managers' valuing symbolism and their constituents valuing tangible action, but also both parties' role in shaping and adopting institutionalized beliefs.

In order to explain how legitimacy effects changes and why they are utilized Suchman creates a number of dichotomies. On the broadest level, legitimacy as a concept is divided into what *makes sense cognitively* and what *has meaning evaluatively.* An organization's legitimacy may be based on behaving in a way that is congruent with what is expected or assumed; in such cases, the approval of their behavior is not questioned as it does not break away from what is taken for granted. On the other hand, legitimacy may also be the result of evaluations by social groups. The organization, then, is legitimate when people's evaluation of them is congruent with what society expects from the specific type of organization, making them worth the consumer's while and more predictable. By attaining legitimacy, the organization may be shielded from controversy, in contrast to organizations in lack of legitimacy (Jepperson, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1991).

In terms of desired results, legitimacy is also divided into *passive* and *active support.* While an organization may maintain legitimacy, i.e. passive support, by behaving properly and appropriately, active support and the immobilization of consumer segments takes more effort. For active support to occur the organization's behavior must have value, such as actively supporting social causes or green initiatives. While passive support only takes conforming with what is usual for such organizations, which fits the taken-for-grantedness of cognitive legitimacy, active support instead demands recurring intervention and continual evaluations (DiMaggio, 1988). Lastly, Suchman divides legitimacy into *continuity* and *credibility.* While consistency allows the organization to invest less resources into maintaining legitimacy, it also helps consumers to behave in a manner that society deems appropriate or desirable; thus, the problem of mobilizing people to take action can be turned on its head and embedded into culture (Jepperson, 1991). While continuity and credibility are distinct, they are also mutually perpetuating; being consistent breeds credence, and having credence promotes continuity.

Further, a number of techniques have been proposed by theorists to retain and regain legitimacy; two frameworks of notoriety are those of Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) and Lindblom (1994). Dowling and Pfeffer outline three strategies to mitigate the threat to a company's legitimacy: adapt the company to existing conceptions of legitimacy; exert pressure to redefine legitimacy in a way that matches the company's current methods of operating; and utilize communication to align and associate the company with symbols, values, or institutions that are deemed strongly legitimate. Lindblom's four courses of action overlap with Dowling and Pfeffer's framework but also add to it. In situations where a company's legitimacy is threatened, they propose that the company: communicates actual changes taking place within the company that brings it closer to what is expected and demanded of them; attempts to alter relevant publics' perception of the company, for instance through accounts, without changing its operations or behavior; deflects criticism by referring to other areas where the company has performed better and more in line with societal expectations; and try to dampen the expectations of relevant publics toward companies to easier align with them. Measures to respond to threats are divided into two categories: *proactive* and *reactive* (Suchman, 1995).

Where proactive strategies seek to predict future developments to allow the company to avoid the threat entirely and gain legitimacy, reactive strategies are those used when already faced with the threat and wanting to regain legitimacy. However, in the case of long-term developments such as the switch in focus, as seen in the demand for sustainability in the fashion industry, companies may respond to threats proactively, aligning themselves with future expectations. In conclusion, the theories proposed by researchers suggest that maintaining legitimacy is easier than gaining it or repairing it, which further suggests that being consistent and gaining credibility while constantly monitoring implicit and explicit developments should logically be the least resource demanding way of ensuring cognitive legitimacy, reducing the required effort on the long-term.

2.4.1.2. Legitimacy in accounting

Another reason for the importance of legitimacy earned through the disclosure of information is the inaction it may promote. According to Arnold and Hammond (1984), organizations may use the disclosure of information to gain unearned legitimacy. Following rules or guidelines that are perceived as legitimate, however well-intentioned they may be, may legitimate organizations despite them not effecting meaningful change. Arnold and Hammond determined that organizations had an active interest in maintaining the status quo, specifically the stability of the market in Apartheid-era South Africa, despite widespread calls for economic sanctions. To incentivize social responsibility, the Sullivan Principles, a set of rules and an associated rating system, was created by a non-corporate, non-governmental body and signed into by a number of large American corporations, which meant that organizations were able to use their complicity with said perceivably legitimate body to improve their own brand perception. However, the rules were negotiated to the point of being unrecognizable in order for corporations to sign into the project.

Following the rules, then, only superficially addressed the issues experienced by black South Africans while legitimating practices that hindered the abolition of Apartheid; segregation was outlawed, but black and white South Africans were still separated by their access to education, employment, and health care. Thus, effectively, the social responsibility promoted by the Sullivan Principles was reformed into a legitimating tool to further corporate and conservative interests. Once organizations were held accountable by new, stricter rules they opted out, causing the founder of the Sullivan Principles to disassociate himself from his own rules, thereby illegitimating the practice. In short, the organizations involved did not further social and environmental interests, but instead their own financial interests. Social accounting, then, helped in supporting and legitimating the lack of action and the continuation of immoral business practices. This view is supported by Gray and Bebbington (2000), whose research further suggest that accounting research and education do not and have not traditionally valued environmental and social responsibility, transparency included. More than anything, it has been a marketing tool catering to investors.

2.4.2. Corporate social responsibility

According to Kalle Lasn (1999), culture is no longer created from the bottom up, i.e. by the people, but instead from the top down. The control of cultural meaning now lies with big corporations with iconic brands, ultimately allowing corporations to fit cultures to their own needs and wants. Furthermore, anti-corporate organizations have started monitoring companies to ensure they live up to certain standards (Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2009). Companies are now expected to be pillars of community, so-called *citizen-artists*, that is to take the role of a citizen and act as if they are interested in progressing said community regardless of the community being composed of potential customers (Holt, 2002).

The question then becomes: how do organizations adapt to cultural or societal expectations without giving up the praxes that make them profitable, and ought we demand them to adapt? What constitutes CSR is also difficult to consensually determine (Sato, 2013); Barnett (2007) argues for "…any discretionary corporate activity intended to further social welfare" while also excluding anything necessitated by legislation or any activity done in the interest of the organization itself. A company may be socially or environmentally conscious by conforming to legislation on gender equality or pollution, and they may have done so regardless of legislation, but they are not acts of CSR if they are not discretionary.

Opinions range from organizations being morally obligated to give back to society since that is whence they draw resources (Barnett, 2007), to organizations only being obligated to adhere to the wants of their shareholders, viz. maximizing profits, arguing that corporations are insufficient in achieving meaningful social change and that investments made towards social progress is misappropriation of shareholders' funds (Friedman, 1970). Friedman further argues that the redistribution of wealth towards social progress instead of shareholders is a disadvantage to the company's competitiveness, and that it accounts to the loss of shareholders' agency (Barnett, 2007). Academic research has not led to a consensus on the financial benefits of CSR measures; differing results for different organizations has instead led to the conclusion that the results of CSR are contingent and non-identical between firms or even between parts of the same company (Barnett, 2007).

Another issue with research on the effects of CSR on financial performance is the terms, tools, and perspectives used when approaching firms' investments in social responsibility. Having several very different starting points, the results of any two investigations into corporate financial performance (CFP), corporate social performance (CSP), and CSR and their interrelation may differ in accordance with the difference in definitions the investigations are based upon. Friedman (1970) argues that companies are socially beneficial by their very nature; whenever a new plant or office is opened the opportunity for reducing unemployment also arises *ceteris paribus*, not to mention the added taxes said company would pay and the funding of benefits for the local community. In order to build a foundation upon which research into CSR can be conducted, Barnett (2007) build a matrix with a set of prerequisites that need be met to call any action CSR. As per the prerequisites proposed by Barnett, the investment must be both *stakeholder relationship oriented* and *social welfare oriented,* or in simpler terms improving CFP through improvements to stakeholder relationships through investments into social welfare. The matrix results in four outcomes depending on the degree to which they meet the prerequisites: if an action contributes to neither stakeholder relationships nor social welfare it is merely oriented towards improvements to processes or infrastructure within the firm; if it is oriented towards improving stakeholder relation but not social welfare it is *direct influence tactics*; and finally, if it improves social welfare but neglects stakeholder relation it results in *agency loss.*

While investments into making the firm more environmentally friendly, for instance by becoming more energy efficient, do improve social welfare it is not *oriented toward social welfare*. Instead, it is a biproduct of a cost-saving measure that helps the firm's CFP, which also does not improve relations to important stakeholders. However, it may provide opportunity platforms for *real options*, i.e. potential opportunities that arise from the investment in making operations greener (Fombrun et al, 2000; Kogut & Kulatilaka, 1994). It may also be utilized by marketing teams to improve the firm's image with stakeholders; in such cases, Jones (1995) suggests that the effect of the actions can be divided into those that arise from process improvements and the resulting lower costs, and those that arise from stakeholders adopting a more positive perception of the firm.

Direct influence tactics do address important stakeholders but fail to improve social welfare. While they may affect a firm's CFP, they cannot be regarded as CSR. Lobbyism, campaign donations, or contractual relationships directed towards key decision-makers, legislators, or notable organizations that may directly influence CFP fall into this category. Cooperative relations to NGOs, for instance, may improve the firm's image and thus stakeholder relations, but they are not meant to improve social welfare; in fact, such arrangements may instead decrease a firm's investments into social welfare (Baysinger, 1984; Baron, 1995) and reduce trust (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Investments made under the guise of CSR may turn out to be expressions of direct influence; if the investment improves social welfare and thus stakeholder relations, but the motive is really to curry favor from another party, the line between CSR and direct influence tactics gets blurry.

Lastly, anonymous donations to charities are similarly beneficial to social welfare, and may also be oriented towards social welfare, but they do not contribute to stakeholder relationships and thus cannot be categorized as acts of CSR. Such behavior results in *agency loss*; shareholder assets are misappropriated and spend on investments that do not contribute to the firm's CFP and thus effectively decreases the value of its stocks (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Investments made under the guise of CSR may actually be agency losses; if an investment is made to improve social welfare, but with a hidden motive to further the responsible manager's own interests, it represents misappropriation of stockholder funds.

The business case for CSR is built upon the improvement of stakeholder relationships through investments into improving social welfare, effectively rendering the firm more attractive in the eyes of both consumers (Turban & Greening, 1997) and potential employees (Brown & Dacin, 1997). The effect on CFP, then, is reflected by lower transaction costs within the firm (Jones, 1995) but also higher revenue from sales outside the firm. The motives behind investment still represents an obstacle to the assessment of corporate actions since only the actors responsible for the investments can be sure of what they seek to accomplish. The communication, then, of acts of CSR to stakeholders becomes a tool to be used by firms, but also a potential pitfall if misused, leading to the problem of professional legitimacy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Philosophical background

This examination of the ethics of marketing at H&M and within the fashion industry as a whole is conducted inductively. The aim is to explore the interaction between companies and their environment and stakeholders by means of their methods of marketing, how it is received by society, and how it affects the structure of both society and the fashion industry. Although the focus is placed on H&M, the results are assumed to be applicable to similar cases according to a priori principles; the effects of H&M's marketing on the fashion industry, consumer culture, and society as a whole can be extended to other companies doing similar work in a similar cultural environment. While companies may not react similarly to cultural tendencies, the case study may still be indicative of solutions to problems and future trends.

Furthermore, if companies tend towards efficacy and thus uniformity, the conditions highlighted may be assumed to be present in other companies. As per the nature of inductive investigations, the results may be criticized for being scientifically invalid, albeit the structure of the paper and the nature of the investigation, i.e. the fact that it is impossible to conclusively determine the absolute morality of practices and the effects of different initiatives, naturally lends itself to an inductive approach.

A positivist approach was quickly ruled out, as the subjective nature of ethics in fashion and the difficulty of determining cause and effect of marketing practices have proven difficult to measure empirically in its conclusive capacity. The paper instead called for an interpretivist approach to allow the incorporation of a priori theorizing which could then be tested on the data collected. However, numerical empirical data is still valuable, and will be included in the form of financial results and statistics to determine both the scope of marketing efforts and their effects, and the measures taken to adhere with CSR regulations and guidelines. The use of both empirical data and interpretivist investigation lends itself well to a critical realist approach as outlined by Roy Bhaskar (1975).

Critical realism disagrees with the epistemological claims made by positivists that genuine knowledge can only be found through experiential data, instead arguing that objective truths exist, but our access to them is limited and they may not be found through the principles of *verification* or *falsification*. Positivism posits that the world and all its processes function according to natural laws, while critical realism takes a more pluralist approach; it is recognized within critical realism that open systems allow multiple factors to collectively effect a result, with no way of separating said factors and assigning a particular effect to a particular cause. As with other scientific philosophies in the ontological tradition of realism, critical realists believe the physical world to exist independently from our perception and experience of it. The individual, however, will perceive it differently, both according to their unique personal circumstances but also due to deeper-lying structures; this does not change the reality of the world.

These structures are the focus of a critical realist approach – examining structures in society allows to critically access the real determinants of culture and the distribution of power (Bhaskar, 1975). Bhaskar divides these structures, be they symbolic, cultural, or political, into three levels: the real/causal, actual, and empirical levels. The real/causal level is constituted by the producers and the productive mechanisms of phenomena, viz. legislators, Marx's capitalists, or natural laws like magnetism (Bhaskar, 1978; Houston, 2001). To Bhaskar, this level is especially important, and is not limited to the empirically observable; the fact that it causes phenomena or effects makes it real (Bhaskar, 1978). The products of the real level, then, constitute the actual level, viz. legislation, manufacturing plants and their content, or literary works; all phenomena produced by the real or causal level, regardless if we observe them or not, are part of the actual level. Lastly, the empirical level is everything we observe and our understanding of the phenomena, that is for instance theories, paradigms, or interpretations.

Regarding this point, Bhaskar argues that in the case of *open systems*, we may not be able to predict outcomes, as there are a number of factors that cause events to occur. Similarly, mechanisms may be countervailing, viz. oppose each other or block the effects of one another, or they may be dependent on other mechanisms to actualize effects. Instead, critical realism provides us the tools to identify *tendencies,* which we can understand, analyze, and explain (Bhaskar, 2010). We cannot, then, determine whether marketing effects an increase in consumption, but we can identify tendencies that arise from marketing practices and identify correlations, which, if we do so sufficiently, may reasonably result in laws that can predict outcomes somewhat reliably. The constant interaction between structures and individuals result in a social reality that is continually evolving, which necessitates constant reinterpretation similarly to a hermeneutic approach. By revealing structures that present as impediments to social progress we facilitate the production of the tools to change or oppose said structures, effectively making the critical realist framework emancipatory (Houston, 2001).

3.2. Data collection

This investigation of ethics in the marketing of fashion will rely on a case study of H&M. Sayer (2000) argues that case studies focusing on one situation or process are conducted intensively rather than extensively, viz. qualitatively rather than quantitatively. This, in practice, means interviews are privileged over statistics, although a critical realist approach is pluralistic and does not call for one method exclusively. Hence, statistics in the form of financial results and CSR reports are valid and useful resources to examine relevant processes and their effects. Therefore, a case study based on critical realist principles is deemed a good fit for the investigation of ethics in the marketing of fashion. This thesis will investigate the three levels of critical realism: the marketers and companies as a whole as the causal level; the marketing schemes, campaigns, and processes as the actual level; and the consumption of and reaction towards the marketing by consumers and cultures in general.

A mixed-method investigation was chosen to allow for both qualitative and quantitative data. First, financial and CSR reports from H&M will be examined to shed light on what is done and what is effected by marketing practices. Based on annual reports from H&M and four other major fast fashion companies, an analysis will be made of the actual information disclosed and the use of external bodies as means of gaining legitimacy. The analysis will be based on Wisemann's (1982) methodology, wherein 18 categories or items of information that are deemed relevant to environmental protection are highlighted and sought out in companies' annual reports. The type of specificity and presence of information gains the organization a score from 0-3, where 0 is the absence of information, 1 is non-quantitative information in general terms, 2 is non-quantitative company-specific information, and 3 is quantitative company-specific information. H&M's annual report will be more thoroughly investigated and discussed comparatively with the other 4. The results of the analysis can be found in appendix 1.
Lastly, a survey has been produced to learn of consumer attitudes towards marketing and ethical fashion in general; the survey was shared and made publicly available on social media like LinkedIn and Facebook.. The surveyed, comprising a *convenience sample*, will indicate consumer responses to corporate disclosures of concern for social and environmental issues. Further, it will showcase the effect of CSR initiatives and the actual demand for change or lack thereof.

3.3. Limitations

The subject matter itself and the critical approach towards actors within the fashion industry have been obstructions to collecting relevant data. Organizations like H&M, Zara, and similar fast fashion companies categorically refuse to give interviews, effectively eliminating the chance of collecting qualitative data from within the organizations. The voluntary nature of information disclosure, aside from what is mandated by law, may prove to limit the amount of accessible information to less than what is desirable. This, in itself, can, in turn, be an argument for or against the sufficiency of the efforts put into social and environmental protection and the effects of disclosures in promoting and effecting progressive change.

Furthermore, the information that is disclosed in annual reports and accounting generally is traditionally seen as objective; its only purpose is to reflect the actual performance of the company and its quantitative results. However, the choice in information is not and cannot be objective as seen in positivist and realist literature. What is valuable for the public is not necessarily what benefits the company and, since such reports are largely catering to shareholders and investors, will often only be disclosed insofar as it presents the company in a favorable light. Thus, the types of information disclosed may not represent the reality of the company and its situation. The information that could present H&M in a less flattering light, however, will not be disclosed at all, developing instead a corporate shadow (Deegan, 2006). This lack of information on less than ideal conditions or operations are therefore hard to come by and an obstacle to a thorough analysis of H&M as an ethical actor.

Meanwhile, accounting theorists have often written their texts from a Realist point of view; thus, the theories and the knowledge they are based upon are objective facts that are part of an objective reality and the theorist is an external party who observes and describes an objective reality with no bias. Further, the theories themselves act as both descriptions of the nature of economics and drivers in developing that same nature (Tinker, Merino & Neimark, 1982). Due to the traditionally Realist nature of accounting, theories and concepts are then reified and become something akin to natural laws. Competitiveness and acquisitiveness are regarded as human nature and natural aspects of market-based economies.

This paper instead regards such concepts as human constructs and the theorist as an inherently biased mediator between the observable reality and its inhabitants. This approach, however, makes the gathering of evidence more difficult as it becomes hard to differentiate between what is causal and what is artificially constructed; one such instance is the reaching of goals by companies, where the goals are both drivers used by managers to direct the company in the desired direction but also normative targets that represent what is desirable socially and environmentally (Tinker, Merino & Neimark, 1982).

4. Data presentation and analysis

From the information outlined in previous section, there exist two solutions through the market to the problem of morality in the fashion industry: consumers can influence companies to comply with expectations by allocating their resources to companies that are deemed deserving; and operating in an ethical and sustainable way becoming profitable, be it through CSR initiatives or technological advancements. In this section, the potential for a market-based solution is analyzed, thereby showing the sufficiency and effect of CSR on the company but also its stakeholders and the environment. Further, the transparency of fast fashion companies and the potential for consumers to make informed decisions is looked upon; this is done by evaluating companies' annual reports first and other communications second.

4.1. H&M and fast fashion

Founded in 1947 in Sweden, Hennes has grown into a global leader in the fast fashion industry. Today, H&M Group has diversified vertically, housing eight brands which operate individually with no use of the H&M brand in their servicescapes aside from the eponymous stores. H&M, as a concept, was meant to be affordable and reactive to cultural and stylistic changes from the beginning. After expanding into the men's and children's clothing markets, and expanding into new markets globally, H&M started online commerce in the 80s in an effort to conquer an emerging market. Since then, H&M Group have mainly expanded horizontally, creating new brands and developing an identity centered around sustainability. Today, sustainability and affordability are at the core of H&M's vision: they "(. . .) are a family of brands, driven by [their] desire to make great design available to everyone in a sustainable way (H&M Group, n.d.a)".

In 2013 H&M made their supplier list public, followed by information on specific factories, materials, and number of laborers per factory on a range of products, notably at arket.com, one of H&M Group's brands. Furthermore, H&M emphasize the important of recycling clothes, and invite consumers to dispose of unwanted clothing in their stores. These efforts combined gained H&M legitimacy as a sustainably company: in 2020, H&M Group were named the most transparent fashion company by the Fashion Transparency Index (H&M Group, 2020).

Fast fashion is a recent development which embraces the global nature of fashion and the fast pace of development it entails. To accommodate the continually changing demand of consumers fast fashion companies like H&M and Zara renew their product portfolio every three to five weeks (Hu et al, 2014), striving to keep up with trends. The amount of time fast fashion clothes are worn is short and consumers willingly dispose of them due to the low cost of renewing, making the impact of consumption of fast fashion significant. H&M comments on this tendency as part of their writings on company values:

> “Being cost-conscious is about keeping an eye on expenses and making smart, sustainable choices even in the small, every-day things. So we look for the ideas and solutions that bring value to our business, while avoiding careless spending.” (H&M Group, n.d.d)

This brings to light a seeming contradiction: sustainability and reducing careless spending do not seem compatible with fast fashion, short product lifecycles, and frequently updated designs. Nonetheless, H&M emphasizes the need for sustainability and a refocusing on social consciousness.

4.2. The fast fashion market – growth and developments

According to Remy, Speelman and Swartz (2016), the average consumption of clothing increased by 60 % from 2000 to 2014 while production doubled. The same research showed that each garment was kept in use only half as much in 2014 as it was in 2000, and that less than 1 % of clothes were recycled. Fast fashion industry leaders like H&M and Inditex, the corporation behind Zara, have aggressively cut costs of production and prioritized lead times; this has led fast fashion to become relatively cheaper as compared to other consumer goods. As a result of the changes made to production methods and priorities, Zara are able to offer 24 new collections every year, whereas H&M offer 12-16 collections per year while refreshing current collections weekly.

Consumers’ rapid turnover of clothes fits the new model of H&M and Zara; McKinsey research suggests that consumers often wear articles of clothing only 6-8 times before falling into disuse (Remy, Speelman & Swartz, 2016). The apparel sector as a whole is also experiencing significant growth; in 2012, the annual growth of the sector was estimated at 3,5 % as compared to 5.46 % growth from 2016-2017, with H&M, Inditex, and TJX Companies making up the top 3 leading retailers of apparel. Forecasts showed this trend to continue, with a large number of corporations competing for market shares; in 2017, H&M held the third largest market share with only 1.4 % (Shahbandeh, 2020). While the Corona-epidemic halted growth and even decreased total revenue in the fast fashion sector, the growth is expected to recover and continue. 2020 saw a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of -12.32 % on account of the pandemic, but by 2023 the CAGR is forecasted to be back to pre-pandemic levels at 6.7 % and a higher total revenue than in 2019 (The Business Research Company, 2020).

According to a shared investigation by the Global Fashion Agenda and the Boston Consulting Group (2017), the consumption is projected to increase by a further 63 % by 2030 as compared to 2015. The compression of production cycles in fast fashion companies is supplemented by developing markets and a higher total number of consumers. One billion significant consumers, that is consumers with the means to take part in markets like apparel and similar consumer goods, are expected to enter the global consuming class by 2025, injecting a total of $30 billion a year into the world economy (Dobbs et al, 2012). This growth moves the *center of gravity* of the consuming class towards the Far East. China alone is expected to enter 100 million working-age consumers into the consuming class by 2030, each with double the spending power of the average working-age consumer in 2016 (Dobbs et al, 2016). Presently, China and Japan are responsible for the second and third highest consumption globally, only surpassed by the American market (Oloruntoba, 2019).

Fast fashion companies are well equipped to sustain this development; short lead times, reactiveness, and flexibility both in terms of designs and suppliers make the adaption to future developments comparatively easy for fashion corporations, albeit the developments do not bode well for the protection and preservation of social and natural environments.

4.3. Survey results

To get insight on the effects of consumer perceptions of CSR and sustainability and their effects on consumer behavior, a survey was conducted, providing 104 responses.
The survey is divided fairly equally between men (42.3 %) and women (56.7 %); 1 participant presents as non-binary. While the plurality (37.5 %) of participants are between 41-65 years of age, the groups of 15-25-year-olds (29.8 %) and 26-40-year-olds (27.9 %) are also well represented. Lastly, 65.4 % of respondents are employed in some capacity, implying stable income, while 28.8 % are students and 5.8 % are either unemployed or retired.

4.3.1. Consumer attitude towards sustainability

Within the surveyed population, the highest priority in determining the sustainability of a company is whether the company reduces its impact on the environment through its choice of materials and methods of manufacturing. 80.8 % believe the company's impact on the environment to be a deciding factor in determining sustainability. 45.2 % of respondents stated that the procurement of materials is central to sustainability; a sustainable company should prioritize the means of procuring the materials they use, and the effect the production of materials has on natural and social environments. While 38.5 % of respondents believed ethical use of labor to be indicative of sustainability, only 20.2 % thought paying a living wage to be necessary.

This sheds light on some problematics that have garnered attention in the media: the safety of employees in manufacturing plants and compliance with regulations have been debated following the Rana Plaza catastrophe in April 2013 but regulations and legislation are more indicatory of cultural perceptions than objective truths. Thus, H&M's vows to pay above minimum wage in East Asian countries are ethically defensible in the sense that they comply with legislation but neglects consideration of the sufficiency of said legislation and of the mandated minimum wage. Durability is important to 38.5 % of respondents. Making products more durable prolongs their life cycles and should in theory lessen the frequency of having to renew. Lastly, transparency is highlighted by 26.9 % of participants. This prioritization indicates the level of trust or the amount of information consumers find to be sufficient when making purchasing decisions; less than a third of participants associate sustainability with the amount of information companies make available to consumers despite information being a prerequisite of making ethical decisions and determining the right way of allocating resources.

In terms of frequency, 46.2 % purchase clothes every season, while 35.6 % do so every month. The shorter shelf-life of clothes in fast fashion and the implied consumer behavior emphasizes one of the main reasons for the industry's impact on the environment: its product life cycles are short, both due to the rapid change of trends and the quality of lower-priced clothing. The low price of fast fashion clothes is one of the main draws for consumers; 59.6 % of respondents mainly make purchases when the price is at its lowest, such as during sales, in contrast to the 46.2 % who make purchases mainly when their clothes are worn out. Also of note is the question of exchange in clothes: only 4.8 % make purchases mainly when their clothes go out of fashion, but 14.4 % still mainly shop when new collections arrive. This is supported by respondent's average duration of use. 44.2 % use their clothes until they are worn out, while 43.3 % average between 1-5 years. New purchases, then, do not replace old clothes; rather, the responses suggest that they add to consumers' existing clothing.

Further, the responses suggest that purchases do not necessitate long periods of reflection; 16.3 % generally make purchases immediately, while 30.8 % wait 1-2 days and 22.1 % may need a full week. This behavior indicates a carelessness in regard to shopping for clothes; consumers generally may not need to give every purchase much thought, which would imply that the impact of such purchase behavior is neglected. This is further supported by the number of respondents who have bought clothes they have never worn. According to Remy, Speelman and Swartz (2016), many consumers only wore clothes 6-8 times before falling into disuse; 67.3 % of respondents claim to have bought clothes that were never used at all. The number of times each article of clothing is worn suggests a lack of importance placed on the impact of both the way they are worn and the impact of their production.

The survey concludes that the three most important selling points of clothes, based on the number of respondents prioritizing it 5/5, are quality of materials (30.8 %), price (29.8 %), and styles (41.3 %) while the country of manufacturing (0 %), impact on the environment (3.8 %), and ethical considerations in the production (1.9 %) were weighted significantly lower. The question, then, is whether consumers are unaware of the harm fast fashion does to social and natural environments, or whether practicality for the consumer is more important than the long-term health of people and the world at large.

4.3.2. Consumer reflections on CSR

Interpreting on responses, consumers value CSR as an ideal. 48.1 % of respondents claim that they are somewhat influenced by the marketing of CSR while a further 3.8 % are very influenced; 26 % are not very influenced while only 3.8 % are not influenced at all. The majority, then, are to some degree positively influenced by CSR practices. However, responses also seemingly suggest either only a superficial interest in CSR or general belief in the information they are presented by sellers. Only 1 % of those surveyed answered 5/5 when asked about the effort done to investigate the legitimacy of CSR claims. 38.5 %, in turn, answered 1/5, indicating little to no effort to examining actual practices of companies. Assuming respondents represent general opinions, these answers suggest a sound foundation for CSR as used for marketing products and brands. While only 1 % believed the truthfulness companies' CSR claims entirely, the plurality was undetermined. 27.9 % somewhat doubted companies' truthfulness and only 4.8 % were very unsure as indicated by those answering 2/5 and 1/5 respectively.

Respondents generally believe consumers to be entitled to information of the ethics of companies. However, the survey shows no clear consensus on whose responsibility it is to inform consumers. When asked if consumers are responsible for ensuring the ethical and sustainable nature of products consumed, 3.8 % strongly agreed; 43.3 % agreed; 29.8 % were neutral; 19.2 % disagreed; and only 5.8 % strongly disagreed. Confronted with the reverse question, whether companies are responsible for ensuring that products are ethically and sustainably produced, 54.8 % strongly agreed; 37.5 % agreed; 6.7 % were neutral; 1 % disagreed; and 4.8 % strongly disagreed. 3.8 % of respondents strongly agree that consumers are responsible for knowing the impact of the products they consume on social and natural environments while 36.5 % agree; 32.7 % are neutral; 23.1 % disagree; and 6.7 % strongly disagree. It is, seemingly, companies who are responsible for providing information on the social and environmental impacts of their products: according to the survey, 51.9 % strongly agree; 31.7 % agree; 12.5 % are neutral; 1 % disagree; and 2.9 % strongly disagree.

Lastly, respondents were asked about their agreement with the notion that governments are responsible for informing on ethics and sustainability but also for ensuring the ethics and sustainability of products produced by companies. 19.2 % strongly agree that the government should intervene; 36.5 % agree; 31.7 % are neutral; 7.7 % disagree; and 5.8 % strongly disagree with government intervention. The numbers seemingly indicate a conflict between consumers and corporations: as demonstrated by American corporations operating in South Africa (Arnold & Hammond, 1994); H&M's own response to an Indian government banning plastic (Phartiyal & Jadhav, 2018); and corporate lobbying leading up to the Rio Summit in 1992 (Gray, 2012), corporations tend to oppose government intervention on the basis of the excessiveness of regulations, the extra resources mandatory regulations demand, and as investigated by this paper, potentially the risk of losing CSR and voluntary disclosures of information as a marketing tool. The highlighted instances of corporate resistance to governmental intervention will be further elaborated upon in later sections.

The surveyed population is generally willing to support local companies in times of economic insecurity: 33.7 % state that their prioritization of local businesses during Corona amounted to 3/5; 36.5 % responded 4/5; and 16.3 % of those surveyed have the support of local businesses as their highest priority as indicated by a 5/5. While these numbers do not reflect attitudes toward sustainability and CSR in general, they do shed light on consumers' willingness to allow change based on proximity; having those that are affected by current conditions in consumers' proximity allows for consumers to adapt their behavior to the benefit of those that need their resources the most. The situation surrounding Covid-19 illustrates a problem highlighted by Singer (1997) amongst others: the welfare of people far removed from consumers is disproportionally unimportant.

Overall, the surveyed population, assuming they represent general public opinion, illustrates both the current state of ethics and transparency in fast fashion, but also why it is an important issue and one that should be investigated further for the sake of social and environmental welfare and for consumers' right to information on the fair allocation of their resources. The survey shows that, while consumers do know and appreciate the concept of sustainability, there is no consensus on any definition or means of ensuring it. Further, while the survey shows a tendency to evaluate products based on their sustainability, consumer behavior is functionally opposed to sustainable practices; quick turnover of collections, frequent purchases, little use of any one article of clothing, and little effort to ensure circularity collectively highlights the problematics of fast-fashion and the way it is marketed.

Assuming consumers make purchase decisions in good faith and knowing that very few consumers investigate the actual sustainability of business practices or CSR claims by corporations, the good consumers mean to do does little to nothing to improve on current social and environmental conditions. These takeaways suggest a cultural issue with sustainability: if consumers buy into corporate claims; current practices are profitable; corporations are allowed to self-regulate; and corporations, as per Adorno, Horkheimer, Holt etc, are the main agenda-setting cultural institutions, then corporations remain the only mechanism with the power to ensure sustainable business practices.

4.4. The business case for CSR

As explained, CSR may provide two financial benefits for organizations: cutting transaction costs by promoting trust and increasing the attractiveness of the organization to employees; and increasing revenue by improving consumers' perception of the organization through investments into societal and environmental causes (Jones, 1995). An organization that utilizes CSR effectively may be perceived as trustworthy, which can help with transaction cuts through the entire supply chain and with attracting and retaining the best talent in employees.

Furthermore, corporate morality is beneficial to the market as a whole. According to Douglass North (1981), "…strong moral and ethical codes of a society are the cement of social stability which makes an economic system viable". According to Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), Holt (2002), and Heding Knudtzen and Bjerre (2009), marketers, and by extension brands, are producers and interpreters of meaning. Conveying morality through communications and behavior and thus imposing it on society would then be beneficial to companies and markets.

In regard to stakeholder relationships, inefficiencies in their cooperation are a burden on not only buyers and sellers but markets and the economy as a whole. Inefficiencies are popularly combatted through contracting (Jones, 1995), where expectations and demands are formalized to ensure the right behavior from every involved actor and to avoid opportunism. When opportunism prevails, transaction costs are higher and efficiency lower. Opportunism, in turn, is often the result of information asymmetry; it follows that more transparency in companies allows stakeholders insight on corporate behavior and policies but also prevents intercorporate transaction costs from increasing more than can be avoided.

4.5. H&M's processes as a means to sustainability

One characteristic of H&M that is often highlighted is their lack of manufacturing factory ownership. The company produces approximately 60 % of their merchandise in Asia, with the rest being primarily of European origin. However, none of the factories are owned by H&M. Instead, the company operates through close cooperation with partners, supervised by local or regional offices. Currently, H&M has 20 such local offices in which 3000 people are employed; of those 3000, 150 are sustainability experts or developers (H&M Group, n.d.c). The tier 1 factories and partners, those that make the garments, procure materials without H&M's involvement but based on prognoses and results compiled by H&M. 80 % of the materials used are procured prior to production of a new collection; the remaining 20 % are contingent on current demand and future trend analyses. As a result, H&M's lead time is shortened significantly, allegedly down to 8 weeks from conception of an idea to arrival in stores, while decreasing waste.

In terms of tier 2 factories, such as those that manufacture the garments that tier 1 contractors produce merchandise from, H&M vows to include them in their supply chain and to make the same demands of them as they do of tier 1 factories (H&M, 2019a). These tier 2 are often not in direct contact with H&M but instead akin to sub-contractors that work with H&M's contractors. To ensure a sustainable supply chain, H&M has developed a set of guidelines to be signed and followed by contractors and partners, but also by sub-contractors, thereby taking some measure of responsibility for the operations of companies throughout the total supply chain. As of now, from H&M's own website, the company currently discloses information on tier 2 mills responsible for manufacturing 70 % of the garments used; by the end of 2021 they aim to disclose information on 100 % of printing and fabric dyeing locations.

From the annual report, H&M (2019a) outlines their continuous investments into shortening the *lead* on products; that is, the time it takes from the product is conceived till it arrives in stores. It is mentioned that controlling the logistics surrounding the manufacturing of the clothes helps in making it more sustainable, but, again, not to what degree or how specifically it is done. New ways of using AI and advanced analytics (AA) are introduced continually to improve both capacity and delivery of products from logistics centers, which, according to the annual report, provides the potential for more sustainable production and less waste. The use of AA and AI allegedly helps with "…trend detection to quantification, allocation, pricing and personalization" (H&M, 2019a: p. 40), thereby decreasing the production of potentially unwanted clothes and the resulting waste.

In the sustainability performance report published along with the annual report in 2019, H&M present more information on initiatives to ensure sustainability.

4.6. Information disclosures in accounting

Based on total scores, the analysis of fast fashion companies' annual reports supports the notion (Gray, 2012) that corporations produce more detailed reports according to their size. The three largest fast fashion companies by total sales in fiscal year 2020 are: Inditex at $24.8B; H&M at $22.5B; and Fast Retailing/Uniqlo at $18.91B. Using Wiseman's methodology, those three scored 33, 29, and 16 respectively out of a potential 54 (see appendix 1). The purpose of the analysis, however, is to investigate the correlation between transparency and environmental performance, the effect of corporations disclosing more information, and the seeming contradiction between profitability and sustainability.

Most importantly, no information is included in any of the reports that degrades the companies' images. In cases where a company failed to meet specific demands they would be hidden behind other information; for instance, Inditex mentioned litigation but only as one unquantified part of a total account. In a similar manner, three out of the five analyses identified quantitative information on emissions; Fast Retailing had information on emissions, but only as percentual reductions as compared to previous years, and others used the same approach. Using procentual change without the context of total emissions highlights the instrumentality of accounting and reporting: it presents the information not in the way that offers the most value but instead in the way that represents the corporation's interest best. In other words, percentual reductions, while good for eco-efficiency, do not mean sustainability if the total emissions are increasing as per recent trends and future prognoses. The use of eco-efficiency as synonymous with sustainability will be further developed in later sections.

The tendency of European based companies reporting information on carbon emissions and water discharge, while others mainly report energy consumption and sourcing, correlates with codified laws in Europe and common law elsewhere. That is, in the EU, where specific regulations are produced for corporations in regard to their environmental impact, companies are mandated to stay within a set of parameters which is reflected in their reporting; H&M and Inditex, based in Sweden and Spain respectively, report such metrics in accordance with EU regulations and for their own benefit (Gallego-Alvarez et al 2017). Overall, the reports indicate a problem of commitment; targets for future developments in terms of emissions, water discharge, and waste disposal, for instance, are largely present in all reports. Generally, though, less information is disclosed on whether corporations reach said targets or invest the resources into facilities and equipment to ensure such improvements; investments into sustainable facilities and equipment, and into the monitoring and ensuring of such developments, are entirely lacking from all reports. Thus, the reports do not show any obvious financial commitment to sustainability, neither in terms of eco-efficiency nor eco-effectiveness.

Lastly, the reports generally lack information on suppliers and their compliance with specific guidelines. In this regard, the five corporations rely on outside organizations and their certificates to ensure supplier compliance. As such, they do not disclose information on the actual impacts of suppliers but instead refer to other sources of information outside annual reports. While such information can be sought out publicly, their absence in annual reports is inherently non-transparent.

From the analysis of H&M's annual report, key information, as defined by the CEP and based on Wiseman's methodology (1982), is lacking. As outlined in the annual account of H&M's 2019 annual report, the company conducts its accounting following EU regulations, Swedish regulations, and recommendations by the International Financial Reporting Standard (IFRS) and the Swedish Financial Reporting Board insofar as they are in accordance with EU and Swedish requirements.

H&M Group does not disclose investments into sustainable production by way of pollution control equipment and facilities. While the processes used and the desired results are outlined in the sustainability report, no information on cost is presented. Neither do the reports present any information on operating costs from pollution control equipment and facilities. The CEP recommends that companies disclose quantitative information on both past and present expenditures and estimates of those that are planned to be made Wiseman, 1982). While presenting the results of expenditures is recommended, the investments made to achieve said results are equally important in gauging the economic decisions involved in lessening the impact on the environment; by neglecting the disclosure of such information companies make it difficult to get a grasp of their willingness to invest in initiatives that are not necessarily profitable. This, in turn, does not help in determining the sufficiency of the market in solving the problem of the fashion industry's impact on the environment.

The Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), on whose recommendations H&M bases their annual and sustainability reports, recommends that all environmental disclosures are present in companies' annual financial filings or accounts, i.e. their annual reports (Financial Stability Board, 2016); these are to be available to the public and thus are easily accessible to all stakeholders. Thus, for the sake of this analysis, only the information present in annual reports will be taken into consideration, entirely disregarding secondary sources of information such as corporate responsibility or sustainability reports. No information on social and environmental investments are present in the accounts, with *social security* being the one exception; what *social security* represents is not made clear and thus it is unclear whether it should be counted in this analysis. Since transparency is essential in the analysis, the data on *social security investments* will not be included.

In the sustainability performance report of 2019, H&M briefly outline some investments meant to further sustainability within the value chain. One such investment is a new *Circular Innovation Lab*; however, as within the annual report, it contains no quantitative information on associated costs. All in all, the accounts, which are highlighted as the preferred platform for informing shareholders and other stakeholders on corporate policy, operations, and financials, contain no quantitative information on investments into sustainability; removing more in-depth information on sustainability from the annual accounts, even if it is present in others reports, suggests that such information is not prioritized by H&M or by shareholders and potential investors.

Similarly, data on expenditures from litigation on social and environmental issues are not present in H&M's reports. Such litigation reflects public or private dissatisfaction with H&M's operations or products and highlights areas that may need improving. Environmental and social litigation may be the result of the company's shadow being made public; this has been the case with H&M on several occasions. In the US, after being accused of not paying for off-the-clock work, H&M paid out $3.8 million to a number of employees after reaching a settlement to avoid the costs associated with further litigation (Sortor, 2020). The previous year had seen H&M being sued in Illinois for collecting employees' fingerprints, which is a violation of the Biometric Information Privacy Act (The Fashion Law, 2019). In Norway, the Norwegian Consumer Authority has accused H&M for using misleading but not necessarily false marketing; Norwegian law mandates that consumers must have access to sufficient information on products to assess whether it matches the way it is presented in marketing material. In the Consumer Authority's opinion, the lack of information on the percentage of the merchandise that stems from recycled polyester or organic cotton, for instance, left consumers with less data than desirable and less than is mandated by law (Segran, 2019). It Is unclear, however, if the case was taken up by Norwegian courts.

In H&M's own annual report, they highlight that 28 cases of non-compliance with their Code of Ethics were handled; of those cases, 26 resulted in warnings or the termination of employees or business partners. Similarly, 5 business relationships were terminated on account of non-compliance with relevant guidelines or laws. They do not, however, specify which issues were identified or how they were sanctioned; even the sanctions mentioned are unclear, as the implications of a written warning are unknown and the distribution of such warnings as compared to terminations is undefined. The lack of information on litigation may itself be part of the company's shadow; if such information was to be published by actors external to H&M, it may illuminate a legitimacy gap, or a schism between the perception of the company and its representation in communications (Deegan, 2006).

H&M scores higher on the information present on pollution, policies, processes, and similar items. While such statements as commitments to change or promises of future progress do communicate intent, they do not provide any measure of effect or even action; the choice of KPIs, then, becomes important. In contrast to other fast fashion companies, H&M reports their total impact, albeit not transparently. The impacts and targets for reductions are categorized as scope 1, 2, and 3; only the first is the impact of H&M's own production, while scope 2 is impact from the production of energy consumed by H&M and scope 3 is impact from external production within H&M's supply chain. Thus, when reporting the total impact of scope 1 and scope 2 emissions collectively, H&M manages to hide increases in scope 1 emissions behind the reductions in scope 2 emissions on account of investments into the sustainable production of energy; these investments, it should be noted, are not made by H&M.

4.7. Gaining and retaining legitimacy

H&M attains legitimacy at different levels and by different methods. In this section, different approaches will be identified and elaborated upon. According to Suchman (1995), organizations can utilize three approaches to gain three types of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. While they are not limited to using only one of the three, they may prove contradictory and thereby become obstacles to each other. Thus, it is important for managers to know the environment they operate within and to know what kind of legitimacy is best suited for the organization within its environment. From the communication within H&M's annual report (2019a), all three approaches are present. Operating within an industry that is criticized for its environmental and social impact, H&M's communications indicate efforts to *disentangle* their operations. The stigma surrounding fast fashion is an obstacle to gaining legitimacy; therefore, rebranding as sustainable fashion, even without meaningfully changing manufacturing processes and operations, allows H&M to gain or retain legitimacy without changing its methods other than superficially.

4.7.1. Pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy

Fast fashion is largely the product of companies attaining pragmatic legitimacy. H&M, as representative of the industry, are legitimized by the pragmatic value they provide consumers. By offering goods that are deemed sustainable at a low price, consumers are dually satisfied: they gain the practicality of cheap and easily available clothes; and they gain the appearance of being socially and environmentally conscious. This pragmatic legitimacy is reflected by the survey conducted for this paper: 29 % of respondents had price as a highest priority when making purchasing decisions while 48.1 % are somewhat influenced by companies' use of CSR and a further 3.8 % state that they are very influenced by such practices. The frequency of purchases and the general reflection on every purchase similarly award H&M pragmatic legitimacy; the survey showed little hesitation in consumers when reflecting on purchase decisions and a tendency to make purchases often, both practices that are well covered by H&M strategies. Pragmatic legitimacy is easy to gain but the legitimacy it provides is also more volatile; the company has to take measures to retain legitimacy and avoid events that may threaten it (Suchman, 1995).

Like pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy is evaluative; it depends on consumers' experience of it more so than the actuality of the company and its operations and behavior. The measures taken by H&M to limit its social and environmental impact, both in reality and as perceived by consumers, are an effort to gain consequential legitimacy. This justifies the resources invested in reducing carbon emissions, increasing the conservation of natural resources, and limiting the damage done to local environments through pollution of dangerous substances, but only insofar as the gain in legitimacy attracts stakeholders to increase revenue. Where consequences are not immediately apparent to consumers, H&M may instead attempt to gain procedural legitimacy. This is evident throughout H&M's annual and sustainability accounts; a lot of focus is placed upon the way the company operates in regard to, for instance, employee management.

The 2019 sustainability report includes information on a number of initiatives meant to improve society in the immediate surroundings of manufacturing plants: women are offered transportation in India areas and at times where they are especially vulnerable (H&M Group, 2019a, pp. 73-74); 500 refugee workers were recruited in Turkey (H&M Group, 2019a, p. 74); a program was established in Myanmar to combat sexual harassment and general gender discrimination (H&M Group, 2019a, p. 74); and wages were increased to between 6-70 % above minimum wage in Turkey and a number of South East Asian countries (H&M Group, 2019a, p. 75). No information is offered on the effects of any of these initiatives, albeit some have been investigated by external bodies; these will be covered in later sections. However, the effects are unimportant to the legitimacy of the company as long as the general perception of its procedures are favorable and in line with ethical codes of audiences (Scott & Meyer, 1991; Scott, 1992).

Similarly, H&M highlights measures taken to ensure structural legitimacy throughout reports. To actualize sustainability strategies and ensure their proper communication and implementation, the company launched their Change-Making Programme (H&M Group, 2019a, p. 12). They also stress their involvement with sustainability-focused groups both external to the company and co-founded by the company: their involvement in sustainable trading is reflected by their cooperation with the Ethical Trading Initiative while their effort to reorchestrate the fashion industry to reflect modern social and environmental demands is apparent through their work with the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (H&M Group, 2019a, p. 13) of which H&M are a founding member. In order to promote sustainability and allow stakeholders to gain insight on actual social and environmental performance, H&M developed the Higg index for comparable data collection to be shared following transparency principles developed by the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (H&M Group, 2019a, p. 20).

Since H&M makes use of a large and diverse supply chain to manufacture its merchandise, they are also responsible for the impact of partners throughout the supply chain. To ensure supply chain compliance with H&M's ethical codes and cultural expectations, H&M developed and implemented the Sustainable Impact Partnership Programme and the Social Labour Convergence Project (H&M Group, 2019a, p. 78), requiring tier 1 and 2 partners to disclose information on impacts based on H&M's own guidelines. Further, the company has constructed a network of sustainability-focused employees lead by Head of Sustainability, Leyla Ertur, who oversees all sustainability developments including the global sustainability department (H&M Group, 2019a, p. 14). As part of a strategy that promotes sustainability throughout the supply chain, not only in tier 1 suppliers but also all lower-level suppliers and sub-contractors, H&M employs 80 sustainability experts and developers spread across 20 local offices (H&M Group, n.d.c).

H&M promoted former head of sustainability, Helena Helmersson, to CEO, taking advantage of her experience in sustainability strategizing and implementation, but also her identity as a leader in sustainable business as shown through numerous awards. The result is a clearly defined hierarchy of groups or individuals handling sustainability at different levels: Helena Helmersson as CEO oversees all operations including, and especially, sustainability; Leyla Ertur oversees sustainability specifically and reports to the board and Helmersson bi-annually; and Anna Gedda oversees global sustainability and reports to Gedda. The clear structures, both within the company and as a part of several external sustainability-focused groups, H&M gains structural legitimacy. Lastly, employing a CEO with a unique relation to both the company and sustainability awards H&M personal legitimacy. As the former head of sustainability and supply and the current CEO of H&M, Helmersson has won numerous awards: in 2014 she was named the most powerful woman in Swedish business by the Swedish organization Veckans Affärer (Danley, 2014); she is named one of Business of Fashion's BoF 500, an index of the most important people in shaping the fashion industry today (Business of Fashion, n.d.); she is ranked fourth in Fortune's list of the Most Powerful Women International (Fortune, n.d.); and she is named an Influential Leader by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) for her work in reshaping the fast fashion industry (AACSB, 2019).

Her accomplishment in sustainability and in reshaping the fast fashion industry in general has led to her name being synonymous with successful and ethical corporate operations and behavior, which awards H&M personal legitimacy by association. Further, under her supervision as head of sustainability in 2019, the company has been awarded with: an inclusion in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index recognizing the top 10 % of sustainability leaders both globally and in Europe; a spot in the top 5 in the Fashion Revolution Fashion Transparency Index of 2019, scoring 61 % with the highest scoring company at 64 %; constituency in the FTSE4GOOD which awards companies that meet stringent socially and environmentally responsible criteria; an inclusion in the Ethisphere Institute's list of the World's Most Ethical Companies; and the number one spot in Corporate Register's CR Reporting Awards 2019 for Creativity in Communication category, as well as placing second in Openness & Honesty, Relevance & Materiality, and Best Report; and other accolades (H&M Group, n.d.b).

Collectively, the measures taken by H&M ensure cognitive legitimacy; they highlight H&M's compliance with socially acceptable practices and attempt to ensure that the company does not lose its congruence with taken-for-granted ways of operating. The use of external groups and certificates further emphasize H&M's behaving in a way that fits with what consumers expect, while awards and communications of special initiatives or actions reflect meaning in H&M's behavior. Thus, they are likely to gain both cognitive and evaluative legitimacy. Cognitive legitimacy shields H&M from controversy by sticking with what consumers expect, allowing for passive support from consumers, while taking extra steps to seemingly improve on existing conditions instead allow for active support, often the result of more evaluative legitimacy. Lastly, H&M highlight their consistency in working towards more sustainability in the fashion industry. According to Suchman (1995), consistency gives companies credibility, but it also imposes values on consumers; consumers of a brand reflecting social consciousness, for instance, are more likely to adopt social conscious practices, in turn reducing the need for mobilization of consumers.

When faced with potential threats to their legitimacy, H&M have responded in a manner well-aligned with the approaches proposed by legitimacy theories; according to Deegan (2006), companies generally have a vested interest in controlling the information that is disclosed in different media, which is best ensured by the company being the first and primary discloser of information. This is done for a number of reasons: to hide or deflect from legitimacy gaps; to hide corporate shadows; to reshape publics' perception of the company; or to respond to crises to the company's legitimacy. This also explains the commitment to an accord meant to ensure safe conditions in Bangladesh after the Rana Plaza catastrophe; even if the targets were not met, H&M attempted to reshape public perception of their operations to something better aligned with cultural expectations.

Despite H&M having no suppliers in the affected Bangladeshi factory, they foresaw the pressure consumers would inevitably put on companies operating in developing nations and using low-wage labor; with Bangladesh being the biggest production center for H&M, the attention and impact would presumably be felt if any of their own suppliers experienced similar events or were documented lacking the safety regulations that led to the catastrophe. Further, the non-committal nature of promises of future results are well-suited to gaining or maintaining legitimacy; while H&M may or may not intend to follow scope 1 and 2 targets for carbon emissions, the fact that they communication a commitment to the targets is, in itself, legitimating.

4.8. H&M through the lens of stakeholder theory

As a global manufacturer and retailer of clothing, H&M has stakeholders in all social groups all over the world. While some groups are more directly impacted by H&M's operations and some stakeholders are more highly prioritized than others, they all play their part in developing strategies within the fast fashion industry. In this section, different stakeholder groups and their relationship with H&M, both those that are formal and informal, are investigated.

4.8.1. H&M's partners and suppliers as stakeholders

H&M, as a multinational enterprise (MNE), is involved with a large and diverse group of suppliers. What is more, H&M do not own any manufacturing plants or any of the manufacturers that supply the textiles used by manufacturers. This, in turn, makes the process of investigating the impact of the production of merchandise more difficult which highlights the need for transparency and the responsibility of H&M to ensure the transparency of their entire supply chain. H&M's decision to have external parties be responsible for the manufacturing of merchandise and the sourcing and procurement of materials necessitates a number of considerations to be made. These fall into three categories: agency, transactions costs, and team production.

One issue stemming from externalizing production is the principal-agent relationship it results in and the potential for misaligned interests (Jones, 1995). H&M, as principal and as an MNE, may be capable of imposing their will on the agents, such as tier 1 manufacturers and, one degree removed, tier 2 textile and dyeing plants; however, they surrender the ability to directly control the methods by which their agents operate. In the case of fast fashion and H&M as an actor within the industry, one example of both incidences is the conflict of economic and environmental/social cost. According to Backs, Jahnke, Lüpke, Stücken & Stummer (2020), fast fashion companies may prioritize lead time over cost of production as the rapid pace of trends demands rapid turnover of products but also complete compliance with strict rules on the emission of chemicals and gases or the use of precious resources and labor. H&M then has to ensure interest alignment, both within and outside the company, between shareholders and management, between management and employees, and between management as representative of the company and partners or suppliers.

In the case of H&M's external manufacturers, that alignment is most often found to be formal; the duration of collaborations and the symmetry of power between parties generally determine to what degree the rules are formalized. Since 2006, when H&M first started registering such statistics, their average partnership has lasted longer than 6 years; in such cases, a formal contract is signed by both parties to avoid having to negotiate on every interaction between parties. However, the degree of specialization further complicates the process of interest alignment. If H&M demand specialized equipment or methods of manufacturing, the manufacturer will either lose a lot of leverage in negotiating prices or be left behind. If H&M does not demand specialization the manufacturer also lack leverage since they may be replaced by a large number of competitors. Thus, in fast fashion, the power distance between principal and agent is largely to the principal's advantage. While H&M does state that their average collaborations last long, they are also willing to replace partners (H&M Group, n.d.c).

Further complicating interest alignment is H&M's decision to allow tier 1 suppliers to negotiate their own collaborations with tier 2 factories, in which H&M are not participating.

If we assume H&M's vows to be sustainable, through their processes, materials used, codes of ethics, and transparency, a number of issues the company has encountered can be explained by the failure of effective interest alignment between parties. Throughout the last decade, H&M has been involved in a number of public scandals where they have been somehow associated with factories whose operations are deemed undesirable in some manner. In Cambodia, following the Rana Plaza incident, H&M's vows to ensure safe working conditions in suppliers' factories only amounted to little change. H&M, as signatories of the Accord, are required to demand of their suppliers the implementation of safety standards within a given, mandated timeframe.

A collaborative investigation conducted by Clean Clothes Campaign, International Labor Rights Forum, Maquila Solidarity Network, and Worker Rights Consortium (2016) concluded that 61 % of H&M's tier 1 Cambodian factories still had not installed fire doors, making emergency exits inaccessible. 16 % of factories still have doors with automatic locks, further making emergency exits inaccessible; in a country of Cambodia's size, those 16 % amount to 25.500 laborers. The results of the investigation were based on only what H&M has termed Gold and Platinum factories; those distinctions are given to factories that are deemed best-in-class, suggesting either the invalidity of such distinctions, cover-ups by the factories themselves, or both.

Another report published by the Changing Markets Foundation (2018) linked H&M and other fast fashion companies to dangerous pollution of water sources in Asian countries. At one factory in India, 2 people were killed and many more otherwise negatively impacted by such pollution, where chemicals in water sources were linked to cancer, tuberculosis, and other illnesses while the air quality was markedly worse immediately surrounding the factory. The same investigation also documented extreme pollution from viscose factories, a material that is branded as a sustainable alternative to silk and cotton; the inexact nature of the branding of seemingly sustainable materials is another issue that will be developed further in a later section of this paper.

A third report, published and conducted by the Clean Clothes Campaign (2016), documented violations of the workers' rights promoted by H&M. According to the report, employees at the four suppliers they investigated experienced fainting while at work, wage cuts for arriving minutes late, a disallowance of bathroom breaks, and lack of the right of association, such as the disallowance of union membership. Employees with more than 2 years of seniority are entitled to permanent contracts by Cambodian law; at the surveyed factories, this right was denied, and employees were instead offered short-term contract which make for financial insecurity in employees.

The reports collective highlight a problem in implementing changes promised by H&M in their tier 1 suppliers. Three explanations can be found: either it is a failure to ensure that agents do not cause moral hazards; a failure in preventing adverse selection in agents; or H&M is promising progress without investing in their implementation. H&M does have initiatives to combat such inefficiencies: all suppliers are mandated to provide information on social and environmental impacts based on a framework developed by H&M. However, the disclosure of such information is up to the individual supplier, which, in theory, should lower monitoring costs.

Transaction costs are another means to explain the development in H&M's suppliers' operations. First, H&M holds a lot of leverage through the scope of the company and the number of factories available to them. This, in turn, is costly for manufacturers; whether they fail to negotiate desirable contracts or have to develop and finance new methods and equipment, the cost eventually will have to be paid by the supplier. These added costs may explain the inability to ensure living wages, investments into facilities, and proper monitoring of operations. They also may explain adverse selection in suppliers; a supplier who is financially challenged by a more resourceful buyer may have adverse priorities. Looking at the situation from the other side, suppliers are encouraged to change their ways of doing things by new demands from corporations; suppliers who actively promote socially and environmentally conscious operations may win over corporations who experience intensified pressure from the public following the attention given to catastrophes and unsustainable methods in developing countries.

Jones' (1995) concept of *team production theory* provides another explanation of H&M's failure to ensure compliance with corporate and social demands at different levels. According to Jones, employees who shirk or are less invested in the ideals the company promote may negatively impact the total performance of the area they work within. Whether they are lazy, disinterested, or opportunistic the employee may eventually misrepresent the company's interest in a way that damages the company's financial or reputational standing. Thus, an employee at a regional office in H&M's Asian markets may find the prospect of higher profits more beneficial to themselves than representing corporate demands; this may, in turn, result in abuse of labor rights, failure to live up to environmental standards, or the lack of investments to ensure employee's safety and complying with safety regulations at different levels.

4.9. A neo-Marxian perspective on developments in the fashion industry

According to György Lukács, ideologies are normalized and reified through continual application in everyday processes. This is reflected by the entire premise of fast fashion; companies strive toward effectivization to reach their maximum profitability, as profitability is traditionally the primary purpose of corporations. This idea has been presented by numerous sociologists and economists through history: it was a central idea in Weber's works; it was emphasized by Marx and foundational in his belief that classes would only be further economically divided; and it was Friedman's suggestion for a definitive purpose and responsibility of all companies. In other words, optimization for the purpose of profitability has become perceived akin to a natural law and something that is necessarily part of running a successful corporation.

This is also reflected in corporate communication, especially that of companies and shareholders or investors. Arnold and Hammond's (1994) investigation of the ideology of accounting in the case of American divestments in South Africa and Tinker, Merino and Neimark's (1982) investigation of the epistemological background of accounting both found ideological motivations in the way accounting is usually done. While often regarded as a descriptive Positivist and Realist account of corporate performance, Tinker, Merino and Neimark argue that accounting is inevitably normative, but also that agents such as corporations have an interest in allowing the perception of accounting to persist.

A Realist conception of accounting allows for the finding of objective facts; the amounts of emissions or the expenditure into sustainability, for instance, reflect the absolute truth of the company. However, as with all social sciences, economics are incompatible with Positivist epistemology, as tendencies and causality cannot be conclusively proven. Thus, what company accounts present in terms of financial information is what the company itself determines is desirable and what the industry traditionally has reified and ossified.

In South Africa, companies who entered into the Sullivan Principles were required to disclose specific information in an attempt to prompt investments into the dissolution of the Apartheid regime and its segregation of people based on ethnicity. Companies were largely unwilling to agree to the Principles if not they could have a say in determining what they would require of them. Eventually, companies were allowed, both politically and socially, to continue their investments into and their operations within South Africa despite the call for sanctions, because companies had an economic interest in not losing the South African market. Meanwhile, the requirements proposed by Sullivan were compromised and the effects were clear: segregation prevailed, as companies and governments made rules that officially illegalized specific behavior but allowed room for reified behavior to persist. Black people still had worse access to medical care and higher positions within companies, and so the segregation remained despite laws that illegalized discriminating between ethnicities doing the same jobs.

In the fashion industry the sustainability of specific materials and the continued use of them have similarly been reified. Similar to South Africa, companies continue investing in unsustainable practices, even if they may reduce their impact on social and natural environments, in order to not lose a significant market. H&M's communications also reflect the seeming legitimacy benefits of commitments despite a lack of real consequences. In their 2019 sustainability report, H&M claim that the fashion industry employs 60 million people on a global scale, whereof most are women. H&M's own supplier factories employ a total of 1,56 million people, of which 63 % are women (H&M Group, 2019a). Highlighting the number of women employed out of context, that is without the data on general gender employment rates in the industry, makes H&M appear gender progressive without having to effect any actual changes.

4.7.1. A neo-Marxian perspective on the marketing of fast fashion and sustainability

While many argue for less harmful business practices, it is not enough to only reduce one's negative impact on the world; people are increasingly demanding actual progress from companies. According to Heding, Knudtzen and Bjerre (2009), the success of companies is more tied to the effectiveness of its communication than its quality of products or distribution. The company's role is an interpreter of cultural phenomena and trends and a creator of products that reflect said culture while also shaping public opinion to the company's own interests (Holt, 2002; Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2009; Askegaard, 2006).

In the fast fashion industry, where cost efficiency, lead times, and general maximization of profitability are key, the task is to conform to a consumer base demanding social and environmental consciousness while imposing acceptance of existing business practices on consumers; the relationship is continually reciprocal. Through their communications, H&M's task becomes convincing consumers that H&M's methods, ethics, and products align with consumers expectations and demands, even if that alignment is only superficial and created through disclosure and a limited perception of the company as a whole. As argued in previous sections of this paper, H&M has done so by different means; one such instance is by being a creator of standards, forming agenda-setting organizations, and producer of vehicles of meaning in the conceptually new market that is sustainable fast fashion.

As developed in the analytic part of this paper, H&M's annual and sustainability reports do reflect both consumer demand of change and the corporate desire to instigate change in the way the fashion industry impacts the world. The means to effect that change, however, are still negotiable. While consumer consciousness of climate change and the impact their behaviors have on the environment is often emphasized, by governments and companies alike, the facts remain the same: large corporations are responsible for the vast majority of the degeneration of the environment. According to a report commissioned by the Carbon Disclosure Program, 71 % of total GHG emissions globally can be traced back to only 100 companies (Griffin, 2017). Another analysis by Richard Heede (2014) for the Climate Accountability Institute concluded that industry leaders knew of fossil fuels impact on the environment as early as 1965; still, since that year only 20 fossil fuel companies, both privately and state owned, are responsible for 35 % of all GHG emissions.

Exxon, who Heede's analysis places fourth on the list of highest total GHG emission numbers, actively withheld and suppressed information on the harmfulness of their methods.

According to a report by Greenpeace (n.d.), investigations have determined that in 1983 Exxon took measures to limit the literature produced and published by the company by cutting the carbon emissions research budget from $900.000 to $150.000 out of a total research budget of $600 million. In 1989 they formed the Global Climate Coalition along with other fossil fuel companies; while officially formed to combat climate change, the coalition instead created primers for legislators and reporters, stating that the link between greenhouse gas emissions and climate was not well understood in an effort to avoid mandatory rules for corporate greenhouse gas emissions.

The effects of large corporations in accelerating climate change, but also in framing the situation, shaping public discourse, and manipulating legislation (Porter & Kramer, 2019), are apparent. Similar methods may be used by H&M, consciously or unconsciously. For instance, an industry that is responsible for the second most greenhouse gasses globally is now also framed as sustainable. H&M, as the second largest agent within the industry, is branding themselves as a sustainable company despite the costly production of merchandise and the resulting emissions continuing to increase.

The manipulation of available environmental information has been used to frame the situation in a way that benefits or at the least does not take away from corporate interests. The fossil fuel industry, for one, replicated strategies used by the tobacco industry to deny climate change, attack opposing views, and stifle action to regulate the industry. A report produced by Cook et al (2019) concludes that the fossil fuel industry knowingly manipulated popular discourse in an effort to avoid financial losses, adding to the evidence presented by Greenpeace (n.a.).

The report further illustrates the process of framing situations and consumer consensus to fit company interests. As with the No Logo movement (Holt, 2002), the industry first tried to suppress information; when it became obvious that the climate was changing, they denied being partly responsible; when they were held accountable they claimed that data on the actual environmental change was exaggerated; and when it garnered enough attention, they reframed the situation to create a consensus that consumers individually should take responsibility and that their behavior could solve climate change problematics (Cook et al, 2019). Marketers and the brands they represent continually interprets and evaluates their own situation and consumer consensuses to adapt to changes, allowing public discourse to evolve but in a manner that suits companies' interests. When opposed by cultural contradictions, they absorb prevalent sentiments and reshape discourse. The effect is, as coined by Adorno (1993), the creation of artifacts of *pseudoculture,* and the imposition of cultureless and, through the disenchantment of the world, culturelessness in consumers (Witkin, 2003).

4.10. Transparency

H&M has vowed to be as transparent as can be, both with their own operations and those of their partners within their supply chain. Recently they were ranked first in Fashion Revolution's Fashion Transparency Index 2020, an analysis of the 250 biggest fashion companies worldwide based on the amount of information disclosed about processes, impact, and intent. In their 2019 annual report H&M publicized the launch of their latest transparency initiative, which would be the first of its kind and scope: all the merchandise available in their online shops would contain information on country of origin, name and address of factories, the number of employees in factories, and the materials used in producing the garments. The same report offered insight into previous steps taken to be more transparent; in 2013, they were allegedly the first company in the fashion industry to disclose their entire supply chain online.

The lack of quantitative data on expenditure resulting from prioritizing sustainability and the innovation of sustainability methods exposes one issue with current financial reporting practices: the rules by which they are produced are largely either decided upon by companies or companies are involved in the production of rules, thus leaving the act of changing practices up to the parties that benefit the most from existing, prevailing practices. In other words, H&M are meant to be controlled by regulations and standards in order to act appropriately, but the rules are written by H&M themselves, leaving little incentive to enact any substantive change without a strong business case.

Further, despite vows of transparency and not necessarily consciously, the nature of H&M's supply chain complicates transparency. While H&M do list their tier 1 and 2 suppliers, they do not include any information on their operations within their own financial and sustainability reporting; thus, interested parties are forced to investigate all such suppliers individually or, as made optimal by H&M, refer to their certifications and compliance with the standards produced by H&M with little evidence documenting said compliance.

Part of transparency as a safeguarding measure must be the ease of accessibility of information, which is not promoted by current accounting standards nor current supply chain management. In effect, supplier compliance cannot be investigated through any means provided by H&M; instead, interest groups external to the company have been conducting their own research to gain insight on the suppliers. Such investigations have shown, for instance, that safety measures promised with the signing of the Accords following the Rana Plaza catastrophe were not sufficiently implemented and that labor rights were not always followed entirely. These facts make blurs the line between H&M's own transparency and those of other, separate corporations; are H&M responsible for their suppliers' transparency and should supplier transparency be reflected when evaluating H&M's transparency?

5. Discussion

To answer the research question, this section will address three primary points: current issues identified in the fashion industry; ideology and agenda-setting; and transparency as a tool in promoting sustainability.

5.1. The ethics of current marketing practices

As highlighted by responders to the survey conducted for this paper, the analysis of H&M's communications in accounts and otherwise, and the number and intensity of organizations formed to ensure sustainable business practices, there is a clear demand for corporate accountability and sustainability. Based on analyses on such communications as compared to actual corporate behavior and the context changes to current praxes are made within, the drivers of social and environmental progress are driven by legislation and consumer demand rather than corporate good will. Wage increases in Asia coincide with changes in legislation while remaining lower than what is determined to be a living or fair wage and safety measures are made or promised following events resulting in public attention or outrage. The people involved in producing the merchandise sold by MNEs are ultimately means to the end that is profitability.

Meanwhile, labor is commoditized; the value of individuals is the utility to the company they represent as reflected by the wage and safety issues H&M and their suppliers are responsible for. As per Marx and later Lukács, the practice of taking advantage of lower production costs and the resulting efficiency and profits is seemingly reified and have resulted in corporations' right to value profits over social and environmental welfare. The labor involved in fast fashion manufacturing is largely alienated and removed from the public's conscious, in turn making any effort to improve their situation more difficult and consumers' relation to the people producing the products they consume non-existing. The drive for efficiency in cutting costs and increasing revenue leads to corporate isomorphism; what is found to be most efficient becomes the standard within the industry. In effect, and as predicted by Marx, the division of classes becomes more pronounced as resources are allocated to capitalists more so than laborers.

According to a report by the World Inequality Lab, resources are increasingly gleaned by the wealthiest 10 % with some of H&M's main manufacturing countries having the starkest contrasts (World Inequality Lab, 2018). The division has only been emphasized by the Covic-19 pandemic; high-income nations, making up 16 % of the global population, have received 56 % of vaccinations while the lowest-income nations have received only 0,1 % of vaccine doses despite making up 9 % of the global population (NEWS WIRES, 2021). These numbers indicate an obvious disbalance in the distribution of resources based on both the wealth and geographical circumstances of people. In other words, while there is a cultural striving for general equality, all people do not represent the same value as required by utilitarian ethicists.

The numbers also suggest an uneven distribution of both internalities and externalities. The relocation of manufacturing to developing nations, justified by the lower price of labor, provide Western nations with long-term benefits: since environmental performance is determined territorially, a nation or company where manufacturing facilities are largely outside its own borders will have a smaller carbon footprint which is attractive to politician, shareholders, and stakeholders alike. Meanwhile, developing nations gain the jobs created by new manufacturing plants; however, the long-term cost is reflected by the higher environmental and social impact. According to Wiedmann and Lenzen (2018), the relocation of manufacturing removes the responsibility of nations and makes domestic legislation and supranational regulations or recommendations like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals insufficient or, at best, not representative of actual social and environmental impacts of consumption. A third of the impact of the total consumption in developed countries is displaced to the developing countries wherein manufacturing takes place.

This is, of course, in stark opposition to the utilitarian notion that all lives count for one each, and especially Singer’s notion that the pleasure added to those who have little getting more is more significant than those who have a lot receiving the same quantity. In other words, unless the pleasure added to those benefitting from the fast fashion industry outweighs the pain those same corporations impose on especially developing nations, but also all who are affected by climate change, current practices are indefensible. As pain and pleasure cannot be quantified, and with the blurred lines between who counts or does not count as stakeholders, no conclusive statements can be made about the distribution of pain and pleasure between parties. However, with current practices favoring those in developed nations while exporting the effects of their consumption on developing nations, and taking into account the instrumentality of the fast fashion industry and its striving for efficiency in costs and market capitalization, the impression left by H&M and others is not favorable; large corporations and those who glean their profits benefit disproportionately from the use of cheaper labor and the use of laborers as means to the end that, ultimately, is profitability. In conclusion, utilitarian theories cannot justify the effects of the fast fashion on its stakeholders.

5.1.1. A deontological critique of fast fashion practices

More than anything, Kant's deontological system of ethics emphasizes the dignity and value of every individual. As so famously stated, no person may be perceived or utilized as a means to an end. This section will delve into the use of laborers as means and commodities. As determined by the Fair Wage Network (2016), laborers are entitled to a wage that ensures and covers living conditions such as food and accommodations, but also a dignified life. While the terms are ambiguous, a life of dignity may reasonable be interpreted as a life of social mobility and the absence of forced labor or labor rights violations. A fair wage, then, covers the essential needs but also what is required to live a desirable life outside the company of employment.

Aside from H&M's commitment to suppliers, as reflected by the length of cooperation stated in annual and sustainability reports, the company allows for the use of tier 2 partners based on utility. The reflexibility and fluidity of H&M's supply chain indicates a prioritization of utility over identity and a use of labor as a means to the end that is profitability. The relative nature of wages and emissions permitted based on geographical circumstances also contradicts deontological demands for universal considerations. According to Kant, and as established in previous sections of this paper, no act or behavior can be allowed if not it would be logically or practically feasible if universally mandated. In other words, the environmental impact of operations permitted in developing countries is disproportionate to the impact on developed countries; were it to be the same impact universally, H&M would likely be sanctioned by, for instance, EU and American institutions.

Similarly, the carbon footprints of people are disproportionally large in developed nations, and the impacts shifted unto developing nations; while reducing those footprints solely in developed nations might be enough (Gray, 2012), it would be mean even more rapid degradation of the environment if it were to become the universal standard in developing nations as well.

5.1.2. What determines the morality of business practices?

As highlighted by ethicists of the Frankfurt School (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002) and later developed by cultural marketing theorists (Askegaard, 2006; Holt, 2002), brands and other highly visible conveyors of meaning play a large role in shaping publics' perceptions of morality. It stands to reason, then, that companies may seek to embed what is economically beneficial into the nature of conducting business, in other words ossifying such practices and making them part of the taken-for-granted comprehension of markets and industries.

Logically, such mechanisms, along with corporate isomorphism, promote inertia; if those with the power to change things are also the ones who benefit the most from the way things are, there is no clear incentive to effect changes to the status quo. This has already been established in this paper; the oil industry hid research on the impact of fossil fuels, corporations with economic interests in South Africa hid behind certificates, and H&M hides behind external standards. By doing so, information on impacts that may shape publics' perceptions are not available and thus cannot be taken into account when determining whether corporate behavior is compatible with cultural expectations.

Collectively, three factors seem to shape the discussion surrounding the morality of fast fashion: the proximity bias, as developed by Singer (1997), where consumers are biased towards solving problems that are culturally or physically close to them; the instrumentality of the industry, that is the way strategizing is done with the specific purpose of ensuring profitability by any means, disregarding matters outside of those that are traditionally beneficial to any corporation; and the constructive, manipulative capacity of marketing and corporate communication, including consumers' access to said communication in contrast to the actual nature of the industry.

5.2. Fast fashion through the lens of critical theory and the cultural approach to marketing

As developed previously, corporations have managed to frame and reframe the situation surrounding their impact on social and environmental welfare continually (Sato, 2018). This is important to consider as it provides the frame of reference from which most critique is constructed. As emphasized by Marxian thinkers, from Marx himself to Lukács and members of the Frankfurt School, capitalists and promoters of capitalism have managed to frame modern corporaions as enacting their right to maximize profit, in turn making this right something akin to a natural law that exists independently of human perception. When profit maximization is the default, all expenditure that does not directly contribute to revenue can be perceived as corporate good-will, creating the foundation for the business case for CSR as a marketing practice. On the other hand, it also ensures that social and environmental welfare will only be prioritized insofar as it is profitable. Adding to the business case for CSR, theorists from a range of fields of study emphasize the benefit of ethical business practices to the market (Holt, 2002; Suchman, 1995; North, 1981).

As proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer, later seeing further development by Holt, brands create vehicles of meaning that consumers adopt. As per Suchman (1995), continuity and credibility, while mutually perpetuating, also effect the adoption of the values conferred by companies. It follows that a consumer base who consumes based on legitimacy and thus the deservedness of consumer resources will be attracted by companies displaying the values that consumers prioritize, but also that consumers will adopt the values displayed by companies, paving the way for stronger moral codes in society. North (1981) states that stronger moral codes breed more efficient markets and better conditions for efficient economies.

This is supported by Jones' (1995) stipulation that legitimacy or trustworthiness causes lower transaction for companies; if all involved parties, then, are deemed morally righteous, they will also all experience lower transaction costs. This logic, in addition to Jones' theory on how CSR causes increases in revenue, should strengthen the argument for CSR as beneficial to companies. However, the effects of such strategies cannot reasonably be measured; in an open, pluralistic system causality cannot be proven, and while tendencies may be identified, too many factors exist to ultimately determine what is caused by the strengthening of societal moral codes and what is partly or entirely caused by other economic mechanisms.

5.2.1. CSR and sustainability as concepts and definitions

So far, the business case for CSR has been developed in theory; however, the actual profitability of CSR is undeterminable (Jones, 1995). Despite the efforts to promote CSR and to develop a theoretical framework for corporations to monetize and prioritize social and environmental action, the focus has remained managerial and consequently business-centered (Gray, 2000). Jones (1995), for one, produced an instrumental framework, that is a model to follow for corporations to gain economic benefits from improving social and environmental welfare; it seems there is little focus on ensuring that corporations instead prioritize the ends in themselves: to ensure the continued habitability of the planet for current and future generations, across geographical and class divides. Corporations have purposely framed the situation to their own benefits (Gray, 2012; Dey et al, 2011) despite the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2018) warning that current projections of future impacts are more severe than manageable.

As highlighted previously, oil companies deliberately repressed information to control the discourse surrounding environmental impacts, while others have manipulated the interpretation of concepts, most notably sustainability and its contrast with CSR (Gray, 2000); H&M has used similar strategies in framing materials such as viscose as sustainable despite heavy damage to local environments (Changing Markets Foundation, 2018). The result is a conflation of the two concepts despite obvious and significant differences. As defined by the United Nations World Commission on Environmental and Development (UNWCED) in their 1987 report *Out Common Future,* sustainability is "…development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UNWCED, 1987, p. 43). Further, as clarified in the report, sustainability also includes the distribution of resources across generations and borders, meaning that operations are not sustainable if any stakeholder is not given the resources they are entitled to.

Traditionally, as framed by Friedman (1970), the implicit assumption has been that corporations are entitled to the profits they earn despite their externalities, an assumption that is represented in the marketing of CSR today. Where sustainability is actions that continue to ensure a habitable planet, CSR is instead operations that take environmental and social issues into account while still being profitable. When profitability and sustainability come into conflict, profitability tends to win. This is, in part, due to the way corporations have shaped discourse such that sustainability and CSR are synonymous; an airline, for instance, cannot be sustainable due to the fuel consumption of planes, but corporations still market themselves as the most sustainable option (Gray, 2012). Similarly, in an industry that is built on short leads, frequent renewal of product ranges, and cheap costs and prices it does not seem possible to actually operate sustainably. The environmental impact alone, as established previously, proves that either i) fast fashion cannot be sustainable, or ii) it chooses not to be. According to Gray (2012), the answer is that sustainability and profitability are incompatible and that, when given the choice, corporations forego sustainability for the sake of profits.

The manipulation of discourses serves to strengthen the idea that sustainability is safe in the hands of corporations; this is supported by corporate lobbying to remove business from the agenda at the 1992 Rio Summit. In light of the numbers presented, especially the percentages of emissions that large corporations are responsible for, and the fact that they may influence the legislating process of governments as demonstrated by the Rio Summit, the focus on large corporations in reducing the harm done to natural and social environments is warranted; they hold the power to shape legislation, influence consumption, and ossify business practices and are, according to Hawken (1992), the sole mechanism capable of effecting actual change.

The question, then, is whether or not sustainable business can be conducted on a large scale without government interference; according to companies themselves, it can and should, but the continual degradation of the planet on account of large corporations sows doubt about that assertion. This doubt is only strengthened by the exposure of corporate activities and their timing: as asserted previously, H&M wage increases in Asian developing nations correlated with new minimum wage legislation; safety measures in H&M's suppliers' factories were only, and partly, implemented when new regulations were produced; and the development of non-plastic packaging and bagging only became a priority in India when legislation necessitated it by banning the use of plastic in packaging and bags. Meanwhile, H&M continued developing their own monitoring and standard-setting organizations, resisting calls for legislation on financial, social, and environmental accounting. Again, either corporations cannot make sustainability and profitability compatible, or they need external bodies to ensure that they do. Either way, it is obvious that such control must be exerted unto corporations if they are to operate sustainably.

5.3. The role of transparency in sustainability

Transparency is important as a tool more than an end in itself; it allows shareholders and consumers to allocate resources based on the ethics of companies' operations while also forcing companies to comply with cultural and market expectations or legislation to avoid sanctions and losing customers and investors. While transparency does not ensure sustainability, it does provide the means for society and the market to punish those that do not live up to their expectations. The distinction between sustainability and transparency is important, as any company can disclose information on their every process or intent while also operating unethically or disclose information selectively by communicating achievements or desired behavior while neglecting to disclose on parts of their operations that do not conform with societal demands.

H&M highlight the transparency of their manufacturing processes and facilities by disclosing information on where clothes are manufactured, what materials are used, and how many employees are involved in each factory; this initiative was established following the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013 where more than 1,000 factory workers were killed. As such, the initiative was seemingly a response to an event that highlighted the need for safety measures in factories in developing nations, and thus a reactive disclosure to limit the potential impact on H&M's legitimacy as the company also had manufacturing facilities in the region. What was the company shadow, the lack of regulations and safety measures in the production of merchandise, became public knowledge and showcased the danger of having made such operations public by external parties. Following the collapse of Rana Plaza, H&M was, as per an article in the New York Times by Jana Kasperkevic (2016), the first big company to sign the Accord on Fire and Building Safety.

Meanwhile, H&M promised to pay employees in developing nations a fair living wage by 2018; this communication has since disappeared from all of H&M's reports and other informative writings on their website (Kasperkevic, 2016). In 2018, the company was in compliance with local legislation in regard to paying above the minimum wage in developing nations; however, they had failed to raise wages to reflect the Fair Living Wage as calculated by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA). In effect, the company is, with few exceptions, transparent about their methods, but resting on the legitimacy of legislations and thereby failing to commit to their own promises.

Transparency is key in the emancipatory process of distancing oneself, as a consumer, from the culture created by marketers. According to Firat and Venkatesh (1995), consumers are placed in proverbial cells around a central watchtower occupied by marketers; by making companies and their operations more transparent, consumers can escape those cells and gain the information necessary to their preferred allocation of resources and their personal creation of identity.

One plausible explanation for the absence of disclosure on investments into sustainable facilities, equipment, and associated operations is H&M's decision to use external manufacturers. While companies following the guidelines formulated by the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) in the EU are recently required to disclose information on their leases, H&M's manufacturing is entirely external to the company and thus not impacted by these changes. This removes the potential for investments into sustainable methods of production by H&M directly, which, then, gives H&M plausible deniability when facing critique in regard to their lack of both investments and the presence of information thereof. Further, it shields them from damage to their own legitimacy when lower-tiered suppliers are non-compliant with regulations at any level;

according to Villena and Gioia (2020), most legal or regulatory issues take place in lower-tiered suppliers, that is those that are lower in big companies' supply chains. The desired cascade effect, then, is not effected.

The numbers present in accounts, both currently and traditionally, are popularly regarded as descriptive, objective, value-free measures of a company's performance (Deegan, 2006); however, the type of information may very well be normative. Further, as part of a *political economy theory* tradition, accounting and associated theories like legitimacy theories are pluralistic and, thus, disregard class difference and struggles to assign all stakeholder some power in exerting pressure on companies (Deegan, 2006). H&M's role in founding groups and organizations to develop guidelines and certificates to be handed out to organizations that comply with what is deemed desirable and ethically defensible and, as a result, made into rules, suggests that H&M are involved in deciding what should be present in a company's accounts. What is present and what is absent may, then, suggest a deliberate prioritization of information based on its desirability to H&M and similar corporations.

The numbers themselves may also reflect a foundational ideology in accounting and in effect of the company. In H&M's 2019 sustainability report, many of their key performance indicators (KPIs) and their targets for the future are written as percentages of current or previous performances. As determined previously, the total production of fast fashion is increasing on a yearly basis. Thus, the KPIs may reflect a percental decrease in emission per unit while the total impact increases. In the presentation of KPIs on page 26, the annual change in emissions from scope 1 and 2, that is H&M's own operations, decrease by two-figure percentage points compared to the previous year, with 2019 being the one exception. However, looking at the data on page 53 the total percental decrease in emissions stems from scope 2 operations, such as more efficient consumption of electricity, heat, and steam produced external to the company.

This, then, is a biproduct of H&M making investments into the efficiency of their own processes and operations, with the environmental impact being a marketable but ultimately secondary benefit. Whether the decrease in scope 2 emissions reflect a genuine investment into sustainability or an investment into H&M's own process and operations efficiency with the added benefit of being marketable to stakeholders, is undeterminable without quantitative information on H&M's expenditures. However, while scope 2 emissions have steadily decreased scope 1 emissions have increased significantly: between 2016 and 2019 total scope 1 emissions, as measured in tons, have increased by 28,95 %. These are the emissions resulting from H&M's internal operations such as manufacturing, water usage, and energy consumption and those from owned sources.

H&M's annual and sustainability reports make numerous references to certifications from external parties or bodies while stating their compliance with the rules dictated by aforementioned groups. Logically, perfect compliance with the right interpretation of reasonably ethical rules would ensure companies' sustainable operations and cut monitoring costs for both companies and external groups. However, as demonstrated in the case of American divestments in South Africa during the Apartheid-regime, the intention of companies handing out certifications to companies are not always aligned with corporate interest and resulting intentions. According to Arnold and Hammond (1994), certifications may be used by corporations to gain unearned legitimacy which becomes an obstacle to progress instead of its driving force. In the case of the Sullivan Principles, the only way companies were willing to be help foster the principles was by compromising Sullivan's original intentions.

Companies, then, used the set of rules to continue their operations within South Africa with little change; making segregation in the workplace illegal did not change the status quo since the structures that enacted the oppression remained in place. Similarly, the structures that cause exploitation of laborers in developing nations, emission of dangerous chemicals and gasses, and depletion of natural resources are still intact. While H&M publicly vowed to pay Cambodian employees above minimum wage, an initiative meant to ensure that employees did not work for less than could sustain them, the structures in Cambodia did not change and thus employees were still paid only a quarter of what was deemed a living wage (David Hachfeld, 2018).

The necessity for transparency, not only for the ethical allocation of resources but for the efficiency of the market and for promoting and effecting moral progress, can be illustrated using Noreen's (1998) metaphor of opportunism in used-car salesmen. Transparency effects information alignment between buyer and seller: companies that are more transparent are less likely to possess more information in a way that results in asymmetry. Being better informed, opportunism may appear in sellers of goods who can utilize said information asymmetry to misrepresent the actual value of a commodity. In the case of H&M and sustainable fashion, value can be substituted for sustainability. In Noreen's metaphor, a salesman buys cars without defects for $5.000 and cars with an average number of defects for $3.000; however, the salesman realizes that consumers cannot distinguish between non-defect, above-average, and below-average cars. Thus, being opportunistic, they buy above-average cars for $3.000. Consumers who deem their cars to be above average will abstain from selling, leaving the used-car salesman with an inventory of only average to below average cars. In result, the salesman will either have to lower prices or lose bankruptcy. In this analogy, the market suffers as there is no supply of higher-priced, higher quality cars while consumers similarly have a smaller supply to choose from and a harder time selling their own cars.

The metaphor is meant to illustrate the effect of opportunistic behavior as based on information asymmetry: it eventually results in markets being boiled down to its lesser desirable parts or the promotion of lesser ideals. A similar argument can be made for sustainable fashion and the importance of transparency. Branding merchandise as sustainable while withholding or suppressing information on actual practices allows opportunism to prevail. Opportunism, in this context, is manufacturing, processes, and operations that are portrayed as seemingly socially and environmentally desirable based on cultural and societal expectations. When H&M brands their own merchandise as affordable, sustainable clothing while also paying below living wages, polluting excessively, or ignoring employee safety they absorb consumers looking for sustainable clothes. Other companies, who may follow environmental and social expectations, are then unable to compete with sustainable fast fashion, thus eliminating the opportunity to ethically produce actual sustainable merchandise. Eventually, those that display opportunistic behavior will benefit, lowering the average quality of the fast fashion market. This tendency promotes dishonest, opportunistic behavior while also being an obstacle to social, environmental, and corporate behavior progress.

As explained, annual accounts are the go-to document for investors and shareholders (Gray & Bebbington, 2000). Thus, removing most of the reporting on social and environmental expenditures and performances from said accounts, despite creating a second report for such information, speaks to the intentionality of the choice of information disclosed in annual accounts. Environmental reporting is highlighted as a means to change corporate behavior and perception of sustainability; that is, promoting the reporting of environmental performance also promotes sustainable business practices. However, with environmental reporting still being in its infancy and thus rapidly changing; with companies generally resisting mandated reporting standards or demanding their own involvement in producing such standards (Larrinaga-González et al, 1999); with changes to accounting standards being more form than substance (Mobus, 2011); and with the interpretive nature of implementing standards in companies (Senn & Giordano-Spring, 2020), there is no clear correlation between environmental reporting being promoted and quantitative information on sustainability expenditures in accounts. Thus, while having more of a presence now than in Tinker, Merino, and Neimark's original analyses of annual accounts (1982), the disclosures are still based on corporate self-interest.

Lastly, the problem of transparency in reporting is magnified by the amount of knowledge of those who use them. According to Khatun et al (2016), shareholders are largely unable to comprehend the content of annual reports sufficiently. According to the survey conducted for this paper, consumers do not engage with information on social and environmental performances at all. Collectively, these findings suggest another area in need of improvement for transparency to be possible: the information must be presented more clearly and in a manner that is comprehensible to non-professional readers.

In conclusion, certain information is absent from the accounts on which most shareholders, interest groups, and investors base their allocation of resources, failing to affect the allocation of resources to the companies that behave and operate sustainably; meanwhile, those that use annual reports for purchase or investment decisions are largely unable to process the information effectively, further complicating the use of information disclosures as a tool to improve social and environmental performances.

5.4. Government intervention in corporate practices

One possible solution to the issue of transparency but also the general impact of fast fashion on social and natural environments is government intervention. Governments do already, to some degree and at different scopes depending on location, intervene in corporate operations. One such example highlighted previously is recent changes to European Union legislation on leasing disclosures in accounting. Mandating socially and environmentally conscious accounting practices would seemingly be a driver of transparency, but corporations have traditionally opposed such measures, partly on account of the excessive nature of such mandatory accounting and the fact that it is excessively resource demanding (Tinker, Merino & Neimark, 1982). In the case of American corporations operating in the South African market corporations opted to produce their own guidelines that were to promote change in South African practices. What was known as progressive change in corporate behavior was proposed, by Sullivan and cooperative corporations, to avoid mandated divestments and the elimination of a market and all associated revenue.

In the case of Exxon, the company cooperated with other fossil fuel companies in forming the Global Climate Coalition as an alternative to governmental regulations on the procurement and use of fossil fuels. H&M has expressed similar resistance to governmental intervention; in India, they opposed the introduction of a ban on plastic in packaging despite emphasizing the harmful impact of plastic on the environment (Phartiyal & Jadhav, 2018). The motivation in all three cases was readily apparent: the proposed bans or regulations would negatively impact the profitability of the company, even if they would improve social and environmental standards.

As established in previous sections, transparency is a prerequisite for progressive change. According to Deegan and Rankin (1997), it is also of great importance for shareholders and stakeholders such as environmental and financial interest groups and accounting academics. However, companies are ultimately most likely to act in their own self-interest; when lobbying for accounting standards, for instance, they will argue for the solution that best represents their own interests (Watts and Zimmerman, 1978). Furthermore, while the materiality of environmental disclosures is significant, individuals or groups with a stake in the accounting of companies generally value financial information higher, meaning investments are more likely made based on financial performance metrics than environmental and social performance metrics (Deegan & Rankin, 1997). Further, if legitimacy is gained through conformity with legislation or established, taken-for-granted practices, and corporations manipulate the production of both legislation and industry practices based on self-interest, it follows that they may gain legitimacy by pursuing their own highest profit without significant change.

As a result, two solutions are left for ensuring socially and environmentally sustainable business practices: sustainability has to be economically beneficial for companies; or external, disinterested parties have to make legislation to ensure social and environmental consciousness. This dilemma emphasizes the potential business case for CSR: desirable corporate behavior may allow corporations to avoid profit-limiting governmental regulations.

On the other hand, the adverse nature of corporations against regulations and the incremental changes indicated so far sows doubt on the sufficiency of market solutions to social and environmental issues. As seen, H&M has in certain cases adhered to legislation with little regard for the sufficiency and ethical implications of the legislation. This goes for the below living wages paid in South East Asian markets, but also for the company's opposition to implementing actual progressive changes to industry practices like banning plastic in packaging and when buying from stores. While the sustainability report for 2019 reflects higher wages paid to employees in Asian markets, between 6-70 % above minimum wage, a report by the Clean Clothes Campaign identified violations of domestic legislation on payment for over-time labor, contractual permanence rights based on seniority and other illegal practices in Cambodia. Not only is it illegal, but it also violates the rules on fair wages as defined by the Fair Wage Network (FWN, 2016). In fact, H&M violate all three factors in the definition of fair wages: failure to pay for over-time and regular payment as mandated by law; appropriate wage structures as based on skill and seniority, as demonstrated by the lack of contractual benefits after two years of seniority; and structures that facilitate collective bargaining, as some factories denied employees access to unions.

According to David Hachfeld (2018), in a collaborative effort between the Clean Clothes Campaign and Public Eye, H&M does not meet a living wage in countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia, and in Bangladore, India, and going by current trends while taking into account inflation H&M's wage increases are either never going to actually reach the level of a living wage or, in the case of Cambodia, will take 20 years. Further, the wage increases largely coincide with changes in legislation on minimum wage, suggesting that legislation is more of a driver in increasing wages than the good-will of H&M.

This is the base for the argument for government intervention in accounting practices and environmental and social disclosures. While research has shown no conclusive effect between environmental transparency and environmental performance, the lack of effect has arguably been on account of the nature and the efficiency of such regulations (Senn & Giordano-Spring, 2020); thus, clear and non-interpretive regulations remain a solution to the problem of ensuring social and environmental reporting and the transparency of such disclosures. Another means of ensuring effective social and environmental performances proposed by theorists and interest holders is auditing; allowing external bodies to audit corporate performances prevents corporations from reporting mandatory information with which they have no experience (Epstein & Freedman, 1994); this, however, does not solve the problem of choosing relevant information and bears further investigation.

5.5. Concluding remarks

Current corporate methods and strategies fail to live up to ethical standards as defined by theorists from deontological and utilitarian schools of thought. While H&M's offering of education and protection to employees is a step towards perceiving of employees as ends, their failure to ensure living wages and safe working conditions for many emphasizes the prevailing perspective of employees as means to the end that is maximizing profits. According to Ng and Singer (1981), those that have less should be privileged over those have more when distributing or redistributing resources; instead, H&M has stuck with wages that are above the legally mandated minimum wage but significantly lower than is determined to be a living or fair wage. This also highlights the commodification of employees: employees are tradable, with companies paying less than what is sufficient to live with dignity.

6. Conclusion and final remarks

The fast fashion industry is responding to the rapid change in cultural expectations towards the social and environmental consciousness of corporations. As demonstrated by its presence in annual reports companies prioritize the need for communicating their involvement in improve the social and environmental consciousness of fashion as an industry. Further supporting this notion, annual reports tend to include large sections dedicated towards sustainability in terms of strategy, vision, methods, and developments so far. Fast fashion companies' annual reports, and in some cases separate sustainability reports, prioritize some categories of information above others, correlating with explicit expectations. As required by several external groups, with whom H&M and others cooperate to ensure sustainability and transparency within the industry, quantitative information is generally present in all company accounts; carbon emissions, electricity consumption, renewables versus non-renewables, recycled materials, and resource preservative measures are presented statistically in accordance with standardized frameworks.

However, the involvement of H&M and others in the production of such frameworks also highlight the demand for fast fashion companies to frame their operations: by being co-decisive in choosing performance indicators, companies can prioritize the information that are beneficial and neglect that which is a threat to their brand. In an academic and financial discipline that is traditionally assumed to be positive and value-free, the presentation of information in percentage, which shows reductions in the use of non-renewables for instance, allows companies to hide the fact that the overall production and consumption is increasing and the associated emissions, while reduced in percentage, are not actually reduced. Similarly, reductions in emissions from the production of energy is included under the overall emissions from companies' operations, hiding the fact that H&M's own operations produce more emissions annually.

Quantitative information on corporate investments in sustainability are entirely absent from annual accounts. While emphasizing the importance of transparency, companies neglect to inform stakeholders of their expenditures on improving sustainability, making it impossible to gauge the resources companies invest and thus their actual commitment to prioritize social and environmental concerns over maximizing profits. As defined by Jones (1995), investments into operational and process efficiency, such as better infrastructure or less resource demanding consumption of power, are not to be included as CSR investments; they are made in the company's own self-interest and with no regard to their effect on social and environmental welfare. This, in turn, removes the possibility for stakeholders to gain insight on the intentions of companies.

In regard to the legitimacy of brands, H&M makes efforts to construct an image of themselves as a leader in sustainability and transparency. Corporate communication makes references to awards won and the forming or memberships of groups and organizations that project social and environmental legitimacy. In the same vein, H&M makes commitments to targets produced by legitimate organizations: the UN, the International Financial Reporting Standards, or the accords produced after the Rana Plaza catastrophe in Bangladesh. However, they do not necessarily live up to those commitments; while promising safe working conditions in Bangladeshi factories, they failed to implement the necessary changes in many cases and as highlighted repeatedly, they have failed in paying employees in developing nations what constitutes a fair or living wage. The choice of information disclosed by H&M indicates a manipulation of data in favor of H&M's brand and its legitimacy; they disclose what is most valuable to shareholders, interest groups and other audiences of their reports, which is financial information, and what is marketable, such as progress made on social and environmental performances insofar as it reflects positively on the company. In conclusion, the data suggests that sustainability through market mechanisms is only possible insofar as it is also profitable; no current research seems to indicate such correlation.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1

Categories and items of information	Number of firms reporting (x/y)	Avr. Industry score	No. of firms w. score = 3	No. of firms w. score = 2	No. of firms w. score = 1	HM
Economic Factors						
Past and current expenditures for pollution control equipment and facilities	0	0	0	0	0	0
Past and current operating costs of pollution control equipment and facilities	0	0	0	0	0	0
Future estimates of expenditures for pollution control equipment and facilities	0	0	0	0	0	0
Futures estimates of operating costs of pollution control equipment and facilities	0	0	0	0	0	0
Litigation (issues taken to court)						
Present litigation						
Potential litigation						
Pollution abatement						
Air emission information						
Water discharge information						
Solid waste disposal information						
Control, installations, facilities or processes described						
Compliance status of facilities						
Other environmentally related information						
Discussion of regulations and requirements						
Environmental policies or company concern for the environment						
Conservation of natural resources						

Awards for environmental protection						
Recycling						
Departments or offices for pollution control						

Appendix 2

How old are you?

	No.	%
15 - 25 år	31	29.8
26 - 40	29	27.9
41 - 65	39	37.5
66 or older	5	4,8

What gender do you identify as?

	No.	%
Female	59	56.7
Male	44	42.3
Non-binary	1	1.0

What is your current occupation?

	No.	%
Employed	65	62.5
Student	30	28.8
Freelance Senior Consultant	1	0.9
Unemployed	2	1.9
Maternity leave (but otherwise employed)	1	1.0
Board member	1	1.0
Retired	4	3.8

What is sustainability to you?

	No.	%
Durability	40	38.5
Ethical labor	42	40.4
Ethical procurement of materials	47	45.2
Reducing the ecological impact of materials and production	84	80.8
Paying living wages	21	20.2
Transparency	28	26.9

How often do you purchase clothes?

	No.	%
Once a year or less regularly	17	16.3
Every new season	48	46.2
Every month	37	35.6
Every week	2	1.9

When do you tend to purchase clothes?

	No.	%
When old clothes are worn out	48	46.2
When new collections arrive	15	14.4
During sales	62	59.6
When I lack something appropriate for a specific occasion	57	54.8

How long do you typically wait to make purchases?

	No.	%
Immediately	17	16.3
1-2 days	32	30.8
A week	23	22.1
Untill it comes on sale	17	16.3

How long do you wear your clothes on average?

	No.	%
For a season (app. half a year)	1	1.0
For a year	7	6.7
Untill they are worn out	45	43.3
1-5 years	46	44.2
Untill they become unfashionable	5	4.8

Have you bought clothes that you have never worn?

	No.	%
No	34	32.7
Yes	70	67.3

How do you handle unwanted clothes? Check multiple if applicable.

	No.	%
Donate to friends or family,	58	55.8
Donate to charity	85	81.7
Keep in storage	35	33.7
Throw them out	21	20.2

What determines whether you buy an article of clothing? 1 is low priority whereas 5 is high priority.

	1		2		3		4		5	
	No.	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**
Quality of materials	1	1.0	10	9.6	22	21.2	39	37.5	32	30.8
Price	1	1.0	5	4.8	30	28.8	37	35.6	31	29.8
Style	1	1.0	4	3.8	21	20.2	37	35.6	43	41.3
Immediate/current trends	16	15.4	30	28.8	41	39.4	14	13.5	5	4.8
Country of manufacturer	47	45.2	30	28.8	19	18.3	8	7.7	0	0
Impact on the environment	15	14.4	41	39.4	32	30.8	15	14.4	4	3.8
Ethical considerations in the production	21	20.2	31	29.8	33	31.7	18	17.3	2	1.9

To what degree do CSR initiatives influence your preferences in regard to brands? [I am:]

	No.	**%**
Not influenced at all	4	3.8
Not very influenced	27	26.0
Somewhat influenced	50	48.1
Very influenced	31	29.8
Undetermined	24	23.1

How much do you investigate what organizations actually do in terms of CSR?

(1 is low priority whereas 5 is high priority)

1		2		3		4		5	
No.	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**
40	38.5	30	28.8	24	23.1	9	8.7	1	1.0

To what degree do you trust the truthfulness of what fast fashion companies disclose in terms of social and environmental consciousness?

(1 is low priority whereas 5 is high priority)

1		2		3		4		5	
No.	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**
5	4.8	29	27.9	48	46.2	21	20.2	1	1.0

To what degree have you prioritized helping local businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic?

(1 is low priority whereas 5 is high priority)

1		2		3		4		5	
No.	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**
2	1.9	12	11.5	35	33.7	38	36.5	17	16.3

To what degree do you agree with the following statements [It is the responsibility of consumers to ensure the products they consume are ethical and sustainable]

	No.	%
Strongly disagree	6	5.8
Disagree	20	19.2
Neutral	31	29.8
Agree	43	41.3
Strongly agree	4	3.8

To what degree do you agree with the following statements [It is the responsibility of companies to ensure their products are ethically and sustainably produced]

	No.	%
Strongly disagree	4	3.8
Disagree	1	1.0
Neutral	7	6.7
Agree	37	35.6
Strongly agree	55	52.9

To what degree do you agree with the following statements [It is the responsibility of consumers to know the social and environmental impacts of products]

	No.	%
Strongly disagree	7	6.7
Disagree	23	22.1
Neutral	34	32.7
Agree	36	34.6
Strongly agree	4	3.8

To what degree do you agree with the following statements [It is the responsibility of companies to make information on the social and environmental impacts of their products available to consumers]

	No.	%
Strongly disagree	3	2.9
Disagree	1	1.0
Neutral	13	12.5
Agree	33	31.7
Strongly agree	54	51.9

To what degree do you agree with the following statements [It is the responsibility of the government to inform and make people and companies sustainably responsible.]

	No.	%
Strongly disagree	6	5.8
Disagree	7	6.7
Neutral	33	31.7
Agree	38	36.5
Strongly agree	20	19.2