

Traces of anti-programs against COVID-19: retailers' responses aimed at mitigating the spread of the virus

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how programs of action and anti-programs, concepts developed by Bruno Latour, are of excellent value in interpreting current world developments through a study of the effects and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was inspired by actor-network theory (ANT) and Bruno Latour's inclusion of nonhuman actors. In this case, I have studied how signs and other artifacts leave traces of anti-programs against the COVID-19 pandemic. Observations, in physical stores and online, are presented as the main empirical material used to identify traces of five anti-programs.

Findings – The five types of anti-programs identified were, namely (1) fighting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic through prompts, (2) verbalizing responsibility, (3) creating a feeling of collectivity, (4) aspiring to heroism and (5) mobilizing support for continued business. The anti-programs were organized via a connection between human and nonhuman actors.

Originality/value – The study illustrates the usefulness of Latour's terminology in exploring contemporary sequences of events by means of using programs of action and anti-programs to study the case of retailers' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study echoes ANT and Latour's ideas about including nonhuman actors in social studies. Moreover, the study demonstrates how these concepts can be productively introduced into studies of complex phenomena, by discussing the choice of viewpoint, how actors can be conjoined into one entity, the inclusion of nonobservable actors and the co-existence of an actor in both the program of action and the anti-programs.

Keywords Bruno Latour, ANT, Programs of action, Anti-programs, Nonhuman actors, COVID-19, Fashion industry

Paper type Research paper

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I would like to express my gratitude to Bruno Latour and his writings for inspiring not only me but also others to approach research in new and innovative ways. I am also grateful to the editors of the Special Issue for their ambition to show how Latour's work and methods continue to serve as a source of inspiration for research endeavors. I am deeply grateful to the participants in my study for their patience and willingness to devote their time to interviews. Although their voices have been deliberately hidden in this study in favor of the traces found in stores and online, their contributions have greatly enhanced my understanding of the pandemic. I would also like to thank the Swedish Retail and Wholesale Council (Handelsrådet) for funding this research project, which unexpectedly evolved into an exploration of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am also grateful to the Centre for Retailing for their funding to attend conferences and present ongoing research. I am indebted to Janice Denegri-Knott, Eva Gustafsson and the dedicated anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on the manuscript. Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Barbara Czarniawska for her unwavering support and inspiration.



Introduction

Latour was known as an anthropologist, sociologist and philosopher, just to mention a few of his epithets. Among his most renowned contributions to academia is the development of actor-network theory (ANT), where he developed his thoughts on the relationship between an actor and a network. For example, he argued for a broader definition of an actor, including nonhuman objects, and the fact that a network should never be regarded as static but seen as something fluid (Latour, 2005; Mol and Law, 1994). However, what is less known in his work are the concepts of programs of action and anti-programs. These concepts reoccur in his writings (see, for example, Latour, 1990, 1992, 1996b, 1999) and have been picked up on by a few researchers (see, for example, Czarniawska, 2014; de Vaujany *et al.*, 2018; McGee, 2014). However, they are seldom discussed in a broader sense outside those specific studies. Only a few researchers have used them in applied studies, e.g. a study of a hotel quality program (Gustavsson, 2000) and urban commons (Brain, 2019). Latour has described programs of action as anticipated actions that can be broken by an anti-program (Latour, 1999). Furthermore, programs of action have been identified as important for understanding the formation of networks (Czarniawska, 2014). In this paper, the concepts are used to demonstrate how Latour's ideas about programs of action and anti-programs are valuable – if not crucial – for understanding current and future ways of organizing social life.

The pandemic offered a unique moment to study the formation of new networks, as well as new ways of organizing social life. The spread of COVID-19 was accompanied by challenges for humanity, both in terms of how to stop the spread of the virus and how to organize social life. This study focuses on Swedish fashion market retailers' responses to the pandemic, by studying anti-programs against the spread of COVID-19.

The pandemic is then seen as representing a program of action – i.e. to spread the virus between human beings – while the retailers' responses are seen as anti-programs aimed at stopping that program of action. While several European countries imposed temporary lockdowns on society (Latour, 2021), the Swedish government and the Public Health Agency of Sweden (PHAS) opted for recommendations and restrictions (PHAS, 2023). This entailed consequences regarding the types of actions and reactions that were evoked by the virus and the response to it. The population was not forced to stay at home, instead being able to move relatively freely during the pandemic. On the other hand, the fear of being infected, combined with restrictions and recommendations regarding what to do and what not to do, led to a situation whereby a lot of people spent most of their time at home.

The specific conditions in Sweden were accompanied by challenges for those working in service and retail. As there was no lockdown, their operations were expected to stay running, although the conditions for doing business had completely changed. For retailers, this meant dealing with a very delicate situation: they were not allowed to cease operations, but at the same time, they were expected to assume responsibility both for workers and customers. The Swedish Trade Federation (STF) (2020a) played an important role in spreading information related to both the virus and which measures to take as regards retail. For example, they developed signs and information material for retailers to use in-store (STF, 2020b), as well as information on how to reduce the spread of the virus in the workplace, for employees (STF, 2020c). In spite of the work of the STF and the retailers, a report by a trade union showed that there was discontent among workers as regards how they were experiencing the situation (Holmlund, 2021). The STF was also responsible for negotiations with the government and the PHAS on recommendations for retailers in Sweden (STF, 2020d, e), e.g. using separate entrances and exits, information on how to move around in-store and which times and days were busier (Beslic, 2021). In parallel with the spread of and fight against the virus, several measures were taken to protect jobs and the economy, both by the European Commission and in a Swedish context (STF, 2022, 2020f). Also, once the restrictions and recommendations had been abolished, the STF provided information on these changes (STF, 2021).

Nevertheless, it was the retailers who had to deal with the day-to-day situation of meeting the customer and dealing with safety concerns using a more direct approach.

The situation thus opened a unique opportunity to study the actions taken by retailers to find new ways of doing business. While not being allowed to cease trading, they were still faced with a situation whereby they needed to engage in the fight against the virus. As a result, retailers needed a transformation in terms of how to organize themselves. In this paper, I document and discuss some aspects of such transformation: (1) how retailers transformed themselves to meet the new reality, (2) how several actors acted to become part of the anti-programs against the COVID-19 pandemic, (3) how some even wanted to be heroes in that fight and (4) how actors wanted to create a sense of community and work together with their customers and other actors. Inspired by Latour and ANT, the material presented here is based on observations of signs and messages. Photographs of the messages from the retailers and the artifacts located in-store became the main evidence supporting my arguments. The photographs themselves form part of a historical record of what happened during the pandemic: However, by analyzing and interpreting them and the messages conveyed by them, we can better understand the transformation that took place during the pandemic, as well as reflect upon potential learnings as regards how to adapt to other changes in society.

Guided by the question “*How did retailers use artifacts in becoming part of the anti-programs against the COVID-19 pandemic?*”, this study aims to contribute toward how to trace anti-programs against programs of action. Although the program of actions and anti-programs, at first sight, might be perceived as separate, in the conclusion section, they will be discussed as entangled and part of the same. One could not exist without the other. The paper brings some novelty to the use of the concepts, demonstrating how a concept coined by Latour but hidden behind more well-known concepts is of excellent value when it comes to studying and approaching social and current world developments. Moreover, it also illustrates how the concepts can be productive in other settings, e.g. retail studies.

Following Latour’s ideas on *tracing associations* as the foundation of critical sociology and ANT (Latour, 1986, 2005), this study has focused on the artifacts found in physical stores and online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, in line with his argumentation, i.e. that merely focusing on human actors has limitations, I have included the study of nonhuman actors to trace both programs of action and anti-programs and how this has formed new networks. The paper is structured as follows: in the next section, the foundation of ANT is presented to give a brief background to the approach used in the study. In the methods section, further details of how the study was conducted are presented. The findings section is called “Traces of anti-programs against the COVID-19 pandemic,” and it focuses on the proofs of the anti-programs as regards how retailers addressed the COVID-19 pandemic. In my analysis, five different anti-programs are outlined, whereby four were accompanied by the objective of taking part in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and one was more focused on creating a program to support the future of the business. In the conclusions section, new associations are created by discussing the implications of the anti-program against the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as what can be learned from responding to other programs of action.

ANT as an approach to fieldwork

The pandemic clearly showed how a nonhuman actor could have an immense impact on society – or the *collective* – as preferred by Latour (2005). When infecting humans, this parasite managed not only to spread rapidly but also to cause mortality and illness, as well as broader societal and environmental upheavals (Wulff, 2022). The virus itself did not, however, cause lockdowns. The fight against it was driven by other actors who wanted to combat its spread – and who thus created an anti-program against this particular actor. Among these actors was the World Health Organization (WHO), which declared the spread of

COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. To describe the sequence of events related to the pandemic, it would not be enough to just look at the actions taken by humans. ANT offers a critique of previous research in sociology, referred to as the “sociology of the social” (Latour, 2005). The critical sociology that Latour defined as the “sociology of associations” offered another way of doing research and seeing the world. To mark this difference, he wrote:

In the alternative view, ‘social’ is not some glue that could fix everything including what the other glues cannot fix; it is *what* is glued together by many other types of connectors. (Latour, 2005, p. 5).

At the core of this view was the notion of doing research differently by accounting for associations rather than merely studying humans and human behavior. “Follow[ing] the actors themselves” (Latour, 2005, pp. 12; 62) has become a catchphrase often used to describe ANT. However, in Latour’s words, this was more about “tracing associations” (Latour, 2005, pp. 1–17), which means finding ways of accounting for such connections and what was glued together in such networks. To him, the social “is visible only by the traces it leaves (under trials) when a *new* association is being produced between elements which themselves are in no way ‘social’” (Latour, 2005, p. 8). Another way to describe his approach to research was in terms of mapping scientific controversies, by defining “a series of transformations – or translations – undergone by a collective of people and things” (Latour *et al.*, 1992, p. 34). Hence, in studying the “social,” one should not be limited to studies of human actors.

Instead, if we take the task of accounting for associations and the “what” seriously, there would also be a need to include nonhuman actors (Latour, 2005; Latour *et al.*, 1992). The seminal article on scallops by Callon (1984) adopted this approach and was one of the first to form the basis for what would later come to be called ANT. Since then, several studies have been inspired by this approach, for e.g. the reassembling of gender through the role of technology (Lagesen, 2012), climate change through a focus on ice (Bjørst, 2010) and the interaction between humans and nonhumans in a study of the Internet of Things (Tatnall and Davey, 2015), just to mention a few. This shift of focus in sociology has thus gained ground and mobilized several researchers into doing research differently, resulting in new perspectives on accounting for the social.

Programs of action and anti-programs

Programs of action and anti-programs are concepts that reoccur in Latour’s writings (see, for example, Latour, 1990, 1992, 1996b, 1999, 2005), also being discussed by those inspired by him (see, for example, Czarniawska, 2014; de Vaujany *et al.*, 2018; McGee, 2014). Latour makes use of several examples to argue for his ideas of programs and anti-programs, e.g. a seat belt that straps the driver in when the door is closed: “IF a car is moving, THEN the driver has a seat belt” (Latour, 1992, p. 226). The program of action is then for the driver to wear a seat belt; otherwise, it would be impossible to drive. In the case of the Berlin Key, the program of action is to relock the door behind you rather than to close the door behind you (Latour, 2012; Latour *et al.*, 1992). Besides those examples, he also defines the concepts in his book *Pandora’s Hope – Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*:

PROGRAMS OF ACTION, ANTIPROGRAMS: Terms from the sociology of technology which have been used to give technical artifacts their active and often polemical character. Each device anticipates what other actors, humans or nonhumans, may do (program of action), but these anticipated actions may not occur because those other actors have different programs – anti-programs from the point of view of the first actor. Hence the artifact becomes the front line of a controversy between programs and anti-programs (Latour, 1999, p. 330).

Hence, the idea here is that there is an anticipated program of action, which might meet with some resistance in terms of anti-programs working against it. Furthermore, he also argued

that artifacts can become the center of controversies between programs and anti-programs. However, the focus of his works is largely technology and not so much other nonhuman actors (for an exception, see [Latour, 1993](#)).

The roots of programs of action can be traced back to Greimas and his ideas about a narrative program ([Beetz, 2013](#); [Czarniawska, 2014, 2022](#)). A narrative program has been described as “a change of state produced by any subject affecting any other subject” ([Czarniawska, 2014, p. 97](#)). However, while Greimas spoke of grammatical subjects, Latour’s understanding of the concept has been widened to include other “actants” such as human beings, animals, objects or concepts ([Latour, 1992](#)). An actant has been defined as “that which accomplishes or undergoes an act” ([Czarniawska, 2022](#)). If an actant is successful in its actions, it might become an actor. In cases where the actant connects to several other actants, it becomes more influential.

The programs of action and anti-programs are important with regard to understanding the formation of actor-networks, summarized by [Czarniawska \(2014\)](#) as follows:

It begins with an identification of actants (those who act and are acted upon). Thereupon one follows the actants through a trajectory—a series of programmes and anti-programmes—until they become actors, until they acquire a distinct and (relatively) stable character or fail to do so. Actants that became actors are those whose programmes succeeded in combating anti-programmes (alternatively, those whose anti-programmes won, as in the stories of opposition and resistance). Such success, claimed Latour, is due to association: the formation and stabilization of networks of actants who can then present themselves as actor-networks (p. 98).

Hence, the formation of networks can be regarded as a consequence of one or more programs of action, whereby an actant has been successful in its action and has managed to stimulate a program of action. [McGee \(2014\)](#) discussed this further by concluding that “All of these forces and objects, human and nonhuman, enter into relation to form alliances, enrolled in specific programs of action and thus bound to one another with more or less intensity.” (p. 3) Hence, programs of action can spur different degrees of intensity.

The focus of this study was the artifacts that appeared as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, using observations from physical and online stores in the Swedish fashion market. Another study of the Swedish fashion market demonstrates the formation of the COVID-19 pandemic as a macro-actor, which, in conjunction with humans (not forgetting that a virus is a parasite needing a host animal in order to spread), had an immense impact on our way of life and also on the organization of the fashion market ([Wulff, 2022](#)). This study takes such ideas a step further by accounting for the traces that show how retailers wanted to become a part of the anti-programs in order to help combat the influence of this new macro-actor.

How the tracing of anti-programs was carried out

The corpus consists of observations made in physical stores and online. As retailers had a presence in both physical stores and online environments, the acting can be considered to have taken place in a transdimensional way, meaning that both the online and offline dimensions were captured ([Akdeniz, 2022](#); [de Souza Junior, 2021, 2022](#)). The two types of observations are then seen as complementary, assisting in creating a more oligoptic view that moves away from a panopticon ([de Souza Junior, 2021, 2022](#); [Latour, 2005](#)). I frame such texts and images as part of five different anti-programs against the COVID-19 virus program of action (in line with [Latour, 2005](#)). In both types of observations, the text was the center of analysis, as this was understood as the main means of conveying a message, with the visual aspects being regarded as a complement to communication. While the focus was on observing objects, the underlying motive is not “objects do[ing] things ‘instead’ of human actors” ([Latour, 2005, p. 72](#)), the purpose instead being that “no science of the social can even

begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call non-humans” (Latour, 2005, p. 72). Hence, action cannot be divided between human and non-human actors, instead being regarded as the result of the connection between them. Consequently, to provide an account of what happened, nonhuman actors were included in the study due to their centrality to the sequence of events.

The sampling of the material was based on the relevance of the topic of the study. Initially, the focus was on retailers’ communication – both online and in-store – as well as on the reactions to such communication, especially on the online forums. For example, a post by a retailer on social media could generate extensive discussions in the comments section. On those occasions, the reactions and comments were included as part of the observation. The focus was on both locally- and internationally-renowned Swedish fashion retailers. After the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the material collection was broadened to also include retailer responses outside the fashion industry, news reports and other information relevant to understanding developments ongoing within society. This broadening made it easier to understand whether the responses and discussions were specific to the fashion industry or if they were more general. Online material was made available via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn and also traditional media platforms such as the news site of Sweden’s state broadcaster (SVT), *GöteborgsPosten* (a daily local newspaper) and *Dagens Industri* (a daily business newspaper). Offline, in-store observations were conducted in Central Gothenburg during the pandemic and included observations of shop windows, inside stores and public areas. Observations of public areas were aimed at capturing information inside shopping malls and on shopping streets to complement the information communicated by the retailers.

Online observations

Firstly, screenshots of marketing and corporate communications have been taken using company websites and social media. The method was inspired by techniques in both netnography (Kozinets, 2006, 2015, 2019) and virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000). These screenshots gave an idea of how retailers’ communication had suddenly shifted away from the intention to attract people into physical stores toward diverting them to other sales channels. Also, in the case of observations of social media, it demonstrated a shift in the reactions of the public to various types of advertising. Just how retailers communicated their actions and their will to take part in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic also shows what kind of image of themselves they wanted to develop during this period. The collection of material using screenshots started before the outbreak of the pandemic, as a part of observing discount practices online. This follows the principle of the qualitative research method in collecting naturally occurring data and following naturally occurring events (Kiyimba, 2018; Van Maanen, 1979). Table A1 in Appendix 1 illustrates how data was collected using screenshots over a period of time, as well as how many of the screenshots related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The period shown in the table is limited to March 2020, when the first traces of the virus became visible in retailers’ communications, until May 2021, when the vaccines had gained traction and the spread of COVID-19 started decreasing.

Offline observations

Secondly, observations were conducted in physical stores. Due to the recommendations and restrictions as regards staying home and only visiting shopping areas when necessary, these observations were limited to a few occasions. Nevertheless, at two preselected times, observations were conducted in Central Gothenburg, the city closest to the researcher’s home. These observations included stores’ communications in terms of signage both outside

entrances and in-store, as well as artifacts such as hand sanitizers at store entrances. [Table A2](#) in Appendix 2 provides more details of the observations made, including their date and location and the number of photographs taken. Nine observations made in physical stores have occurred since the first outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan in December 2019 ([Spiteri et al., 2020](#)). Even though the spread of COVID-19 was classified as a pandemic in March 2020, the observations made in February and March 2020 did not contain any signs of the pandemic. Hence, only the two observations conducted after March 2020 have been included in this paper's empirical findings and analysis. Consequently, the empirical findings from physical stores were made in August 2020 and December 2021 and documented using 333 photographs.

Reflections on the methods

Inspired by Latour's way of using photographs (see, for example, [Latour, 1996a](#); [Latour and Woolgar, 1979/1986](#)) for the material collection and its presentation, I have chosen to include photographs and screenshots. Unlike the presentation of the photographs in "Laboratory life" ([Latour and Woolgar, 1979/1986](#)), I have also included comments. Although the photographs in "Laboratory Life" were commented on in the text, one of the critiques offered after the first publication was that they had not been commented upon ([Latour and Woolgar, 1979/1986](#), p. 283). Including comments means that the reader can get involved in reflexivity, albeit with regard to questioning my interpretation of the photographs – whether trustworthy or not and whether agreeing with the interpretation or not – which paves the way for a more transparent discussion with that reader.

Another difference was that observations were made both in physical stores and online, leading to a large number of photographs to choose from and more visual impressions. The explosion of visual impressions reinforces the point of including visual material in the writing of scientific articles. When reading "Laboratory Life," the photographs add value to the book in a way that would be difficult to express in words. Similarly, the photographs included in this paper can be valuable not only for future researchers and students when it comes to understanding and making sense of what we lived through during the pandemic but also for practitioners as regards identifying ways of formulating messages that vary in their effectiveness. Besides, it also demonstrates how a certain language had developed during this period of time, one that was specific to the terms used in that context but that might make little sense in another context, something that is further discussed in the analysis.

A shortcoming of the included photographs is their quality. Taking photographs of shop windows and signs covered by plexiglass proved difficult, as there were a lot of reflections. This impacted the quality of some of the photographs. In terms of screenshots, it was only after some time that I realized that I could extend the length of the photographs, i.e. to include "likes" and comments regarding the same picture. Hence, in the beginning, the content was divided into several screenshots, one on the ad and another on the reactions and comments. By the time that I had gathered data on the pandemic, this problem had been solved, meaning that all the information was included in one single screenshot. Using photographs during fieldwork thus presents certain challenges and is also a skill that needs to be developed.

Making sense of the traces left

True to Latour and his criticism of labeling and *a priori* definitions ([Latour, 2005](#)), I have stayed close to the observations made during material collection. Inspired by grounded theory and its focus on theory building using empirical data ([Charmaz, 2014](#); [Glaser and Strauss, 1967](#)), the material has been arranged into five themes. However, the technique has involved finding traces of different anti-programs and making those traces visible, rather than making codes at various levels. Latour has argued for shifting the focus away from

explaining toward describing to a greater extent, paving the way for different understandings and interpretations of the material (Latour, 2005). His argument was that explanations and the use of labeling would reproduce power asymmetries (Latour, 2005). Similar arguments can be found in writings on a narrative approach and the use of “plots” to present material (Czarniawska, 1998, 2004). Hence, to avoid reproducing power asymmetries, this paper offers a description of the sequence of events as well as how I have approached this to make sense of the material.

Traces of anti-programs against the COVID-19 pandemic

During the pandemic, retailers swiftly changed their communications to include information on how to reduce the risk of being infected, as well as when and where to shop more safely (see also Wulff, 2022). Messages were generally in the form of in-store signs but sometimes accompanied by other artifacts, e.g. hand sanitizers. Communication differed to some extent online, as the focus was not on directing people in-store but on encouraging them to shop online and to demonstrate the role of the retailer in the fight against the virus. Together, they form traces of the anti-programs against the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 1: This message was about how to act and move around, after entering the store. It was accompanied by a “thank you,” which assumed that you had followed this prompt, regardless of whether that was the case. This sign also included the word “considerate,” which implies that, by following the prompt, you were being considerate. However, it did not state towards whom to be considerate – fellow customers, employees or the company itself? The heart at the bottom right can be seen as a way of reinforcing the message of being considerate.

Figure 1 *Keep your distance! Keep your distance!
Thank you for being considerate!*

Source(s): Author’s work



Figure 2 Please keep your distance! Please keep your distance! We encourage everyone to keep at least a meter apart from other customers and employees whenever possible.

Source(s): Author's work



Figure 3 Temporary opening hours. Temporary opening hours. At [company website], we're always open!

Source(s): Author's work

Figure 2: This is another sign telling people what to do and how to behave while in-store. This sign is clearer, stating that it is “other customers” and “employees” that should be protected from the risk of the virus. There is, however, a reservation embedded in the message: “whenever possible,” recognizing that at times it might be difficult to follow this instruction. This sign also shows, at the end of its message, that several companies were making use of the same signage. In this particular case, the companies were all part of one group.

Figure 3: This shows that the company has changed its opening hours. One interpretation here is that it is adapting to reduced sales in-store and a lack of customers. Another interpretation is protecting the employees, as this means less time at work. As opening hours had been shortened, this entailed the risk of crowding. However, as few people were in movement during this period, this risk can be considered minimal. The message is supplemented by information on the web shop always being open, which is an implicit way to encourage the customer to do online shopping.

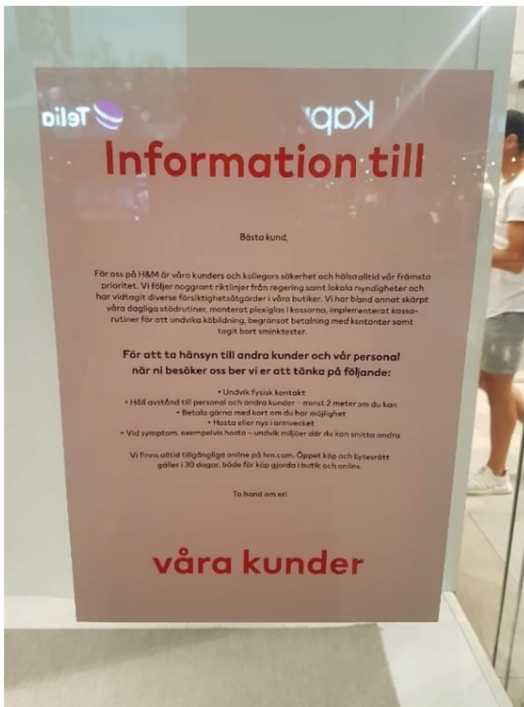


Figure 4 Information to our customers.

Information to our customers

Dear customer,

For us at [company name], the health and safety of our customers and colleagues is always our top priority. We carefully follow government and local authority guidelines and we've taken several precautions in-store. For example, we've improved our day-to-day cleaning routines, installed plexiglass at cash-desks, implemented new payment routines to avoid queuing, limited payment methods using cash, and removed make-up tests.

To be considerate to our other customers and employees, we ask you to keep the following in mind when visiting our stores: Avoid physical contact

Keep your distance to employees and other customers – at least 2 meters whenever you can Please pay by card, whenever possible. Cough or sneeze into the crook of your arm When you have any symptoms - like a cough – avoid environments where you risk infecting others We're available online at [company website]. Returns and refunds may be made within 30 days of purchase, both for online and in-store purchases.

Take care!

Source(s): Author's work

Figure 4: This sign includes a statement reassuring us that the company cares not only about its customers but also about its employees. By referring to the guidelines of governments and authorities, it demonstrates that it is aware of the rules and regulations, thus signaling legitimacy and responsibility.

This was supplemented by several examples of the types of measures the company had taken. The message was also supplemented by a text prompting customers to behave and act in certain ways, like the encouragements of other companies. These recommendations also included paying by card rather than in cash, which was considered a safer way to pay due to less contact. The information about avoiding environments where you risk infecting others might be considered slightly superfluous, as those visiting the store have already violated that request if they are already there with symptoms. Another store was observed to include a similar message: "Stay at home if you feel sick or if you have symptoms." Although this message made sense in terms of one issued by the authorities regarding how to act, it made less sense to include it in information read by those already in the store. The message is considerate at the end, telling the reader to "take care."



Figure 5: The upper-left sign encourages customers as regards how they should act (be considerate, keep your distance and avoid queuing), with the message to the customer being that he/she is welcome and appreciated and should be able to feel safe when visiting the store. Protection from infection could not, at this point, be guaranteed, but this was a way of trying to convince customers that retailers were taking adequate safety measures. Hence, no warranties were given: instead, the company used a vague message saying that “it’s important to us.” Interestingly, the sentence ends with “when you shop with us.” A more inclusive way of communicating this message would be to state “when you visit our shop.” In the lower-left sign, the company pleads with the customer to stay loyal to the company. The last sentence can be interpreted as a philosophical statement: “Tack för att du finns” can be translated as “we’re glad you exist” but has instead been interpreted as “thanks for coming.” My interpretation is that this is a way of expressing gratitude to those who – despite all the recommendations and restrictions – shop with the company, regardless of whether this is online or in physical stores. Retailers were having an exceedingly difficult time financially at this point, with a sharp decrease in sales, so there was also the dimension of wanting to keep existing customers. In the last message, there is a tone of desperation in wanting to keep your customers and your business up and running despite the challenging times.

Figure 5 We appreciate your visit, cash-free store, please support your local store.

Sign 1 (upper-left): We appreciate your visit.

It’s important to us that you as a customer of [name of company] feel safe when shopping with us. To do so, we ask you to be considerate, keep your distance and avoid queuing around the fitting rooms and cash-desks.

Sign 2: This is a cash-free store.

Sign 3: Support your local store. We’re now facing big challenges. [company name] cares about you and your safety. Whichever way you choose to shop, we’re here when you need us – both in your local [company name] store and online. Thank you for coming.

[company name]

Source(s): Author’s work

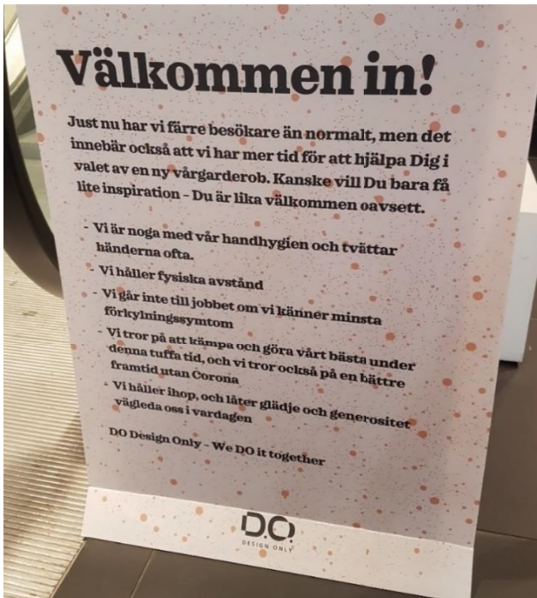


Figure 6 *Welcome! Welcome! Right now, we're getting fewer visitors than normal, which also means we'll have more time to help you choose your new spring wardrobe. Maybe you've only come here for some inspiration – You're just as welcome nevertheless.*

- *We're careful with our hand hygiene and we wash our hands regularly.*
 - *We keep our distance from each other.*
 - *We don't go to work if we feel even the slightest cold or flu symptoms.*
 - *We believe in fighting back and doing our best during this challenging time, and we also believe in a better future without Corona.*
 - *We're sticking together, letting joy and generosity guide us day-to-day.*
- [Company name] – We're DOING this together!*

Source(s): Author's work

Figure 6: This message is written in a very direct manner to those visiting the store. Compared to another company, which focused its message on its paying customers, this had a more inclusive tone, also being directed at those who might not be doing any shopping but just visiting the store for inspiration. At the same time, there is some expectation on customers to go shopping, with this retailer pointing out the benefits of having fewer customers in terms of having more time to serve those actually there. The message focuses mainly on the actions taken by the company, i.e. showing responsibility, but it is also written like a manifesto on how to get through these challenging times together. Some parts, e.g. “let joy and generosity guide us” and “we’re DOING this together,” are not to be seen in other companies’ in-store messages and seem to be a way of inspiring hope and a sense of community.



Figure 7 Shop from home. Get it delivered direct to your door.

Source(s): Author's work

Figure 7: Even when visiting physical stores, customers were encouraged to choose online stores instead. This department store had not previously launched a website for an online store but now felt the urgency to do so. Like many other companies, it also offered free home deliveries (although there were some conditions regarding a minimum expenditure). The message is supplemented by some encouragement to also consider ordering products for friends, probably to boost diminishing sales.



Figure 8 Hello again! Hello again! We have taken some extra precautions to guarantee customer safety in-store. Distance – Hand sanitizers – Protective gloves. # [company name] Together

Source(s): Author's work

Figure 8: Some companies were using a more informal tone, like this one opening with “hello again.” However, this message is sharper in tone than the others, leaving few interpretations as this company was claiming to “guarantee” customer safety by means of three measures: distance, hand sanitizers and protective gloves. Gloves were not to be seen in other retailers’ communications but could indicate some influence from the recommendations of other countries as this store was part of an international retailer.

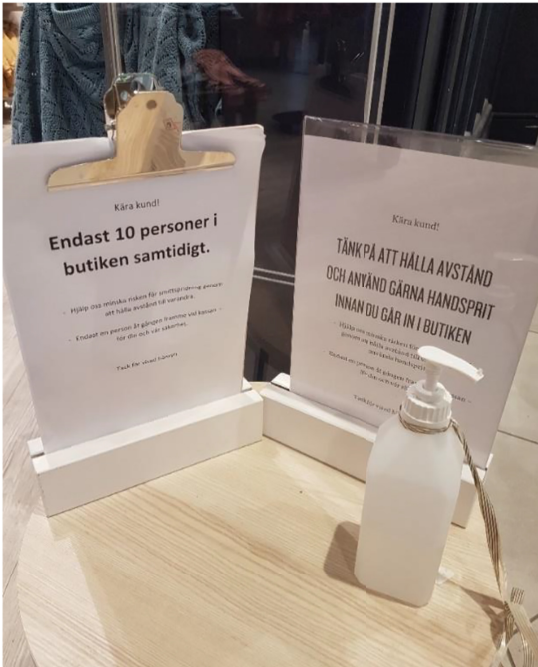


Figure 9 Dear Customer!

Sign 1 (left): Dear customer! Only 10 people at a time in the store. Help us reduce the risk of spreading infection by keeping your distance from others. Only one person at a time at the cash-desk, for everyone’s safety. Thank you for being considerate.

Sign 2 (right): Dear customer! Remember to your distance and please use the hand sanitizer before entering the store [...].

Source(s): Author’s work

Signs supplemented by additional artifacts

Figure 9: This sign contains several implicit statements: firstly, “reduce the spread of infection,” without mentioning the COVID-19 virus; secondly, “keep your distance” is used, without defining what that distance is; thirdly, “only one person at a time at the cash-desk, for everyone’s safety,” without stating what the risk is concerns; fourthly, thanking the customer for being considerate, without knowing whether these instructions have been followed (or even understood); fifthly, encouraging people to use hand sanitizer, without explaining why and lastly (but not connected with the COVID-19 pandemic) the fact that the person entering is a *customer* even though he/she might just be a *visitor*. The term “dear customer” can then be considered to build trust in and closeness to the person entering the store. All these implicit statements point to a common language that had developed during the pandemic, meaning that things did not need to be explained in order to be understood. Most readers, having lived through the pandemic, would not even reflect on the absurdity of these messages if communicated without context.



Figure 10: Both this and another sign indicated that the pictures had been taken during a period of decreased spreading of the COVID-19 virus, as the signs say “again” and “back.” In this example, the signs had been supplemented by a hand sanitizer beside the information board. Another message mentioned a “limited number of shoppers in-store simultaneously.” In this context, it was implying that the number of visitors was being regulated. In another context, such a phrase would lack meaning and make little sense. Hence, it seems as if a common language had developed during the pandemic, whereby people could make sense of phrases that would previously have been difficult to make sense of.

Figure 10 Welcome back! Welcome back! We prioritize the health of our customers and employees. Use hand sanitizers and remember to keep your distance. Limited number of shoppers in-store simultaneously. [company name]

Source(s): Author’s work



Figure 11 Entrance signs. Entry (arrow to the left).
Exit (arrow to the right)

Source(s): Author's work

Figure 11: After the PHAS negotiations with the government in September (STF, 2021), one of the outcomes was the recommendation of separating entry and exit, which was made visible in-store using various signs and directions. This sign on left shows an example of how this was implemented. Interestingly, the entry arrow points to the left and the exit to the right. The intuitive path would be the opposite, as people in Sweden drive on the right, which also has implications for how people move around in in-store environments. Hence, the sign was a way of encouraging a movement pattern other than the intuitive one.

Online communications related to the COVID-19 pandemic

In early March 2020, few traces of the spread of COVID-19 were to be found online in retailers' communications. They were posting information about "the last day of the sale," "save up to 70%" and "Life's a PARTY" (Observation, March 2–5, 2020). However, in mid-March, only a few days later, one Swedish international fashion retailer received a comment on one of its posts regarding sales: "Save your money for food and medicine, not for clothes. One day we'll have to stay home – what will we need clothes for then?", while another comment was "protect your company from large losses, start selling hand sanitizers instead" (Observation, March 12, 2020). This was after the spread of COVID-19 was classified as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Nevertheless, the original posts had received a lot of "likes" at this point. After the Swedish Government and the PHAS held a press conference whose message was "work from home if possible" (Observation, March 16, 2020), observations were made of companies offering home delivery services (Observation, March 16–17, 2020). A post about a big clearance sale in Central Gothenburg encountered several negative comments and "angry" smileys (Observation, March 16, 2020). Being responsible at this time also meant advocating tele-working, closing businesses and working through the crisis together, something that was communicated by many retailers and that encountered positive reactions on social media (Observations, March 17, 2020). Hence, in March 2020, there was a shift in terms of the type of marketing communication and posts on social media that were considered acceptable (see also Wulff, 2022).

Social engagement online

However, some companies did not find it enough to take actions aimed at reducing the spread, which related to their own businesses, instead taking things one step further by, for e.g. donating hand sanitizers, face masks, disposable gloves and protective aprons to hospitals.

Such initiatives were made public by means of posts on social media, often encouraging others to follow suit (Observations, March 14–16, May 19; 25; 29, 2020, see also [Wulff, 2022](#)). Initiatives taken in other retail sectors included an online food delivery company donating food and hygiene packages to a charity shop (Observation, May 29, 2020). Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) offered its cabin crew training days at a local hospital, receiving over 33,000 “likes/hearts/applause” (Observation, April 1, 2020), while Austrian Airlines used its flights to transport medical supplies (March 28, 2020). Hence, many companies wanted to take part in the more general fight against spreading the virus.



In a few short months, we have seen how the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has affected communities all over the world. H&M Foundation is now donating USD 500,000 to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund for [World Health Organization](#) launched by [United Nations Foundation](#) on Friday.

The fund will support the World Health Organization’s global efforts to track and understand the spread of the virus. The work is focused on ensuring that patients get the care they need, that frontline workers get essential supplies and information and accelerating the efforts to develop vaccines, tests, and treatments. Ensuring that all countries are prepared, especially those most vulnerable and with the weakest health systems, to step up their preparedness to prevent COVID-19.

#COVID19Fund Donate at <https://lnkd.in/dVDk5p>
Full press release found at https://lnkd.in/gjBhU_Z

Figure 12 Supporting the United Nations Foundation

Source(s): Author’s work

Figure 12: One company that was especially visible in terms of this type of action and communicating it within the fashion industry, was a Swedish international fashion retailer. A post on LinkedIn, where the chief executive officer (CEO) expressed her concern about the seriousness of the situation, received hundreds of “likes/hearts/applause” (Observation, March 17, 2020). A few days later, the company announced a donation of USD 500,000 to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund in support of the WHO. Two months later, the retailer announced that it would let global aid organizations utilize its channels to share information during the COVID-19 pandemic (Observation, May 19, 2020). Another scheme was to provide supplies of fabric for the “Masque Solidaire” (Solidarity Mask) initiative, receiving at least 1,092 “likes/hearts/applause” and 22 comments (Observations, May 25, 2020).

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We are so proud to announce that we are reallocating 1 Million SEK to enter **UNICEFS** important new project "Create a Protective Environment for Children in Bangladesh During COVID-19".

The project will aid:

Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) – Provide handwashing facilities, 3,000 families in the slum and 8,000 people on the move will have access to water and soap for promoting daily hand washing

Nutrition- support city corporations for management of Severe Acute Malnutrition among children of under 2 years of age.

Child Protection- support children and their families released from detention centres, identify vulnerable children considering COVID-19 situation and refer them to appropriate services, create online opportunities for adolescent and youth to share their experiences and concerns regarding COVID -19

"We are so proud to be able to be part of the solution together with our long-term partner UNICEF. This will truly make a big difference and we are incredibly proud to have been able to work both quickly and flexibly together with UNICEF to reallocate our donations to this project which will make such a big change for the better in Bangladesh." says **Emma Garrote Fredman**, Global Production and Sustainability Manager at Gina Tricot. [#unicef](#) [#ginatricot](#) [#covid19](#)

Figure 13 Supporting UNICEF program

Source(s): Author's work

Figure 13: Another company took similar actions and made statements announcing that this retailer was working together with The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to create a protective environment for children in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic (Observation, May 5, 2020). A third company, Indiska, offered support to businesses that had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic by offering free advertising space on its channels (Observation, May 25, 2020). Hence, there were several examples of companies, both fashion retailers and others, that were taking and communicating actions regarding how to combat the pandemic by means of initiatives lying outside their normal business operations. Such initiatives, e.g. donating money, supporting the poor or helping both aid organizations and companies affected by the pandemic, can all be regarded as acts of heroism in the anti-program against the virus.

The five anti-programs traced

Taken together, the photographs form traces of the anti-programs that retailers had engaged with, thus becoming actors in this kind of fight. While the virus can be regarded as a macro-actor, as both the spread of and impact on people's lives were immense, the signs and objects – i.e. the traces of the actions taken by retailers – were used by retailers to go from actants and objects to actors and subjects. Retailers thus became actors in fighting the virus. As they were considerably small actors compared to the virus, their role was rather acting as micro-actors: nobody could fight the virus alone, but the more retailers used the language of the

government and authorities, the greater would be the likelihood of a successful anti-program. In that sense, the initiatives remind us of the anthill analogy rather than a common defense (similar to what is described in Czarniawska, 2009, regarding how new institutions emerge). The signs themselves were, of course, also objects, together with the hand sanitizers.

The retailers took on either the role of an intermediary or that of a mediator (Latour, 2005), meaning that different degrees of intervention with the original message were occurring. Some signs and messages could be directly traced back to the PHAS and the Swedish Government. For example, messages such as “stay at home if you’re showing signs of an infection” were being used by some retailers regardless of them not making sense in that environment, implying an intermediary role. Other messages were modified to a greater extent, e.g. pay by card or use contactless payment, messages that could not be traced back to governmental communication, implying a more interpretative and mediating role [1]. Regardless of the type of message, retailers used it to demonstrate their participation in the anti-program.

Hence, five types of anti-programs were identified: (1) *fighting the spread of COVID-19 using prompts*, (2) *verbalizing responsibility*, (3) *creating a feeling of collectivity*, (4) *aspiring toward heroism in the fight* and (5) *mobilizing support for continued trading* (see Table A3 in Appendix 3). While the first four programs were part of the anti-program against the COVID-19 pandemic, the fifth was aimed at finding support for future business. This shows how mobilizing the crowd did not purely have the purpose of fighting the virus, but that there was also some concern that its spread would undermine their business and that they thus needed continued support – and sales – in order to survive such a fight.

Conclusion

Inspired by the programs of action and anti-programs of Bruno Latour, I have argued in this paper that the virus, in conjunction with humans, constituted a program of action for spreading disease, something that was met with resistance and attempts to stop the spread of the virus in terms of five anti-programs. Also, the anti-programs consisted of a conjunction between human and nonhuman actors, e.g. signs and hand sanitizers. There are several ways in which the study can be of help in outlining Latour’s contribution to the methodology of studying organizations, and these will be discussed below.

First, there is a duality in Latour’s writing. On the one hand, he is against reductionism and criticizes the division between society and nature (Latour *et al.*, 1992). He argues that studying only one or the other is insufficient, whereas ANT has been suggested to include both humans and nonhumans. On the other hand, he advocates using simple examples to illustrate the essence of a technique (Latour, 1995). By mapping scientific controversies in a very simple manner on a socio-technical graph and accounting for the viewpoint and the action and reaction, one can depict “a series of transformations – or – translations undergone by a collective of people and things” (Latour *et al.*, 1992, p. 34). Hence, Latour was not against simplifications *per se*, only when they were considered problematic and done in a way where the essence was lost. Instead, using simple examples and staying close to the empirical material offers a research tool for capturing the complexity in an accessible and comprehensive way. This also opens research up to scrutiny and discussion. Latour *et al.* (1992) compared this with a black box, a controversy that can be unveiled, but only after it has happened and often only when things have gone wrong. This line of thought includes using programs of action and anti-programs to map the controversies.

Second, one important aspect raised by Latour (1995) is thinking in terms of different viewpoints. Depending on the viewpoint taken, different stories can be told. For example, the study reported in this paper has taken the viewpoint of the virus as its starting point. The virus, together with the human actors, represented a program of action in its simplest form

capable of being described as wanting to spread disease. From the viewpoint of the virus-human, each attempt to stop the spread can be regarded as an anti-program. Here too, both human and nonhuman actors were involved in the anti-programs. What is interesting about this case is the fact that human and nonhuman actors cannot be fully separated. Only in conjunction can they act as a program of action as well as an anti-program. Hence, while the examples given by Latour in his writings focus on single actors working together to form a program or anti-program (e.g. “the hotel manager”, “the doorman”, “the doorstep” or “the cat”, “Gaston” or “homeowner’s janitor verbal notice,” etc.), in this study, while focusing on the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the lines between the different actors become more blurred. The virus cannot operate on its own and neither can humans. An actant is thus not only a separate entity, but it can also consist of two entities that are conjoined. Adding to the complexity, Latour has advocated only including what is observable in studies. However, in this case, there was also a need to include nonobservable actors. The virus cannot be observed with the naked eye. Still, the implications of the spread of the virus were more than visible (but not accounted for in this particular study). This study thus challenges the notion of only accounting for what has been observed by also including nonobservable actors.

Third, another contribution to Latour’s writing and methodology made by this study is the illustration of how the same type of actor – humans – was both part of the program of action and the anti-program. Latour has previously demonstrated how actors can be enrolled as part of an anti-program while initially being part of a program of action and vice versa. However, what this case adds is that it shows how allies and opponents are the same. On the one hand, this is due to “humans” being accounted for as a group and not separated into specific individuals. Observing the specific individual would have added clarity as regards when a “human” is part of the program of action (infected) and when he/she part of the anti-programs (efforts to interrupt the program). On the other hand, even if a specific individual had been pinpointed in this controversy, that individual could still have been part of both programs and anti-programs. A person can be infected while simultaneously taking measures to interrupt the spread of the virus.

The contributions made by this study can be seen in terms of challenging some of the ideas presented by Bruno Latour. However, in my view, they are developing his ideas by showing how simple ways of mapping controversies can also be used for more complex phenomena. Nevertheless, this would require a broadening of Latour’s initial ideas. Latour was a pioneer in terms of including both human and nonhuman actors in the social studies of science. In this study, I have taken the idea one step further by arguing that some actors cannot operate on their own, instead being dependent on the conjunction of another actor, accounted for as one entity. Additionally, including the virus as part of an actor extends the notion of including only observable actors. Without the inclusion of the virus, although this is not visible, the narrative would make little sense and be disregarded as meaningless. Third, the case shows that an actor can be part of both the program of action and the anti-program simultaneously, paving the way for new discussions ahead. How can we make use of the simple model while still encompassing even more complexity? Although staying true to Latour’s idea of using a simple example to illustrate the essence of a technique, I think there is potential in the methodology developed by Latour and his colleagues to also account for more complex examples. I think this would be a way for current and future researchers to honor his writings and work, not only building on his ideas but also continuing to discuss and develop them. Programs of action and anti-programs of action are excellent examples of a research tool of the utmost usefulness in mapping controversies and accounting for translations performed by a collective of people and things. Let’s cherish this heritage and engage with Latour’s work in order to continue unboxing black boxes.

Note

1. Paying by cash was later disregarded as regards having a negative impact on spread: <https://www.svenskhandel.se/nyheter/nyhet/corona-kontanter-innebar-ingen-extra-smittorisk> (in Swedish)

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Appendix 1

Month	Total no.	COVID-19 pandemic related No.	Source	COVID-19 retail related communications No.	Types of communications
Mar 20	1,069	313	Facebook, LinkedIn, SVT News, Chrome and Confederation of Swedish Enterprise	74	Swedish international fashion retailers, local fashion store, fashion rental, fashion outlet, footwear company and customer reactions
Apr 20	1,031	126	Facebook, LinkedIn and SVT News	64	Footwear retailer, underwear retailers, Swedish international fashion retailers, fashion association, fashion outlet, fashion rental, local fashion store, national fashion retailers, fashion platform retailer operating on the Swedish marketplace and customer reactions
May 20	1,093	231	Facebook, LinkedIn, Chrome and GöteborgsPosten	140	Fashion sportswear retailer, Swedish international retailers, fashion association, textiles association, national fashion retailers, underwear retailers and customer reactions
June 20	652	85	Facebook, LinkedIn and SVT News	59	Swedish international fashion retailers, trade paper, children's clothing retailer, international platform operating on the Swedish market, national fashion retailers, footwear company, textiles association, fashion association, fashion rentals and customer reactions
July 20	238	8	LinkedIn and Facebook	8	Swedish international fashion retailers, national fashion retailer, textiles association, e-commerce fashion retailer and customer reactions
Aug 20	426	9	GöteborgsPosten, SVT News, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram	4	Swedish international fashion retailers, trade paper online and customer reactions
Sep 20	334	20	Facebook, SVT News and LinkedIn	10	Footwear retailers, international workers' rights association, Swedish international fashion retailer, national fashion retailer and customer reactions
Oct 20	537	44	Facebook, SVT News, LinkedIn and GöteborgPosten	15	Swedish international fashion retailer, local fashion store, national fashion retailer, retail association, local paper and customer reactions
Nov 20	492	36	Facebook, SVT News, LinkedIn and Instagram	27	Local fashion store, Swedish international fashion retailer, fashion association, online platform for fashion, national fashion retailersv customer reactions
Dec 20	313	25	LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and SVT News	22	International fashion retailers, remake retailers, retail paper online, SVT news, newspaper, footwear retailer, international fashion site and premium multi-retailer

(continued)

Table A1.
List of observations
online. Number of
screenshots per month
(in total and connected
to the COVID-19
pandemic)

Month	Total no.	COVID-19 pandemic related No.	Source	COVID-19 retail related communications No.	Types of communications
Jan 21	158	49	SVT News, LinkedIn, Facebook and GöteborgsPosten	45	International workers' rights organization, retail association, Swedish international fashion retailer, newspaper and customer reactions
Feb 21	158	7	SVT News and Facebook	6	Local textiles store, Swedish international fashion retailer, local shopping mall and local shopping guide
Mar 21	139	12	Facebook and Chrome	10	Budget clothing retailer, customer reactions and multi-brand fashion retailer
Apr 21	75	11	Facebook	11	Fashion outlet and fashion agency
May 21	90	6	Facebook and LinkedIn	6	Swedish international fashion retailers, trade paper online, national fashion retailers and e-commerce fashion retailer
Total	6,805	982		501	

Table A1.

Source(s): Author's work

Appendix 2

Table A2.

List of observations offline. Date and place of observations and numbers of different types of photographs

Date	Place	Total (no.)	Photographs Of people moving around in-store and on the street	COVID-19 retail-related communications
August 17, 2020	Gothenburg	219	101	46
December 17, 2021	Gothenburg	114	62	29
Total		333	163	75

Source(s): Author's work

Types of anti-programs	Traces
1. Fighting spread of COVID-19 using prompts	Avoid physical contact; Keep your distance from employees and other customers – at least 2 meters whenever you can; Please pay by card, whenever possible; Cough or sneeze into the crook of your arm; When you have symptoms, like a cough, avoid environments where you risk infecting others; This is a cash-free store; Use hand sanitizers and remember to keep your distance; Help us reduce the risk of spreading infection by keeping your distance from each other; Only one person at a time at the cash-desk, for your safety and ours; Remember to keep your distance and please use the hand sanitizer before entering the store; Entry (arrow to the left), Exit (arrow to the right)
2. Verbalizing responsibility	We take care with our hand hygiene and wash our hands regularly; We keep our physical distance; We don't go to work when we have even the slightest cold symptoms; We have taken extra precautions to guarantee in-store safety; Distance – Hand sanitizers – Protective gloves; We prioritize the health of our customers and employees; Limited number of shoppers in-store simultaneously; Only 10 people at a time in-store
3. Creating a feeling of collectivity	Take care of yourself!; It's important to us that you as a customer of [name of company] feel safe when shopping with us; We're now facing big challenges. [Company name] cares about you and your safety; Whichever way you choose to shop, we'll be here when you need us – both in your local [company name] store and online; We believe in fighting and doing our best at this challenging time, and we also believe in a better future without Corona; We're sticking together, and letting joy and generosity guide us through day-to-day life; We're doing this together!; #[company name] Together; Thanks for being considerate
4. Aspiring to heroism	The H&M Foundation is now donating USD 500,000 to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund in support of the World Health Organization, launched by the United Nations Foundation on Friday (H&M Foundation, March 20, 2020); We're so proud to announce that we're reallocating 1 million SEK to enter the important new UNICEF project "Create a protective Environment for children in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Gina Tricot, May 6 2020); We're letting aid organizations utilize our channels to share information during the COVID-19 pandemic (H&M, May, 19, 2020); At Happy Socks, we're donating socks to the doctors and nurses working tirelessly at the forefront of this COVID-19 pandemic (Happy Socks, May 25, 2020); H&M is proud to be the first fashion brand to provide supplies of fabrics to the "Masque Solidaire" (Solidarity Mask) initiative of Paris Good Fashion (H&M, May 25, 2020); Up until today, we've helped 40 companies with free advertising – and the need has been overwhelming (Indiska, May 25, 2020); Good things happen when we support each other. This week, we're lending our social media channels to Oxfam, a global aid organization working hard to prevent the spread of the virus (H&M, May 29, 2020)

(continued)

Table A3.
Types of anti-programs. The traces were obtained from messages in-store and observations online

Types of anti-programs	Traces
5. Mobilizing support for continued trading	Temporary opening hours; We're available online at [company website]. Returns and refunds are available for 30 days, both for online and in-store purchases; Shop from home – get delivery directly to your door; For those existing and new Key Customers, we now open up for online shopping of the department store's selection with free delivery (when spending more than 500 SEK per household) Home delivery; You can also choose to send a gift to someone you like, direct to their home. Just ask us, or book at [company website]; Shop online!; Free delivery over 500 SEK; Free delivery and free returns when you pick up from and return to our department store; We appreciate your visit; Support your local retailer; Thank you for coming here; Welcome back!

Table A3. Source(s): Author's work

About the author

Gabriella Wulff, Ph.D., is a researcher and lecturer in textile management at the Swedish School of Textiles and a visiting researcher at the Gothenburg Research Institute. She has published in the *Journal of Cleaner Production* and *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*. Gabriella is a board member of the Sociology of Consumption research network, part of the European Sociological Association. In addition, she has written discussion articles in newspapers and participated in TV, radio and newspaper interviews to disseminate knowledge and contribute to public debate on issues in the fashion industry and sustainable development. Gabriella Wulff can be contacted at: gabriella.wulff@hb.se

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