

## **Marketing Trends 2012 Doctoral Colloquium**

Co-creating Meanings of Sustainability: A Discursive Study of the Fur Trade Industry

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this inquiry I am studying how do meanings become institutionalized within a field and furthermore, how are these meanings production, dissemination and reception. Previously this has been looked on the context of technology adoption but up until today, no research has looked it from a perspective of consumer products and brands. To redress this research gap, I conduct longitudinal archival work within a controversial fashion industry. This will be complimented by a multiplicity of 'stakeholder' interviews. In so doing, I will adopt a critical discourse analytic (CDA) theoretical framework and methodology to gain understanding of the multiple strategies marketers engage with in co-producing ethically legitimate brands and how consumers utilize these brand-related meanings in their consumption justification narratives. From a managerial perspective, my thesis will she light on the issues of brand management within controversial industries.

**Keywords:** Controversial fashion, discourse analysis, discursive struggle, institutional entrepreneurship, brand management

## **Introduction**

This doctoral research aims at understanding the discursive activity different stakeholders such as marketers of fur products as well as public relations officers within fur opposing NGOs within a controversial high-fashion industry engage in when seeking to ethically legitimate and de-legitimate the commercial activities and products involved in this institutional field (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Suchmann 1995). With social responsibility becoming an increasingly important attribute for organizations operating in controversial industry fields, the fashion fur market offers a rich context for investigating how the notion of sustainable consumption is normatively co-constructed by marketers and opposing social movements alike (e.g. Tarrow 1994), and for examining the kinds of the discursive struggles and strategies such (de-)legitimizing activities could involve (e.g. Hardy and Philips 1999). Moreover, as consumption has been conceptualized as a co-constructive activity between consumers and producers, I aim to understand how consumers utilize these discursive resources provided in order to rationalize and justify their consumption.

Sustainability of consumer society (Slater 1997) appears to be one of the central mantras of the new millennium; it is on the lips of producers, consumers, policymakers, activists and so on, with a wealth of topics covered across different media almost daily. This development has not been sudden, however. Since the 50's, management scholars have commented on companies needs to undertake activities that might be regarded as socially responsible (Heald, 1957, cited in Ullmann, 1985). Marketers have followed suit since the 70's, with a growing body of research in the field of social marketing (Anderson & Cunningham 1972, Webster 1975, Antil and Bennett 1979, Ajzen and Fishbein 1980, Fuller 1999, see also Prothero et al. 2010). With the rise of discourses of socially responsible and proactive consumer-citizenship (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), individuals and collectives have become increasingly aware of their ability to have a positive impact on the well-being of society through their consumption practices (Cherrier 2007). Consequently, sustainability aspects of consumer products have become an integral part of value propositions of brands; corporate social responsibility (CSR) issues regarding production processes as well as marketing communications (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001, Sherwin, 1983) are attracting more and more attention from commercial actors. Indeed, it has become common parlance for marketers to use such terms as ecological, sustainable, ethical, fair trade, and such to describe their products.

Regardless of these developments and literatures, however, there remains a need to attain more empirical understanding of how sustainability is actually constructed in different industry fields and by multiple stakeholders. In particular with respect to controversial markets; fields that are naturally laden with conflicting subject positions and inflamed juxtapositions of meanings, and that are also difficult to access due to fear of negative press and activist responses. To exemplify such conflicting voices and juxtapositions within the field of high-fashion fur trade, we may observe how activists generally seek to frame furs as unethical by portraying them as symbols of vanity and extravagance, while marketers emphasize the material superiority and traditionality of furs in their marketing communications. In like vein, but from a co-productive perspective, we may observe how discourses advocated by social movements feed into and are re-appropriated by marketers; during times that furs have been seen as opulent and overly extravagant, the portrayal of furs in advertising and PR has mainly revolved around the sustainable and traditional aspects of using furs. These are, of course, just a few and very simple examples of how both social

movements and marketers contribute to field-specific as well as societal level discourses through their legitimating and de-legitimizing activity. The aim and importance of this research would lie, then, in mapping out and analyzing in depth the dynamics of discursive meaning-making within this particular industry field, and in doing so, producing actionable points for both industry stakeholders as well as policy makers.

### **Research questions:**

In light of the above – the aim of this research is to investigate the Finnish fur industry and its discourses, in particular the processes of their production, dissemination and reception. Thus, the two primary research interests are (a) to build an understanding of change in discourses over time in relation to broader societal discourses (b) to empirically uncover and theorize on the strategies that are employed in transforming and shifting the meanings around consumption objects. Moreover, this will enable me to further understand the co-creative nature of meaning-making within this consumption phenomenon. Regarding this latter point, I will be looking at the justification/rationalization narratives consumers tell in order to rationalize their controversial consumption habits.

### **Research Problem (and RQ's)**

Accordingly, a tentative research problem could be as follows: *“How are discourses within an institutional field crafted, maintained and disseminated over time?”*

As I am trying to map out the change in this context and also understand the strategies undertaken to influence them, the below research questions partially anticipate what is to emerge from this study in due course: an account of discursive change within an institutional field (Hardy and Philips 1999).

Following this logic,

1. How have the discourses within the field of fur-related high-fashion industry changed over time?
2. How have different stakeholders such as marketers and activists contributed towards this change?
3. How have consumers adopted and appropriated these discourses in their justification narratives?

### **Method and data collection**

This doctoral research will involve studying the controversial field of high-fashion fur trade using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework. This is an approach that focuses on the role of discourses in constituting and sustaining power relations, and hence, on how actors are both enabled and constrained by discursive processes (Fairclough 1992).

The case sample will include individuals from the Finnish fur sales sector (the owner of Saga fur brand), activist individuals and groups, as well as consumers of fur products. This will add up to approximately 60 interviews – 30 interviews with consumers and altogether 30 interviews with activist groups and marketers. To gain a holistic and dynamic grasp of the field under study, these interview data will be embedded and analyzed within a socio-historic framework that reflects the evolution of broader societal discourses surrounding the issue of fur production and consumption within the international high fashion industry. This data will

be acquired through systematic archival work within the archives of Finnish Fur sales and largest women magazines in Finland. This framing will aid in identifying the intertextual/interdiscursive relations between relevant social movements, discourses and marketing attempts and show how such interactions might transform the institutional field.

### **Anticipated results**

From a managerial point of view, I seek to understand how controversial brands may gain ethical legitimacy by providing consumers with discursive resources for their negotiation of ethicality. From this vantage point, then, my research will also produce implications for managerial practices of “branding”, “reputation management” and “strategic communication.

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