WHAT IS COOL AND WHO IS IN?
FINNISH MARKETING COMMUNICATION
PRACTITIONERS ON BRAND AND CLOTHING-
RELATED BULLYING AMONG CHILDREN,
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND
PREVENTION ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

Background  In consumer culture, marketing communications is recognised as a communication system that shapes and provides resources for our understandings of the world. Arguably, those accounts channel and reproduce only dominant ideologies, which contributes to that understanding being narrow, by stigmatising those idiosyncrasies that exist beyond generally accepted norms of consumption. In relation to clothing and children’s socialisation, that stigma becomes treated differently, in a violent manner, compared to those who dress accordingly to the norms. Nevertheless, a solution for the issue is commonly sought in consumers, and not in marketers.

Purpose  The purpose of this study is to examine Finnish marketing communication practitioners’ perceptions of the phenomenon and responsibility of brand and clothing-related bullying, and to explore activities that are associated with inhibiting the bullying behaviour. Additionally, pedagogical marketing communications is discussed in relation to the other prevention activities to explore how the concept is interpret by marketing practitioners.

Method  The research was interpretivist and qualitative by nature. A method of semi-structured interviews was chosen to explore marketing communication practitioners’ perceptions of the subject matter.

Findings  The findings of this study indicate that marketing communication practitioners do not consider children as competent, but rather as vulnerable social beings when it comes to consumer life. Being perceived as such, the practitioners view parents, society and marketers responsible for providing solutions to the complex phenomenon, which according to the practitioners has ultimately stemmed from the structural development of societies in which digitalisation and social medias play an integral part.

Contribution  The research has three identifiable implications on both theoretical and practical fields of fashion and marketing. First, it gives valuable information on how marketers view children as a market. Second, it provides a new, marketer’s viewpoint of to look at the phenomenon. Third, it recognises the marketers to have their roles as consumers beyond their roles as marketplace authoritatives.

Keywords: branding, clothing, children, socialisation, bullying, social responsibility, marketing communications
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In Pori, Finland, June 2019

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1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the reader to the background of this study and describes why the subject is contemporary and relevant to study today in Finland. It further presents the problem discussion, research purpose and research questions, which direct the research process. This study’s key concepts as well as delimitations are also introduced. The introduction is concluded with the structure of this thesis.

1.1 Foreword from the author

Now, those that know me, know also that I am not that fond of children to start with. Regardless, I have repeatedly found myself in situations where there is something to do with this specific group of people: in the children’s clothing departments twiddling those colourful and printed garments through my fingers, and further discussing pedagogy with my friends, of which a majority happen to be school teachers today. Not that it would stop there, almost seven years ago I also happened to become an aunt myself. My niece and nephew have grown in an environment that differentiates quite a bit from the one I grew in. In an ever tighter thrust of this consumption realm, they have opened Christmas presents one after another in such mania that they could barely remember what the last gift box included. Earlier this spring I asked my six-year-old niece what she would like to have for her birthday, also as to mind her starting school journey later in fall. She, knowing as she is, stated: “Adidas and unicorns”.

As such events have come across me, I have started to think more critically about my own passions and career goals in fashion and marketing communications. Studies in The Swedish School of Textiles have made me encounter issues of sustainability in all aspects of fashion industry. I have come to question whether I will be just another contributor to such unhealthy cycle of consumption. Cultural studies made me encounter the fact that people are the ones to create phenomena, and thus people can collectively also make a difference. Last fall I ran into a news article about children bullying one another based on what kind of brands and clothes they are wearing. Incorporating this compelling article with my further interests - and that previously mentioned unintended tendency of mine - I had found the topic for my master’s thesis.

1.2 Background

Consumer culture, defined by extensive consumption-based values shared by the majority, characterises today’s economically advanced societies, in which life revolves around consumption (Fullerton & Punj 1998; Holt 2002). The culture, and following mass production and consumption, has enabled commodities that previously used to be privileged possessions
of the wealthy now to be legitimate desires for almost everyone (Fullerton & Punj 1998; McKendrick, Brewer & Plumb 1982). Besides the centrality of consumption, the culture of consumption builds upon demand creation and following voracious or free-floating desire, as "novelty-seeking has become commonplace" and therefore wanted commodities are constantly transforming (Fullerton & Punj 1998, p. 397). Fullerton & Punj (ibid.) further argue consumer culture to have affected moral values: "traits such as envy, pride, greed and lust, [figured] large among the "seven deadly sins" of Christian theology, have metamorphosed into legitimate personal aspirations, even keys to personal fulfilment", and hedonistic values such as extravagant consumption have become to exemplify the good life.

Buying itself has become more impulsive, as "much of life [today] is spent in exchange institutions" and shopping has therefore become more effortless (Fullerton & Punj 1998, p. 398). Exchange settings have also become more, if not endlessly, open; not only shopping malls have become spots for social interaction and expression, where children and teenagers are socialised into the culture of consumption, but also the world wide web and its countless applications (ibid.). Goods have also come to accumulate social meanings; products have increasingly become the means to enhance self-concepts, to ascribe identities to others, and to increase the sense of belonging (ibid.). Indeed, being capable of acting as "promoters and mediators [in] social relationships", the brands, the things and the ways we consume can send cues about our social standing to others, and hence affect how others socialise with us (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya 2017, p. 16; Williams & Littlefield 2018).

Children are said to begin recognising brand-related consumption symbols, and status and group membership attributions as early as six years old, and children as young as seven years old already seem to know the symbolic meaning of clothing (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Brands are indeed said to be essential in enforcing the sense of belonging among children (Lee, Motion & Conroy 2008; Yle 2009), and clothing is considered to be an important consumption good to signal in-group status in the early contexts of socialising behaviours, such as schools (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Clothing brands therefore relate to social acceptance, which can be seen in the usage of styles and brands that are accepted within the own reference group, and consequently in the avoidance of those which belong to another group (Fritzson 2019; Lee, Motion & Conroy 2008; Salumäki 2018). Clothes namely serve a dynamic role in social signalling, because of the changing nature of fashion, which "results in various emulations between the members of different social classes" (Williams & Littlefield 2018, p. 5).

Finland has in recent years been swept over by a trend for fashionable children’s clothing (Vasama 2017; Väntönen 2016), which can be seen in the number of such new brands established in last 10 years (for example, Gugguu, Kaiko Clothing, Mainio Clothing and Vimm). These brands offer sizes as small as 62 centimetres to all the way to 150, and some brands further have offering for women as well, hence targeting children from infancy to roughly twelve years of age, and even further to adolescence. Some consider the hype to be ultimately about mothers; children’s clothes seem to mean much more than things to wear to many parents (Vasama 2017). At the same time, however, contrasting news echo from different parts of the world. A recent article in Dagens Nyheter described how youth must wear the right brands and right style to be accepted and respected by their peers in school (Sääf 2019). For the same reason a school in the United Kingdom was earlier reported to ban the usage of certain branded jackets to fight the sense of inequality among students, as expensive brands can be seen as stigmatising families that struggle financially (Agerholm 2018; John 2018). Feeling left out is not, however, the only worry that children and youth
may have; expensive, branded garments have also been reported become robbed in Stockholm (Sääf 2019).

Marketing activities, as counts marketing communications, have arguably played a significant role in developing and sustaining the consumer culture (Fullerton & Punj 1998). According to Fullerton & Punj (ibid.), the modern culture would never have achieved its contemporary magnitude and shape without marketing. Holt (2002) further argues the culture to be structured by companies and their marketing activities, demonstrating that companies’ collective branding efforts do indeed shape consumer desires and actions; the consumption trend. By Holt’s (ibid., p. 71) words, ”[the] consumer culture is [organised] around the principle of obeisance to the cultural authority of marketers”. Marketers are hence seen as cultural engineers, who organise how people think and feel through branded commodities (ibid.). Likewise, people who are merged in the consumer culture - consumers - unconsciously grant companies the authority to organise their tastes (ibid.).

Fullerton & Punj (1998) argue marketing activities to have unintentionally stimulated those misbehaviours in consumers. Type of misbehaviour that is generally associated with children is bullying (Williams & Littlefield 2018). When children, socialisation, brands and clothing are combined, one gets a phenomenon called brand and clothing-related bullying, which refers to such violent behaviour that stems from the worn clothes and the meanings that those clothes communicate in a certain social environment (ibid.). Brand bullying and other type of consumption-related misbehaviours can be considered as side products of consumer culture, risen from the emergence of brands and branding in our society (Fullerton & Punj 1998). Marketing is arguably channelling culture that leaves no room for idiosyncrasies, further leading to industries that ”produce [only] a conformity of style, marginali[s]e risk taking, and close down interpretation” (Holt 2002, p. 71). Children, being early adopters of newer technologies and heavy on using media altogether, are considered specifically vulnerable, and thus an easy target for marketing activities as ever creative marketing messaging on several different medias have literally opened doors to their homes and lives, both on conscious and unconscious levels (Calvert 2008; Schroeder & Borgerson 2005).

The phenomenon and bullying behaviours affect some children more than others. In addition to negative mental and even physical health outcomes related to peer rejection, often the threat of violence and social exclusion influences the behaviour of the victims towards the dominant ideals (Williams & Littlefield 2018; Salumäki 2018). From brand management perspective, the phenomenon is disappointing, because it causes resistance towards brands and styles that are seen as being beyond the generally accepted norm, which further complicates launching new brands and styles.

Regardless of argued marketing contributions, solution for brand and clothing-related bullying is often sought not in brands but in consumers. The general assumption that changing individual behaviour of the bullies prevents brand-related violent behaviour from happening, however, hides under the social and structural causes of bullying, and particularly the role of consumer culture maintaining and reproducing social class hierarchies (Williams & Littlefield 2018). We are said to live in a culture, in which brands and marketing communications are collectively affecting the ways we think, feel and therefore behave. Is it not a matter of reconsideration of social responsibilities and actions when marketing activities influence any of the several stakeholders in an unanticipated and a negative way (Holt 2002; Fry & Polonsky 2004)? Managing social phenomenon is generally considered a difficult task to do. Nevertheless, education and deterrence have been suggested to provide more or less efficient
means to manage consumer misbehaviour (Fullerton & Punj 1997b; 2004). Williams & Littlefield (2018) similarly proposed education by marketers, together with parents and schooling, to diminish or even prevent bullying behaviours’ occurrence. Schroeder & Borgerson (2005) in a similar sense asserted the pedagogical role of marketing communications in our society, arguing corporate messaging to be a matter of social responsibility as much as any other business activity.

1.3 Problem discussion

Brand bullying is an emerging issue within the children’s and teenagers’ socialisation, where clothing is considered an essential consumption good to signal in-group status (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Marketing is said to be a key contributor to developing and sustaining consumer culture, as well as in shaping consumer desires and actions (Fullerton & Punj 1998; Holt 2002). Marketers are thus seen to organise how people think and feel through branded commodities (Holt 2002). Regardless, the emphasis of previous research of brand bullying has typically been directed towards prevention activities from the consumer end, suggesting the solution to be sought in consumers, further hiding under the social and structural causes bullying (Williams & Littlefield 2018).

Brand bullying could be considered as rather new phenomenon within the field of consumer misbehaviour research (Fullerton & Punj 1997a), and hence not many researchers have focused on the issue before, especially in the marketing context. Even in one of the key sources of this study, the brand and clothing-related behaviours emerged out of another research of which purpose was to study the nature of bullying in schools (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Marketing communications, however, emerged as a key aspect of the study’s interview data (ibid.). The phenomenon has not got adequate attention in the recent fashion and marketing research, where moreover brand and marketing communication practitioners’ point of view would need to be studied to reach more of a multi-dimensional view of the issue.

1.4 Research purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine marketing communication practitioners’ perceptions of the phenomenon of brand and clothing-related bullying in Finland. Thus, the thesis explores responsibilities related to such violent social behaviour, and further discusses activities that are associated with inhibiting those behaviours in children. Additionally, pedagogical marketing communications is discussed in relation to the other prevention activities to explore how the concept is interpret by the marketplace authorities – the practitioners.
1.5 Research questions

To fulfil the purpose of the study and to address Finnish brand and marketing communication practitioners’ perceptions regarding the phenomenon of brand and clothing-related bullying, this thesis aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What is marketing communication practitioners’ perception of the phenomenon of brand and clothing-related bullying?

RQ2. Who do marketing communication practitioners perceive as responsible for brand and clothing-related bullying?

RQ3. Through what kind of activities do marketing communication practitioners consider brand and clothing-related bullying could be prevented?

Education and pedagogical marketing communications has been discussed in the context of brand bullying and other unwished, consumption-related social behaviours as a possible prevention activity (Fullerton & Punj 2004; Schroeder & Borgerson 2005; Williams & Littlefield 2018). The concept does not, however, have a clear theoretical nor practical definition of it, which is why I would moreover like to discuss the concept with the interviewees in relation to other prevention activities.

i. What is practitioners’ perception of the concept ‘pedagogical marketing communications’?

1.6 Definitions of key concepts

Consumer misbehaviour refers to behavioural acts by consumers which violate the generally accepted norms of consumption, and thus disrupt the expected order of consumption situations, and hence defies the consumption system from running smoothly (Fullerton & Punj 1997a). It is considered a prominent problem by being inseparable part of consumer experience, that results in material and psychological harm to marketers as well as other consumers (Fullerton & Punj 1997a; Fullerton & Punj 1998). Fullerton & Punj (ibid.) argue the misbehaviour to be stimulated by marketing activities that are initially thought to encourage consumers towards consumption.

Brand and clothing-related bullying could be considered as a sub-phenomenon to consumer misbehaviour. It refers to such violent behaviour that a group member or several group members practice on someone for wearing brands and clothes that differentiate from those dominant fashions in that group (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Such behaviour is first and
foremost associated with children's socialisation, namely because external socialising agents such as parents, peers and medias are considered central not only to children's socialisation, but also to the acts of bullying as they are often viewed to take place “among peer groups against socially stigmatised vulnerable others” (ibid., p. 992).

*Marketing communications* in this thesis refers to such marketing activities that communicate the essence of a brand and those values to be associated with that brand to its market. The type of communication is not differentiated between channels that are deployed to convey the message to consumers and other stakeholders of a brand; instead, corporate messages in both traditional (e.g. TV, radio, print advertising) and new medias (e.g. websites and social medias), as well as in retail environments (e.g. window displays and visual merchandising) are grouped under the broad term ‘marketing communications’. This term is respectively used in this study to refer to all communication activities within those channels mentioned.

### 1.7 Delimitations

This research’s focus is on examining marketing communication practitioners’ perceptions of brand and clothing-related bullying among children. Hence, although similar bullying behaviours might be connected to adulthood as well, this study does not consider such behaviours in relation to adults’ socialising practices. Further, this study does not investigate other parts of children’s clothing market, such as design or product development, although those undoubtedly could be considered to have a central role by their contribution to the phenomenon. In addition, all of the respondents of this study represented Finnish companies, that is children’s clothing brands and marketing agencies, and thus the outcomes of this study reflect the perceptions of the phenomenon in Finland.

### 1.8 Thesis outline

*Chapter one* presents the background for this study. The reader is introduced to the concept of consumer culture, and further to phenomena of consumer misbehaviour and brand and clothing-related bullying, that arguably marketing communications urge in consumers. The introduction also problematises the general assumption in which solution for these misbehaviours is sought primarily in consumers and not in the brands. The motivation for the study is further elaborated by presenting the purpose, the research questions and the delimitations of this study.

Having background in consumer culture, *chapter two* immerses the reader into further aspects of that culture. It depicts the relationship between children and the marketplace and further describes the role of brands in children’s social life. Previous research regarding consumer misbehaviour and brand and clothing-related bullying is presented, while pondering marketing contributions to such phenomena. Social responsibility as well as activities that
have in previous research been suggested to provide a solution for inhibiting those phenomena, are likewise described in the literature review.

Chapter three describes this research’s theoretical framework, namely consumer culture theory and further the theory of discourse with the focus on two prevailing discourses on children’s position at the marketplace.

Chapter four explains the methodology of this study. It presents the philosophical stances behind the research, and describes and motivates the selected methods for sampling, data collection and data analysis.

Chapter five presents the findings of this study being interpret by the author with those lenses of the theoretical framework described in chapter three.

Chapter six discusses and reflects the findings on previously written literature of the subject matter, while also addressing the research questions of this research.

Chapter seven presents the conclusions of this study and discusses its contributions to both theory and practice. Conclusions further discusses the study’s limitations, as well as gives suggestions for future research.
2 Literature review

This chapter immerses the reader to further aspects of the consumer culture. First, the introduction depicts the relationship between children and the market, and further describes children’s socialisation with regards to clothing and brands. Second, it presents previous research that considers consumer misbehaviour and brand and clothing-related bullying, and ponders marketing’s contributions to such phenomena. Bridging such, third, the second chapter furthermore discusses social responsibilities as well as different communication activities that have in previous research been brought up as means to minimise or inhibit those misbehaviours in consumers.

2.1 Children at the marketplace: becoming and being consumers

“Children have always been consumers in the sense that they consume a part of what is produced by society” (Olesen 2004, p. 277). Olesen (ibid.) elaborates how children’s position to the market, however, has traditionally been distanced, as their purchases have been largely handled by adults, namely by their parents. The development of the consumer culture, however, has made children to encounter commerce earlier than ever before (Ekström 2010). Today many societies consider consumption as an important matter that fulfils both functional and symbolic needs (Tinson & Nancarrow 2010). Childhood, on the other hand, is considered an important stage of life for consumer socialisation (Langer 2004). Consumer socialisation refers to “the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant for their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Ward 1974, p. 2). Different medias, family, schools, peers and other reference groups have come to operate more and more as socialising agents that assist children to cope in the consumption realm (Tinson & Nancarrow 2010).

Marketers are interested in children as consumers for various reasons (Ekström 2010). The discretionary income of children has increased over time and thus children are considered to have more purchasing power today (Ekström 2010; Calvert 2008). Children are also viewed as the future market, and it is argued that childhood shopping habits are likely to shape adult consumer behaviour (Tinson & Nancarrow 2010). For example, favourable attitudes and thus well-established brand relationships are said to last far into the adulthood (Calvert 2008). It is also very well acknowledged that children often take part in families’ purchase decision making and that this part-taking is moreover thought to take place at a younger age than in the past (Calvert 2008; Roedder-John 1999; Tinson & Nancarrow 2010). Small children might influence on daily household purchases such as breakfast products and sweets that are worth a little, but the influence is also considered to grow gradually as children age (Calvert 2008). Older children might have a say in bigger family acquisitions, even such as holiday destinations (ibid.).

Children’s consumption has historically reflected adult understandings of childhood (Olesen 2004). In the turbulence of consumer culture, however, childhood has become increasingly commercialised (Martens, Southerton & Scott 2004). In the wake, the basis of children’s
material culture has experienced a shift from objective needs of children to subjective preferences of children; from adult’s perceptions of what is considered good for children to what children themselves would like to have (Olesen 2004). Indeed, whereas identifying children as a market previously used to fuel moral policemen in the public further resulting in hate mail, today there exists entire brands, stores, television networks, social and other new medias developed specifically to serve this market (Calvert 2008; Cook 2011).

When it comes to the omni-channel nature of today’s consumption realm, and namely that fusion of consumption and new media, Tufte & Rasmussen (2010) recognise two groups that lead the edge: children and marketers. Indeed, children and youth have become heavy media users and early adopters of newer technologies (Calvert 2008). In fact, children could be considered more of ‘social beings’ than ‘social becomings’ when it comes to their competencies regarding the internet, mobile phones and consumption (Tufte & Rasmussen 2010). Parents, teachers and politicians are thought to lag far behind trying to keep up with the development of technology and digitalisation (ibid.). Respectively, the development of technology and the merge of consumption and new media has enabled marketers new ways to communicate about brands and their products (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). Marketing and advertising on different medias have therefore become “efficient pathways into children’s homes and lives” which respectively has resulted in the child consumer becoming a productive means to open the family pocketbook (Calvert 2008, p. 207; Cook 2007).

The notion of the child consumer and the new ways of marketing have allowed ever younger children to become embedded into the marketplace and further into the culture of consumption (Cook 2011). In general, the existence of children as consumers seems to be accepted as a social inevitability (ibid.). On the other hand, however, the growth of the children’s market is also considered to entail something more than a mere growth in demand (Cook 2011; Calvert 2008). Namely, the transformation is said not to have taken hold without marketing and its activities (Cook 2007; Cook 2011), which respectively has made following statement seem accurate:

Promoting and marketing products intended for children's use and consumption takes place within a highly surveilled, emotionally charged moral context. At its heart, the moral question surrounding children's participation in consumer life concerns itself with determining the extent to which the target market [...] can be said to be able to behave as knowing consumers.

(Cook 2011)

Generally speaking, today’s children are namely viewed as ‘becomings’ and ‘beings’ when considering them as consumers; on their way to become adults, while also being social actors having those qualities of competence, such as more or less convincing negotiating skills that are considered essential in order to be regarded as a legitimate consumer (Tufte & Rasmussen 2010). Indeed, these, what appear to be contrasting, views of children often emerge as fighting tensions from public discussions regarding children’s participation to consumer life (ibid.). These two discourses of children are further referred to in chapter 2.3 discussing social responsibility, as well as in chapter 3.2, as a part of the theoretical framework guiding the findings’ analysis in this study.
2.1.1 Children, clothing brands and social life

According to Holt (2002, p. 71), "the modern era of consumer capitalism was the first one to rely upon the ideological premise that social identities are best realised through commodities". Indeed, encapsulating symbolic meanings, brands are, among other things consumed, because they communicate things about ourselves to the surrounding world (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya 2017). Brands are known be used to construct and enhance identities, and further to express and convey it to others (ibid.). Hence, brands could be considered particularly significant to social life, as they are capable of acting as “promoters and mediators [in] social relationships” (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya 2017, p. 16; Williams & Littlefield 2018).

Brands are reported to support self-concept and enforce the sense of belonging also among children (Lee, Motion & Conroy 2008; Yle 2009). Children are said to begin recognising brand-related consumption symbols, and status and group membership attributions as early as six years old (Williams & Littlefield 2018). These attributions are often stronger for products intended for children’s use, such as toys (ibid.). Connections between self-concept and brands, however, seem to become deeper as children age (ibid.). Product symbolism is considered to be specifically important to children in their teenage years as branded items are consumed to compensate uncertainties in the rites of passage, namely in states of transitioning from old roles to new ones, such as when changing school (Belk 1988). Material possessions in this context are considered as a way to establish identities and to gain prestige from peers (ibid.). On the other hand, childhood as a whole can be considered as a rite of passage, as children are after all viewed as both becomings and beings (Tuft & Rasmussen 2010).

Children as young as seven to ten years old already seem to know the symbolic meaning of clothing (Hogg, Bruce & Hill 1998). Clothing is indeed considered to be an important consumption good to signal in-group status among children in the early contexts of socialising behaviours, such as schools (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Clothes namely serve a dynamic role in social signalling, because the changing nature of fashion, which “results in various emulations between the members of different social classes” (ibid., p. 5). Clothing brands therefore relate to social acceptance, which can be seen in the usage of brands that are accepted within the own reference group, and consequently in the avoidance of those brands which belong to another group (Lee, Motion & Conroy 2008). Piacentini & Mailer (2004) similarly found that the choice of clothing is closely connected to teenagers’ self-concepts, both as a way for self-expression and as a means to make judgements about people and situations that they face. Avoidance of peer rejection is generally considered to encourage these materialistic values among children (Williams & Littlefield 2018).

Findings of Piacentini & Mailer’s (2004) study further showed that wearing cheap clothes was out of the question for the youth. The consensual view among respondents of their study was that such clothes would urge teasing and undoubtedly exclude them from in-group status (ibid.). In this sense brands are considered important in signalling social position, but mainly in terms of economic capital (ibid.). However, wearing branded garments was further considered to indicate product knowledge in terms of what brands and styles are considered fashionable at the time, and thus also acceptable (ibid.). In this sense, taste of clothing and ways to dress oneself were thought to be based on distinctions, and thus to enable people to judge and classify each other (Holt 1998). This finding echoes those of Bourdieu (1996), who argued cultural needs and certain tastes to be products of upbringing and education, and thus
function as markers of class. According to Bourdieu (ibid.), consumption hence serves as a tool to legitimate social differences.

2.2 Consumer misbehaviour

As Holt (2002, p. 71) debates, “the concept ‘consumer culture’ refers to the dominant mode of consumption that is structured by the collective actions of firms in their marketing activities”. Building upon an ideology of consumption, the consumer culture, and namely the activity of consumption, is considered to govern, and provide a solution on many, if not even all, aspects of life (ibid.). Consumption is thus seen as good, ideal behaviour, to which marketers aim to encourage consumers through different marketing activities. Respectively, non-consumption, or otherwise hampering consumption, is seen as bad behaviour, as it conflicts with the generally accepted ideal that marketers have initially set (ibid.). This “bad” consumer behaviour is more commonly known as ‘consumer misbehaviour’, and has been largely debated by authors such as Fullerton & Punj (1997a; 1997b; 1998; 2004), whose articles provide a good and clear overview of what could be considered the counter-phenomenon to the dominant mode of consumption.

Consumer misbehaviour is defined as behavioural acts by consumers which violate the generally accepted norms of consumption, and thus disrupt the expected order in such situations (Fullerton & Punj 1997a). Probably the most known example of such acts is shoplifting, however being only one of many variants of the phenomenon (ibid.). Nevertheless, acts breaking the norms of consumption can be performed outside the direct consumption or product exchange situations as well (ibid.). Common examples of such would include acts of vandalism and physical or verbal abuse of other consumers, which necessarily do not take place in an exchange setting, for example in a physical store (Fullerton & Punj 1997a; Fullerton & Punj 2004). As the consumption culture has developed over time, so has the world of consumer misbehaviour expanded with it (Fullerton & Punj 2004). In addition to known, long-reported misbehaviours, environmental changes and technological advances have created new opportunities for consumers to misbehave (Fullerton & Punj 2004; Fullerton & Punj 1998).

The term ‘misbehaviour’ implies that there are norms by which behaving is seen as correct, while violating those norms by incorrect behaviour can be frowned upon and judged (Fullerton & Punj 1997a). The norms regarding consumption behaviour are in turn founded upon the ideology of consumption, broader societal norms based on it, and the organisation’s expectations about behaviour (Fullerton & Punj 1997a; Harris & Daunt 2011). Misbehavioural acts ”tend to be held in disrepute by marketers and by most consumers, but […] not necessarily with equal conviction or intensity”, as many consumers do misbehave at some point and therefore behaviours seen as norm violating from the perspective of marketers are often considered logical from the consumers’ own perspective (Fullerton & Punj 1997a, p. 336; Harris & Daunt 2011). Typically consumers consider misbehaviour more acceptable when the victimised organisation is of a larger size, whereas misbehaviour directed towards small companies is viewed as unacceptable (Fullerton, Neale & Dootson 2014).
Who then misbehave? According to Fullerton & Punj (2004), distinguishing consumers prone to misbehaviour from other consumers based on socioeconomic factors, lifestyle, gender or physical characteristics is difficult. Authors further disprove the assumption often made by marketing firms and many consumers that misbehaviour would be a lower income or education class phenomenon (ibid.). Instead, misbehavers seem to cover the entire socioeconomic spectrum, where moreover only small minority of misbehavers match any observable profile (ibid.). In turn, personality traits of self-esteem, consumer alienation, sensation seeking, and aggressiveness are often emphasised as important to understanding the phenomenon (Daunt & Harris 2012). Machiavellianism, the tendency to manipulate other people as stepping stones in order to achieve own interests and goals, have further been highlighted in the context of discussing personality traits that increase the likeliness for misbehaviour (ibid.). Moreover, antecedents and motives for misbehaviour have been researched; forwarded motives include pathological socialisation, namely viewing misbehaviour as a revenge towards a corporation, and further dominant motivators of financial gain, ego gain and revenge (Daunt & Harris 2012; Fullerton & Punj 2004). Grove, Fisk & Joby (2004) further asserted the role of physical, atmospheric and social surroundings as triggers for misbehaviour.

The phenomenon of consumer misbehaviour is described as a prominent problem, as it by being an inseparable part of consumer experience affects the experiences of all consumers; those that are not themselves misbehaving undoubtedly suffer from other’s misconduct some of the time (Fullerton & Punj 1998). Regardless that misbehavioural acts are generally considered as “part of people’s conduct in their role as consumers”, the authors also characterise consumer misbehaviour as “the dark, feral side of the consumer”, which results in material and psychological harm to both marketers and other consumers (Fullerton & Punj 1997a, p. 336; Fullerton & Punj 2004, p. 1239). Consumer misbehaviour moreover challenges the norms and role expectations of consumption and further sets the marketers’ legitimacy to set boundaries to question (Fullerton & Punj 1998). Misbehaviour hence defies the consumption system from running smoothly (ibid.).

Calling it ”the great paradox of modern culture of consumption”, Fullerton & Punj (1998, p. 394) argue widespread consumer misbehaviour to be a fundamental and even intrinsic element of consumer culture, unintentionally stimulated by the same marketing values and practices which are foremost designed to stimulate the legitimate and ideal ways of consumption. In fact, the authors call the concurrent development of consumer culture and consumer misbehaviour “the tandem evolution” as the culture and the phenomenon have evolved and grown hand in hand (Fullerton & Punj 1998, p. 402). In their historical-theoretical analysis Fullerton & Punj (ibid.) found conspicuous relationships between the core values of the contemporary culture of consumption and the known causes of consumer misbehaviour further illuminating the influencing yet unintentional role of marketing reinforcing those relationships.

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationships between the core characteristics of consumer culture and the motives for consumer misbehaviour. Firstly, the centrality of consumption and namely the power of marketers has for several reasons raised negative attitudes towards big corporations, which has respectively made them easier targets for misbehaviour (Fullerton & Punj 1998). Indeed, some consumers seem to feel that big, impersonal organisations deserve and can afford the behaviour unlike smaller companies (ibid.). The openness of new exchange environments and impulsive nature of actions, on the other hand, is considered to provoke misbehaviour by offering an opportunity to misbehave (ibid.).
Companies produce a growing number of things and experiences for consumption, thus making consumers to “desire ever more, better and newer” (Fullerton & Punj 1998, p. 404). Yet, only handful of them can afford all they desire, which further makes some consumers to violate the norms of consumption to reach their desires (ibid.). Accordingly, the changed moral values, namely the right for self-indulgence, are difficult to overcome for some consumers, which causes them to conquer possible moral constraints and misbehave (ibid.). Respectively, misbehaviour enables some thrill-seeking consumers to realise their cravings in a pulsating way, hence adding to the pleasure of the experience; similarly to how marketing and consumer culture seem to reinforce praising and legitimatising hedonism (ibid.). Further, the social meanings conveyed by material possessions is considered so strong that it often defeats doubts regarding the legitimacy of acquisitions, especially when the broader culture seems to value wealth and power (ibid.). Hence, for some consumers misbehaviour may be an attempt to overcome social inequality (ibid.).

2.2.1 Brand and clothing-related bullying among children

As previous research regarding brand and clothing-related bullying could be considered minimal, it was seen appropriate to connect such bullying behaviours to consumer misbehaviour altogether. In addition to having a negative tone in their name, there are also further characteristics that link these behaviours. To start with, both are ultimately about consumers, and more specifically about such behaviours of theirs that are thought to conflict with certain norms of a society (Fullerton & Punj 1997a). Both behaviours also pose negative direct and indirect consequences on different parts of that society: on consumers, but also on marketers and companies to whose existence consumption and thus sales are considered essential (ibid.). However, while previous research regarding consumer misbehaviour has
emphasised misbehavioural acts to occur within relationships between consumers and companies, and namely in such way that a consumer imposes them on a company, brand and clothing-related bullying regards misbehavioural actions to take place in consumer-to-consumer socialisation (Fullerton & Punj 1997a; Williams & Littlefield 2018).

Brand and clothing-related bullying can be described as a violent behaviour that ultimately stems from the tension between people’s simultaneous need to belong somewhere and to differentiate from others (Williams & Littlefield). This correspondingly reflects to the consumption of certain brands over others in that different brands hold different symbolic meaning to them (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya 2017). Hence, wearing brands and fashions that are not viewed as acceptable within a certain group of consumers might lead to that person being stigmatised and thus being treated differently, in a violent manner, in comparison to those who dress accordingly to the group standards (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya 2017; Williams & Littlefield 2018). Such behaviour is first and foremost associated with children and their socialisation due to their psychological abilities being in-progress (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Namely for this reason, and in comparison to adults, children are considered to actively reflect their environment by ‘social scaffolding’ – by learning from different socialising agents, such as parents, peers and medias (ibid.). When it comes to social behaviours and namely to acts of bullying, such external socialisation agents are of utmost importance, as bullying is often viewed to take place indeed “among peer groups against socially stigmatised vulnerable others” (ibid., p. 992).

Four types of violent social behaviours connected to brand and clothing-related bullying have been recognised in the previous study by Williams & Littlefield (2018): physical bullying, verbal bullying (e.g. name-calling, threatening), relational bullying (e.g. exclusion, brand ignorance), and lastly cyberbullying (ibid.). These behaviours have further been divided into covert and overt violence, the first one mentioned being defined as “behaviour that threatens consequences that are more social in nature” and overt violence being defined as “the threat of physical injury” (ibid., p. 10). Acknowledging that bullying is stereotypically seen as violent behaviour, the authors recognised also a range of influence strategies in the activity that aim to encourage the usage of certain brands and fashions over others (ibid.). Described by the victims, such strategies were most often characterised as punishments for negative behaviour, which included both covert and over violence in a repetitive manner, rather than positive reinforcements (ibid.). Public nature of these behaviours was furthermore considered as essential, as it might serve as “a stronger motivator to adjust consumption behaviour” towards the socially accepted norm (ibid., p. 8). As children are recognised as particularly susceptible for peer influence, they are also more prone to compare themselves to others, and thus the avoidance of peer rejection often serves as a powerful motivation to conform to dominant cultural consumption norms (ibid.).

Reportedly, against the general assumption, bullying behaviours do not limit to upper classes, but is, in fact, more common among the middle classes (Williams & Littlefield 2018). The victims of brand bullying, however, often seem to fall on the side of lower social class based on their income and thus ability to acquire the brands that are seen as desirable (Williams & Littlefield 2018). The research further confirmed, that children indeed contrast between acceptable brands associating them with in-group, and brands that can be purchased at discount stores and hypermarkets hence representing stigma by being beyond the norm (Williams & Littlefield 2018; Bouchet 2018). Sometimes the general look of clothing, or dressing too brand conscious, could be enough for ridicule or acceptance, meaning that
different or certain type of clothing can exclude one from in-group status, regardless of the garment’s label or price tag (Williams & Littlefield 2018).

The bullying behaviours affect some children more than others. In addition to negative mental and physical health outcomes related to peer rejection, often the threat of violence or social exclusion influences the behaviour of bullying victims towards the dominant ideals, which further contributes to the dominant culture and to the continuity of limitations of acceptable tastes (Williams & Littlefield 2018; Salumäki 2018). Reportedly, some parents also feel pressured to buy the right things for their children (Nalbantoglu 2017). However, the issue is not said to touch only upon consumers but is rather multifaceted. From brand management perspective, the phenomenon is disappointing, because it causes resistance towards brands and styles that are seen as being beyond the generally accepted norm, which further complicates launching new brands and styles. The dominant brands are furthermore often global and affluent, as evident in global marketing campaigns and thus in our culture, which makes them hard for smaller and local companies to compete with (Schroeder & Borgerson 2005).

2.3 Call out for social responsibility

Commonly brands engage in marketing activities resulting in outcomes that are beneficial to both the company and its stakeholders (Fry & Polonsky 2004). Nonetheless, a growing number of situations come about where marketing activities influence the stakeholders, for example consumers and eventually society at large, in an unanticipated and a negative way (ibid.). Companies have traditionally adopted an organisational perspective to evaluate the overall success of its marketing network; as the focus has been on the financial benefit to the organisation (for example profits and competitive advantage), considerations of the total set of benefits and costs to all stakeholders involved have not been paid enough attention to (ibid.). Likewise, Fullerton & Punj (2004) consider marketers to be ambivalent towards the phenomenon of consumer misbehaviour; traditionally marketers have tried to even deny its occurrence. Denying the existence of the problem, however, is considered to only reinforce the tendency of consumers to misbehave, and therefore to unintentionally ingrain misbehaviour deeper in to the culture of consumption (ibid.).

Reportedly, consumers do expect to be protected while in exchange settings, whether that is in a physical store or online today, and they criticise marketers for not preventing and taking responsibility for consumer misbehaviour (Fullerton & Punj 2004). Runmerhagen & Benkenstein (2017, p. 1857) point out, however, that "consumer misbehaviour [can not] always be ascribed to the same cause, and that responsibilities can vary between observed incidents”. Attributing the consumer misconduct to an organisational factor or to misbehaving consumer may result in different perceptions of responsibility and processing of the same type of misbehaviour; assumption of company responsibility raises consumers’ expectations of the organisation to provide a solution to the problem, whereas when customer is thought to be responsible for the situation, one is also expected to solve it (ibid.).

In service marketing research, consumer-to-consumer interactions have been researched to largely determine customers’ overall satisfaction and assessment of the service experience.
(Rummerhagen & Benkenstein 2017). Regardless, misbehaviour related to consumer-to-consumer interactions, as counts brand bullying, have been marginally researched in the past "as they have long been considered difficult to influence" (ibid., p. 1858). Ekström (2006) likewise problematised the division of responsibilities when it comes to consumer socialisation. Similarly, in case of brand bullying, ascribing responsibility between marketers and consumers can be difficult, as brand meaning is not only produced by marketers, but instead co-created with consumers (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya 2017). The general assumption that changing individual behaviour of the bullies prevents brand and clothing-related violent behaviour from happening, however, hides under the social and structural causes of bullying, and particularly the role of consumer culture maintaining and reproducing social class hierarchies (Williams & Littlefield 2018).

The conceptualisations of children as consumers add another aspect to the considerations of social responsibility. On one hand, it makes practical sense to consider that children have their own desires and preferences and that they are at least to some extent able to act upon them, even if preferences would be mediated by parents, laws and other gatekeepers (Cook 2011). Moreover, marketing is considered to contribute to children’s empowerment as consumers, and "knowing the child" in a particular way through research can provide the company a competitive advantage (ibid.). On the other hand, these new conceptualisations are thought to "[bring] the child in as a partner against counterclaims about inappropriateness in terms of level of development or concerns about materialism" (ibid.). Thus, as Cook (ibid.) debates, conceptualising children as competent, knowing consumers reaches more dimensions than merely providing a moral cover for marketers; instead, it also brings fore matters of the moral and ethics of markets and market behaviours in terms of who and what can be perceived as appropriate subjects of commercial action.

Hence, the challenge for brands and other organisations in today’s competitive marketing environment is not limited to producing profits and benefits for their shareholders, but also to consider how various stakeholders evaluate "exchange success" (Fry & Polonsky 2004, p. 1209). As Fry & Polonsky (2004) describe, increasing profit does not necessarily mean improved quality of life for communities. Thus, marketers would need to adopt broader perspectives for evaluating exchange networks, to weigh both value chains and harm chains, and "manage their affairs in such way that […] they are not detrimental to society” (ibid., p. 1209).

### 2.3.1 Prevention of misbehaviour related to consumption

In their extensive research on consumer misbehaviour, Fullerton & Punj (2004) have also analysed how negative consumer behaviour could be managed and controlled. As misbehaviour by consumers is said to have serious consequences, both financially and socially, it is no wonder that efforts to control it are a matter of interest for both practitioners and other consumers (Fullerton & Punj 1997b). Researchers and other social observers have suggested solutions ranging widely between macro-level resolutions (society), mid-level co-operations (marketers and municipalities) and micro-level changes (companies) (ibid.). The most common approaches to managing consumption-related misbehaviours are, however, deterrence and education (Fullerton & Punj 1997b; Fullerton & Punj 2004). The most significant difference between these approaches is that the first one aims to intimidate
misbehavers by emphasising deterrent measures, while the latter aims to impact proactively by changing consumers’ overall and moral attitudes (Fullerton & Punj 1997b).

Table 1. Summary of reasons for consumer misbehaviour and likelihood of control (Fullerton & Punj 1997b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Likelihood of control through education</th>
<th>Likelihood of control through deterrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative attitudes towards exchange institution</td>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathological socialisation</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low and moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calculating opportunism</td>
<td>Low and moderate</td>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provocative situational factors</td>
<td>Low to moderate</td>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfilled aspirations</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of moral constraints</td>
<td>Low and moderate</td>
<td>Moderate to good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviant thrill-seeking</td>
<td>Moderate at best</td>
<td>Low to moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential association</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low to moderate to high</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Deterrence is reportedly the most commonly used approach for management of consumer misbehaviour, which stresses the usage of formal and informal sanctions (Fullerton & Punj 2004). It is founded upon deterrence theory arguing that systematic and consistent deterrence procedures could effectively prevent misbehaviour from happening by magnifying the perceived risks related to misconduct (ibid.). Deterrence strategy is considered to mesh especially well with the idea that misbehaviour would be the outcome of rationally calculated opportunism by increasing the “costs” and cutting the perceived “benefits” of misconduct (Fullerton & Punj 1997b). Contrastingly, deterrence will be of no use against consumer misbehaviour that is based on thrill-seeking or negative attitudes towards the exchange institution; instead, such measures can reinforce the behaviour by offering additional sense of thrill or by reinforcing beliefs that the organisation is distrustful (ibid.). Moreover, consumer perceptions of and reactions to the risks of the sanctions seem to vary from intimidation to laughter, and deterrence measures may as well have a counterproductive effect on well-behaving consumers if they feel harassed (ibid.).

The educational approach, on the other hand, aims to manage misbehaviour by deploying promotional messages to persuade consumers “to unlearn patterns of misconduct and to strengthen moral constraints which inhibit misbehaviour” (Fullerton & Punj 1997b, p. 340;
Fullerton & Punj 2004, p. 1245). Managing misbehaviour through education is rooted in control theory, which in turn is based on the assumption that connecting all groups to the values of larger society would reduce deviance (Fullerton & Punj 2004). Education could prove overpowering to deterrence in preventing misconduct based in negative attitudes towards institutions (ibid.). According to Fullerton & Punj (ibid.), education could however be ruled out when aiming to prevent misbehaviours related to unfilled aspirations, differential association, psychological problems and provocative situational factors, as its effectiveness in these cases is seen as minimal.

### 2.3.2 Prevention of brand and clothing-related bullying

Research regarding the management or control of brand or clothing-related bullying is minimal. On the other hand, the research emphasis of the phenomenon has typically been directed heavily on consumer end prevention activities (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Common view has been that “alteration of individual behaviour [...] will serve to prevent the activity” (Williams & Littlefield 2018, p. 2). In their research Williams & Littlefield (ibid.) indeed found a range of responses that suggested either embracing or rejecting the dominant discourse. Approach of embracing is characterised as an active desire to avoid getting bullied and hence adopting the dominant way of consumption, whereas rejection approach is thought to actively fight the stigma of difference, commonly through “an alternative aesthetic” or by other type of active opposition, such as providing a verbal self-justification (ibid., p. 17).

Both approaches described in the previous chapter (2.3.1) can be contrasted to approaches of passive resignation and doing nothing (Fullerton & Punj 2004). Deterrence, however, would not likely be the most suitable control technique or strategy regarding such misbehaviours as brand bullying for several reasons. First, the most common type of bullying, namely relational bullying, is difficult to detect (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Second, brand bullying often occurs in such situations that are out of reach of marketers, school personnel, parents or other type of authority who should intervene bullying situations and discipline the bully (ibid.). Third, determining suitable sanctions for the behaviour would be difficult, if not even unethical (ibid.). Education in its different forms, on the other hand, would seem appropriate considering who the matter touches upon the most (ibid.). Valkenburg & Cantor (2001) asserted the foundation for consumption patterns and behaviour to be laid during the first twelve years of life. Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya (2017) further declared children to rely largely on different medias saturated with marketing as socialising agents. Children are moreover considered the future (Calvert 2008). Hence, it can be argued that shaping attitudes towards open-mindedness in terms of the diversity and versatility of life could only help with breaking the outdated constructs of social class hierarchies that also seem to fuel those bullying behaviours.
2.3.2.1 The mediating role of parents and media literacy programs

It has previously been suggested that education by marketers, together with parents and academic personnel, might prevent bullying behaviour from occurring (Williams & Littlefield 2018). In the main, children and specifically young children are using technological devices and thus being exposed to marketing efforts within the family home (Calvert 2008). Parents are also undoubtedly providing their children the financial resources to make purchases (ibid.). Thus, parents can be considered as efficient gatekeepers of children’s commercial action (ibid.). Parents’ role and responsibility in managing children’s usage of technological devices and hence exposure to marketing communications, and further in handling product requests has previously been emphasised (ibid.). Calvert (ibid.) argues that indeed parents’ actions could prove influential in shaping children’s responses to marketed products and further in how marketing affects their children’s developmental outcomes. Moreover, the research regarding children’s consumer socialisation have not only asserted parents’ role as gatekeepers of their children’s commercial action, but also acknowledged the power of parental force in terms of influence (Ekström 2010). That is, parents are seen to transmit those values and ideals as well as models for behaviour to their children (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Such would suggest, that parents would thus need pay more attention to what they are passing on by the process of social scaffolding.

The explosive growth of technology has shaped not only the commercial world, but also the everyday life of people. Children’s heavy usage of different medias, that today are saturated with commercial messaging, have previously been connected both to children’s empowerment when it comes to consumer life (Cook 2011), as well as having a negative impact on children’s psychological development (Calvert 2008). Media literacy programs have been suggested to provide part-solution to the problem. These programs would consist of school-based efforts to educate children to understand and critically evaluate media conventions, such as commonly used marketing techniques (ibid.). The aim of these programs would indeed be to educate and influence children to “become critical citizens in a democratic society […] where market forces have growing influence on our daily lives” both online and offline (Tufte & Rasmussen 2010). However, societal media literacy education is also problematised in a sense that those deciding and governing it are generally considered to lag far behind marketers and children in relation to media technology and new media applications (ibid.). Tufte & Rasmussen (ibid.). describe older generation of parents and politicians generally not to have sufficient knowledge themselves regarding these applications so that they could guide and assist children in using them. It has been suggested, however, that marketers, consumer organisations and politicians could take more of a proactive stance in bridging this ‘gap of knowledge’ by providing information, teaching and other initiatives for media literacy education (ibid.).

2.3.2.2 Pedagogical marketing communications

In contemporary consumer culture marketers are viewed as cultural engineers, who shape people’s thinking and feelings through marketing practices, such as branded commodities and marketing communications (Holt 2002). Schroeder & Borgerson (2005, p. 578) respectively recognise marketing communications as a global communication system that shapes and
provides resources for “our understandings of the world”. Arguably these marketing accounts, however, channel and reproduce only dominant ideologies, which contributes to our understanding being narrow, hence stigmatising the idiosyncrasies that exist beyond the generally accepted norms (Holt 2002). This further causes industries to produce only a conformity of style and to discriminate those beyond the dominant ideals, hence precluding interpretation of things (ibid.).

Today, children confront the market earlier than ever before (Calvert 2008; Ekström 2010). Children are furthermore considered not only to be early adopters of newer technologies, but also heavy on using media altogether (Calvert 2008). These devices and medias are further considered to have become essential sources of information when it comes to children’s learning and socialising processes (Bertilsson & Tarnovskaya 2017). Marketers, too, rely heavily on newer technological advances and medias to convey their commercial messages. A large part of this corporate communication constitutes of visual material, such as images of people, namely models or other celebrity endorsers, influencers and consumer spokespersons (Schroeder & Borgerson 2005). “Serving as stimuli, signs or representations that drive cognition, interpretation and preference”, this imagery can be considered to influence what children know and believe, and hence affect how they behave in certain situations (ibid., p. 578). Schroeder & Borgerson (2005) argue, that it thus should no longer be considered satisfactory to associate marketing communications solely with persuasion (ibid). Instead, brand communication should be seen as a representational system which, beyond being a strategic tool, should further be used for its pedagogical functions (ibid.). Hence, ethical aspects of marketing communications should not only be considered in terms of the target market’s age and perceived savviness as was described in chapter 2.3, but regarding its content and namely the kind of representations of identities it evokes.

When it comes to proactively fighting bullying behaviours stemming from brands and clothing choices, brands and marketers could through marketing communications inform the children of respect for individual consumption preferences and different kind of identities through new and various kinds of representations of identity (Schroeder & Borgerson 2005; Williams & Littlefield 2018).
3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis is built upon the consumer culture theory and further to its branch focusing on marketplace ideologies. These ideologies are further communicated through certain discourses in the social world, which is why the theory of discourse also seemed particularly appropriate for the framework of this study. Two dominant discourses of the child consumer were chosen for this thesis, as the study is investigating brand and clothing-related bullying among children. These two theories are seen as complementing each other when studying a phenomenon central to the contemporary consumer culture.

3.1 Consumer culture theory

Despite its name consumer culture theory (CCT) does not refer to a unified theory, but rather to “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings” (Arnould & Thompson 2005, p. 868). Although the researchers within CCT are considered to represent various theoretical approaches and research goals, their efforts can often be linked by the mutual orientation towards the studies of cultural complexity (ibid.). Yet, four different research approaches within CCT are generally emphasised: consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, socio-historical consumption patterns and marketplace ideologies (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Ekström, Otosson, Parment & Ehnsiö 2017).

Although CCT’s focus is in on culture, it, instead of representing “a homogeneous system of shared meanings, values and ways of life”, aims to explore the heterogeneous and various meanings found in the marketplace (Ekström et al. 2017, p. 190). Generally speaking, CCT has helped in developing significant knowledge of consumption and marketplace behaviours (Arnould & Thompson 2005). Studies regarding the consumption of market-made commodities and marketing symbols is considered an integral part of CCT (ibid.). However, the term ‘consumer culture’ also refers to an interconnected regime of commercially produced images and texts which certain groups of participants - consumers - use to make collective sense of their environments, and which thus guide their experiences and lives (ibid.). Marketplace ideologies are therefore considered important, as they shape consumers’ and other actors’ thoughts, feelings and actions (ibid.). This branch of CCT is considered of particular importance for this thesis, as those marketplace ideologies likely influence marketing practitioners’ perceptions of the phenomenon, and their actions to fight it.

Qualitative methods are generally found more suitable when studying consumer culture, as CCT often focuses on aspects of consumption, that are not approachable through measures such as experimentations or surveys (Arnould & Thompson 2005). Nevertheless, quantitative and analytic methods can not be completely excluded from the area of research, as they can still be used if they are found necessary (ibid.).
3.2 Discourse theory

Neither discourse theory can be considered a concrete system of ideas nor a generally accepted theory (Mills 1997). Instead, it refers to “a range of different theories which have been broadly grouped under the term ‘discourse theory’” (ibid., p. 16). Although the French social theorist, philosopher and public intellectual Michel Foucault is a central character in the discussions of discourse, there are also many other theorists whose contribution to the different perspectives of discourse theory can be considered important (Mills 1997; Cole 2019a). “Institutional nature of discourse and its situatedness in the social” are considered to be essential attributes that group these different perspectives together (Mills 1997, p. 11).

Simply put, discourse is a direction, or a way to communicate about and understand the world and phenomena around us (Cole 2019b). Foucault further elaborates discourse to be “the general domain of all statements”; the sum of signs and their relations, which communicate meaning between and among objects, subjects and concepts (Cole 2019b; Mills 1997, p. 7). According to Foucault, however, discourses are more than merely a way of thinking. By being embedded to and emerging out of social institutions, such as different organisations and media, it gives structure and order to language and thought (Cole 2019b). It hence organises “both our sense of reality and the notion of our own identity” (Mills 1997, p. 5). Thus, discourses affect social life by shaping thoughts, ideas, beliefs, values, identities and behaviours, and by doing so produces much of what takes place within us and in societies (Cole 2019b).

Discourse is seen as rooted in and emerging out of relations of power, because those in control of previously described institutions control it according to a certain ideology or world view (Cole 2019b). Discourse is a representation of a certain ideology through thought and language (ibid.). By representing a certain world view, discourses tend to legitimise only a certain kind of knowledge and undermine others, hence connecting power to itself (ibid.). In a certain ideology, dominant discourses, or ways of thinking, are considered normal and right, while other discourses are considered abnormal and wrong, therefore contributing to minorities becoming marginalised and stigmatised (ibid.). Therefore discourse, power, and knowledge are considered to be connected, and together they work to create hierarchies (ibid.).

3.2.1 Two prevailing discourses on children as consumers

Considerations regarding the extent to which children can be said to behave as knowing consumers revolves around different judgments that touch upon the appropriateness of the promotional message or the product itself in terms of the target market’s age and developmental stage (Cook 2011). Over time, there have been two prevailing discourses on children as consumers: one considering them as competent, or at least being capable of learning the skills for life as a consumer, and another considering them as victims who need to be protected from the dangers of marketing activities (Ekström 2010). In adults’ way of thinking, the child consumer has hence stood for both individual autonomy and corporate exploitation (Cook 2007). Incorporating consumer life to development of technology and
different medias moreover add another twist to such considerations, as those undoubtedly are a prominent part of today’s consumption realm (Tufte & Rasmussen 2010).

As demonstrated above in figure 2, there are two dominant approaches to consider children’s competencies in relation to digitalisation and consumption (Tufte & Rasmussen 2010). On left side, there is a concept of that child who is on one’s way to become a grown-up (ibid.). This discourse emphasises guiding and educating the child (ibid.). School is generally seen as advocating the position by “educating the child to become a good citizen in a democratic society” (ibid.). Respectively, books and traditional media represent the cultural capital in this way of thinking (ibid.). On the other hand, the right side represents free market sources, namely marketers and others interested in the children’s market, who view children to be competent social beings by emphasising children’s capabilities to make choices and further to influence other members of the family (ibid.). This discourse thus views children as competent both as consumers and users of new media (ibid.). Parents, teachers, politicians and other mediators are considered to fall in between in these two dominant approaches by balancing between them by “doing their best to educate children and take the appropriate pedagogical and legal action” (ibid.). These approaches are further discussed under following subheadings.

3.2.1.1 Consumer critical discourse: the vulnerable child

One of the biggest perspectives on researching the effects of advertising and marketing on children are analyses of age-based changes in children’s comprehension of commercial messages and the intent behind them (Calvert 2008). Developmental psychologists, and marketing and communication researchers, often refer to the four stages of Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development to explain how children of different ages understand advertising in different media, such as in television (ibid.).
Generally speaking, before the age of eight, children believe the purpose of marketing communications to be helping them in buying decisions; they are not aware of commercials’ persuasive intent to make them purchase specific products (Calvert 2008). During the stage of preoperational thought, roughly from ages two to seven, children are considered perceptually bound and hence focus on properties such as product looks (ibid.) Young children at this stage also commonly use animistic thinking and can hence believe imaginary events and characters to be real (ibid). Calvert (ibid.) further considers preoperational modes of thought to put children in a definitive disadvantage in understanding the commercial intent of marketing communications, and thus in being capable of making informed choices regarding product requests and purchases. Not until the stage of operational thought, ages seven to eleven, are children considered to understand their world in a more realistic way (ibid.). Among other things, children at this stage understand that perceptual manipulations do not change the ultimate qualities of a product (ibid.). Furthermore, children begin to grasp the true intent of advertising (ibid.). By the stage of formal operational thought, age twelve and upward, adolescents are considered capable of reasoning abstractly and comprehending the motives of marketers (ibid.).

Building up on previously demonstrated Piaget’s theory, Deborah Roedder-John (1999) has formulated a three-stage model of consumer socialisation: the perceptual stage covering ages three to seven, the analytical stage covering ages seven to eleven, and the reflective stage covering ages eleven to sixteen (Calvert 2008). During the perceptual stage, children are considered to focus on ”single dimensions of objects and events” thus limiting their decision-making skills as informed consumers (ibid., p. 215). Within the analytical stage, children’s knowledge of marketing techniques and brands becomes more sophisticated, as they gain further abilities to analyse products from more than one perspective at a time (ibid.). Over the reflective stage, ”a mature understanding of products and marketing practices results in relatively sophisticated knowledge of products and advertiser intent” (ibid., p. 215).

Defining ‘a consumer’ as being ”able to feel wants and preferences, to search to fulfil them, to make a choice and a purchase, and to evaluate the products and its alternatives”, Valkenburg & Cantor (2001, p. 62) have further elaborated children’s psychological development into consumers. Incorporating a variety of different theoretical perspectives from literature, authors discuss each of the phases of consumer behaviour and expound why certain
characteristics of consumer behaviour emerge at a certain age (ibid.). The model has four stages as follows:

Table 2. Summary of the four stages of child’s development into a consumer (Valkenburg & Cantor 2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Consumer Behaviour</th>
</tr>
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| Later elementary school, 8-12 years        | • Eye for detail and quality develops  
   • Sincere interest towards real-life phenomena  
   • Preference for collecting objects  
   • Ability to recognise and interpret other's emotions  
   • Importance of the opinions of peers  
   • Preference for products with social function  
   • Developing criticality towards advertisements |
|                                            | → Consumer                                                                                              |
| Early elementary school, 5-8 years         | • Many of the characteristics of the previous group  
   • Ability to distinguish fantasy and reality is in transition  
   • Attention span becomes larger  
   • Imaginative play and preference for more fast-paced entertainment |
|                                            | → First independent purchase                                                                             |
| Preschoolers, 3-5 years                    | • Limited ability to distinguish fantasy from reality and commercials from tv programs  
   • Think that information in commercials is true  
   • Responsiveness to programs with a slow pace and a lot of repetition and to individual striking features of products  
   • Can not keep their minds off tempting products for long  
   • Learning to negotiate |
|                                            | → Conflicts in consumption situations                                                                    |
| Infants and toddlers, 0-2 years             | • Innate tendency to respond to language and speech  
   • Responsiveness towards songs, rhymes and music  
   • Preference for colourful and sharp contrasted imagery |
|                                            | Consumer behaviour is primarily reactive and not very intentional.  
   → Children of consumers                                                                         |

Infants and toddlers, aged zero to two years, are reported to already have desires and preferences regarding what to eat, wear, watch or play with (Valkenburg & Cantor 2001). Babies’ preference for music and for images with sharp contrasts and colours tend to be well acknowledged within education and marketing departments; it is no coincidence that such elements are often a prominent part of educational and entertainment programs for children at this stage (ibid). Children are further said to start making connections between television advertising and products in the store by the age of two (ibid.). Nevertheless, the children of this age group can not be considered as consumers on their own right, since their product choices are not yet goal-directed (ibid.). Instead they can be referred to as ‘children of consumers’ (ibid.). Within the second stage, preschoolers aged two to five, children seem to
think that the informational content of commercials is true; they do not comprehend the persuasive intent of advertising and they further have difficulties to distinguish advertising from other television content (ibid.). Another characteristic influencing the consumer behaviour of this age group might be the tendency to focus on an individual, prominent feature of an object over other, less striking features (ibid.). Preschoolers can further not keep their minds off from desirable products for long, which causes children to nag and demand for certain products by whining and throwing tantrums, further causing conflicts between children and parents (ibid.; Calvert 2008).

By the time of early elementary school, children have learned more effective negotiation skills to get desired products (Calvert 2008; Valkenburg & Cantor 2001). Many of the characteristics of preschoolers are said also to hold for early elementary school, to ages between five and eight (Valkenburg & Cantor 2001). However, many of the previously described characteristics of are also considered to be in transition during the third stage (ibid.). First, children at this stage "begin to make clearer distinctions between what is real and what is imaginary" (ibid.; Calvert 2008, p. 215). They are further able to hold their attention to far longer than at previous stages (ibid.). The first purchases, outside the company of parents, are also commonly made at this stage of development (ibid.). During the final stage, from eight to twelve years, children’s choice of consumption goods start to be heavily influenced by the opinions of their peers and "their understanding of other’s emotions [start to improve] considerably” (Calvert 2008, p. 215; Valkenburg & Cantor 2001). Children at the later elementary school -stage moreover develop their eye for details and quality, and thereby learn to critically evaluate and compare products and information given about them, for example in advertisements (ibid.). In the later years of this stage, children’s view of the world turns further realistic, and their interest in products shifts from toys to products with social function, such as music or sports equipment, that could be of interest also for adults (Valkenburg & Cantor 2001).

Considering the information given before, it is no wonder that marketing activities have been declared to have the highest impact on children aged of eight and below (Valkenburg & Cantor 2001). Respectively, it neither seems obscure why some accounts consider children of the same age specifically vulnerable to marketing activities (ibid.; Calvert 2008). Valkenburg & Cantor (2001) conclude that although the consumer behaviour continues to develop throughout adolescence and further to adulthood, generally speaking a child does by the age of twelve fulfil the previously described definition of a consumer.

### 3.2.1.2 Marketing discourse: the competent child

Although the previously described psychological development approach, based on the work of Piaget, has its benefits, it has been criticised for not considering how children are socialised into consumers within specific social and cultural contexts of their everyday lives; how it is to be a child in the consumer culture (Nairn 2010). Thus, researchers have come to broaden their research frameworks, moving away from quantitative experimental methods to using qualitative methods, to study children’s understanding of consumer world beyond age differences, acknowledging that such things as gender, ethnicity, social dynamics and other societal changes are likely to influence how children interact with the realm of consumption (Nairn 2010; Ekström 2006). Academic field that studies this type of cultural consumer
development is sociology, which examines such processes in which people adopt culture that they are born into (Ekström 2006). More specifically, cultural consumer socialisation has its focus on how people obtain their social characteristics and learn to think and behave in such manner that is considered appropriate in that society (ibid.). Specific focus is on those socialising agents that contribute to people’s learning, as only changes originating from interaction with other people can be considered to be products of socialisation (ibid.). However, that interaction can be direct or indirect by nature (ibid.). The advances of technology and digitalisation have enabled socialisation to take place in many other ways than before, as internet with unlimited amount of reference groups has become an important consumer socialising agent, empowering children in their competencies as consumers (ibid.).

Cook (2007, p. 38) defines ‘the child consumer’ as ”a social [construct – that is] an assemblage of qualities, beliefs and conjectures concerning the “nature” and motivation of children regarding commercial goods and meanings”. This child consumer is considered to reside in marketing communications and in business strategies altogether, often guiding the imaginations and actions of manufacturers and marketers (ibid.). Hence, Cook (ibid.) further elaborates the concept to emerge from discourses produced by marketers, researchers, and all those interested in the children’s market. Such accounts view children to be ”competent social subjects with the right to participate in society and have an influence over their own lives” (Tingstad 2007, p. 27). In case of consumer culture, this means that children are addressed as ”consumers in their own right, with their own money to spend, and with the capability to make their own purchase decisions” (Johansson 2004, p. 229).

Accordingly to the previously discussed construct of the child consumer, Brembeck, Johansson & Kampmann (2004) recognise the competent child as reflexive, autonomous and robust. This conceptualisation has been dealt widely in the research of several fields, including culture, pedagogy and media (ibid.). Månsson (2008) describes how the concept and the current childhood seem to have many characteristics in common; that children today are viewed as social actors, who as equally engage in shaping their social reality as they are objects of adult socialisation. Understandingly, however, these views have also stirred certain concerns and expectations (Brembeck, Johansson & Kampmann 2004). Månsson (2008, p. 3) describes how ”the emphasis on a self-governed, self-regulating child can lead to expectations of the child as being able to handle too much on its own, to make tough decisions demanding adult responsibility”. Indeed, the question of responsibility is a relevant matter for such conceptualisations (Ekström 2006). When it comes to consumer socialisation in the consumer society, one might question whether and to what extent it is that society’s responsibility to educate people to function as consumers (ibid.). Finding that balance seems to be problematic, as society is simultaneously expected to educate its members to be responsible and “allow for the development of free and creative, [individualistic people]” (ibid., pp. 74-75).
4 Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology of this thesis. It presents the philosophical stances behind the research and further presents the methods for gathering the empirical data as well as for its analysis. Ethical considerations of the research are also included in this chapter.

4.1 Research philosophy and approach

The term ‘research philosophy’ refers to the development of knowledge and further to the nature of that knowledge (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009). It comprises of important assumptions regarding the researcher’s world view, and which hence underpins the research strategy and the chosen methods as a part of that strategy (ibid.). The main influence is a particular view "of the relationship between knowledge and the process by which it is developed” (ibid., p. 108).

This research takes a subjectivist ontological standpoint, hence viewing social phenomena to be created from the perceptions and actions of those social actors, that are concerned with their existence (Saunders et al. 2009). Subjectivity is considered particularly suitable for this research, as the purpose is to explore the meanings that individuals, namely marketing communication practitioners, attach to the phenomenon of brand and clothing-related bullying (ibid.). Considering the purpose and research questions of this study further, taking an epistemological position of interpretivism seems appropriate, as subjective views of those social actors are considered central to understanding the phenomenon (ibid.). Given that this research follows a subjective and interpretivist thinking, it further follows inductive reasoning. Inductive approach namely aims to build a theory based on the findings of the conducted research, usually relying heavily on qualitative data (Saunders et al. 2009). Inductive approach seems more suitable for this research, as the purpose is to collect marketing communication practitioners’ views on the matter of brand and clothing-related bullying and social responsibilities, and further to explore their perceptions of how the issue could be solved through the activities of marketing communications.

4.2 Sampling

The sampling of this study was purposive, meaning that the sampling was conducted in a deliberate, strategic manner with a certain purpose in mind (Bryman & Bell 2015; Punch 2014). That purpose emerged out of the collision of previous research’s pointing finger towards brands and marketers while actually lacking marketer perceptions of marketplace phenomena. Thus, this research’s objective was to fill that gap by taking a sample namely among the marketers to understand how they perceive the phenomenon of brand and clothing-
related bullying among children. Similarly to as Bryman & Bell (2015) debate, the sampling was thus directly connected to the research questions of this study.

Twenty-five Finnish children’s clothing brands were contacted in mid-March to take part in this study. The contacted brands were chosen on the basis that their product is designed specifically for the use and consumption of children, that their product is pricewise more expensive than the average product in the market, and that they originate from Finland. This kind of sampling strategy was initially seen as ideal, as the study was to examine a phenomenon that is central to children’s usage of brands and thus also to children’s socialisation. Limiting the study to Finland was further motivated with the contemporary magnitude of Finnish children’s clothing market. The interview requests were further aimed at brand employees working in departments of marketing and communications, as those are considered to produce and manage the content in different medias, which again are seen as important socialising agents to children. Unfortunately, only a few of the contacted brands replied, and thus another bunch of requests were sent to local marketing agencies in the beginning and halfway April. Extending the interview repertoire to marketing agencies was reasoned with the marketing communication focus of this research. However, as the results of the hunt for suitable interviewees still seemed to lack, total of fifteen children’s clothing brands from Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden were further contacted to participate to this study by phone interview in the end of April.

Out of the total of fifty interview requests sent, twelve replied. In the end, six marketing communication practitioners from Finland agreed to be interviewed for their perceptions of the matter, on behalf for the represented brands and marketing agencies. Three respondents were representing Finnish children’s clothing brands, and three respondents Finnish marketing agencies. Respondents C and D were interviewed at the same time, as they were working for the same brand’s marketing communications and thus interviewing this way seemed more convenient for them.

Table 3. Respondents, their position and type of a company represented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Representing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Marketing manager</td>
<td>Brand A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Marketing manager</td>
<td>Brand B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Social media manager</td>
<td>Brand C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Co-founder / Project - / account manager</td>
<td>Marketing agency A / Brand C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Art director</td>
<td>Marketing agency B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Art director</td>
<td>Marketing agency C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3 Data collection method

This study was conducted by semi-structured interviews with marketing communication practitioners. In cultural marketing research, interviews are considered as a certain form of social interaction that is guided and constraint by relevant cultural discourses and particular cultural conventions about how interviews should be carried out, both by the interviewee and the interviewer (Moisander & Valtonen 2006). Beyond being a method for gathering information, an interview is rather considered as a vehicle for producing cultural talk, which can further be analysed to gain cultural knowledge about the marketplace (ibid.). In this sense, “interview participants are […] understood as actively involved in using the available cultural resources and discursive practices to construct meaningful accounts of social reality” (ibid., p. 71).

In case of this study, the interviews were themed around the phenomenon (brand and clothing-related bullying), responsibility and prevention of the phenomenon. As all interviewees were from Finland, the interviews were accordingly conducted in Finnish language. Interviews lasted approximately one hour each, the shortest recording being forty minutes long and the longest being one hour and fifteen minutes. The interviews were held, and the data was gathered in Pori, Helsinki and one over the phone on a five-week period from the beginning of April to the first week of May 2019.

4.4 Method for analysing the data

The focus in analysing interview material is not to collect information about facts and views about marketplace phenomena, but instead to examine meanings and practices through which social reality is constructed (Moisander & Valtonen 2006). More specifically, as Moisander & Valtonen (ibid., p. 72) further describe, the analytic focus of cultural research “lies on the ways in which marketplace phenomena are represented or produced discursively in text, talk, images and other signifying practices”. The context in which the data is produced is also an important matter that needs to be taken into consideration when analysing it (Moisander & Valtonen 2006). As Moisander & Valtonen (ibid., p. 72) debate, in interviews “we ‘do’ authentic experiences as much as we do opinion offering”. The data in this study was co-produced by the author guiding and constraining the discussion. Moreover, two of the respondents were interviewed at the same time, and hence this interview was not only co-produced by me, but also by the other respondent.

The interpretation of the empirical data is not objective. As Moisander & Valtonen (2006) state, in qualitative research the data is open to multiple interpretations. A certain interpretation constitutes of the cultural pre-understanding of that interpreter – “the accumulation of the beliefs, codes, metaphors, myths, events, practices, institutions and ideologies that shape one’s interpretation” (ibid., p. 107). My cultural knowledge of the subject matter constitutes of my perceptions of children as more or less knowing consumers, and my views of marketers having that authoritative role in shaping the ways in which people think, feel and behave. Respectively, my understanding of disciplinary academic knowledge constitutes of those cultural marketing and consumption courses studied, and of books and
scientific articles read throughout higher education and particularly during the process of writing this thesis. These assumptions and perceptions affect my analysis of the data, as they have affected the whole writing process from planning to sampling, and further to conducting the interviews.

The analysis of the empirical data was started off with first listening the interviews soon after they were conducted, after which they were transcribed; five hours and thirty-six minutes of recorded material turned into seventy-one pages of text. The actual analysis was carried out by a method that counts as thematic content analysis, which Bryman (2016, p. 584) describes not to be a truly identifiable approach by not constituting of “a distinctive cluster of techniques”. In fact, precise, systematic approaches can be criticised for making the analysis process too technical, thus running the risk for producing highly expectable results (Moisander & Valtonen 2006). Following previously mentioned guidelines, the analysis of the interview texts was done in a rigour manner, but without exact systematic practices. Among other things I looked for norms in the text, as well as the ways in which the respondents produced the ‘other’ in their talk. According to Moisander & Valtonen (2006) it is important to question why there are norms and why certain norms are referred to in a certain situation. Respectively, searching for other in the text is considered to offer insights into the nature of different subject positions that different market actors assign to one another (ibid.). After reading the transcripts for several times, more themes were discovered that were further separated into subcategories. In the end, the final themes found in the results and analysis - section emerged from the data.

4.5 Considerations of trustworthiness and authenticity

Generally speaking, establishing and assessing the quality of qualitative research is considered somewhat problematic, as research of qualitative nature can typically not be measured. In fact, some accounts consider the application of frameworks such as reliability and validity to disregard the essence of subjective nature of qualitative research (Bryman & Bell 2015). Thus, this research aims to consider its quality similarly to the criterion of trustworthiness and authenticity, as suggested by Guba & Lincoln (ibid.).

Trustworthiness of qualitative research constitutes of four criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Bryman & Bell 2015). The constraints in time and other resources limited the opportunities to validate this research’s findings and their interpretation, which respectively affected the credibility and the dependability of this research to be considered low. On the other hand, the transferability of this research could be considered to be high because of the highly strategic sampling process contributing to “rich accounts of the details of a culture” (ibid., p. 402). Similarly, as a researcher, I have tried to my best in acting “in good faith”, meaning that my personal values or theoretical inclinations should not have overtly affected the conduct and findings of this research, which again should have aided the confirmability of this research (ibid., p. 403).

Additionally, the research can be considered to have reached authenticity in fairness by indeed representing those viewpoints of the marketplace phenomena that are rarely studied, namely marketing practitioners’ views on brand and clothing-related bullying (Bryman & Bell
2015). Respectively, this is also considered to contribute to the educative and ontological authenticity by aiding understanding and respect between different members of the consumer culture, and thus to increase the overall understanding of the consumption realm (ibid.).

### 4.5.1 Considerations of ethics

When it comes to planning a research and collecting, analysing and reporting data, it is important to pay attention to research ethics (Saunders et al. 2009). In the context of research, ethics refer to the appropriateness of researcher’s behaviour in relation to the rights of those who are researched, or who otherwise become affected by it (ibid.).

The respondents were informed of the purpose of this study in the initial interview request, which I sent to the contacted companies by e-mail, and again in the beginning of the interview. The interviewees knew the subjects and themes of the discussion beforehand, so that they could prepare their thoughts for the actual interview situation. The respondents participated this study voluntarily, and they were informed of their right to leave the interview situation at any point if they wished so, and further of their right to leave questions unanswered. The interviewees were further aware that their statements might be shown as a part of my report’s findings. To protect respondents’ privacy, anonymity regarding respondent’s name and the represented company was agreed upon before I started recording.
5 Results and analysis

Generally speaking, children’s consumption of brands and goods altogether takes place within a social environment (Ekström 2010). Children’s consumer life is mediated by adults, namely parents, and further highly influenced by other socialising agents, such as peers and marketing-saturated medias (Calvert 2008). Thus, to examine and to provide solutions for a phenomenon that is perceived, above all, central to children’s socialisation and consumption of brands, one must also understand which socialising forces are considered to have contributed to the birth of the issue. Hence, the results and their analysis are presented as five chapters, which each discuss the perceived socialising forces and their contributions to the phenomenon. Those reference groups that are acknowledged in this study are children and adults with specific focus on parents. Other socialising agents are digitalised consumption realm with its marketing-saturated medias, and fashion in relation to consumer society.

5.1 Children – mere reflections of consumerist society and modern parenting?

Children were considered central characters to the phenomenon of brand and clothing-related bullying, and hence it is no wonder that a lot of the discussion revolved around them. The bullying activity was connected primarily to school environment, and it was thought to especially touch upon teenagers, but also increasingly upon younger children due to digitalisation and social medias, which have contributed to increasing the knowledge of brands and fashions, while also allowing that information to reach ever younger children.

5.1.1 Rather vulnerable than competent child consumer

As discussed in the theoretical framework of this study, there have been two prevailing discourses on children as consumers: one that considers them as vulnerable victims of marketing, and one that considers them as competent social actors in the consumption realm (Ekström 2010). In the discussions, the respondents more often referred to that discourse of the vulnerable child, as children’s behaviour was often characterised almost as being mere reflections of their parents’ values and actions, or as being influenced so easily by marketing in different medias. Children’s psychological capabilities to look beyond marketing communications was also highlighted, further suggesting connections to the previously described psychological discourse of that vulnerable child.

When discussing who should bear the responsibility for the bullying activity and the harm that it causes, none of the respondents named children. Instead, children’s behaviour was seen to be so much influenced by the actions of the closest reference groups, namely parents, that children were not held accountable for their behaviour. Children’s actions were hence seen as
reflections of what happens around them rather than conscious decisions to cause harm, as following statement suggests:

I think that [the responsibility] distributes to both ends (to consumers and to brands), except not to children, in that I view children as rather receiving party after all... although they sure do pass on such messages to each other, by bullying I mean, but [the phenomenon] is in not in any way children’s fault.

(Respondent D)

The vulnerability of children was further acknowledged when considering the kind of influence that different medias have on them. Many of the respondents reflected this view through using their observations of their own children, or of children they know, as a reference. Young children were, for example, said to have imitated dance moves from music videos, or to have kicked another child at a nursery school, because one had seen a character to do so in a video game.

I have thought about this through my nieces, who are three and six years old. Watching music videos is their biggest entertainment and from there they have learned like, unlimited amount of dance moves. And so, those moves and gestures grab to them like a magnet.

(Respondent A)

Children’s psychological capabilities to read and thus to understand marketing communications were considered to make children specifically vulnerable to the omni-channel nature of today’s commercial world. Social medias that hold both authentic real-life content and paid commercial content were further highlighted in this context. Children were considered to adopt these medias into their daily lives ever younger, and many respondents seemed concerned over the fact that media literacy education is not emphasised more, as children can not tell the difference between the types of content.

Children see what is laid in front of them. They do not have, like, the ability to analyse it in a sense that they could imagine what happened in the photoshoot situation and how much work was put into it [the image].

(Respondent C)

When considering whether general rules and guidelines regarding the marketing of children’s products are useful, Respondent B stated that “everything that protects childhood is valuable, in my opinion”, hence stating that marketing that targets children should be regulated more by upper authorities.

Nevertheless, although the respondents actively referred to psychological development when elaborating children’s competencies, the respondents also recognised limitations in
psychology-centred thinking by suggesting that one’s competencies can not fully be
determined by one’s age as cognitive skills were considered to differ between different
individuals. Thus, children were also viewed as partly competent social actors, being slightly
closer to that autonomy of an adult. For example, children were commonly viewed to engage
actively in shopping for clothes. The level in which children were thought to influence those
buying decisions was thought to grow with children; teenagers were perceived to have more
influencing power when it came to clothing acquisitions than those younger children. Denying
the usage smart devices and those medias was moreover not seen as an ideal solution to
protect the children among respondents, as “children would face the commercial world at
some point anyway” (Respondent F) and further because “those devices are a part of the
communication culture today” (Respondent E). Additionally, denying the usage of smart
devices was also said to feed the need for using them.

5.1.1.1 Bullying is “built-in” to childhood

Brand and clothing-related bullying was viewed to be just another form of bullying in general.
According to the respondents, the phenomenon of bullying has existed always, but people
have been paying attention to different things and thus bullying behaviour has stemmed from
different reasons as times have passed. Brands and clothing were reasoned to become a matter
for bullying following the cultural change originating from increased affluence of societies
that led to the change of consumption habits, and further following digitalisation and social
medias, that have on their part increased awareness of different brands and fashions, thus
enabling and enforcing comparison of clothing.

And this, like an analogy of bullying, or bullying in general, as a
phenomenon, it has existed always. Why it is done, it has probably changed
more to this kind of… outer, or it has gone to this, kind of, brand side.

(Respondent E)

Many of the respondents reflected on their own childhood and teenage years when reasoning
their views, and some stated that clothes and accessories indeed have been a matter for
bullying for longer time. Respondent F even reflected further in history stating that
somewhere a hundred years ago wearing broken or worn out garments fuelled bullying
behaviour. Respondent A elaborated that in her childhood, somewhere between twenty and
thirty years ago, in a similar sense old, used clothing provoked bullying behaviour, whereas it
is not seen as desirable due to the new sustainability ideal.

But if you think of our childhood too, that there was always a certain thing
that one should have, and if you did not have it, then it easily turned out like
“you do not have these skate shoes…”, that was an example of a thing that
one must have had back then, “…then you are not a cool, like, dude”.

(Respondent C)
Above, Respondent C reflected on her childhood, approximately twenty years ago, and stated there must have always been certain items to avoid getting bullied. Respondent F thought bullying in her childhood to be connected more to certain fashions, styles and clothing in general, whereas she thought the brand aspect of clothing to have come in the picture later, in recent years. On the other hand, Respondent E elaborated that there were certain brands in 1990’s as well, but that social medias and raised awareness has made the phenomenon more visible today and thus increased its magnitude.

Respondent E considered bullying to be even a primitive feature of humanity, which stems from people’s desire to belong somewhere. Respondent C elaborated children’s central role to the phenomenon by emphasising that fact that “a child is still, at that… construction of one’s identity and that view of one’s self”, and thus strongly reflecting what happens around them. Similarly, Respondent A similarly found bullying to be untowardly written in humanity. Children’s role to the phenomenon was reasoned with their further psychological abilities being in-progress. Children’s understanding of own words and actions and their consequences, psycho-social abilities, were compared to those of adults. Psychological incapability to distinguish right from wrong and thus to capability to make proper judgements of behaviour was further highlighted.

Well… We pondered that… it is presumably something that it is – as harsh as it sounds – in a certain way built-in to children… That they do not have an understanding, like adults, of what is okay and what is not.  

(Respondent A)

Respondent A considered the phenomenon to be tied mainly to childhood, and further viewed children to grow out of the behaviour as they grow up – “as they get the wits and understand the consequences of their behaviour”. On the other hand, some of the respondents viewed the bullying activity not to end to childhood, but instead to become less visible, further suggesting that the wits and understanding thus turn to sneakier ways of bullying. Instead of excluding one outside the group, Respondent E imagined brand and clothing-related bullying among adults to be “what adults know best” - looking down one’s nose and sharing screenshots of one’s clothes and doings in social media to private discussions.

Many of the respondents also pondered that if the bullying was not about brands and clothing, it would most likely be about something else. This type of thinking suggests, that bullying behaviours are considered to be so deeply inscribed to humanity and to childhood, that when one type of bullying ends, it would in a sense force people to move on to another form of bullying.

**5.1.1.2 Bullying – violence against the stigmatised and thus vulnerable others**

When discussing who bullies, the respondents had a consensual view that the bullying behaviour stems from lack of self-confidence. Respondent F further elaborated the bully to be nevertheless daring by nature, and to have a group of people behind oneself as to provide
support in the bullying activity. Bullying was hence seen as a way to boost one’s ego by discriminating others based on what they have or what they are lacking. Bullying one because of expensive or luxury items, on the other hand, was further considered to stem from jealousy. The respondents’ mutual perception was, that bullying behaviour does not have anything to do with social class or with sets of values that could be connected to certain social position. Instead, bullies were considered to be found all over the socioeconomic spectrum. As Respondent E put it: “I would not say, that only rich people’s kids bully, or that only poor people’s kids bully, but that it happens among all kinds of young people and children”.

Similarly, the victims of brand and clothing-related bullying were not considered to fall into any specific social class, although capability to acquire brands seen as desirable was acknowledged among the respondents. The likely victim of bullying behaviour was characterised by being shy and insecure, and thus looking vulnerable outside, which was thought to make them potential targets for bullying. Respondents mutually viewed that standing out from the mass, or dominant way of consumption, either way would increase the risk to become bullied. Lacking certain brands and styles as well as dressing too brand conscious were further highlighted in this context. Extremities such as brands that are sold at hypermarkets as well as luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton were mentioned at this point as being acknowledged to represent stigma. Brand fakes were further mentioned to fall into the same category with those market brands. Respondent F further elaborated how dressing differently than others in one’s age group was likely to lead to bullying situations, suggesting that clothes that could be considered “too childish” compared to one’s age would be stigmatised.

If we speak specifically about this brand bullying, then I think that the reasons for bullying can be… that if you do not have some specific brand that, at that time, is thought to represent such thing that “you are cool”, that is one reason. Or then if the brand is the wrong kind… or if a child or a teen wears, these, kind of, market brands, which again are… not appreciated.

(Respondent E)

The brands that were considered to be seen as desirable among children and teens were sports brands. Respondent E further highlighted the fact that as brands might include sub-brands, the sub-brand might become appreciated more than the mother brand itself. This was considered to be the case namely for Adidas, in which Adidas Originals was considered to appear “cooler” to children than the basic-Adidas, which respectively was considered to be “nothing” in children’s eyes. Respondent D further brought up that the victim might as well be someone to whom clothes do not mean much, and thus one does not care how one looks or what one wears. In this sense the victim could be considered to get bullied over nothing.

The consensual view among respondents was that the bullying activity in itself is mainly indirect, meaning that the victim is often excluded from groups. Brand and clothing-related bullying was considered to be verbal violence at severest, namely name-calling, and commenting and belittling other’s clothing choices. Bullying situations were seen as rarely escalating to physical violence. Respondent B’s thought “I do not view it to be physical in any way, rather it is… words and such gestures, that suggests whether one is included or not” encapsulated these views altogether. Some of the respondents further acknowledged social
media as an efficient platform to bully, as that is where the sight of parents’ or adults’ eyes necessarily does not reach to.

Respondents very strongly viewed that the victims most likely avoid getting bullied by adopting the dominant consumption norm, although they would not even like to do so. Rejecting the desirable brands or providing self-justification for one’s behaviour were considered to demand so much courage from the victim, that most children would not be able to do so. Additionally, children were thought not to tell about such incidents further to their parents at home, or other type of authoritative adult, but instead to keep it to themselves.

As unfortunate as it is, but… in a way, by settling oneself within that mass, one might get off lighter. And that is the path that many most likely choose after all… even if one would not even want it.

(Respondent A)

5.1.1.2.1 The youth – the primetime of brand bullying?

Although the discussion revolved much around childhood altogether, the respondents mutual view was that the issue touches most upon the youth - the kids in their teenage years and namely in the classes of secondary school. The need to belong was emphasised when talking about the youth and thus, creation of own identity and signalling one’s social status through the usage of certain type of clothing and other acquisitions were considered important matters especially for them. Respondents considered blending in to be essential for the teenagers and for that reason they were considered to have more tendency to compare oneself to others. Accordingly, influences of peer groups and social media were considered more effective at this life stage. In this sense, diverging from such norms that state how the youth should look, that are further set by certain trendsetters and influencers, were considered to fuel bullying behaviours in the teenage years.

The youth probably thinks that it is better to stay in the middle and to have those [things] that, in a way, everyone else has. So, in a sense, standing out either way, easily appears as a negative thing to them.

(Respondent D)

Acquisitions of specific brands, compared to certain styles and fashions, were viewed to become more important at this life stage. Youth were also considered to be more straightforward in the bullying activity itself, compared to those of younger children. Teenagers were consensually viewed as being more outspoken about commenting on other’s clothes and styles in a sarcastic way – in disguising a mean comment into friendliness. Respondent C further elaborated that teenagers do not necessarily have the confidence and courage to disagree with the generally accepted ideals, stemming from the strong urge to belong.
Whereas children were not generally seen as the ones bearing the responsibility brand and clothing-related bullying behaviours, the youth were to some extent. This view suggests that the child’s responsibility is seen to grow as they grow themselves.

5.1.1.3 Bullying has a primary harm on that child consumer

Respondents consensual perception was that the phenomenon is very saddening and discouraging. The biggest harm was considered to be caused to that child that is being a victim, in that how one experiences being bullied over branded clothes or over lacking them. The phenomenon was furthermore perceived to be limiting the variety of ideal identities. Avoiding bullying by adopting the dominant fashion and brands was thus seen as worrying, as it was considered to distract children’s creation of their own identities.

I think that it is very untoward if it (the phenomenon) governs… or if one has to consider how to dress according to such point of view that one gets bullied by wearing certain brand or type of clothes. I think that dressing should always have a starting point at what feels good to self and what pleases own eyes.

(Respondent A)

Many of the harms caused were considered to reflect back to society. The phenomenon was, among other things, thought to build up the sense on inequality among children and parents. The bullying behaviours related to clothing and brands were further considered to crumble children’s self-confidence, which respectively was thought to reflect to the functioning of the whole society.

If we think of youth’s self-esteem, and specifically crumbling it through these type of bullying incidents, and at very young age, then it sure does, inevitably, affect how one adjusts to be part of the society. So, in a sense, it sure is a societal problem as well.

(Respondent E)

Many of the respondents could not readily think of many negative consequences that the phenomenon would urge upon brands, but instead emphasised those consequences on consumers. Nevertheless, respondent E recognised widespread misbehaviour of bullying to affect negatively to brand image and thus weaken the purchasing power of a brand. Respondent D acknowledged the generally accepted brands to often be big and affluent, which was thought to contribute to only “small segment of companies being supported”. Further being recognised as international, the cash flow of those accepted brands were thought not to support the economy of Finland.
5.2 The phenomenon is more about adults than it is about children

During the discussions, respondents hyphenated parents’ role in relation to the birth of the phenomenon. Parents were the first ones to be brought up when discussing division of responsibilities, namely in upbringing and in their position of being role models guiding their children to pursue meaningful lives. Needless to say, parents or adults were also expected to intervene bullying situations if happened to see one. Further, the child’s role as the extended self of a parent was highlighted in the interviews, as well as parents’ increased pressure to right things for their children in such fear that otherwise their children might get bullied.

5.2.1 Parents’ primary responsibility in upbringing the child

When discussing the division of responsibilities when it comes to brand and clothing-related bullying, all of the respondents were very much on the same page. The consensual view on the matter was that the responsibility should first and foremost be parents’ by upbringing the child. In this context, ‘upbringing’ referred to several things: teaching the child to treat others with respect, teaching open-mindedness, teaching media literacy and educating the child of relevant values and meaningful ways to live life by showing example.

... and what accentuates in my mind the most is the importance of upbringing, the importance of modern upbringing, in that how this brand bullying could then... for real, be prevented. By educating oneself and own offspring.

(Respondent E)

Teaching children to treat others with respect was highly accentuated in this context. Parents were expected to teach their children towards open-mindedness regarding different identities and consumption habits, and further to treat everyone in an equal manner regardless of their clothes and other outlook; no one should be bullied, and everyone should be included to “fun and games”. As Respondent C described: “…parents should discuss about things in such way that the child understands that clothes do not determine anyone’s value, but that it is something else that does”.

Respondents further brought up the need for parents to teach their children about different medias and how to critically evaluate information in those channels. Respondent C, for example, elaborated there to be a need to discuss about social media in a sense, that although much of the content is real-life, other content is not and thus they do not represent real life either; that much of the pictures are heavily modified and people have used a lot of time to make them look the way they do. Respondents also held a mutual understanding that many parents do not necessarily hold that much knowledge that they could pass it on, in which case the responsibility was consequently viewed to be school’s by supporting parents in that media literacy education.
‘Upbringing’ also referred to living in such way that one wants their children to live – to teach important values and thus ways to live meaningful lives by showing example. In this context, Respondent F elaborated that parents should emphasise their children that “one can just be oneself and there is no need to run after certain fashions and brands”. Such statement suggests that parents’ role in supporting their children’s self-esteem was considered crucial. Respondent C further stated that there would be a need to generally talk about the acquisitions, instead of just buying what the child wants, as to make justified decisions regarding what is bought, what is not, and why. Respondent D continued discussing the matter by saying that “it sure is learnt easily from home, whether it is a toy, a phone or clothes, that it means more when it is new… new and fine”, suggesting that values leading to bullying generally originate from home by learning from parents’ behaviour.

Another consensual view brought up in the discussions was that teaching these things to child should start earlier than they now do. This view was emphasised especially when talking about social media. Respondent C, for example, pondered why certain discussions are postponed by the parents, further rationalised by such statements as “there is no need to talk about this yet because [the child] is so little” or that “[the child] can not yet understand that anyway”, when actually many things could be discussed with a child as well – not necessarily the way one would talk about them to another adult, but in such manner that child could understand it. Topics on what should be taught and discussed were further considered to be “tied to the times”. In this sense, parents were expected to keep up with the modern times as well.

5.2.2 Younger children as parents’ extended self

Parents’, or more specifically mothers’, increased interest to dress their children “fashionably” was further acknowledged among the respondents. Discussions around the topic suggested that the phenomenon was thought to have stemmed from such trend, in that parents’ world view would have descended to their children – whether the parents themselves were aware of it or not – and thus fuelled those bullying behaviours. Social media was further brought up in this context: the visual realm of these medias was thought to emphasise beautiful aspects of living to such point that it was considered to drive people towards valuing the outer features over “the inner beauty” of people, and consequently these values were then thought to descend to children.

I think that the bully is a child, that is used to, or has been taught to such things, maybe by accident and without an adult being aware of or seeking it, that there are certain norms. And it is not necessarily no more of conscious thing what one wants to communicate, that it can come without one’s awareness.  

(Respondent B)

Dressing altogether was seen as a certain kind of commitment, as wearing certain brands was thought to be a statement for supporting values of that brand. As children were considered to
be dressed by their parents, their clothes were generally acknowledged to signal the values and thus a world view of their parents. Social media, in which the collection of children was thought to have grown exponentially within last few years, and branded personas was further discussed in this context: children were seen to have become sub-brands or their parents’ brand. Dressed children were hence considered to signify their parents’ status.

But I have sure reflected my own behaviour in that, as I have that, erm, passion for dressing and I buy those [children’s] clothes myself, then the responsibility is in a sense mine. And as I have a strong sense of style, I also take it to them, that I in a sense brand them, these kids, as a part of my own brand.

(Respondent E)

What was further considered worrying was that this “sub-branding” was thought to take place earlier than before. Respondent C pondered how parents might think of their child’s outfits before one is even born. In this sense some parents’ view of seeing the world was considered to have become skewed, as children were thought to become, in a sense, objectified. These kinds of findings suggest that such matters were considered to have contributions to the phenomenon itself as well.

When you follow the discussion over there, and the way how children are in a certain manner objectified, that in a sense there is a want to dress, there is a want to show it to others, in a longer timespan it sure creates such view to a child, that… that dressing, and the way one looks, defines what one is.

(Respondent D)

5.2.2.1 Switch from playing child into a cool kid

Respectively, the increased thinking valuing appearance and visual outlook of things was further considered to have affected the way in which children today are dressed altogether. “Coolness” has become a new ideal of childhood, that is manifested in social and other medias. This was correspondingly considered to have affected the children’s clothing market as well, in that more of these types of clothes would be produced.

I feel that… ten or fifteen years ago media hardly emphasised on kids or the way they dress… Unlike now, if you follow any media, you will sure notice, if it is about fashion I mean, something that regards children’s dress as well.

(Respondent D)

Parents in this context were thought to be dressing their child in a way to make them visually pleasing, instead of considering how certain garments feel to children and whether the child
can play in them comfortably. This view was further connected the tendency top plan outfits for ever younger children, who necessarily do not have their say yet regarding what they are wearing. “A two-year-old might not be able to tell that “this [garment] is not very nice now” when playing, for example, at a sandbox, when the parents have chosen the clothes based on their looks or brand” (Respondent C).

“Somehow, I would wish […] that the children’s clothing market would take a direction to such that those [clothes] would really serve their user”, elaborated Respondent C further, stating that designing of children’s clothes should have a starting point in that it respects the child and their activities, namely play. Children’s clothes lacking practical aspects were pondered among several respondents. Comments such “in a sense, there is less practicality in the clothes [today] than what used to be before, when there were play clothes” (Respondent F), shed light to the fact that the market truly is perceived to have changed its direction and starting point from that playing and thus functioning child to that of the cool kid.

5.2.3 Buying equals good parenting? The pressure to buy the right things

Several respondents also hyphenated parents’ increased pressure to buy right things for their children. This was namely considered to have resulted from the increased tendency to value appearance and certain brand over others, but also from such fear that children might get bullied if they are not wearing what the reference groups at the time view as acceptable. Below a respondent elaborated how she felt pressured after seeing a thirteen-year-old girl to be dressed in expensive brands from head to toe, further pondering whether it is good for anyone to be “a walking advertisement” in such sense.

There are these kind of examples, that at parking lot of a local, small market, a girl of our girl’s age, she is wearing Yeezy Boosts, price, about two hundred euros, then she has a pair of Calvin Klein college pants and a Helly Hansen jacket… and a backpack and a cap from Vans. And then, as I walk, I ponder that “okay, she is wearing a thousand euros”… and that “is this now, what I, as a parent, am expected to offer her”.

(Respondent E)

Another discussion took considerations of pressure steps further. Namely in that the perceived expectations regarding what children need and what they should have to “qualify” in life have grown so big that it might even affect the societal birth rates. In Finland, low birth rates have been debated lately a lot in media. In general, women’s increased interest towards further education, for example, is thought to postpone them getting any children. However, increased expectations regarding “good parenting” might as well be one reason:

And then again, when you said that people are ready to spend more and more of money to children’s clothes and other supplies, then the thought that you should have these and that, so if one thinks that, or plans, or wants, that we
would like to have a child, then one might also be thinking that “can we even afford it”.

(Respondent C)

5.3 Digitalised consumption realm and children

The advances on digitalisation and social medias were hyphenated in many contexts when discussing the phenomenon – where it all has started and why it has reached the magnitude it is today. The role of social media was considered especially essential to the phenomenon. The most problematised aspect was that of the environment’s nature, in that regardless of its name, it is highly commercialised, thus making it challenging for consumers, and specifically children, to differentiate between commercial ideals and reality.

5.3.1 Social and oh-so-commercial media setting standards for acceptance

When discussing matters that have partly caused the phenomenon, respondents invariably named social media as one of the key aspects that have at least made the phenomenon more visible. In a sense, digitalisation and social media were considered to bridge commercial world and reality tightly together, thus making people not only consumers, but their own brands and medias. These aspects consequently were thought to have contributed to raised awareness, and further to bringing certain goods readily available for consumption for everyone.

…digitalisation and social media. They have a rather big role in that what kind of brands emerge in there, among children, because people, just ordinary people, have become their own medias… And they market those brands to their own crowd of users and followers.

(Respondent E)

Respondents consensually problematised the inevitability that ever younger children use smart devices and social medias without supervision. This was, respectively, connected children’s psychological capability to recognise and distinguish between commercial and so-called authentic content in these medias. The respondents seemed especially concerned over the fact that the content most likely appears as real life to children, which respectively was thought to reflect back to society as increased expectations regarding how one is supposed to look or to live life. Social media was thus, in a sense, seen as setting standards for things seen as acceptable, or in other words “cool”.

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In Instagram and other channels, if they show you an expensive bag and take beautiful pictures with it [...] it might turn out that it [the bag] is not even that person’s, that it was borrowed or something. That the reality and real life is hard to distinguish… and especially a child is not, most likely, thinking it to be, in a sense, staged.

(Respondent F)

These channels were further problematised for providing a hide-out platform for bullying, where the guarding sight of a parent or other adult does necessarily not reach to.

5.3.1.1 Children growing older younger

In connection to debating children’s usage of different medias, the respondents thought children to appear older compared to their age. Digitalisation and the development of medias were considered to contribute to increased amount of knowledge, further enabling sharing that knowledge to ever younger children. This was thought to increase children’s competencies not only as consumers, but also as social actors being part of a society. From empowerment to exploitation, however, such was also recognised for depriving the essence childhood from children. Social medias were in this context thought to feed children with overly expectations regarding the ways in which it is generally considered acceptable to live life. Representing people of all age groups and lifestyles, social medias were further recognised for enabling comparison beyond peers, thus descending that dressing culture of adolescents and adults to ever younger children.

… in a way, social media creates that, that people look for role models in older people than… in our adolescence, like fifteen years ago. The youth did not look for role models in much older people in such manner that they do today, especially when it comes to fashion.

(Respondent D)

The adult influence was considered to have turned into a standard among children. Thus, appearing younger or more childish than that standard was thought to urge bullying behaviours. Respondent F suggested the issue to be societal by stating that “a quite major societal change would be needed so that children could be children for longer”, further indicating that the phenomenon is worrying.

5.3.1.2 Importance of media literacy education

It is not surprising that after discussing social media, respondents consensual view was that today’s children would need more and more efficient media literacy education both at home
and in school. Changes in commercial environment were thought to have reached such magnitude that the respondents saw it to be necessary to start such education earlier, even in late nursery school, or at latest, in the beginning of primary school. The purpose of media literacy education was considered to be teaching children to understand the messages of the consumption realm – increase children’s ability to critically evaluate content in different medias and to read marketing communication messages altogether.

Although the school and society were first and foremost seen as responsible for providing media literacy education, some accounts further suggested that brands could also co-operate with them for this matter, to pursue their corporate social responsibility strategies in such manner.

5.3.2 Marketing to children is morally wrong

Discussing the rules and guidelines that there exists when the marketed product is intended for children’s usage, many of the brand respondents promptly explained, that their marketing is not targeted towards children, and thus children are not considered as recipients of the marketing message. Respondent B pondered further whether there even is a need to market anything to children, while also acknowledging it to be common practise. She concluded such activity to be something, that she is “not a fan of”. Respectively, acknowledging the strong influence that marketing messages have on children, Respondent D further stated that their marketing is not intended to influence children. These types of answers shed light on the fact, that in general marketing to children is indeed considered morally inappropriate.

Again, in itself we have a little… Or that the greater part of our products is for children, but our marketing is directed towards that adult, who makes the buying decision. That our perspective is to speak to that, like, average mom. Some dads as well, but it clearly seems that this is more of a mom’s thing, this clothing thing. So, in that sense we do not, like, strive to speak to that end user, the child.

(Respondent A)

However, shopping for clothes was also generally considered a mutual activity within families, where moreover children were considered to be actively engaged in. The influence over what is bought was considered to gradually grow with children. Respondent E elaborated that there would be a need to further considerate marketing messages especially in the context of marketing products that are intended for children’s use, as children might come across them anyway, whether the marketer behind them intended so or not.

I could imagine that [in many families clothes] are picked together, in which case children are also exposed to that catalogue and to that message in the process. It is never targeted just to parents, if I for example think of basic
H&M kids’ catalogue, which in my opinion is sure sought to build in such way that it tempts that child to say that “mum, I want that”.

(Respondent E)

5.3.3 Marketing and communication are matters of social responsibility

Respondent E connected the responsibility of preventing bullying behaviours to sustainability and further to corporate social responsibility strategies, which are enjoying much of attention in today’s fashion business environment. Social sustainability, as we know it, considering matters like where and by whom the garments are made, is often highly emphasised when it comes to children’s clothing brands and their communication. Considerations regarding one of the most important stakeholders of the brand, namely consumers, are however typically left ignored in these strategies. Thus, ethical considerations were to some degree be thought to be there only to sell the product, which respectively questions the purpose of ethics altogether.

At the moment every company tout only about their production chain, like “we use ecological this and that”, and that “we have eco-certified this and that”. That is now what they want to talk about, instead of talking about the social responsibility from a wider perspective. [...] That how are the ethics, or that responsibility of theirs, at that point when [the product] has already been bought.

(Respondent E)

All of the respondents shared the view of children being vulnerable to the influences of marketing communications. Respondent D, for example, elaborated on the kind of influence that advertising has on children. He gave an example on an experiment that he had read about lately, where a group of children were divided into two groups. The other group was exposed to a toy advertisement, while the other was not. After, all of the children were asked whether they would like to play “with a nasty boy” and the advertised toy, or with “a nice boy”. All of the children in that group, which had been exposed to that advertisement, chose to be playing with the nasty boy and the toy, while those, that had not been exposed to the advertisement, chose to play with the nice boy. He concluded that in this sense, marketing communications should indeed be considered as a matter of responsibility, in that it guides children’s behaviour.

5.3.3.1 Proactive stance in preventing bullying behaviours

Preventing the issue as a brand was generally considered as a difficult task to do. The rather complicated nature of the phenomenon as well as the social environment in which brand meanings are created were debated in this context. Moreover, the consumption-centred environment the brands operate in was considered rather problematic in general, as consumer
actions and marketing were seen contributing to one another in good but also in bad. Especially measuring marketing communications’ level of ethics and thus standardisation of communication proved problematic in the discussions due to the unmeasurable nature of the topic. The typical way of measuring marketing communications through the amount of sales was generally considered not to be suitable for the matter.

… is it not always that the brand works for its views and [tries to leverage those to consumers] through meeting points, thus trying to influence those [meanings], but that, in the end, it is in consumer’s hands… what are those meanings that are attached to [the brand].

(Respondent A)

Respondent A discussed how the objective of consumption and doing business should reach measures beyond buying and selling. Instead both consumers and businesses should acknowledge the overall picture in which their activities take place. Pondering on prevention activities, marketplace ideologies were brought up: “in my opinion, that […] doing good as an ideology would be something wonderful to embed in people already when they are little, so that it would inherent part of that life and those activities” (Respondent A). Respectively, the values, which the company or brand operates from, were considered important in this context. Respondent C declared that a brand’s main responsibility is to communicate and to live by those values that they have stated, so that the consumer knows what they are buying and what kind of values they are hence supporting.

When it came to the ways to prevent the behaviour, many suggested public campaigning for the matter and brands to take stances for matters that fit to those values of theirs. Brands were further suggested to support societal media literacy programs as part of their corporate social responsibility strategies. Brand anonymity, namely hiding brand labels and prints, was also brought up as a way to fight brand bullying, although it was considered to work more efficiently as an individual campaign, thus not actively preventing the problem in a longer time span. Above anything else, the practitioners viewed that the issue would need to be brought under the daylight by public discussion. Brands should part-take the discussion, instead of shoving it under the rug, and encourage different parties to influence the behaviour towards better ends.

The purpose behind the communication and thinking to whom it is wanted to be targeted were additionally highlighted as urgent. Critical evaluation of the content as to guarantee that there is nothing questionable in the message was considered a primary step in that a marketer can stand behind the communication and thus bear responsibility for it. Although parents were seen as having the first-hand responsibility in teaching values to children, the brands were also being expected to sell the product in an appropriate manner, without a certain discrimination. “I believe that marketing and advertising can be done ethically, and like, without selling such thought that “you are bad if you do not have this”” (Respondent D).
5.3.3.2 Social media's potential in preventing bullying behaviours

Although digitalisation and social medias were considered to have contributed largely to such untoward phenomenon, respondents also seemed to value certain advances of technology. For example, more accurate targeting was considered as one benefit, that could contribute also to preventing the problem by assuring that children would not come across inappropriate content even by accident. Further, social medias were mutually considered to have brought difficult topics under public debate. Brands were in this context suggested to collaborate with social media influencers in one way or another to raise awareness. Respectively, raised awareness of the phenomenon was considered to help spotting such situations in real life to possibly intervene them.

Social media was moreover thought to have made communication both ways easier. This was perceived a benefit in a sense that information would flow from consumers to brands as well, thus making brands more aware of debates regarding the brand, further enabling them to readily react to them accordingly.

5.3.3.3 Pedagogical marketing communications

The consensual view among respondents was that marketing communications’ purpose is to guide consumers in their buying decisions and thus educate consumer to make wiser choices regarding their purchases. All of the respondents also acknowledged marketing communications to be influencing children to greater extent than adults. The mutual view was that marketing that targets, or is in some other way connected to, this especially vulnerable group of people, should be produced with particular, ethical caution.

… in some way I feel that all marketing communications is pedagogical, even though it is commercial action that always strives towards a company making profit. But in the end, alongside it also communicates, like, societal matters.  
(Respondent E)

Beyond promotion, marketing was acknowledged also to communicate societal matters such as values and ideals alongside promoting products or brands for consumption. Some values and ideals represented in marketing communications were correspondingly thought to reinforce those brand and clothing-related bullying behaviours among children. In this context, some themes emerged under debate more than others, when discussing marketing communication representations that were considered to actively fight formation of such phenomena.
5.3.3.3.1 “Everybody is worth the same” - normalising the ordinary

Marketing in general was seen to represent rather narrow variety of different identities, which respectively was considered to stigmatise certain looks and values thus enforcing bullying behaviours. According to Respondent B, pedagogical marketing communications indeed refers to “accepting parity – that one is enough the way one is, and that one does not have to try to be anything else”. The consensual view among respondents was that marketing should aim towards equality and hence represent wide variety of identities - also those of ordinary people.

We, our aim has always been that… in our own communication we would show different kinds of people, that it would not be a certain pattern of […] what kind of models or… That the objective is to portray ordinary people and of various appearances, and so, that way communicate such view that we are all worth the same.

(Respondent A)

Different kind of identities regarding ethnicity, size and appearance were highlighted by many respondents in this context. Realness and naturalness altogether were emphasised in a sense that children should be portrayed as children in those activities that children do. The mutual view was that marketing communications should not lay down expectations on children and youth suggesting that only certain ways of doing or certain kinds of looks and identities are acceptable. Marketing should thus reflect more reality.

The responsibility-thinking in that the marketing message would be a correct one for the youth. That [brands] would not in their position create more, like… expectations, in a sense, that [youth] would start to experience expectations regarding how they should look like.

(Respondent E)

5.3.3.3.2 Sensitivity to gender and sexualisation

“Brands’ role in that communication of the societal civilisation, which constitutes gendering and all these, in a sense, matters of sexualisation, that it is quite big in the end”, elaborated Respondent E. Gender was further debated in other discussions as well, in that marketers should avoid ascribing gender-identities to people by embedding those in their communication. Mainstream brands, such as H&M, were blamed for basing much their marketing strategies on the ideology of two genders, consequently communicating such ideology everywhere from their retail spaces to mail order catalogues. The consensual view among respondents was that there is no need to promote such ideology that girl’s and boy’s dress differently regarding the colour, the fit, or the general type of garment, or that one’s clothes underline one’s gender.
Or then one can also think, that “okay, every time I put these pink shoes, they think I am a girl, even if I am a boy”. […] that even though there are certain norms, to some that pink can be boys’ colour as well…

(Respondent B)

Connecting children to sex or other things from adults’ world was considered as simply unacceptable. Such was considered to happen especially when marketing girls’ fashion products. In this context interviewees debated marketing campaigns that had gone horribly wrong in such sense. One example given was a look book -incident in which young girl was dressed, in a fashionable sense, to sheer skirt thus showing considerably skin, which respectively had resulted in the brand ending up in “the eye of the storm”. Thus, avoiding sexualisation of children was thought to be one of “the unwritten rules” of marketing of children’s products. Marketing communications that breathes child-like feel throughout was considered essential, also in a sense that sexualisation would not turn into an expectation that children and youth would then try to seek in their lives as ideal. Marketing communications representing such ideals was considered to reinforce those bullying behaviours in children.

5.4 Ever faster and ever cheaper – debating fashion and consumer society

Some respondents further ended up debating the nature of today’s fashion industry, which respectively was considered to contribute to the magnitude of the phenomenon. Ever faster fashion cycle, as a one thing, was thought to fuel bullying behaviours in that also the acceptable and desired brands and styles were seen as going in and out of fashion. The industrial move towards slow fashion was in this sense seen as positive change, also with regards to such phenomenon as brand and clothing-related bullying.

Everything becomes old so old nowadays, in that this cycle is so fast, that it sure does contribute to… in a way, that those generally accepted, mainstream brands, that that world changes as well… that which it is that is acceptable at each time and so on…

(Respondent A)

Price aspect of clothing was further acknowledged to be setting people from different income classes in inequal positions to acquire brands and styles that are at times seen as desirable, thus fuelling also bullying behaviours. Debating the subject, fashion industry was described to have become perverted regarding the costs and prices of products, which respectively in a longer timespan was considered to have affected consumers’ general mindset regarding what is average price of clothes, and respectively what is ideal to have.
… we talked a lot about [...] that garment’s worth, or about that price-based profiling and how everything is not available for everyone… and it is a major subject for discussion of clothing and fashion business altogether… that we have perceived that normal price, as in what is a normal price for a certain product, but that [the perceived normal price] is way too low.

(Respondent A)

Branded items are generally viewed to cost more than similar unbranded products. The general perception is that those branded commodities cost more namely because of that brand name. This “extra cost” was debated when discussing the price of clothing. Generally speaking, in fashion something costing “above the average” is automatically thought to include that extra cost for a brand name, although the cost might as well be justified by real, ethical manufacturing costs. Thus, brands would need to be open about what the price of a garment consists of, and to justify it with proper arguments. This type of transparency in brand communication was additionally thought to fight inequality stemming from branded garments and thus, in a way, prevent such phenomenon from growing.
6 Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of this study in relation to previous research and the reviewed literature altogether. In order address the research questions of this study, the discussion is divided into four chapters by following themes: the perceptions of the phenomenon, the responsibility in relation to the notions of child consumer, preventive marketing activities, and further the concept of pedagogical marketing communications.

6.1 Brand and clothing-related bullying: the vulnerable against vulnerable others

The marketing practitioners viewed bullying behaviours altogether to be built-in to childhood. Correspondingly, the phenomenon, being one form of such, was thought to touch first and foremost, but not entirely, upon children. The phenomenon’s connection to children was reasoned with children being psychologically “incomplete”, thus actively comparing themselves and reflecting their surroundings through their own behaviour. Some respondents pondered children to grow out of the behaviour, while others suggested bullying to become less visible, or otherwise neutralised, as children reach adulthood. Thus, unlike Daunt & Harris (2012) and Fullerton & Punj (1998), the respondents could not recognise any certain personality traits that would urge bullying behaviours. Similarly to Fullerton & Punj (2004), neither did the practitioners perceive any specific social class being more inclined towards bullying than others. After all, alike Williams & Littlefield (2018), marketing practitioners acknowledged brand and clothing-related bullying behaviours to originate ultimately from the simultaneous need of human beings to belong and to differentiate from others, further being not exclusive to children. Practitioners further reasoned bullying behaviours with low self-esteem and jealousy. Bullying was hence viewed as a violent activity, that boosts the bully’s ego. Daunt & Harris (2012) similarly acknowledged ego gain as one of the key motivators for consumer misbehaviour. Likewise, Fullerton & Punj (1998) reasoned consumer misbehaviour to be an attempt to overcome social inequality, that stem from the expectations that the consumer culture poses on people as ideal.

In wider perspective, however, the respondents thought the phenomenon to stem from increased expectations that different social phenomena and the digitalised consumption realm together urge upon children; not fitting to those expectations was considered to prompt getting bullied. Thus, what could be considered a contrasting view to previous research is that the phenomenon was generally not considered to be existing on its own (Williams & Littlefield 2018). Instead, brand and clothing-related bullying was rather seen as a culmination of several on-going phenomena. Parents and social media were in this context highlighted as the main contributors. Parents’, and especially mother’s, increased inclination to dress their children fashionably, as to represent their own values, status and way of life, was commonly brought up in the discussions as a key contributing factor. Hence, the general notion of children was thought to have changed from the playing child into such cool kid that better symbolises and delivers that status. This, on the other hand, was thought to escalate to children as increased expectations. Further, in relation to children’s heavy usage of marketing-saturated medias,
children were thought to appear older than they really are. Social media was seen as opening doors equally to adults’ world, which was further thought to enable comparison beyond peers, thus setting such standards that one must appear older, in terms of clothing, in order to be accepted by peer groups and thus avoid getting bullied.

In literature, bullying behaviours were said to occur amongst peer groups, to which school could be considered a central setting by gathering together children from a wide variety of backgrounds (Williams & Littlefield 2018). The marketing practitioners similarly associated the bullying behaviours with school environment, and specifically with teenagers’ socialisation. These perceptions align with previous research, in that in Williams & Littlefield’s (ibid.) research such bullying experiences were indeed recalled from the ages between eleven and eighteen years. Nevertheless, the practitioners also viewed the phenomenon to touch increasingly upon younger children, due to the amount of information that is available to ever younger children through their active usage different medias. The bullying activity in itself was perceived to be covert violence, and mainly relational, meaning that a bullied child would above all be excluded from certain groups by ignorance. Verbal bullying was recognised as the severest form of bullying in this context, to which teenagers were considered more inclined to, compared to those younger children. In addition to excluding someone from the group based on one’s clothing, teenagers were imagined to express that distinction by commenting each other’s choice of clothes and fashions in a malicious manner.

The respondents mutually considered ‘coolness’ to be something that fulfils those expectations and standards, thus granting an acceptance of a certain group. That coolness was thought to be conveyed by wearing certain brands and fashions, which were further considered to differ by the age group, and further by interests that unite members of a certain group. Coolness was also characterised as ‘mainstream’, further indicating those accepted brands and fashions to be dominant, thus be worn by the majority of that age group. Similarly to previous research (Williams & Littlefield 2018), practitioners viewed that standing out from the mass either way would increase the risk to become bullied. Teenagers, who were first and foremost associated with the phenomenon, were imagined to value especially sport brands such as Adidas, falling pricewise somewhere between low-end and high-end brands. Pricewise extremities, such as given examples of market brands and luxury brands, as well as brand fakes were considered to represent stigma and thus urge bullying behaviours. Victims of brand and clothing-related bullying were not considered to fall under any specific social class per se, although children having background in families with less economic capital were acknowledged to be in inferior position to acquire brands and fashions that are at the time seen as acceptable. However, echoing Bourdieu (1996), coolness in this context might also refer to cultural capital; that knowledge gained through different socialising agents about those brands and fashions that are considered as acceptable at the time. Emphasising on knowledge being an integral part of the behaviour, practitioners might also have suggested that those bullying have higher hierarchical status in terms of the amount of knowledge and thus cultural capital.

The marketing practitioners described the phenomenon by such adjectives as saddening and discouraging, namely to sympathise for those children that get bullied for the matter. Indeed, the biggest harm caused by the phenomenon was considered to be how the victim experiences being bullied over branded, fashionable clothes, or over lacking them. Another harm was seen in what Williams & Littlefield (2018) called embracing approach (adopting the dominant brands and fashions in order to avoid bullying) in that it was seen to limit the variety of
acceptable identities, and thus to distract children in their creation of their selves. These harms were collectively also thought to reflect back to the functioning of the society as crumbling self-confidence and increased sense of inequality among children, but also among parents, who were first recognised as making the household buying decisions regarding children’s clothing. Inevitably escalating to ever younger children, the phenomenon was also considered to increase the pressure among parents to buy the right things for their children as to protect them from bullying. Whereas the consequences that the phenomenon pose on consumers were considered various and rather easy to name, the effects on brands or companies were not that easy to point out for the marketing practitioners. Similarly to as Lee, Motion & Conroy (2008) suggested, the practitioners indicated the phenomenon in a long run to decrease brand value and affect negatively to sales. The phenomenon’s consequences on companies were not, however, emphasised as much as its effects on consumers.

6.2 Reconsidering social responsibilities: rather vulnerable than competent child consumer

Whereas William & Littlefield’s (2018) research focused on consumer, or more specifically, children’s perceptions of the phenomenon, this study addressed those views of marketers. Similar results would suggest that there are no great contradictions between consumer and marketer views on brand and clothing-related bullying, or that at least children’s and marketers’ perceptions align well with each other. This finding would echo those ideas of Tufte & Rasmussen (2010), who argued children and marketers to be the ones “leading the edge” in today’s digitalised consumption realm, thus sharing a similar mindset on the phenomenon. However, when it comes to children’s competencies as consumers, marketers seemed to consider children as rather vulnerable than competent actors, even if having those qualities from both sides. The practitioners elaborated vulnerability by referring often to children’s psychological development being in-progress, similarly to that consumer critical discourse of a child consumer (Valkenburg & Cantor 2011). Respectively, children were also acknowledged to have those qualities of competence in, for example, purchase decision making and family dynamics (Ekström 2010). Children’s influencing power on clothing purchases was generally considered to grow with children, further echoing the theories of psychological development. Early adoption of social medias, however, was seen as empowering ever younger children as consumers by enabling efficient sharing of knowledge regarding acceptable brands and fashions, which again was thought to contribute to that influencing power. Thus, marketers could be considered to have “a foot in both camps”, further rejecting that traditional construct of two conflicting discourses that often reside in academic papers as well as in public discussions (Cook 2007; Cook 2011; Tufte & Rasmussen 2010). Instead, these two discourses were considered to exist together, inevitably, even if that traditional discourse of the vulnerable child seemed to govern the discussion on social responsibilities.

Olesen (2004) elaborated how the products of children’s market have taken a turn from the objective needs of children to subjective preferences of children. Based on the findings of this study, however, it seems that this is not the case at least when it comes to children’s clothing market and the fashion industry. The clothing purchases of younger children were considered to be largely handled by parents, who dress their children to communicate their own status.
Hence children’s position to the market would still be distanced, similarly to how Olesen (ibid.) described it to be traditionally. Thus, based on the marketing practitioners’ perception, children’s consumption of fashion and clothing still reflects those adult understandings of childhood – and of what constitutes good parenting (ibid.). All of the brand respondents also promptly explained their marketing communications to be targeting parents, instead of children, which further advocates this view. Cook (2011) debated marketers to have built up this construct of a competent child as to provide a moral cover for their business activities. However, as the practitioners rather considered marketing to children to be morally inappropriate, marketing children’s products to adults could instead be considered to serve as a moral cover (ibid.).

The marketing practitioners viewed the merge of childhood and consumption to be inevitable in today’s digitalised consumption realm, in which information is readily available to ever younger children. Socialising agents such as parents and peer groups, as well as different medias and marketing communications, were acknowledged to indisputably influence children in their behaviours, both in good and in bad. As Williams & Littlefield (2018, p. 992) described, such socialising forces gain increased importance, when it comes to bullying, as those behaviours generally occur “among peer groups against socially stigmatised vulnerable others”. In the context of brand and clothing-related bullying, children play the part both for the bully and the bullied. When discussing responsibilities, the most rational thing to do would be to assign that responsibility on the child that bullies, similarly to how the previous quote indicated (ibid.). However, in the findings of this study, children altogether emerged as those vulnerable social beings, further to such extent that the practitioners did not perceive them as accountable for their behaviour. This was the case especially when it came to younger children, as the perceived responsibility was considered to grow with children. Nevertheless, this view at once rejected that general assumption, that a simple change in individual’s behaviour, whether that is the bully or the bullied, would be a satisfactory measure to prevent the behaviour from occurring (ibid.). As children were seen as mere reflections of what happens around them, the marketers instead pointed their fingers towards parents and the consumerist society, further reflecting their own role as the producers of that culture.

### 6.3 Proactive measures to inhibit brand and clothing-related bullying

Fullerton & Punj (1997a; 2004) argued there to be two corporate-based approaches to managing consumer misbehaviour: deterrence and education. Both approaches are ultimately about influence, in that the usage of informal sanctions as well as strengthening moral constraints through corporate messaging are seen to prevent misbehaviour (ibid.). In theory, however, these approaches might also apply to the functioning of the society as a whole. Prevention of brand and clothing-related bullying is in previous research seen to depend on the “alteration of individual behaviour” (Williams & Littlefield 2018, p. 2). Traditionally speaking, deterrence and school- and upbringing-based education could be considered as measures that influence the bully towards better ends of behaviour and thus inhibit the phenomenon. However, in a sense, the nature of deterrence could also characterise the nature phenomenon altogether. Williams & Littlefield (ibid.), for example, elaborated how the threat of peer rejection, which in this case counts as an informal sanction, drives the victims towards
the generally accepted consumption trend. This was seen as a worrying consequence among the marketers, who further pondered such to distract children in their creation of selves by contributing to limited variety of acceptable identities. Generally, the practitioners did not view deterrence to be a suitable measure to prevent the behaviour. This was because children were seen as rather vulnerable social beings, whose actions reflect those of their surroundings and thus they should not be punished for the behaviour. The influence of proactive education, on the other hand, was largely emphasised for being believed to reinforce those positive behaviours in children (Fullerton & Punj 1997a; 2004).

The marketers acknowledged the bullying behaviours as well as children’s consumption to take place within a highly complex social setting, that is not only mediated by parents, peers and other societal gatekeepers, but also saturated by marketing messaging. This view reinforced those findings of much previous research (Ekström 2006). However, against the general assumptions of critical marketing accounts (Cook 2007; Cook 2011; Holt 2002), the practitioners considered neither the child consumer nor the phenomenon to be a mere consequence of marketing activities. Instead, both were rather viewed as intrinsic products of inherent, and thus inevitable, structural development of societies to which digitalisation and social media was considered an integral part. Marketing respectively was viewed to have evolved with it, thus functioning both as a producer and a mirror of those societies. Hence, the practitioners did not only associate education with corporate marketing activities, but rather recognised education in larger societal context; in terms of influence and those perceived accountable social dynamics that exist in the marketplace of children. Hence, those named to act on their responsibilities were parents, society and marketers.

6.3.1 Parents’ responsibility in upbringing and dressing the child

When discussing responsibilities and the activities by which the phenomenon could be inhibited, parents were the first ones to be brought up. The practitioners considered parents as being the closest reference group to children, thus also having the greatest educative influence on them. Literature on children’s relationship with technology and marketing communications in a similar sense emphasised the importance of parents in managing children’s commercial action (Calvert 2008). Calvert (ibid.) reasoned this view by stating that children are most often exposed to different medias and thus to marketing communications within the family home, and further elaborated parents’ role in providing financial resources for children’s consumption. Referring to parents as gatekeepers who manage children’s consumption, Calvert (ibid.) suggests that parents should act on the behaviour when it occurs; intervene the problematic situation in one way or another. This view on influence differentiates quite a bit from that of the marketers, who similarly to Ekström (2010) recognised the parental educative influence to be realised by upbringing. Upbringing further referred to such proactive measures that teach children open-mindedness regarding different identities and consumption habits, media literacy, and to treat others with respect in equal terms. Values and meaningful ways of life were further characterised as passing from parents to children, hence suggesting that also parents should reflect on their own consumption behaviour more as those might socially scaffold to children. Respectively, one respondent also brought up the need to talk about acquisitions as to make justified decisions regarding what is bought, what is not, and why.
6.3.2 Society’s responsibility in contemporary education

As debated earlier, the marketers acknowledged digitalisation and different medias to be largely saturating the everyday life of today’s children. Similarly to Cook (2011) and Calvert (2008), the practitioners recognised the transformation to bring about benefits as well as harms to the functioning of society. Those harms were mainly associated with such consequences that result from using technological devices and applications incorrectly, which again were thought to contribute to creation of different social phenomena. ‘Incorrectly’ in this context referred to such as using those devices too much, and further lacking the capabilities to critically view and read content in those medias. Although media literacy education was previously considered as being parents’ responsibility, the marketers very well acknowledged that some parents might not have the knowledge and skills of those applications that they could in an educative manner introduce children to them. Thus, media literacy education was also viewed as a societal responsibility to be taught to children in schools, similarly to how Calvert (ibid.) it first and foremost recognised. The aim of such programs would through education to influence children to become critical citizens of consumer society (Tufte & Rasmussen 2010). However, some respondents similarly to Tufte & Rasmussen (ibid.) problematised school-based media literacy education by recognising the older generation of teachers, similarly to some parents, to lack the necessary knowledge and skills in order to teach others. In this sense, some of the practitioners criticised societal policymakers for not keeping up with major societal changes. The marketing practitioners did, however, recognise media literacy education also as a matter through which brands could pursue corporate social responsibility strategies. This finding aligned with Tufte & Rasmussen (ibid.), who suggested marketers, consumer organisations and politicians to consider anticipatory measures in bridging that gap of knowledge by providing materials for media literacy education.

6.3.3 Marketers’ responsibility in ethical ways of fashion business

The marketing practitioners acknowledged the market for children’s fashion to ideally exist in an environment, where the purpose of consumption and business reaches measures beyond buying and selling. Such argument echoes the thoughts of Fry & Polonsky (2004), who debated increasing profit necessarily not to mean improved quality of life for communities. The authors thus suggested companies to consider more about ethics to evaluate their exchange success, compared to those traditionally used organisational measures such as sales (ibid.). Considering social responsibility, the practitioners viewed the ideologies and values from which the company operates of utmost importance. To bear those responsibilities, the companies were expected to practice those stated views and values consistently in corporate activities as to efficiently communicate those further to consumers, who in a similar sense were viewed communicate their own values through their clothing. When it came specifically to the fashion industry, the movement towards slow fashion was characterised as an act of responsibility, that would also contribute to inhibiting bullying behaviours that stem from the fast fashion cycle. Williams & Littlefield (2018) explained clothing to serve a dynamic role in social signalling namely because of that changing nature of fashion. The aspect of price was also recognised to set people from different income classes in inequal positions in terms of
acquiring those desirable brands and fashions. In this context, transparency in communicating and justifying the product costs was thought to fight the sense of inequality.

To inhibit brand and clothing-related bullying behaviours in children, the practitioners emphasised the need to raise awareness of the phenomenon: the need to educate consumers about the issue, and thus to influence the behaviour towards better ends. Raised awareness was also considered to enable recognising and thus intervening bullying situations. Ways to fulfil that need were found numerous, varying from public campaigning to supporting societal media literacy programs. Social media was further recognised as an efficient channel to raising awareness. Brands were, for example, suggested to collaborate with influencers for the matter in order to make their campaigning more interesting for the target group of children. In a similar sense to enforcing the brand-consumer relationships, social media was also seen to aid communication between brands and consumers, thus enabling brands to react to situations in a contemporary manner. Additionally, campaigns of brand anonymity were brought up as means to fight the phenomenon.

Marketing communications was further seen as a matter of social responsibilities, especially when the marketed product is intended for children’s consumption. The vulnerable child consumer emerged from the discussion when debating the subject. In this context, the activity of critical evaluation of the message’s purpose, content and targeting were highlighted of utmost importance. The practitioners expected the brands to promote the product in an appropriate manner, without any kind of discrimination, that could urge those bullying behaviours in the product’s target group.

6.3.3.1 Pedagogical marketing communications

The marketing practitioners’ mutual view was that the general purpose of marketing communications is to guide consumers in their buying decisions and to educate them towards better consumption habits. Further being acknowledged to simultaneously communicate societal matters, all marketing communications was in such sense characterised as being pedagogical. Similarly to Schroeder & Borgerson (2005), the practitioners recognised such communication, along other socialising agents, to influence consumer’s thoughts, preferences and behaviour. Known to have a greater impact on children, marketing communications promoting products for children’s consumption was mutually thought to be produced with particular, ethical caution. That caution was, in the context of children’s clothing and fashion, further defined as open-mindedness regarding the wide variety of possible, real identities, and as sensitivity to matters of gender and sexualisation. By paying attention to these, the marketing practitioners considered to be able to inhibit brand and clothing-related bullying from occurring. Not enforcing those existing and possible narrow-minded representations of identity, and thus not contributing to certain expectations regarding looks and ways of consumption were considered as essential with the aim of preventing the behaviour.
7 Conclusions

This chapter presents the conclusions of this research with direct reference to the research questions that guided this study. It also discusses the research’s practical implications to highlight this study’s contributions to the theoretical and practical fields of fashion and marketing. Moreover, this chapter ponders the research’s limitations as well as suggests subject matters for future research.

The mutual perception among the marketing communication practitioners was that the child is rather vulnerable than competent social being when it comes to consumer life. Even if children were considered to have those qualities of both discourses, that view of the vulnerable child dominated and thus guided the marketers’ perceptions not only on the phenomenon, but also on social responsibilities and preventive actions.

To address the first research question of this study (RQ1. What is marketing communication practitioners’ perception of the phenomenon of brand and clothing-related bullying?), the practitioners viewed brand and clothing-related bullying to be a complex phenomenon that first and foremost stems from the inherent and simultaneous needs of human beings to belong and to differentiate from others. The structural development of societies, in which digitalisation and social media play an integral part, and the increased expectations that it poses on children was considered to have a major contribution to the magnitude of the phenomenon today. Those expectations were further seen to be tightly connected to other social phenomena, such as parents’ increased inclination to dress their children fashionably, further resulting in the new ideal of the cool kid, and the notion of children appearing older younger. Aligning with the reviewed literature, the phenomenon was above all connected to childhood, in which bullying behaviours altogether were seen as being built-in to. The practitioners viewed the phenomenon to cause most harm on consumers, and further on that child who gets bullied over branded clothes or over lacking them. Parents’ increased pressure to buy the right things was also brought up as a negative consequence that the phenomenon poses on consumers. The phenomenon was not acknowledged to have any serious consequences on brands, although the practitioners recognised widespread phenomenon to affect negatively to brand value and thus to sales.

To address the second research question (RQ2. Who do marketing communication practitioners perceive as responsible for brand and clothing-related bullying?), the practitioners viewed children’s consumption behaviour to be indisputably influenced by different socialising agents to such extent, that children were not considered at all accountable for the phenomenon. Instead, the responsibility was assigned to those socialising agents: to parents, consumerist society, and further to marketers as producers of that culture.

To address the third research question (RQ3. Through what kind of activities do marketing communication practitioners consider brand and clothing-related bullying could be prevented?), the marketers recognised education in a larger societal context to provide means for the aim of inhibiting brand and clothing-related bullying behaviours from occurring. Parents’ responsibility was translated into educative upbringing, while societal education was recognised in terms of media literacy education. Marketers’ responsibilities were thought to
be best realised through ethical ways of fashion business, in which corporate ideologies and values were emphasised. The marketers were moreover seen as being responsible for raising awareness and thus educating consumers about the phenomenon through campaigning, supporting societal media literacy programs and influencer collaborations. Critical evaluation of marketing message’s purpose, content and target were further highlighted as a responsibility of utmost importance, when the marketed product is intended for children’s consumption.

The marketing communication practitioners viewed the purpose of marketing communications to be guiding and educating consumers towards better consumption habits. Marketing communications was, however, also recognised to alongside its general functions to communicate societal matters, such as ideologies and values. Promoting products for children’s consumption was thought to be produced with particular, ethical caution. Thus, to address the final research question (i. What is practitioners’ perception of the concept ‘pedagogical marketing communications’?), the practitioners perceived all marketing communications to be pedagogical to some extent. Pedagogy-thinking in communications was considered especially important, when the communication would be about such products that are intended for children’s consumption. In the particular context of preventing bullying behaviours, pedagogy in communications referred to avoiding those exiting narrow-minded representations of identities, and further avoiding sexualising children in any manner.

### 7.1 Practical implications

The first practical implication of this thesis would be that it gives valuable information regarding how the market of children is interpreted by marketers. Against the given assumptions of previous literature and research, this study’s findings suggest that a marketer discourse does not only reside on one side of the presented model of two opposing discourses, but instead marketers have a foot in both camps. The findings thus suggest that there is no need to conceptualise the discourses on separate, opposing sides, but instead acknowledge both sides to exist in the same child consumer.

The second practical implication would be that “new” viewpoint to look at the phenomenon of brand and clothing-related bullying. Reportedly, no research has before studied this phenomenon from marketer’s perspective. Hence, this research contributes to that multidimensional view of the subject matter.

Partly connected to the first two implications, the third practical implication, especially for the theoretical field, would be the recognition of market actors having simultaneously several roles in a society. Although this study above all addresses the views of company representatives, the findings also indicate their dual-role in the consumer society; beyond their authoritative role in marketing communications, the respondents also have their roles as consumers, parents, aunts and uncles. These roles can not necessarily be separated from each other, and thus they also guide the respondents’ perceptions on the subject matter, even if one would be interviewed as and for their authoritative role.
7.2 Limitations

Like any other study, this research also has its limitations. One would be the time in which this research was to be realised, in that the number of respondents could have been higher if there was more time to conduct the interviews. Time constraints in this case applied to both parties, the author writing this study and the potential interviewees having managerial positions and thus hands full of work at the time when the interviews were scheduled to be conducted. Another limitation would be the actual number of respondents that I managed to conduct the interview with. Although the empirical data gathered could be considered to have those “rich accounts of the details of a culture” that Bryman & Bell (2015, p. 402) described, this study’s findings can not really be generalised.

The respondents have a managerial position in represented companies. I, as a researcher, must acknowledge that having any position in companies that are public by nature might have contributed to the respondents giving socially desirable answers to the asked questions on behalf of the brand. Moreover, some of the respondents could be considered to have a dual-role in the consumer society in that they have a close relationship with children, in terms of being a parent or an aunt or uncle. This factor could have contributed to having such bias in the study’s findings that those respondents’ perceptions reflected more of that other role loaded with emotions than marketing practitioner’s role, thus giving answers inclined more towards that discourse of the vulnerable child.

7.3 Suggestions for future research

Children in relation to consumption and brands could undoubtedly be considered as inexhaustible subject matter for future research. The complex environment in which children’s consumption of clothes and fashion takes place, with its many reference groups, medias and other technological advances, provide many angles and viewpoints from which to look at children’s consumption behaviour.

However, when it comes to such violent social behaviours as brand and clothing-related bullying, limiting studies more specifically to certain age groups would assuredly yield engrossing insights into how children of different ages acknowledge to be using certain brands and fashions, and how they experience the phenomenon. Changing a viewpoint and distancing the phenomenon from children, it would moreover be interesting to study whether and how brand and clothing-related bullying shows in adults’ socialisation practices.

Another subject for future study could be parents’ perceptions of the phenomenon, and specifically how those perceptions are known to influence parents’ purchasing behaviour when acquiring fashion products for their children. Do such phenomena truly increase parents’ pressure to buy the right things? Moreover, children as parents’ extended self as its own phenomenon could also be an interesting area of research.
References


Väntönen, E. (2016). ”Nyt olette tytöt astumassa liian suuriin saapaisiin” – Vähätellyt ouluulaissisarukset suunnittelevat nyt vaatteita, joita äidit jonottavat ja diilaavat ylimäalla


Appendices

The phenomenon - brand and clothing-related bullying
• What do you think about the phenomenon?
• What do you think has caused the phenomenon?
• Which factors have contributed to the birth of the issue?
• Why is the issue talked about now?
• Why do you think children are often highlighted when the issue is talked about?
• Who does the issue touch upon? Who is bullied? Who bullies and why?
• What kind of brands and clothes represent stigma and why - what kind of brands and clothes do you think one gets bullied for? (You can think the brands fe. regarding brand name, style, price and the place it is sold at etc.)
• What do you think the bullying activity is like?
• What kind of drawbacks does the issue cause? Think of consumers, companies/brands and society at large.
• Other thoughts of the matter?

Responsibility
• Who should bear responsibility for the issue? Think of fe. consumers (children and their parents), companies/brands, society? How could the responsibility be divided?
• What kind of tools could be used to take responsibility for the matter? How could the responsibility be possibly measured? Think about corporate social responsibility.

Marketing communications
• What kind of directives and rules there are when the marketed product is directed towards children's use? Do you consider these necessary?
• Would you wish there was more of these types of guidelines to work with?
• In your opinion, what should be especially observed when marketing products towards children's use? Think fe. about visual and verbal means, themes and stories.
• How do you think the phenomenon could be prevented through marketing communications? Think fe. about visual and verbal means, themes and stories.

• What do you think pedagogical marketing communications is? What kind of elements does it consist of? You can think of fe. visual and verbal means, themes and stories.
• What could pedagogical marketing communications be in the context of brand and clothing-related bullying?

• Can you think of any other ways to try to prevent the problem?

Some schools in the UK and USA have banned the usage of Canada Goose and Moncler jackets to fight the sense of inequality among school children.
• What kind of thoughts this provokes in you?

• Any other thoughts about the issue? Free word.