Walking the talk

Political consumers and their information search towards more sustainable consumption choices

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Abstract

Political consumers, by using their consumerism to make political statements, constitute a potential force in changing global consumption patterns towards more sustainable ones. Thus new insights concerning this specific group and its ways of searching for information prior to a purchase decision might help understand the mechanisms behind sustainable consumption choices. This study is based on a series of twelve personal qualitative interviews conducted with Swedish consumers of sustainable goods. These interviews confirmed certain characteristics known to political consumers, such as a high level of commitment, high standards regarding information and the frequent use of labelling schemes. Furthermore this study has shown the complexity experienced by this group of consumers regarding sustainability claims and the role of a chosen “sustainability champion” in helping make sense of this complex information. Finally this study reminds of the significance of respecting the consumer and his trust for a message as well as the need for simple and clear information tools to distinguish proper sustainable goods from others.

Key Words

Political consumerism, consumer information search, sustainable consumption, information sources

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Contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 4

2. Background and theoretical framework ......................................................................................... 6
   Political consumers ............................................................................................................................... 6
   Consumer Information Search ............................................................................................................. 10

3. Method ................................................................................................................................................ 15
   Choice of method ................................................................................................................................. 15
   Method implementation ....................................................................................................................... 17
   Respondents .......................................................................................................................................... 20

4. Findings and analysis .......................................................................................................................... 23
   Level of commitment and consumer motivation ................................................................................... 26
   Problem recognition ............................................................................................................................. 27
   Constraint Recognition ......................................................................................................................... 28
   Active information search vs. passive information processing ............................................................. 30
   Information channels ............................................................................................................................ 31

5. Discussion ............................................................................................................................................ 38

6. Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 42

7. References .......................................................................................................................................... 43

Appendix A - Interview guide .............................................................................................................. 46
Appendix B – Schmidt & Spreng proposed model of external consumer information search
.................................................................................................................................................................. 47
1. Introduction

Sales of organic and Fairtrade products in Sweden increased in 2008 and 2009 by 18% and 25% respectively (KRAV, 2010; Fairtrade, 2010). Even capital-intensive goods marketed with sustainable arguments, i.e. claimed to be better alternatives for the environment or society, have been on the rise, e.g. the sales of “green” cars have increased by 39% from April 2009 to April 2010 (Trafikstyrelsen, 2010). This is remarkable in the context of the current financial crisis, and a clear statement that a group of consumers “walks the talk”, i.e. is willing to pay a higher price for products supporting their idea of sustainability.\(^1\)

Nevertheless, even if the increase in organic food consumption seems promising, it represented merely 3 to 4% of the total value of food consumption in Sweden in 2008 (KRAV, 2010). Hence, there is a very large part of the Swedish population that could make a change in their consumption choices in order to support organic production.

Consumers do have both a great responsibility as well as a fantastic power to keep the planet on a safer track; hence it is relevant to reflect on what could be done to inspire buyers to make many more sustainable consumption choices. One possible answer might be to stimulate “political consumers”, i.e. consumers making consumption choices based on environmental, social and/or ethical values, to lead the way towards more sustainable consumption. In order to do so, it is important to understand this group of consumers as an audience and to improve our understanding of their information search. Consumer information search is a major part of the entire purchase decision process and “represents the primary stage at which marketing can provide information and influence consumers’ decisions” (Wilkie & Dickson, 1985; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996; p.246). As will be reviewed during the course of this thesis, political consumers appear to have a higher level of education as well as a higher level of commitment; this study aims at assessing whether these findings imply that political consumers have higher demands on information sources as well as on messages.

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\(^1\) There are various definitions of sustainability, but for the purpose of this study it will imply aiming at a reduced harm on environmental, social and/or ethical premises.
Research Question
How do political consumers search and assess information prior to sustainable purchases or investments?

Aim of the thesis
The purpose of this study is to gain new insights in consumer information search specific to political consumerism in order to understand how these end-users to find and to evaluate the information they need prior to a purchase decision. Hence, this research seeks to identify which problems these persons faced and which sources and types of information they resorted to in order to find an answer to these problems.

This study might help public agencies, NGO’s, producers and any interested stakeholder improve their communication towards a public which is strongly committed to making more sustainable consumption choices. Hence, by communicating more effectively, both regarding their messages as well as their contexts, these stakeholders can help consumers make better and/or easier choices, thus stimulating sustainable consumption as a whole.

Scope
The scope of this study will encompass a group of Swedish consumers who have made some kind of purchase based on their political values. It will not attempt to gather quantitative data but it will aim instead at collecting information search and processing experiences. Choosing Sweden as a base of data collection is a legitimate choice, as it is a country where political consumerism has developed very strongly (Stolle et al., 2005).
2. Background and theoretical framework

"Business has overtaken politics as the primary shaping force in society, which means consumers are voting every time they flex their spending muscle, and that in turn makes the vigilante consumer into a powerful consumer (...)” (Scammel, 2000, p.351). These words of Anita Roddick, founder of the Body Shop and a successful social entrepreneur, illustrate the shift between the power of politics and the power of businesses and consumers in shaping society which has occurred during the last decades. Many are the proponents of a revolution in consumption patterns as the solution to stop the ongoing destruction of our planet which our current lifestyles are leading to, e.g. “the rise of green consumerism is a response to recognition that current consumption patterns are unsustainable” (Micheletti et al., 2004, p.161).

In order to answer the research question in the best possible way, it is essential to start by getting a picture of the group of individuals who are going to be the subject of this study, i.e. the political consumers.

Political consumers

The rise of power of consumers during the industrial age has inspired researchers and scholars to study this phenomenon and it has lead to new theories and concepts. In order to clarify the context of this research, it is important to define some of these notions and to understand why and how consumers make choices based on values related to ethics, social and/or environmental concerns.

Definition

The concept of sustainable consumption was introduced at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 when Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 stated that “patterns of consumption and production that reduce environmental stress and (...) meet the basic needs of humanity” should be created (Jackson, 2006, p.3). Furthermore Agenda 21 advocates the development of “a better understanding of the role of consumption and how to bring about more sustainable consumption patterns”. While sustainable consumption is defined by the nature of the consumer’s choices, political consumerism, i.e. consumption based on non-economic values such as ethics, social and/or environmental concern (Boström et al., 2005), relates more exactly to the expected consequences of these choices.

The concept of political consumerism as such originates from the Brent Spar conflict involving Shell in the Northern Sea in 1995 and is defined as the choice of products or producers made by
consumers with the motive of influencing their political, social, economic, ethical or environmental surroundings (Jensen, 2003; Micheletti et al., 2004; Shah et al., 2007).

The drivers of political consumerism
The development of political consumerism has intensified during the last decades due to various factors, such as globalization (Stolle et al., 2005), a growing distrust in political institutions (Micheletti et al., 2004), the decline of workers’ power (Scammel, 2000), increased media coverage of ethical and socially non-responsible corporate actions (May et al., 2007) and the rise of new technologies enabling much easier and faster communications (Micheletti et al., 2004). Among these drivers, globalization appears to be quite significant. Globalization has fundamentally changed the balance of power equilibrium sovereign nations and corporations. In 2007, the largest economies in the world, i.e. economic entities with the highest Gross Domestic Products, were equally shared between multinationals and countries (Mark-Herbert & von Schantz, 2007), with the implication that individuals now have as much power as consumers as they have as citizens.

Purchase motives have a central role in the concept of political consumerism
In the concept of political consumerism, a central issue is the motivation behind the actual purchase (Downs 1957, Putman 1993 according to Stolle et al. 2005 - p.254). According to Stolle et al. (2005), political consumerism should be defined with regard to three parameters: “behavior” (i.e. this excludes all people who are not making their own consumption decisions), “motivation” (i.e. all boycotts or buycotts are not necessarily acts of political consumerism, organic milk might simply taste better and an socially responsible investment might be selected only because it is the most profitable one) and “frequency” (i.e. there should some kind of pattern in the behavior). This part of the theory will be used to assess how much a respondent might be a political consumer.

For the purpose of this research, the notion of political consumerism will encompass all purchases and investments made by consumers with the aim of making a positive impact on sustainable development; i.e. on environmental, ethical or social premises as well as economic development.

Political consumers as a public
As a group, political consumers appear to have a higher level of both education and income than average consumers, they live more often in an urban area and women tend to be overrepresented.
among political consumers. They also appear to resort to online sources to a greater extent than respondents not engaging in political consumption (Micheletti & Stolle, 2005).

As an audience, political consumers are found to be insightful and able to process complex information to make what they believe is the right choice in terms of environmental or social impact. They also are always questioning information as well as the choices made. These consumers trust certain labels but they are always prepared to retrieve their trust, i.e. stop buying that specific label, in the light of new information. Hence, as a receiver of information, the political consumer is both enlightened and demanding at the same time (Micheletti et al., 2004, Boström & Klintman, 2008).

**Political consumerism’s tools**
Acts of political consumerism can be defined according to various parameters, e.g monetary (e.g. boycotts of corporations or donations to NGO’s) vs. discursive (e.g. protests or letter to the editor) or positive vs. negative (Micheletti et al., 2004, Boström & Klintman, 2008).

Boycotts are the most ancient and well-known kind of negative political consumerism actions. They can affect countries or corporations, e.g. Israel or Coca-Cola, but they might also involve specific types of products such as hormone-raised cattle or animal-tested cosmetics (Boström & Klintman, 2008).

During the 20th century, the use of boycotts as political actions increased. Some of them have had long-lasting effects such as the boycott on Nestlé’s products due to the brand marketing milk substitute in the third world. The brand was still one of the most boycotted in the world in 2005 according to journalist Ian Johnston (www.telegraph.co.uk, 2009).

Other negative political consumerism options might be signed petitions, demonstrations, occupied buildings or culture jamming, also defined as discursive political consumerism (Micheletti and Stolle, 2005), but it might even include refraining from consuming altogether. Although not considered in a common way as a political consumerism tool, the active abstaining from consumption is actually a political statement in the meaning. Furthermore it is argued by some ecological economists (Lintott, 1998) to be the only true sustainable consumption alternative.

Historically, political consumerism has mostly been associated with negative actions such as the ones mentioned above. Nevertheless “deliberately buying products for political or ethical reasons is also an act of political consumerism” (Stolle et al., 2005 – p.254). Positive actions, as
mentioned above, consist mostly of “buycotts” and of consuming according to labeling schemes. The concept of “buycott” is quite new and certainly not as well-known as its boycott opposite. A type of buycott consists of purchasing goods according to labeling schemes. Labeling schemes may concern various types of products and services, among other as organic food, Fairtrade products, social responsible investments and sustainable wood (Boström & Klintman, 2008). Eco-labels will be discussed more in depth further down.

**Political consumers and their need for an information update**

In the context of this research, it is interesting to compare political consumerism with consumption based on price or taste, which can become almost a mechanical consumption process. When a consumer decides to make a deliberate consumption choice not based on price or habits but on e.g. ethical values, this entails a need for an information update. Considering the new decision parameters, e.g. environmental impact or ethical values, which product is the most suitable? Which are the options at hand and how may they be evaluated?

In order to assist consumers in this process, producers and consumer associations have created labels, which aim to simplify the task of gathering the right information. By creating schemes with defined criteria and rules, suppliers and agencies enable consumers to find “ready-to-buy” products meeting their demands, for e.g. organic food or energy-efficient appliances, thus offering an efficient and easy alternative to price tags.

Regarding political consumers’ relation to information, it is asserted that these consumers need an open flow of information in order to get insights in the social, ethical and environmental impacts of these choices (May et al., 2007). Further Scammel argues that “we are better-informed shoppers than ever before” (2000, p.351) thanks to the media coverage of sustainable issues. Does this imply better information in quality or only in quantity? It is relevant to reflect on the amount of information available to consumers and compare it with the amount of options and choices they are facing. In this context of information overflow, studying the process of information search of political consumers might help stakeholders to enhance their communication towards end-users, both in terms of quality as well as of accessibility (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996).
Consumer Information Search

Consumer information search might be defined as an active collection of information in order to optimize a purchase decision. It represents an essential part of this decision process, a process which starts with problem recognition and goes on to post-purchase behavior. Information being “the key to raising awareness of the range of consumption options available and enabling the consumers to decide which choices are best” (Jackson, 2006, p.35), it plays a strategic role for both corporations and public agencies (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996) thus making consumer information search the subject of various studies (Mooorthy et al., 1997). Nevertheless, there has been little research done on information search specific to political consumers, apart from the research mentioned previously showing that these consumers have a high involvement and a strong critical sense in their purchase process. Consideration should also be taken to the contextual change which has occurred in this field of research due to the digital revolution and the rise of Internet as a central information source, which will be discussed more closely in the next part of this paper.

So as to gain new insights on the information search specific to political consumers, it is necessary to look into the theoretical framework of consumer information search regarding the notion of activity vs. passivity, the impacting variables and the variety of information sources available. The situational theory of publics is a suitable model for this purpose. It argues that consumers opt for either an active or a passive communication behavior, depending on three independent variables, i.e. (1) problem recognition, (2) constraint recognition and (3) level of commitment (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

In order to summarize this part of a theory I have created a framework model (Figure 1).
Search activity vs. passivity (I)
First, an individual might process information as a passive receiver, reacting merely to the message created and controlled by the sender (Windahl & Signitzer, 1992). Many scholars have depreciated the value of passive information processing to the benefit of active information seeking. Nevertheless there are proponents of the value of passive communication behaviors as a process of ongoing search, i.e. “search occurring outside the purchase process”, which has an evident impact on purchase choices (Bloch et al., 1986, p.119).

If the consumer becomes active, the communication behavior will convert from information-processing to information-seeking. This is also referred to as pre-purchase information search, i.e. collecting information appropriate to a specific consumption need (Bloch et al., 1986).

Information-seeking, as opposed to information-processing, is viewed by many as leading to a higher involvement in the purchase decision (Dervin, 1989) as well as to a better understanding of the given information (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Problem recognition, level of commitment and constraint recognition (II)
The first factor stimulating information search is **problem recognition**, i.e. whether the buyer detects a need for improvement in a given situation (i.e. “problem”) and thus a need for additional information (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Furthermore the notion of problem recognition might be assimilated with the concept of information gap, i.e. a divergence between one’s knowledge of the world and one’s experience of the world, in the paradigm of sense-making.

The sense-making theory defines information search as a process of bridging an *information gap* or discontinuity, by integrating new information with formerly acquired insights (Dervin, 1983).

In the context of political consumerism, the problem recognition is highly intertwined with *purchase motives*, i.e. a need to find the best available products or brands based on environmental, social and/or ethical values.

Theory shows that higher problem recognition stimulates both an active search for new information as well as the passive processing of randomly received information.

Second to problem recognition is **constraint recognition**, i.e. the perception of obstacles and limitations in a given situation. Constraint recognition might be summarized as one’s ability, or lack of, to influence a given consumption situation and it implies a limitation of the number of options at hand for a consumer (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1989). This concept of *ability to search* is also a central concept to the model of Schmidt & Spreng (1996) as one of four principal factors impacting on external consumer information search activities together with motivation to search, *perceived benefits of search* and perceived costs of search. This paradigm is particularly interesting to correlate with the situational theory of publics as it offers empirical findings which may relate to the findings of this research (see figure 2 in Appendix B).

Both “ability to search” and “perceived costs of search”, i.e. efforts asserted to search for information such as time or expenses, affect constraint recognition, by either enhancing it (higher perceived costs meaning stronger limitations and enhanced constraint) or by reducing it (a higher ability to search lowers the perception of constraint). Regarding “perceived costs of search”, it is interesting to note that they are increased by a higher product complexity and by time pressure, but reduced by information accessibility (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996).

Theory shows that high constraint recognition, as opposed to high problem recognition, has a negative impact on both active search for information as well as passive processing of randomly received information.
The third independent variable consists of the level of commitment of the consumer to a given situation. In the context of this study, it translates as the degree of involvement perceived by a respondent for a specific purchase (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1989). This also connects to the notions of motivation to search (i.e. the drive to make an effort to collect information) and perceived benefits of search, e.g. better or cheaper purchase (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996).

Motivation to search is increased by need for cognition, higher enduring involvement, shopping enthusiasm and by the perceived benefits of search. These are, in their turn, enhanced by a customer’s need to justify oneself or by his satisfaction with previous purchases.

The sense-making approach, as mentioned above, also emphasizes the role of motivation in consumer information search strategies as it argues that time and space are building the context when specific information will be used to bridge a gap (Dervin, 1983) and implying that it is essential to look at information search from the perspective of the timing and the motive. When do receivers need specific information and what do they intend to use this information for, i.e. which gap do they need to fill? (Windall & Signitzer, 1992)

To summarize, it is useful to assess a public’s, or a consumer’s, problem recognition, constraint recognition and motivation in order to predict if one’s communication behavior will be passive, active or both. For example, high problem recognition associated to low constraint recognition should imply a high level of communication behavior, both passive and active. A high degree of involvement will stimulate an active communication behavior, i.e. information-seeking. Given their purchasing decision process, this theoretical framework confirms the portrait of political consumers as active information seekers.

**Information channels and the role of accumulated knowledge (III)**

Having reviewed the two possible alternatives of information gathering behaviors, i.e. passive vs. active, this study will from now on focus on the latter and review which information channels are available to political consumers.

In this context, four channels of information reaching political communication receivers have been identified, which might be applied to the context of political consumerism: intrapersonal, interpersonal, media and political predisposition (Asp, 1986).

*Intrapersonal communication* consists of information collected directly through personal observations. Sources of intrapersonal information might encompass manufacturers’ and resellers’ information such as brochures, homepages and sales pitches.
Interpersonal communication comprises information collected indirectly through the intermediary of other receivers, i.e. social networks such as friends, families, colleagues, online discussion groups or new social media such as Facebook.

Media communication is transmitted directly by the mass media and might encompass printed newspaper and magazines, websites, TV and radio (Olshavsky & Wymer, 1995; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996).

Political predisposition consists of information formerly processed and collected through the three other channels and which influences the mindset of the person. Predisposition might be assimilated to the notion of accumulated or acquired knowledge which is a central and crucial notion in several theories regarding information search (Hall, 1980; Bloch et al., 1986; Kuhlthau, 1991; Windahl & Signitzer, 1992; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996).

The role of online media in political consumers’ information search
It seems appropriate to finalize this theoretical presentation by emphasizing the role of the relatively recent digital revolution and the rise of online media. Scammel summarizes this phenomenon effectively when writing that “the internet is opening up new worlds for the citizen-consumer” (2000, p.355). According to her, Internet has not changed traditional politics very much but it has changed the equilibrium between consumers and corporations, one factor among others being the empowerment of NGO’s and consumer groups with an effective and relatively cheap communication tool. Furthermore the Internet enables media, networks and consumers to share news, actions and contacts instantaneously (Micheletti et al., 2004; Scammel, 2000). Naturally, there are some potential pitfalls inbred with such totally open and public forums with no quality control of the information they convey. Already in 1992 McQuail predicted that the progress of Information Technologies would change the way senders and receivers communicate, i.e. how receivers would seek information in the future (McQuail, 1992; Windahl & Signitzer, 1992).
3. Method

The choice of a research method depends first and foremost on the type of findings one wishes to collect (Blaxter et al., 2006). Findings are any piece of information that can be used to answer a question, thus not only quantitative data but also quotations, historical facts, etc. or, in our case, recollections of information search and information-processing (Booth et al., 2003).

Choice of method

The aim of this research is primarily to understand the process of information-seeking and to gather individual experiences and interpretations of this process; thus the right methodological approach should be qualitative.

A qualitative approach is a methodology that seeks to understand “how people construct the world around them” (Kvale, 2007, p. x). A quantitative approach, i.e. a methodology the purpose of which is to generate numbers and statistics, would be more suitable if this study was to test beforehand defined information sources and messages in a large group of political consumers.

Qualitative interviews present the advantage of facilitating the dialogue between interviewer and respondent, leaving more freedom to the interviewee compared with a survey interview (Flick, 1998; Bryman, 1989). Furthermore, qualitative interviews focus on the respondent through open questions, facilitating the formulation of more complex and richer answers.

Examples of qualitative methods are: participant observations, document analysis, focus groups and qualitative interviews, which are the most suitable method for the purpose of this thesis as I will argue in the following paragraphs.

Individual interviews

Interviews offer the best way to reconstruct an event or a process experienced by an individual (Bryman, 2008). They are very appropriate in this context as this study seeks to “understand the meaning of respondent’s experiences and life worlds” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p.83).

Interviews might be individual or collective. The benefits of group interviews include time-efficiency, gathering several opinions at one time, and the group dynamic that might occur. According to Gibbs (1997), the focus groups method is characterized first and foremost by the understanding and information produced by the exchange between participants. On the other hand, group interviews are time-consuming to set up, and the group dynamics mentioned above might be a drawback as it can lead to some respondents expressing themselves much more thoroughly or forcefully than others. Group interviews also provide less time and
freedom for each respondent to explain his views. Individual interviews, on the contrary, offer a more personal and private setting, which can make the respondent feel safer and offer an enhanced potential to get insights into his genuine experiences and interpretations.

After assessing the benefits and drawbacks of these different qualitative methods I came to the conclusion that individual interviews would be the optimal method to collect the desired data to answer my research question.

Individual interviews can vary in different ways; the most common dimension discussed being the degree of structure (Kvale, 1996, Bryman 2008).

**Semi-structured vs. unstructured interviews**

The choice between unstructured and semi-structured interviews depends, among other things, on the desired degree of openness and free flow (Bryman, 2008). The unstructured interview, using sometimes only one single starting question, might lead to a truly open conversation, supposing that the interviewee opens up and speaks freely. If the subject is very specific or if several researchers are interviewing, a semi-structured interview method is more suitable. In this case, the interviewer will create an interview guide with a various amount of questions, using this guide as a thread through the interview. Nonetheless, the semi-structured interview still leaves some flexibility regarding the exact wording as well as the exact order in which the themes are addressed (Kvale 1996, Flick 1998, Bryman 2008).

In both cases, the interviewer plays a crucial role in the success of this part of the research. Kvale and Bryman both agree on this and together they enumerate twelve abilities that any researcher should keep in mind when conducting qualitative individual interviews, e.g. “openness, insight, clarity, balance and ethical consciousness” (Kvale 1996, Bryman 2008, p. 306).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the purpose of the interview in order to determine whether it should be “factual”, “conceptual”, “discursive” or “narrative” (Kvale, 2007). While factual and conceptual interviews intend to produce facts or conceptualizations of e.g. words and idioms, the discursive and narrative forms of interviews aim to make sense of discourses or stories and experiences. In this specific case, a narrative interview will be the most suitable alternative, thus specifying my role as an interviewer as a “co-producer” of the account implying that I should help the respondent retell as well as structure his story.

**Critique of the chosen method**

Walking the Talk
A common drawback with qualitative interviews is that they may proceed in various ways and thus lead to various results (Gubrium & Holtstein, 2001).

A specific challenge with semi-structured interviews is that it demands that the interviewer has the ability to keep the interview on a certain path and at the same time maintaining the desired flow in the dialogue (Flick, 1998). This also entails the capacity to keep an overview of the interview in order to ensure that all themes are discussed, i.e. choosing very carefully the moments to ask questions in order to follow-up or redirect the conversation. As Kvale summarizes “interviewing is a craft: it does not follow content- or context-free rules of methods, but rests on the judgments of a qualified researcher” (1996, p.105).

One of the most common criticisms concerning qualitative methods, and interviewing in particular, is the risk of the data being biased by the researcher (Mays & Pope, 1995; Kvale, 1996; Bryman, 1996). Furthermore the findings generated by an interview study might be questioned as not being representative enough (Kvale, 2007).

**Method implementation**

**Respondent selection**

In the context of this research project, several criteria were identified to choose and find potential respondents. First, respondents were defined as being political consumers, i.e. purchasing products or services with a specific environmental, social or ethical value. Second, I wished to assess information-seeking strategies prior to purchases of both expensive goods such as cars or big appliances and cheaper products such as food or clothing. There were several reasons for this approach; first I wanted to interview respondents of all ages and economic means, and not only persons having the financial means to buy a car. Second, I wished to assess the information search process for both capital-intensive purchases as well as daily consumer products. Therefore I decided to actively seek persons who had bought an eco-friendly car as well as persons who bought organic or Fairtrade food.

In order to find respondents who matched the defined set of criteria, I used several different tactics. The first one was to contact a car dealership and ask for the names of customers who had bought an eco-friendly car during the last year. I received a list of twelve contacts which resulted in one respondent. Furthermore I used my own network, both private and professional, to ask people if they knew anyone meeting my criteria. I got several contacts, and among them seven were available for an interview. The last four respondents were found based on the snow-ball
method, i.e. by asking some of the respondents if they knew anyone who consumed eco-friendly or Fairtrade products.

Due to time restrictions and to the fact that it was important for me to meet the interviewees in person, I also limited the selection to persons living or working in the Stockholm area.

**Interview guide**

The interview guide was constructed around the major themes identified during the literature review of the theoretical framework: the forces driving respondents to act as political consumers, their level of search activity, the concept of information gap, the different types of information channels and the use of political consumption tools.

Besides these themes, I also had several underlying questions that I hoped to get more insights on, such as their perception of sustainability as a marketing argument, the threat of greenwashing, and their own ideas around a more effective way to communicate sustainability.

I formulated questions around my themes, and added an opening question about which products or services the respondent purchased based on sustainable values and created an interview guide consisting of six questions (see Appendix A).

**Interviews**

The interviews were completed during the period 29th of March to 4th of May 2010.

In order to achieve the best result, i.e. being able to focus on the respondent and on the interview itself, all interviews were recorded. Therefore, the settings were chosen to be as calm as possible and most of the time the meetings took place in conference rooms at the respondent’s workplace. In two occasions, the interview was conducted in a cafeteria leading to a more unfocused dialogue.

Each interview started with a small introduction explaining the context of this research and presenting the themes that were supposed to be discussed. Then the interview proceeded, more or less structured, depending on the openness of respondent. Some interviewees were quite efficient in their answers, other discussed various issues; some respondents had a lot of relevant information to share, others had less. I tried to keep the conversation alive by using several of the different types of questions presented by Kvale (1996, p. 133-135): “specifying”, “follow-up” and “interpreting”.

Walking the Talk
The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and ended with a short debriefing and a request for follow-up contact via e-mail if necessary.

**Material processing**

While the interviewing process was going on, the completed interviews were transcribed and systematized in a spreadsheet in order to facilitate the analysis of the qualitative and discursive data.

In order to organize the results, adequate themes were identified that would deliver appropriate answers to the research question. Next, all answers regarding one theme were summarized with supporting quotes, in order to present the findings in a fully analyzed version.

**Strengths and weaknesses of the empirical material**

The completion of this series of interviews resulted in a riche collection of experiences, giving me a variety of insights in how political consumers might search for information specific to e.g. ecological food or green cars.

Using individual interviews offered a great opportunity to create an open discussion, thus leading the respondents to recall interesting facts or sentiments throughout the interview. For example, a significant motive might have expressed almost at the end of the discussion as a result of a follow-up question having actually no connection to that particular theme.

Furthermore, enlarging the scope of the respondent’s selection to both capital-intensive as well as Fast Moving Consumer Goods enabled me to interview a satisfying variety of persons, both regarding gender, age, occupations and motives.

However, choosing a semi-structured method entailed a challenge to ask the right questions, to either follow-up, summarize or clarify. Nevertheless sometimes this type of questions ended up being leading questions instead, which became clear to me during the review of the findings. To me, this diminishes the credibility of certain answers. In these cases, I have chosen not to include the findings as evidences.

Regarding the selection of respondents, the choice was made to conduct all interviews with consumers who had made at least one purchase defined as political consumerism, in order to collect a maximum of insights to answer the research question. The shortcoming of this strategy is that no “ordinary” consumer, i.e. consuming with regard to only price or quality, was interviewed. Thus there was no opportunity to make a comparative study of how political
consumers and ordinary consumers searched for information. Hence, the findings of this study as being relevant only to political consumers might be subject to discussion.

Finally, it is important to point out that the interviews were conducted in Swedish while the thesis was written in English. Thus the interview transcribes were translated during the analysis process, which entails some potential lack of exactitude, or even some misquotes, concerning the exact meaning of what respondents might have said during the interview. This is a shortcoming worth mentioning as wording and interpretations are such a crucial part of the findings.

**Respondents**

The respondent selection, as described earlier, resulted in a group of twelve individuals which I will present a bit more thoroughly in order to provide a context to the results of the interview process.

Erik, 26, is a Program Developer, who recently graduated as an engineer. He lives with his girlfriend in a flat they have bought in the district of Kungsholmen in Stockholm City. Erik does not have any strong connections to sustainability issues but he has recently bought a green car and he owns shares in a wind power farm.

Camilla is a 26-years-old Sustainability Consultant with a Master’s degree in Environmental Sciences. She lives on her own in a rental flat in Fredhäll, a part of the City of Stockholm. Camilla purchases quite a lot of products based on her sustainability values; she has also recently chosen a green electricity supplier.

Mirja, 33, lives in a rental in Årsta, a borough south of Stockholm City. She is a true sustainability expert with a degree in Environmental Management, and her work experience includes positions as Consumer Advisor and now as a consultant specialized in sustainable transportation. Mirja is even a Fairtrade ambassador and an ambitious consumer of sustainable products.

Linus is 27 years old and works for the National Council of Swedish Youth Organizations, specifically focusing on students elections. Linus has an academic background in political sciences and social policy. He grew up on an organic farm and is today very committed to food issues as the co-founder of a think-tank, as well as a Facebook group, called “Dyrare mat nu!”2.

Linus lives in a sublet in Södermalm, a part of downtown Stockholm.

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2 “More expensive food now!” – www.dyraremat.nu

Walking the Talk
Britt, 55, lives in a passive house[^3] in Sollentuna, a suburb north of Stockholm, with her husband. They have three children aged 21 to 29. Britt has a degree in Systems Sciences and is now IT-strategy Manager at Naturvårdsverket (Swedish EPA). At the time of the interview Britt was working as an executive at Sony Ericsson. Britt is a committed political consumer, paying attention to sustainability both in her daily consumption as well as in housing and cars.

Malin, 27, is an engineer who recently moved to Stockholm with her American boyfriend Kit. They live in a sublet in the borough of Bromma. Malin works as a Quality Engineer at Spendrups. She tries to be as conscious as possible when buying food, especially since meeting Kit who is a health and fitness professional.

Susanna is a 47-years-old preschool teacher, working part time as a psychotherapist. Susanna has a bachelor in Economy and she lives in a house in Bromma with her husband and their two children, aged 16 and 19. Susanna has occasionally bought some products because of ethical or ecological arguments, e.g. new energy-efficient appliances.

Carola, 47, lives in a house in Spånga, a suburb to Stockholm City, with her three children, aged 9 to 12. She has a university degree and works as a communication officer at Hewlett Packard. Carola likes to buy locally produced food and she has recently purchased a green car.

Niklas grew up in Northern Germany and moved to Sweden during his studies in human ecology and political sciences. Niklas is 27 years old and lives in a rental in Älta, south of Stockholm. He works as a journalist and as an organization consultant. Niklas is very committed to sustainable issues: he consumes organic and Fairtrade food, he has purchased green electricity and invested in ethical pension funds.

Ellinor, 52, is working both as a politician for Moderaterna for the town of Huddinge and as a Sustainability Consultant at Sustema. She has a Masters degree in Environmental Management and Auditing. Ellinor lives with her husband in a house in Huddinge, they have four children aged 20 to 29. Ellinor has an ambition to make most of her consumer choices according to sustainable values, from organic food to green computers. She also uses her knowledge and findings concerning green goods in her job as an advisor.

[^3]: Passive houses are houses built to be extremely energy-efficient – see http://www.cepheus.de/eng/
Thomas is a 35-year-old IT executive with a degree in System Engineering. Thomas lives with his wife and their 2-years old daughter in an apartment in the Vasastan district, in Stockholm City. Thomas is keen on buying organic food and he also recently purchased a green car.

Patrik, 44, is an IT entrepreneur with a degree in Engineering. He lives with his wife and their three children in a house in the borough of Gamla Enskede in the outskirts of Stockholm. Patrik buys eco-labeled and Fairtrade food and he has also purchased energy-efficient appliances. Furthermore he was a pioneer in the purchase of green cars.

The strengths and weaknesses of this study’s method design and its impact on the empirical material will be discussed more thoroughly in the discussion part of this presentation.
4. Findings and analysis

As described earlier, all the interviews were summarized according to the different themes identified during the theoretical review; e.g. level commitment, problem recognition, search activity and information channels. These themes and the corresponding findings are now to be presented with a corresponding analysis. However, in order to evaluate these results in a context of political consumerism, the first step is to determine how much each respondent can be defined to be a political consumer.

Patterns of political consumerism

In order to analyze the results of this study, i.e. to compare them with the theoretical framework, it is meaningful to assess the degree of political consumerism of the respondent group. To do so, one option is to assess whether the interviewees recalled having deliberately acted as political consumers, i.e. having resorted to actions such as buycotts or boycotts.

Buycotts

Certain types of products were deliberately purchased, either for their positive impact on the environment, e.g. “I want to encourage people on other continents who have switched to organic” (Ellinor), or for their origins, “I like to buy what has been baked at this specific farm or in this specific store: when I can more or less see where it comes from, then I buy it. (...) I choose deliberately “locally produced”” (Carola).

It is worth noting that some respondents spontaneously related that they were actively and deliberately choosing independent brands instead of the supermarkets’ own brands, e.g. “I choose something else because I want to have several options. I want to support the diversity of suppliers” (Patrik). This is definitely an act of political consumerism.

Purchase of Eco-labeled goods

Eco-labels were largely discussed throughout the interviews, mainly because they apply to consumer goods purchased on a daily basis and specifically food.

Regarding eco-labels in general, most interviewees were positive and mentioned using them as an information tool in their consumption, e.g. “I trust all eco-labels: Svanen, Falken, KRAV” (Ellinor) or “I rely on KRAV and organic products” (Patrik).

Regarding suppliers and supermarkets’ private labeling schemes, Ellinor said: “I want to (trust them) and I have decided to do so”.

Walking the Talk
A few interviewees expressed that they faced some difficulties when they had to choose between e.g. KRAV and Fairtrade. “Last time I bought honey, there was Fairtrade and there was organic, but not both. (...) Then the choice becomes suddenly more difficult (...) but then you just have to pick something. (...) I often buy Fairtrade (...) and if there is both Fairtrade and organic, then I choose that” (Patrik).

One specific eco-label, Rainforest Alliance, was mentioned several times as not being trusted at all, e.g. “Rainforest Alliance, I don’t have any trust in it whatsoever”(Niklas), “never Rainforest Alliance”(Mirja) or “it is not sharp enough” (Linus). Others labels were neither fully trusted nor rejected, such as Svensk Sigill which was defined as “half-and-half” by Niklas and, for Ellinor, “Sigill is nothing that I deliberately look for, but if there is no KRAV, then why not?” “Svensk Sigill or Rainforest Alliance, these labels are much more abstract (than KRAV and Fairtrade), they try to communicate an added value without actually saying what the added value is” (Linus).

Furthermore, several persons expressed more trust in the Swedish eco-labels than in the European ones, e.g. “if there are two products, one with this EU-label and one with KRAV, and it is about the same price, then I take the one labeled with KRAV”(Malin) or “if there are Swedish or foreign ones, than I choose the Swedish one” (Camilla). This kind of preference was justified by a belief that Swedish rules and controls are more rigorous than other countries’, e.g. “one has heard that KRAV is stricter” (Malin), “I have an impression, or rather I have learned that there are harsher rules her (...) it might also be because it is easier to find information and understand what it is about” (Camilla) or “one believes that there are better rules, stricter rules in Sweden for animals and so” (Patrik). Also, the organization standing behind the certification mattered, e.g. “Svensk Sigill is initiated by LRF, and it is true that they are not the ones I trust the most” (Niklas) or “one wants to know what kind of organization it is” (Britt).

One respondent, Carola, was extremely skeptical and rather distrustful regarding eco-labels. According to her organic or locally produced milk is a “counterfeited trademark” and a “marketing gimmick”.

Boycotts
The interviews resulted in a several illustrations of boycotts as acts of political consumerism. It regarded either a specific brand, e.g. Nestlé (Camilla) or Coca-Cola (Ellinor), a country (“in the

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4 LRF is the Federation of Swedish Farmers

Walking the Talk
past I used to not buy things from Israel, I still think about it but not in the same active way” (Mirja)) or a specific type of products, e.g. “no convenience food, nothing from the freezers, instead only fresh vegetables” (Patrik).

In connection to the buycotts of independent brands, several persons admitted to boycotting supermarket brands, e.g. “I try to avoid own brands” (Patrik) and “I do not like the concept of own brands at all” (Mirja), and thus supporting independent brands as mentioned above.

Regarding boycotts there were some interesting comments on the complexity it entails in this age of globalization, e.g. “it is so difficult nowadays because many brands comprise many other brands” (Camilla).

**Consuming less or buying second hand**

Some respondents referred to minimizing their consumption as a way of making a positive impact on sustainability, e.g. “I simply try to shop less” (Ellinor) or “you reflect one more time before completing your purchase (...) you do not have to buy plenty of things” (Thomas). This is well summarized with the following quote: “I try to think that if you buy less things you automatically make a better environmental conscious choice” (Mirja).

A last option for consuming politically was buying second-hand, e.g. “clothes... I try to buy mostly second-hand, that should count as well. I feel like I get nice things of rather good quality (...) to a good price and I also avoid the whole consumerism merry-go-round” (Camilla).

**Level of commitment as a political consumer**

In order to define the degree of political consumption of each respondent I chose to assess the number of products bought according to political values and by the expressed motives behind the purchase.

Some interviewees, even though they had purchased at least one product with a positive sustainable impact such as a car, were rather forthright about their lack of commitment for sustainability in general, e.g. “I’m not passionate about the environment” and “there is a limit for what you can pay for it to be green and good” (Susanna).

Other individuals were moderately active as political consumers, limiting their sustainable purchases to e.g. organic food, a green car or an energy-efficient appliance (Thomas).

Finally, a part of the group did correspond to the definition of political consumers in a very high grade; either because of the motives they expressed (see Linus and Niklas above) or their
mindset concerning their general consumption, e.g. “today there are very few things I purchase without sustainability in mind” (Britt) or “I try to think about it (sustainability) as much as possible” and “if there is none (Fairtrade labeled option) I will take a walk to another store” (Mirja).

Furthermore, some criteria were identified as enhancing the level of political consumption such as being a Fairtrade ambassador (Mirja), being the initiator to an action group concerning organic food (Linus) or being a politician (Ellinor).

To summarize, every respondent was graded according to the criteria mentioned above which resulted in the following rating:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of political consumerism</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very High</td>
<td>Mirja, Linus, Britt, Niklas, Ellinor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Camilla, Patrik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Malin, Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Erik, Susanna, Carola</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This classification will be useful to assess whether the degree of political consumerism impacts on the studied variables of the information search process and on the choice of information channels.

**Level of commitment and consumer motivation**

The motives driving the interviewees into making sustainable purchases can be categorized in five different categories: financial benefits, health-related benefits, environmental concern, social fairness concern and complying with a spouse’s own political consumerism.

Some individuals appeared to have one dominant driving force, e.g. Erik who purchased his green car because of “mostly financial reasons” or Carola who buys locally produced food to help “people in my neighborhood to keep their jobs”.

For others, the motives appear to be several, i.e. both collective and individualistic. A collective motivation might be specified as a genuine concern for the planet, “a general feeling that one should contribute to a better environment” (Patrik); for social fairness, “treating the labor force well” (Susanna); or for the well-being of animals, “regarding cosmetics, I am very strict about...”
animal testing” (Camilla). Some respondents expressed a holistic mindset about sustainability in general: “you need to use your power as a consumer to make a change for the better” (Niklas), “one is a cog or a driving force to count on” (Ellinor), “when I had my children, I started thinking that they were going to live longer in this world than I will” (Britt). At the same time some interviewees related to individual driving forces such as health, buying "food of good quality so you don’t buy food containing toxic chemicals" (Patrik) or for “my own health, I believe that I feel better and that it tastes better” (Malin). There might also be a financial incentive like buying a green car "because you received some compensation" (Thomas). Furthermore, one respondent admitted that her personal image was an important incentive since she works with sustainability issues as an advisor, saying that “if I run into a store and I meet a client, there is a motivation in the fact that it doesn’t look good if I have standard eggs in my basket” (Ellinor).

It is interesting to note that a couple of individuals had a clear and expressed political motive for their purchase decisions such as “you make an active choice when you put something in your shopping basket, and the more consistent you are, the more it will show in the statistics” (Linus) or “you need to use your power as a consumer to make a change for the better. Elections are every fourth year while you buy something every day” (Niklas).

Finally, a couple of interviewees referred frequently to their spouses as driving forces for their green or ethical purchases, e.g. “then I met Kit, he was very much into this (organic food) and thought it was very important to buy this kind of food” (Malin) or “my wife, she was actually more into getting a green car than I was” (Thomas).

To summarize, by comparing these finding to the theoretical framework, a person with a higher degree of political consumerism like Britt would be more active in her communication behavior than a person like Susanna with a weaker commitment for this type of consumption. Regarding motives as a variable, it seems that the strength of the motivation matters more than whether the motives are of individualistic or collective nature.

**Problem recognition**

This study shows individual differences in the level of problem recognition. For some, the difference was quite small, e.g. “there was not so much to choose from regarding the different car brands” and "ethanol was the only option available” (Patrik). Others faced a complex need for further information, e.g. a need for a complete understanding of the debate on ethanol, “is this (ethanol) the best for the whole world given all different parameters of the production...”
process and of the decomposition of emissions?” (Thomas), or a necessity to find out about a whole new construction method because the suppliers “did not know what (a passive house) was” (Britt). One example of strong problem recognition is the purchase, by Erik, of a new car that was supposed to be “smaller”, “automated”, “consuming less fuel”, “driven on gas instead of diesel” “costing less in taxes” and that would be classified as a green car. This example also confirmed the positive correlation between high problem recognition, higher product complexity and high activity search.

Furthermore, the difference of search activity between Thomas and Patrik concerning their choice of green car is also confirming the theory of correlation between search activity and problem recognition. In this case Thomas had more options at hand concerning fuel than Patrik (who bought a green car very early when ethanol was the only option), he also was much more aware of and concerned about the issue concerning ethanol. Another example of positive correlation between high involvement, perceived information gap and search activity would be the following: “when I got my first rental (...) there was no question about me purchasing green electricity. (I did not know) very much, but one must study the matter” (Niklas). On the contrary, the following quote represents a link between moderate level of commitment, moderate perception of information gap and moderate activity search: “I might have needed quite a lot of information, but it was kind of enough for me to know that this (car) meant a little less emissions and that I could fill it with some ethanol” (Carola).

On the other hand, a couple of examples argue against a correlation between problem recognition and search activity, due to lack of motivation, e.g. “I had quite little information, and I sought quite little information. I think this (choosing an electricity provider) is very boring to care about” (Mirja). This is also showing that a high degree of political consumerism does not always guarantee a high level of motivation to search for information. Another example is rather related to the lack of urgency, e.g. “I notice that I want to know more (about green cars), but I don’t need to know today, because I don’t need to buy an eco-friendly car now” (Susanna).

**Constraint Recognition**

Regarding constraint recognition, i.e. the perceived limitations and/or difficulties encountered during information search, it appeared to be mostly related to information complexity, lack of time, trust or interest.

Several examples related to the search ability being lessened by the complexity of the different messages received. Britt exemplified this by explaining how complicated it was for her to choose
the right wine, considering the production, the transportation and even the glass used to make the bottles. Ellinor found that choosing an energy-efficient furnace, “is a lot and one feels totally lost there”. Even eco-labels were source of confusion, e.g. “I really understand that one gets confused (...) as a consumer one does not have the strength to find out all the background information” (Camilla). Moreover, complexity was central in the discussion that occurred around the issue of ethanol, e.g. “it felt like it did not contribute to anything really because one had an opinion and you did not have any evidences about whether it was right or wrong” (Thomas) and “is it good for the environment? Some say it is, and others they it is worthless” (Patrik).

Regarding the perceived costs of search, several interviewees spoke about the lack of time as being a limitation in their information search, e.g. Ellinor felt when looking for a sustainable furnace: “there somewhere was my limit... I had to speak to three or four different persons at that company, and there somewhere, you run out of energy” or Susanna looking for appliances “it was very much about lack of time on my part”. Even information regarding more straightforward products such as food and eco-labels was regarded as time-consuming by some, e.g. “I personally do not have the time or the energy to study all this’’(Carola) or “it is not possible to read all research in detail at all time”(Niklas).

Lack of trust in the message itself was another perceived limitation, e.g. “I don’t buy (green) electricity because my power comes from the same wire as all other power, so I don’t know if it is from this or that hydroelectric power station. As long as I cannot get a 100% proof I will choose the cheapest” (Carola), or in the transmitter of the message “I feel often cheated, if you look a food-stuffs, you don’t know what there is in it” (Patrik).

Finally, information search was limited by a lack of interest, “the information I get about eco-labels, it is a bit too boring” (Carola), which in this case was highly correlated to a very low level of commitment as a political consumers thus confirming this theoretical argument.

To summarize, the results of this specific findings confirm that constraint recognition is indeed correlated to the ability to search, specifically here it is enhanced by the limited ability to search due to information complexity. Moreover it corroborates the connection between constraint recognition and perceived costs of search such as search being time-consuming. This study also shows that other factors such as lack of interest and lack of message reliability enhance constraint recognition.
Active information search vs. passive information processing

The interviews showed a high variation in whether participants sought more information actively or not. It is interesting to compare these findings with the theoretical framework and its alleged correlations between search activity and problem recognition, constraint recognition and level of commitment.

First, a couple of respondents admitted that they had been rather passive in their information gathering, e.g. “if you look at electricity, then I have only received information, in the way that they would call from time to time” (Carola) or “(I’m) not directly asking or trying to get others’ advices. It is more about me being open for information, about the product coming from people and media” (Susanna). These findings corroborate the theoretical correlation between the level of commitment as a political consumer (as both interviewees have a low grade of political consumerism) and the degree of activity. Nevertheless, this is questioned by the fact that another respondent with a low grade of political consumerism, Erik still showed a high level of activity in his purchase of a green car. This inconsistency with the theoretical framework might be explained by the fact that this specific respondent did have a kind of “geek” interest for cars.

However, most respondents reported some level of activity although with obvious nuances. Some were extremely ambitious in their search, e.g. Ellinor who “spent two whole days doing research on computers” or Britt who “had to do the entire information search because (the house suppliers) didn’t know what this (passive house) was”. Others were more moderate, mostly with regards to food or consumer goods like clothes or cosmetics. Regarding food, most respondents referred to finding the right products with the help of eco-labels or specific displays in the store, e.g. “it is easy to buy because you only pick things where there is a green sign” (Britt), but few had looked up exactly what the labels stood for. One exception was the high level of active search of Mirja who has “a habit of asking (about eco-labels) at the cashier and they can rarely answer. And I have made a habit of e-mailing to check any new eco-label (…)”.

Regarding car purchases, the level of activity varied from very high, e.g. researching online, speaking to salespeople and relatives, taking cars for trial runs (Erik, Thomas), to very limited, e.g. a single discussion at the car dealership (Carola). This variation of activity for the same range of products might be explained by at least two different parameters. First the degree of commitment for the environment which led some individuals to actively search for information on fuel: “"we read a bit on how ethanol worked” (Patrik) or “we kept our ears and eyes open quite a lot and absorbed what was said” (Thomas). A less committed consumer was more
passive and let the chosen car dealer recommend an appropriate green car model (Carola). This relates even to the second parameter, i.e. brand preference. In the case of a brand being chosen prior to the information search, the search in itself became less active as the number of options was more limited, e.g. “I was already into a Volvo (...), I did not do so much... I went there and asked what they had” (Carola).

An example of a very active search was presented by Britt regarding her investment in a new house four years ago which led her to “read, in details, what it meant to build a passive house” in order to create a “specification, on the whole, of what a passive house was” because the suppliers she had contacted either did not know about this specific kind of houses or did not want to build it. This relates to the theoretical argument of high correlation between search activity and both high level of commitment and capital-intensive purchases.

One quote summarizes perfectly the alleged connection between search activity and level of commitment: “if one thing is more important for me to find out, then I spend more time on it (...). I would not spend two whole days to find eco-labeled white board pens ” (Ellinor).

Information channels
This part of the result analysis is an important part of the study as it answers some key research questions, i.e. which information channels and messages are resorted to by our specific group of respondents. These different information sources will be examined according to the classification presented in the theory chapter: intrapersonal sources, interpersonal sources, media and predisposition.

Intrapersonal sources of information
All respondents referred to information collected directly through personal observations, in a greater or lesser degree and with different sources of information.

Several respondents recalled looking up information directly from the producer or supplier, e.g. “one would look in brochures to see how much this car would consume in fuel” (Erik) or “I went to a kitchen store and asked for a brochure (...), lots of brochures, I like that” (Susanna). Other examples might be that “I called the supplier who manufactured the furnace and simply interrogated them” (Ellinor) or that “I looked up which companies they (the pension funds) had invested in” (Niklas). Regarding cars, most of the time the search proceeded in two steps, first choosing the fuel type and then choosing the car model, e.g. “we decided that we would get an
ethanol-driven car... then we went out to look up potential car models or brands that would have ethanol-driven cars” (Thomas).

In some cases, the information consisted of observations collected in person in the stores, e.g. for appliances “I just went and looked at fridges in a store” (Carola) or “we went to the stores (...) and made a list with the noise level and the environmental impact of each machine” (Britt). Also regarding green cars, important information might be gathered directly at the car dealership, e.g. “we took several green cars for a trial run” (Thomas). Even for food or clothes, stores are an important source of information, e.g. “I usually ask what they have in organic clothing” (Linus).

These findings do not show any significant difference in the use of interpersonal sources of information related to the degree of political consumerism.

**Interpersonal sources of information**

Most of the interviewees recalled resorting to their social networks as information sources, either relatives or acquaintances, “people one works with” (Malin) or “I have a few colleagues here who drive green cars and have done from early on, I listen a lot to them” (Thomas).

In several cases, it was obvious that specific persons had endorsed the role of a sustainability champion, thus playing a critical part as a source of information, e.g. “I listen to people whom I trust in other contexts” (Linus), boiler “I have a former colleague whom I have discussed with at several occasions... he works with electricity or at an energy company”. Malin referred to her boyfriend who “as a professional could recommend this (organic food) to others (...) so it felt like he knew about this”.

Experts can also consist of suppliers or professionals within a specific field. One example is about buying a new kitchen including appliances, “I trusted an experienced supplier (...) and we assumed that they had made this choice for us, that it was environmentally conscious and fine” (Susanna). Another example concerns food and refers to the founder of Middagsfrid5 who sends a newsletter every week together with the food delivery, “she propagates a lot for these things (...) and I find it interesting to read. What she says influences me a lot” (Patrik).

Interpersonal communication might even consist of sales pitches, in person or on the phone, e.g. Camilla considered changing electricity supplier because “they “jumped” on me at Ikea”.

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5 A food delivery subscription service with focus on healthy and organic food

Walking the Talk
Emphasizing the power or interpersonal communication, Malin related an anecdote about her boyfriend telling people about antibiotics in non-organic milk and “when he told people about this they wanted to buy organic milk instead”. Even children can become information sources, e.g. “my daughter (...) did a high-school project about organic clothes (...) it worked as an alarm clock saying this might be the future” (Susanna).

Finally, there were cases when interpersonal communication was not resorted to because the person did not need further information, e.g. “because I felt that there was not much to discuss really” (Niklas).

Regarding interpersonal sources of information, this study confirms their importance in the search process as they were mentioned in all twelve interviews. Nevertheless, there appears to be a difference when it comes to the sources themselves: while respondents with a low grade of political consumerism would rely almost completely on a salesperson or a supplier, the rest will select their own sustainability experts among friends, relatives or colleagues and rely mostly on these chosen persons.

**Media**

The role of media in conveying information is obvious and it was evidently confirmed by most interviews. Sometimes the type of media was not specified, e.g. “there was quite a lot of debate (about ethanol) in the media” (Thomas), but most of the times the channel was identified as being TV, a book or Internet.

**Newspapers and magazines, printed or online**

The press, as a printed paper or an online service, was mentioned often; daily newspapers, e.g “You read and follow the news in the papers” (Ellinor) and “we also read newspaper online, like Dagens Nyheter” (Malin), and specialized sustainability press, e.g. “I subscribe to specialized publications like Effekt” (Niklas).

Reviews and tests published in newspapers and magazines appeared to play an important part for several respondents, e.g. “I do rely on these consumer tests in newspaper, in DN” (Susanna) or “I bought them (reviews in the papers) when I saw on the placards that there was a green car review” (Thomas) and also “when I grew up, we had Råd & Rön⁶, so I have a lot of confidence in this publication” (Patrik).

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⁶ Swedish Consumer Magazine with focus on product tests and reviews
Regarding specialized press, several respondents referred to it as a source they would not resort to, e.g. “we did not buy any automotive magazines or anything like that” (Thomas). Nevertheless one interviewee mentioned it as a useful media: “(we checked) ‘Vi Bilägare’ for example, if we talk about cars” (Erik).

Radio
Radio was referred to only once in a specific way: “we do not have a TV, but we listen to radio a lot” (Malin).

Internet
The dominance of Internet as a communication and information search channel is an expected finding of this study.

Online search was mentioned by almost all respondents as an information channel. It was praised for its magnitude, “you can find almost any information online” (Niklas), for its simplicity, “Internet is… it is so much easier now to find information” (Camilla), or for its flexibility, “I find that it is internet that enables me to choose what I want to search for” (Britt).

For some of the interviewees, Internet is used as a TV channel, e.g. “I do not own a TV so if I watch (documentaries) then I watch them on SVT Play”(Niklas) and “we do not watch TV so much anymore, instead we watch TV online when we like to” (Britt).

For others, Internet’s value resided very much in search engines, e.g. “there is a variety of homepages one can look up, both from the energy agency and from different environmental organizations, in order to compare energy suppliers” (Niklas) and “I searched online, I used this ‘energikollen’ or ‘elskling’ or something like that” (Camilla). The most common search tool online appeared to be “Google”, e.g. “it was rather searching on “Google” and see where you end up” (Thomas), which offers what a respondent referred to as “chains of links” offering “a tremendous and complete view of an issue” (Britt).

Books and Documentaries
Finally, a few persons referred to documentaries as an information source, e.g. “I saw “Bananas”8. Before that I could sometimes buy normal bananas (...) but now I have become

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7 www.elskling.se - Online price comparison engine of energy suppliers
8 A documentary about Dole and their banana plantations in Central America
totally unwilling” (Malin) or “I think that “Landets Brunsås” explained this really well: consumers get what they pay for” (Mirja). Furthermore one respondent mentioned a specific book, “I have read this book (...) “the secret chef” (Patrik), as having had an impact on his consumption choices.

The review of the different media used in the process of information search shows no correlations between specific media and a higher degree of political consumerism, except for books and documentaries which were mentioned only by active political consumers.

**Predisposition and accumulated knowledge**

As mentioned earlier, a fourth information source consists of one’s predisposition, i.e. accumulated knowledge and opinion. This might be assimilated to the concept of ongoing search and it is also the result of information processing as discussed above.

The interviews resulted in several examples of information-processing having an impact on subsequent consumption choices. Sometimes, the information would originate from a rather unexpected context, e.g. when Carola referred to TV-show about celebrities surviving in the jungle as an information source regarding how a Swedish farmer would take care of his animals, which would in its turn influence her to choose locally produced food. Ongoing advertising campaigns were also referred to as playing a part as information-processing, e.g. “I believe that Saab advertized quite a lot about green cars around that time, and it shaped me a great deal” (Thomas) or “It was (this brand) I knew about, they had advertized” (Mirja).

Another example of information-processing would be knowledge accumulated during former studies (Camilla), e.g. “this was also part of what I studied, like life-cycle analysis” (Malin) or “I actually wrote my thesis on the discursive analysis of Swedish meat producers” (Niklas). Work is also a context where people receive information they might use subsequently in their political consumption, e.g. “I was asked to be environmental coordinator in this preschool (...) there I learned a lot about environmental consciousness” (Susanna) or “I have learned a lot here (at work) (...) I have met people who are interested” (Camilla).

Furthermore, several respondents referred to information which they could not tell the precise origin of, e.g. ”exactly how I knew that? I might have heard it on the news, or read it, I guess I just tripped over it“ (Erik), “you know so much“ (Mirja) or “you just know this” (Ellinor). This

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9 TV-documentary about the Swedish eating habits

10 A book about additives in the food industry
confirms the role of information-processing leading to an accumulation of knowledge and playing an important role to fill the information gap occurring in connection with a specific purchase.

One example was related by Ellinor when she tried to identify the source of her knowledge concerning green cars and specifically biogas vs. hybrid electrical cars: “I don’t really know where I got this information but this is stuff that you search for all the time” (Ellinor).

Political predisposition might be translated in marketing terms as brand awareness or brand preference, which is addressed by Susanna when saying that “I have faith, somehow, in companies which have lived for such a long time that they are forced to actually keep up with progress and follow environmental and ethical rules”. This might also entail that a brand might be avoided because of accumulated negative inputs, e.g. “I do not think I would have chosen (Vattenfall), much because they have appeared so much in the media, and they have received so much negative criticism” (Camilla).

Furthermore, some quotes confirm the earlier findings of Schmidt and Spreng, arguing that higher satisfaction with brands/products reduces search activity: “I trusted (Volvo) because I think it is a strong brand, so I did not search much more than that” (Carola), “we had a Saab earlier so the choice was easy to make. (...) We thought it was a very good car so that is what we bought” (Patrik) or “I had already chosen the brand (...) because we had a Miele tumble-dryer (...) and we thought we were very happy with it” (Patrik).

These findings confirm the role of accumulated knowledge and predisposition as a source of information.

**Summary of findings**

Summarizing the findings of this study in the context of the research question confirms that political consumers do have a strong commitment to taking their responsibility towards a more sustainable world through their consumption choices.
This analysis has resulted in the following conclusions regarding the first part of the research question, i.e. how political consumers search for information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political consumers = traditional consumers</th>
<th>Political consumers ≠ traditional consumers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use all four types of information sources</td>
<td>More ambitious and active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal sources are significant</td>
<td>Refer to books and documentaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet is predominant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resort to eco-labels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search activity is restrained by</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of time, trust or interest or</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because of message complexity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2 – findings regarding information search*

Regarding the second part of the research question, i.e. how political consumers assess information prior to a purchase, this study provides the following insights:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political consumers = traditional consumers</th>
<th>Political consumers ≠ traditional consumers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced complexity in assessing</td>
<td>Rely only on chosen champions as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information</td>
<td>interpersonal sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information processing has a significant</td>
<td>Higher knowledge and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>role</td>
<td>awareness about eco-labels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Swedish labels more than</td>
<td>More skeptical about certain eco-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>labels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3 – findings regarding information assessment*
5. Discussion

Based on the summary of this study’s findings, it is interesting to discuss their implication in the information flow between political consumers and information providers, both regarding search and assessment.

Facilitating information search

One of the principal problems faced by consumers devoted to consuming more sustainably is first and foremost finding proper options, i.e. goods produced with greater care for social premises and/or for the environment.

One way of doing so is creating specific online search engines, i.e. tools which show available products and services according to a variety of parameters which in this case should encompass sustainable criteria, or adding sustainable criteria to existing search engines. Sustainable criteria might be the energy class, the level of CO2 emissions, a Fairtrade certification or other eco-label certifications. “Elskling”, a search engine for electrical power mentioned earlier, is a good illustration of this concept as it offers price, customer-satisfaction as well as environment as its principal search criteria.

Moreover it is primordial to help consumers obtain the proper information at the time and place of consumption, i.e. first and foremost in the store. Clear and accurate information about eco-friendly or Fairtrade features should be easy to find both on product packaging and on the shelves. As an example, the Swedish supermarket brand ICA uses green signs on the shelves in order to point out eco-friendly products in their stores. It is also important to educate the staff in these specific issues as it is natural for customers to turn to them whenever they do not find the proper information in the store.

This highlights the role of labeling schemes as tools for easier information search. Eco-labels, with their recognizable logos, are appreciated for the way they convey accurate and relevant information very efficiently. Other labeling schemes, such as energy classes used for appliances, are confirmed by this research as being helpful much due to their clarity. Nevertheless the increasing variety of eco-labels has created a dilemma by increasing the complexity related to assessing one eco-label amid others as will be discussed further down.
This study has also provided some new insights regarding the role of interpersonal sources in this context. How might this specific type of sources be used to facilitate information search? One alternative would be to take advantage of the rise of online social media such as Facebook, Twitter and other discussion forums. By creating e.g. a Facebook group with “fans”, stakeholders such as NGO’s or corporations might provide potential consumers with interesting and updated information while stimulating the chain of interpersonal connections amid fans. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms of online social media before implementing such a strategy as it implies new behaviors, e.g. being able to handle anonymous and negative comments.

**Facilitating information assessment**

It appeared throughout the results of this research that consumers found some of the information difficult to evaluate. One explanation for this might be the objective of transparency that many stakeholders aim for, e.g. transparency concerning the different impacts of the supplier chain. Hence, in the name of this transparency, an overload of information is sometimes provided to the consumer thus overwhelming him with facts he might not want nor understand. In order to let the buyer select which information he wishes to take in (this study has shown that this is highly individual), it is appropriate to provide information at several levels of complexity through appropriate channels. Hence information on product labeling and product advertisement should be short and easy to assess, e.g. eco-label logotype or level of CO2 emission. On the other hand, more comprehensive information such as labeling schemes’ criteria or corporations’ CSR policies would be suitably presented on websites or in specific folders.

As discussed earlier labeling schemes constitute efficient tools in enabling consumers to search for the right product. Nevertheless each of them is specialized in areas such as organic farming, social fairness or local production; thus none offers an overall certificate regarding the impact of a product on all these parameters throughout the whole life-cycle. As one of the respondent in this study suggested, it would be useful to apply the system of letters A-G of energy classes to other products such as cars or even food, in order to understand the true bearing their choices would have in a global context. It will be interesting to see if the new EU directive about

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11 There is a EU directive concerning CO2 labeling of cars, but its implementation may vary from country to country (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/air/transport/co2/co2_cars_labelling.htm)


Walking the Talk
energy labeling will answer the wishes of respondents for more clarity on diverse new product ranges.

The present study shows the existence of an information gap experienced by consumers regarding the all encompassing sustainability impact of a product. They seem to have a hard time making the right choice between a diesel car with low fuel consumption and a car running on ethanol, or between organic honey from overseas and local non-organic honey. Attempts are made to measure the full impact of human processes on their ecological and social environments with diverse methods, e.g. the method of Life Cycle Assessment. Another approach consists in measuring the “ecological footprint”, i.e. the total consumption of natural resources and ecosystem services. This calculation has been done for populations or cities, but it is still rare to find ecological footprint assessments for specific products, although it exists for e.g. salmon, eggs or soybeans. Although this method does not assess the effect of the product on workers’ conditions or on animals’ welfare, it might still be considered as a useful tool in communicating environmental sustainability towards consumers and as a driver for suppliers and consumers to understand the value of ecosystem services.

Another obstacle faced by the public when assessing information prior to a political consumption choice is the issue of trustworthiness of the message. This study confirms that consumers, regardless of their level of commitment regarding sustainability, condemn what they perceive as greenwashing, i.e. misusing sustainable arguments or overstating a corporation’s achievements in CSR-related issues. Greenwashing results in various potential damages when exposed; first, it weakens specific corporations’ brands, e.g. Vattenfall which was mentioned in this study several times, due to the loss of credibility perceived by the public, and won the award of “Climate Greenwasher” in 2009. Furthermore, the accumulation of greenwashing claims and evidences is feeding a growing mistrust from the consumers and thus threatens the credibility of the sustainable discourse per se. This is one of the most serious challenges faced by sustainability advocates in these times of “climategate” and financial turmoil. Furthermore, as a reaction to greenwashing and its threats, a new phenomenon has appeared, namely “greenblushing”, i.e. the behavior of certain corporations which have deliberately toned down their CSR achievements by fear of being accused of greenwashing. Hence, greenwashing, by indirectly leading to greenblushing, might question the whole concept of sustainable communication. This would be a loss for corporations, consumers and sustainable development per se. In order to refrain

13 http://www.climategreenwash.org/
corporations from resorting to greenwashing, it is necessary for the appropriate authorities (such as Konsumentombudsman in Sweden or the Advertising Standards Authority in the UK) to sharpen the regulations and above all the sanctions against this type of misleading unethical business communication. It is also appropriate to underline the role of media in this context. They do have an important part and responsibility in reporting greenwashing malpractice; nevertheless it is essential that this type of coverage remains fair and balanced, e.g. not focusing only on famous brands and big corporations.

Finally, this research brings up the issue of positive vs. negative information. Several respondents spontaneously suggested that stakeholders, in this case public agencies and retailers, should take a more aggressive stance when promoting more sustainable alternatives. Today the norm is still “non-organic”, “non-Fairtrade” and “non eco-friendly” products. Hence it demands a deliberate choice from consumers to pick more sustainable options, and often to a higher cost. Some interviewees argued that the system should be reversed meaning that organic, Fairtrade or “green” products should be the norm and thus not be labeled in a particular way. Instead the labeling should be a negative one, e.g. a red “non eco-friendly” label or a “pesticide-filled” sign on non-organic produce. This is quite an extreme suggestion, but it might be worth discussing further the use of more aggressive and intimidating messages as a complement to positive and rewarding claims.
6. Conclusion

This study has aimed to provide new insights concerning political consumers’ information search and assessment prior to purchases of sustainable goods and services with the goal of facilitating this process and thus sustainable consumption per se.

Empirical evidences were gathered through qualitative interviews with twelve Swedish consumers of sustainable goods and confirmed several theoretical arguments identified during the literature review of theories regarding both Political Consumerism and Consumer Information Search. This collection of findings has shown that this specific group of buyers faces various problems throughout their decision processes such as finding an eco-friendly alternative meeting their demands and being able to rely on their sustainability claims. In order to solve these issues, respondents needed to gather different types of information such as product specification (including price, attributes, energy class, type of fuel, how it was produced) as well as facts regarding fuel or building techniques. Sources of information that have appeared to be used by political consumers in this study were interpersonal sources (i.e. relatives and acquaintances were very influential); consumer groups, NGOs and search engines; eco-labels (but only those approved); suppliers product information and finally general news coverage in the media. Last but not least, information and knowledge accumulated formerly have much impact in the decision process of these individuals.

To summarize this study, it appears that building and conserving trust is central to political consumers, thus “greenwashing” is to be totally prohibited if sustainable communication is to be fruitful in the long term. Furthermore it would be beneficial to find a way to inform about the total impact of products on environmental and social premises, both in the local and in the global context. Although this might certainly constitute a very challenging task considering the complexity of these issues, there are some interesting concepts to look into, e.g. ecological footprint. This might be a tough challenge but it is nevertheless critical, even more so in times of financial recession, to aim at offering consumers efficient tools and valuable incentives to “walk the talk” for a common future in a more sustainable world.
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Appendix A - Interview guide

1. Which products or services have you purchased based on environmental, ethical or social values?

2. What were your motives in making these choices?

3. How much and what kind of information did you need in order to make a purchase decision?

4. How active were you in your search for information?

5. How did you go about to find the information you needed?

6. Afterward, do you find that you had difficulties finding the right information to make the proper choice?
Appendix B – Schmidt & Spreng proposed model of external consumer information search