

ephemera: theory & politics
in organization



Ethics of the Brand

What is *ephemera*: theory & politics in organization?

ephemera is an independent journal, founded in 2001. *ephemera* provides its content free of charge, and charges its readers only with free thought.

theory

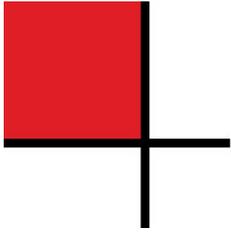
ephemera encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes and organizational life. This does not preclude empirical studies or commentaries on contemporary issues, but such contributions consider how theory and practice intersect in these cases. We especially publish articles that apply or develop theoretical insights that are not part of the established canon of organization studies. *ephemera* counters the current hegemonization of social theory and operates at the borders of organization studies in that it continuously seeks to question what organization studies is and what it can become.

politics

ephemera encourages the amplification of the political problematics of organization within academic debate, which today is being actively de-politized by the current organization of thought within and without universities and business schools. We welcome papers that engage the political in a variety of ways as required by the organizational forms being interrogated in a given instance.

organization

Articles published in *ephemera* are concerned with theoretical and political aspects of organizations, organization and organizing. We refrain from imposing a narrow definition of organization, which would unnecessarily halt debate. Eager to avoid the charge of 'anything goes' however, we do invite our authors to state how their contributions connect to questions of organization and organizing, both theoretical and practical.



ephemera

theory & politics in organization

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Ethics of the brand

Carys Egan-Wyer, Sara Louise Muhr, Anna Pfeiffer and Peter Svensson

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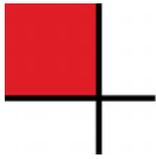


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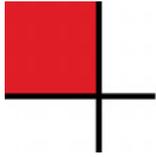
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The ethics of the brand

Carys Egan-Wyer, Sara Louise Muhr, Anna Pfeiffer and Peter Svensson

Introduction

Ethical brands have risen to prominence in recent years as a market solution to a diverse range of political, social and, in this case most interestingly, ethical problems. By signifying the ethical beliefs of the firm behind them, ethical brands offer an apparently simple solution to ethical consumers: buy into the brands that represent the value systems that they believe in and avoid buying into those with value-systems that they do not believe in. Lehner and Halliday (this issue), for example, argue that brands are a 'practical and effective way' (13) to address the market demand for ethicality because 'they offer a means for firms to internalise positive externalities' (23) associated with ethical behaviour. The assumption, then, is that if society desires ethical behaviour from firms, firms will not dare to behave otherwise for fear of inflicting costly damage on their carefully crafted brand images. According to economic rules of demand and supply, the market should then ensure that firms respond to the ethical requirements of the society in which they reside. As a consequence, brand management has incorporated as one of its main tasks the translation of the ethical positions on the market into communicable brand messages.

However, critical research has acknowledged the fundamental incompatibility of ethics and capitalism, as it is argued that 'ethics' tend to be used quite superficially as a legitimising signpost, effectively concealing the (possible) structural lack of ethics built into the capitalist order per se. Consequently, ethical branding may in fact legitimise the un-ethical aspects and elements of capitalist relations and practices. Moreover, when ethics are commodified, e.g. in the form of brand image, the human relations underlying the production processes are, in effect, concealed rather than exposed: 'instead of seeing these human relations we see only an object' (Jones, Parker and ten Bos, 2005: 104).

Paradoxically, so it seems, ethical brands may indeed repress – or at least obfuscate – the most urgent ethical questions in capitalism rather than bringing them into the limelight.

As is the case with ethics itself, a term which is difficult to pin down in one, single definition (e.g. Jones, 2003; Jones, Parker and ten Bos, 2005; Muhr, 2008), the notion of ethical brands seems to be rife with paradoxes and dilemmas (see also Muhr and Rehn, forthcoming). An overriding tension in debates about ethical brands is that of the incompatibility of ethics and capitalist modes of production and consumption. This special issue is an attempt to address, discuss and reflect upon this.

The incompatibility of ethics and capitalism

One of the first mainstream brands to be built on the notion of ethical consumerism was The Body Shop. Founder Anita Roddick was an environmental activist and campaigner for the homeless, victims of domestic violence and disadvantaged children (Mcintyre, 2007). Founded in 1976, The Body Shop broke the mould by refusing to sell cosmetics that were tested on animals and by promoting fair trade practices in developing countries. Thirty years later, many were shocked when The Body Shop was sold for £652 million to L'Oréal, a multinational that had been awarded Ethical Consumer Magazine's lowest rating for its poor record on animal testing (Cahalane, 2006). The deal seemed to symbolise the practical incompatibility of ethics and capitalism, and can be seen as emblematic of the apparent dilemma faced by both consumers and producers who wish to act ethically within a capitalist system governed by its own order of ethics. A famous version of this standpoint was formulated by Milton Friedman (1970), who argued that a firm's only responsibility is to maximise profits.

One reason why ethics and capitalism are arguably incompatible is that 'ethics' are transformed when inserted into the capitalist/market logic: from being principles of human existence and social life, into a strategic resource to be exploited by the corporation. In other words, ethics (whatever this term may refer to) has become one of many alternative strategic tools with which competitive advantages are built. Consequently, when other strategic alternatives present themselves as more efficient, productive and profitable, ethics are likely to be abandoned, all according to the ethic of business – not to be confused with 'business ethics' (De George, 1987). Put differently, when you put a price tag on ethics, you also plant ethical considerations in the soil of financial and strategic rationalities. Ethics then become marketable and sellable; an item on the balance sheet. They are no longer constituted by a set of principles or duties (as

formulated by Kant) nor by a utilitarian calculus of any sort (as laid out by Mill), but simply by market demand (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2010: 70). In other words, the reason for being ethical (or appearing to be ethical) resides not in the urgent impulse for ethical behaviour in the world, but in the market demand for it. This somewhat unstable kind of ethics is arguably unable to support long-term perspectives and hence the so-called sustainable development of global capitalism.

As highlighted by many of the papers in this issue (especially Fordyce and Ryan, this issue; Lehner and Halliday, this issue; and Bertilsson, this issue), it is difficult, some would argue impossible, for corporations as well as consumers to act ethically within a capitalist system. For firms, maximising profits and minimising costs do not often go hand in hand with, for example, paying employees and suppliers well or handling waste carefully. If they do, it is usually because consumers are prepared to pay a premium for brands that they believe do this (Low and Davenport, 2005). This in itself may be considered unethical in that the less wealthy segments of the population are, in effect, excluded from the ethical decisions being made in the markets. This raises a range of new questions concerning how consumers are involved in the ethical constructions of a brand, such as 'is it *just* that only those who can afford the luxury of ethical brands have access to them?' and 'has ethical consumerism become a middle class luxury, a salvation to which poor people have no access?'

Ethics and capitalism as incompatible for consumers?

Consumers then, face several challenges when attempting to act as ethical citizens. First of all, it is not an easy task to get a picture of what precisely ethical behaviour might look like. Even if that obstacle is overcome, consumers then face the second challenge of working out which companies are actually engaging in such behaviour.

As highlighted by Bertilsson (this issue), business and consumption ethics might refer to such diverse categories as ecological sustainability, racial and gender equality, environmental safety, conditions for employees, animal welfare, income for suppliers, over-consumption, waste management, accounting policies and so on. Ethical considerations may even stretch to the reputations of the political powers in countries from where raw materials are sourced and in which brands are produced (see e.g. Ayres, 2012). Even if consumers can negotiate this minefield of potentially contradictory ethical requirements and decide what seems to constitute their own ethical beliefs and values, they must also decide how to evaluate the firm's offering in line with their own ethical beliefs and

values. There are so many aspects of production and consumption that need to be taken into account in an ethical evaluation of a corporation. Many difficult questions are raised when the ethics of a firm is in the limelight: how much can a company control what goes on in the world? Where do the limits of ethical responsibility lie? How should responsibility be shared by the actors in a market? How should ethical dilemmas – for instance diverging interests of employees, owners, consumers and citizens – be solved?

Some would argue that consumers find it so challenging to consume ethically because the very notion of an ethical brand is inherently paradoxical; that brands and the market itself are naturally parasitic, feeding off individuals' attempts to differentiate and distance themselves from unethical actions, co-opting it and selling it back to them in packaged, branded form (Holt 2002). According to Holt (2002: 88), it is the market that now produces 'the experiential and symbolic freedom' that others argued could only be achieved by emancipation from the capitalist system (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). This raises the question of why consumers bother to buy ethical brands at all if it is so hard for them to tell which companies are ethical – or worse, if they fear that 'ethicalness is just a façade that helps companies to earn more money?' (Bertilsson, this issue: 127).

Why do consumers bother with ethical brands?

Of course, by seeing ethical consumption as hedonistic consumption, it is relatively easy to understand why consumers who believe the claims made by certain organisations consume ethical brands. They derive some kind of joy or satisfaction from the purchase of an ethical brand because they believe they are doing good for others (Szmigin and Carrigan, 2005).

A more extreme answer to the question of why consumers bother with ethical brands would be that they have little choice. The only way out of the ethics/capitalism dilemma is to exit the market altogether and to accept a different logic of production, distribution and consumption. For example, by selecting free or open source options like the Diaspora social networking platform described by Fordyce and van Ryan (this issue). Smith (this issue) describes another form of non-market distribution of goods, although the gifting of products for promotional purposes to 'friends' of the brand hardly fits with traditional conceptualisations of what it means to be ethical. In general though, as Kozinets (2002) highlights in his study of the anti-market Burning Man festival, escape from the capitalist system is possible only in limited time and space. In normal life, consumers may find it hard to make choices that fall

outside of capitalist logic, since the very concept of ethical brands privileges a market solution to ethical problems over a rejection of consumption completely.

A much more optimistic answer can be found in the symbolic value of ethical brands. When consuming a brand, an individual incorporates the symbolic value of that brand into her own self-image. Brands that are seen to be good, fair or ethical, regardless of whether or not they are 'true', thus seem to have more desirable associations (Elliot and Wattanasuvan, 1998). Arvidsson (in this issue) build on a similar argument. He argues that, even if the ethicality of a particular brand is contested, consuming and/or producing that brand can contribute to the construction of an ethical personal brand.

Yet another way of discussing this question is explicated by Walz, Andéhn and Kingston (this issue). Drawing on Pfaller's work on interpassive enjoyment (also popularized by Žižek and Sloterdijk), they argue that cynical consumers may 'derive pleasure in various, less obvious ways' (57) from the consumption of ethical brands, even if they do not believe that their consumption 'will result in the purported [ethical] outcomes' (57). Consuming brands marketed as ethical can provide a moment of relief from the responsibility of consumer sovereignty and thereby give a feeling of what they (again based on Pfaller) call 'thievish joy' in having gotten away with this double deception.

In this issue, we do not seek to provide one answer to – or way out of – the ethics/capitalism dilemma. Instead, we try to highlight the multiple ways of understanding the dilemma and its imperfect solutions. Instead of trying to figure out the impossible – what ethics is, what an ethical brand is, whether a brand can really be ethical or not – we will end this editorial by stressing how such impossibility can be communicated through the brand itself, and how the practice of reflecting on this impossibility might actually constitute the ethics of the brand. In other words, if we reject the functionalist claim of being able to evaluate the ethicality of brands objectively, how can we talk about an ethics of the brand on a more abstract basis?

The undecidability of ethics

The important first step is to stop trying to distinguish the good from the bad; to rid ourselves of the notion that brands are either ethical or not. Since even the most apparently ethical brands – like The Body Shop above – often end up being questioned or doing questionable things, the project of separating 'good' brands from 'bad' brands is doomed from the outset. We argue that ethics lie not in a simple choice – ethical or not. The ethics of the brand lie in how a brand is

produced or consumed; whether this is done uncritically or whether it is done with a certain portion of self-distance, irony, humour or similar mechanisms. This undoubtedly complicates the brand message in ways that make it more difficult to objectively evaluate the ethics of the brand. But on the other hand it also opens up many different ways for groups, people, or organizations to construct themselves, which become important ethical statements.

Consider for example how Jack Wills (Smith, this issue) creates an almost comically elitist brand by playing up, instead of avoiding, connotations of ridiculous snobbery associated with its claim of being *Outfitters to the gentry*. Many could attack Jack Wills for being terribly discriminatory but it still manages to institute an ethical economy wherein goods are allocated to those deemed worthy of representing the brand. It does so, we believe, because it is so extreme in its elitism that it borders the comical, which makes it difficult to attack in a serious fashion. It embraces, rather than shies away from the potential controversy that could ensue and thus its critics may well find themselves disarmed. Similarly, innocent smoothies, as highlighted by Walz et al. (this issue), use humour and self-irony to construct their ethical claims. They admit that they probably sound a little like a Miss World contestant – presumably with unrealistic dreams of world peace – but argue that they are nevertheless doing their best to take responsibility for the effects of their business on society and the environment. Would innocent have succeeded in the same way if they had tried to build a serious ethical brand that claimed total ethicality? As we saw above, such serious claims are often easily destroyed by a detailed investigation into suppliers, logistics, employees etc.

Most of the brands mentioned in this issue somehow try to turn the ethical claim upside down or complicate it, so it is no longer clear where precisely the ethical claim lies. This certainly seems to be the case with ICA, the Swedish supermarket whose campaign with Jerry (who has down-syndrome) as the protagonist became a massive success (see Concha-Ferreira, this issue). While this complication could be understood as a way for brands to avoid the critical gaze of the ethical consumer, it can also – and perhaps more interestingly – be seen as symptomatic of the fragmentation and complication seen in many other areas of postmodern life (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Baumann 2000). Consumers no longer want their ethical claims served ready-made and what all of these campaigns or brand constructions have in common is that the ethical claim is complexified and left to the consumer to decipher. The uncritical ethical consumer can consume the ethical claim in a nonreflective way, whereas the critical ethical consumer can construct the ethics of the brand for herself, using the different kinds of ethical claims offered.

Why then is it that such complex ethical brands work? In a similar argument to that made by Kornberger (this issue), we suggest that one answer could be that the ethics reside in the undecidability of ethics; in the very dilemma of ethics and capitalism itself. That is, constructing a brand around the dilemma, making the dilemma central for the very ethical claim instead of trying to avoid it, leaves the consumer with a choice. It is in the act of pondering that choice that the consumer is acting ethically. Consumers no longer want standard or simple ethical claims that are frequently – and perhaps inevitably – eventually discredited in one way or another. Too many corporations have been exposed because they have been subjected to critical scrutiny (like the case of Nike's use of child labour) and so the trust in their standard ethical claims has been lost. Instead, consumers are attracted to brands that give them the possibility to *think* about ethics – either by being comically elitist like Jack Wills; ironic about themselves, like innocent; or complex in their message like ICA. In other words, more complex brand messages, built on humour and irony, give brands the possibility of a new kind of ethics.

Such an ethics can be said to stem from Derrida's (1993) notion of aporias, in which undecidability becomes the very condition of responsibility and decision. To be responsible is to make a decision in a situation marked by undecidability, in a situation where one does not have the perfect or right answer, where one does not really know what is good or bad (see also Derrida, 1997). In these in-between spaces – in-between definite notions of good and bad – one takes responsibility by accepting dilemmas, absence of knowledge, lack of guarantees, and ambiguity as immanent parts of social interaction. Reflecting on and making decisions in such circumstances of lack – where there can never be an absolutely 'right decision – is the very definition of responsible and ethical consumer practice (see also Kornberger, this issue; Loacker and Muhr, 2009). Without the undecidability and uncertainty, there is no responsibility or ethics, just simple obedience. Where ethics seem most difficult to determine, then, is actually where they are to be found. The ethics of the brand is exactly to be found in the midst of its own impossibility.

Contributions

The special issue begins with Matthias Lehner and Sue Vaux Halliday's article, in which brands are described as a practical way to encourage sustainable market activity by firms. Using examples from food retailing, Lehner and Halliday make an argument that might alarm sustainability advocates – who often see

marketing and branding as the driver of over-consumption in western society. They make the case that brands, by allowing them to internalise the positive externalities connected to acting sustainably, encourage firms to enact the sustainability demands of the purchasing public. The authors also claim that the cost of creating a trustworthy brand discourages corporations from undermining that brand by acting against market expectations. However, Lehner and Halliday also warn against a *purely* brand-focused approach to sustainability. They fear that corporate dominance of the societal discourses in which people make sense of sustainability could see them becoming commercialised for short-term gain.

Robbie Fordyce and Luke van Ryn argue, on the contrary, that ethics and capitalism are fundamentally incompatible; that capitalism creates a need for ethical products and then benefits from their sale; and that ethics in capitalism are mere window dressing. They argue that consumption of commodities, even ethically branded ones, will never lead to changes in the mode of production. What is necessary for such an ethical revolution to take place is for consumers to refuse to consume or to exit the capitalist system entirely, as in the case of free and open source products.

In their article, *The magic of ethical brands*, Markus Walz, Sean Hingston and Mikael Andéhn bring Pfaller's concept of 'illusions without owners' to the discussion of ethical consumption. They suggest that consumers of symbols – in this case ethical brands – do not only use them in identity and communication work but also in a form of interpassive delegation, that is, delegating the ethical responsibility as well as the belief in that responsibility. Walz et al. argue that even cynical consumers, who do not believe the message of ethical brands, may still act as if they do believe. By doing so, they experience a moment of relief from the responsibility of consumer sovereignty as well as a feeling of 'thievish joy' in having gotten away with this double deception.

In his examination of the heraldry of the Jack Wills brand, Daniel Smith demonstrates how a brand can institute an ethical economy. Goods are allocated to those within the economy of distribution who are deemed worthy of representing the brand and likely to uphold its brand image. The Jack Wills brand imitates the heraldry of the British aristocracy as a means to create fiduciarity but, as argued above, the members of this ethical economy seem to recognise that these efforts are somewhat tongue-in-cheek.

In this issue's first note, Ignacio Concha-Ferreira sheds light upon the emergence of what he refers to as 'welfare coolness'. Concha-Ferreira argues that, in its endless pursuit of new areas to exploit, branding has transformed the image of the welfare society by means of 'giving welfare the fundamental quality

of cool' (109), redressing the tired and gloomy notion of welfare in new, shining – and indeed cool – armour.

In the second note of the issue, Adam Arvidsson questions the otherwise generally accepted assumption among critical scholars that ethical brands, by definition, are the negation of ethics. Instead of trying to argue for brands' value through their market function, Arvidsson points to the possibility of their entrepreneurial ethics; that is the possibility they provide individuals to build ethical personal brands via social media.

In his note, Jon Bertilsson brings to the fore what he sees as the internal conflict, or tension, between the motive of profit maximization driving corporations' decisions and actions and the notion of public good that undergirds ethical reasoning. This tension makes it difficult, perhaps even inconceivable, to align an ethical brand image with corporate ethical behaviour. The marriage between brand ethics and corporate profit is thus not a very happy and harmonious one, partly because it tries to combine two mutually exclusive ideas of ethics: ethics as a duty and ethics as a brand management tool.

In the final note, Martin Kornberger presents a somewhat different approach to brand ethics than that adopted by Bertilsson. Kornberger takes issue with the polemical dichotomy that, according to him, has been allowed to define the debate on ethics: the liberal tradition stressing the importance of brands for responsibility and accountability in the market, and, in the opposing corner, the critical tradition in which brands and branding are conceived of as elements of a fundamentally problematic system (market culture, consumer society, capitalism, etc.). As an alternative, Kornberger suggests a view of brands as neither good nor evil but rather as the providers of the conditions (and a potential) for ethical practice.

The issue ends with three reviews of books that, in different ways, tackle the relation between ethics and branding. Leo McCann reviews Brannan et al.'s book *Branded lives: The production and consumption of meaning at work* (2011), which deals with employee branding: the attempts to govern the actions and souls of the staff. In the second review, Charlotta Karlsdóttir comments on Lindstrom's book, *Brandwashed: Tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy* (2011), in which the author sets out to reveal the tricks of the branding trade. Elizabeth Nixon has written the last review of this issue, in which she gives her view on Devinney et al.'s *The myth of the ethical consumer* (2010), a book that sets out to problematize the idea of ethical consumption by turning the gaze towards consumers' decision-making and considerations about ethical products.

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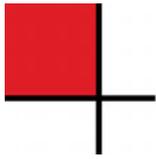
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Branding sustainability: Opportunity and risk behind a brand-based approach to sustainable markets*

Matthias Lehner and Sue Vaux Halliday

In this article we discuss the role of brands in the creation of sustainable markets. We focus on the increasing importance of ethical branding and how it might help to overcome some institutional shortcomings inherent in current market settings. We also discuss the increasing influence of brand communities and the seeming potential for a ‘democratisation’ of brand value and values. Brands are in this article described as one practical and effective way forward to develop the market for sustainable products further. We illustrate this from examples of food retailing, showing how companies have already started to follow this logic. At the same time this article raises doubts over the long-term effectiveness of a (purely) brand-focused approach to sustainable market exchange. On the one hand we claim that brands have proven receptive to public top-down (i.e. policy makers) and bottom-up (i.e. social movements) pressure. For intensive public scrutiny has resulted in markets developing in line with public interests. Yet, on the other hand, we raise concerns over brands’ increasing dominance. Dominance, that is, over the exchange process of sustainable products and services; also over the societal discourse in which sustainability is continuously made sense of. We conclude with the attempt to provide a more nuanced view on brands. We acknowledge their effectiveness in ‘bringing sustainable markets to life’, but also stress the risk of brands achieving discursive dominance over the (democratically legitimized) public debate. For this undermines societal efforts to ‘green’ markets.

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The need for sustainable market exchange

Introducing sustainability as a core value and practice in business is said to be one of society's most promising means for safeguarding natural resources and eco-systems. This has led to much interest in how to integrate sustainability into the market-economic system. This view is expressed in the European Commission's (2008) *Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy Action Plan*, which aims at combining the benefits of economic activity with the principle of sustainable development. It puts responsibility for sustainable consumption and production (SCP) mostly on the shoulders of the two main actors in the market, the consumer and the firm, an approach that strongly relies on market demand (Seyfang, 2005). The European Commission (2011) depicts Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a key tool to achieve SCP, which, it is hoped, will render the innovative potential and market power of individual firms a tool for more sustainable consumption patterns. The problem with this idea, however, is that firms operate in a market setting that does not encourage this kind of behaviour. Given the existing 'rules of the game' (i.e. the institutional market setup), promoting sustainability might well be anticipated to be tricky and unprofitable for a firm. The question this raises is whether policy makers will have to intervene in the market in order to push it towards desired levels of sustainability, or is there a possibility that market actors themselves can develop towards SCP simply due to the pressing necessity to do so?

In this article we discuss the increasingly important role for brands to act as informal institutional arrangements that allow businesses to engage with sustainability. We look at the example of retail brands and their at least partial success in bringing sustainability to the market. We then discuss how this development entails both opportunity and risk for the overall development of the market. Situating our discussion in the context of notions of value co-creation, we reflect upon how the relationship between brands and sustainability can lead to promising alliances between business and consumers and make consumption more sustainable. We finally note the dilemma this approach entails, which derives from the corporate ownership of brands. In the end, we establish a nuanced view on brands, which we believe helps to understand one possible function of brands as 'carriers of sustainability'.

Branding sustainability

Brands, Akerlof (1970) notes, are company owned quality assurance schemes, and a means to both reduce information asymmetry and build trust. They therefore possess potential to be the foundation for further market growth for

sustainable products and services, as they offer a way for corporations to ‘harness’ gains from investments in the development of this market in terms of brand value and customer loyalty, and so to internalize some of the positive externalities² from market development work. Together with another informal market institution – 3rd party labelling – brands have played a prominent role in the successful establishment of a market for sustainable products and services. During the last decade or so, sustainability-oriented brands, supported by 3rd party labels, have proliferated. The exchange around these brands, and the stepwise familiarisation of consumers with them, has established a meeting place for consumers interested in sustainable product offerings and firms willing and able to offer these products at a price premium.

This development must be praised for two achievements in respect to the shortcomings of the current setup of formal market institutions. First, the existence of brands, supported by 3rd party labels, allows consumers searching for specific sustainable product offerings to make seemingly easy and safe choices (Kooos, 2011). Brands thus help to overcome the information asymmetry Akerlof (1970) blames for the non-existence of markets for certain product qualities (here: sustainability). Second, brands are a tool well-suited for business to engage with sustainability as they allow firms to ‘occupy’ a certain sustainable cause. This results in (some) internalization of the positive externalities a market actor creates when actively promoting the development (both in size and scope) of markets for sustainable products and services.

Brands, one could argue, are not only the prerequisite for SCP as a business-led strategy, but are also among the most practicable approaches to achieve SCP. In a market where institutional shortcomings hinder the development of sustainable products and services, brands offer an alternative institutional arrangement to establish the trust between consumer and producer necessary for the market to thrive. Brands, therefore, can provide an effective tool for market actors to explore new ways to satisfy unmet demand and actively develop the market.

The prevalent scepticism towards brands

The proposition that brands are becoming a (or even *the*) major driving force behind SCP and thereby decentre the historically strong social movements rings

2 With ‘positive market externalities’ we refer to corporate efforts to support the cause of sustainable consumption and production – through information campaigns, product development, supply-chain efforts, etc. – that result in the market at large becoming more sustainable while the company behind this effort can gain no or little individual benefit from this effort.

alarm bells in many SCP advocates' ears (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Marketing is often criticised for being a primary cause of the very overproduction that promotes unsustainability. Marketing is pictured as a tool to brainwash consumers and so having a negative effect both on society and the individual. It has been challenged for its contribution to the deterioration of our natural environment. It is blamed for over-consumption and said to mostly exist to create artificial wants among consumers (Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero, 1997). Marketing, in sum, is perceived as the primary driver of over-consumption (van Dam and Apeldoorn, 1996). As Alvesson and Willmott (1996: 21) note, '[f]rom a critical perspective the discourses and practices of marketing ... are seen to be as much a propagator and seducer of consumer desire as they are an articulation of, or response to, human need' It is further claimed that marketing aims to 'encourage the fulfilment of sociocultural needs through consumption of new goods' (Schaefer and Crane, 2005: 88). Kilbourne et al. (1997: 5) describe marketing's main objective as to encourage a development 'from consuming to live into living to consume'. To keep consumption levels rising, marketers primarily work on the commodification of life in which an imperious market absorbs traditionally nonmarket areas of life. Marketing, it is claimed, wrongly equates increasing consumption levels with increasing quality of life and promotes this view to society, while rarely questioning the implications of this ideal. Marketing, seen through this lens, thereby perpetuates the ideology of consumerism and over-consumption, with all its negative environmental and social consequences. Motivated by fear of the direction and power of marketing, the WWF has critiqued advertising and the (negative) potential brands offer for firms to both 'cover' unsustainable behaviour and shape consumer culture to produce ever-higher consumption levels (Alexander, Crompton and Shrubsole, 2011). Alexander et al. (2011) therefore suggest that the only viable solution to this abuse of market power lies in more civil society activity, while marketing needs to be prevented from unleashing its negative impact by curtailing its pervasiveness in society. Moisander, Markkula and Eräranta (2010) argue in a similar manner by stating that the agency of individual consumers in sustainable consumption receives too much attention while, in fact, individuals' choices and actions are shaped to a great extent by business activities. They state that '[m]arketing activities typically involve the exercise of power on consumers through various techniques and practices of *government*' (Moisander et al., 2010: 74; italics in original). By 'structuring [people's] possible field of action to generate sales' (*ibid.*) marketing co-opts the sustainability idea to generate profits. Brands are, in this context, depicted as refinement of this attempt and therefore act to undermine the ideals of sustainability. Holt (2002: 88) states that '[b]rands now cause trouble, not because they dictate tastes, but because they allow companies to dodge civic obligations'. He also claims that many 'brands seem so

disconnected from, and often contrary to, the material actions of the companies that own them' (Holt, 2002: 88).

From this angle the recent trend of corporations making sustainable causes part of their brand identity is criticised for divorcing social movements such as organic agriculture from their original values and meaning and assimilating them into the market economic system (Niggli, 2005; Reuter, 2002; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007). This undermines societal efforts to promote sustainability. Proponents of sustainability cast in a negative light the development of mainstream brands starting to 'occupy' the previously mostly independently managed niches of sustainable consumption and production (e.g. organic agriculture, Fairtrade, local consumption), whereby sustainable causes turn into a feature of the brand. The price, it is claimed, that a democratic society pays for the finesse and 'buzz' that brands add to acts of sustainable consumption is no less than control over the overall meaning of sustainability.

Putting the consumer in charge of brand values

Despite the above-illustrated scepticism towards corporate marketing and branding it is often claimed that not less, but more business engagement will be necessary to achieve sustainable markets (cf. Ottman, Stafford and Hartman, 2006; Peattie and Crane, 2005). This is a reaction to the puzzling disparity between claimed consumer concern for sustainability and the size of the existing market (Carrington, Neville and Whitwell, 2010; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007). What has been termed the 'value-action gap' (or: 'attitude-behaviour gap') persists in most markets where sustainable product alternatives are available and sustainability-oriented products and services remain niches (Thøgersen, 2010; Reynolds, 2009). In order to bridge the gap between claimed concern and actual consumer behaviour it is claimed that more not less marketing is required, with brands as the centre-piece of such efforts. These brands need to intimately connect to consumers' lives and thereby find ways to embed sustainability into individuals' consumption in meaningful and seemingly natural ways (Ottman, Stafford and Hartman, 2006). Ideally, brands here become a tool to integrate sustainability into consumption in ways that provide consumers with emotional and social wellbeing and seamlessly fit into the post-modern consumer's identity-creation project (cf. Arvidsson, 2005; 2008).

This view resonates well with a new stream of ideas on how to view the relationship between companies, the consumer and society at large that has gained popularity in the marketing literature in recent years. It redefines the

predominant idea of how and where value is created (Arvidsson, 2011), and promotes a view in which value-creation has over the last century or so moved from the production line (in the post-Second world war thrift economy), to the marketing department (in the recent needs-creation and consumption-perpetuating overflow economy) to now end up with the consumer (in the global, highly competitive and connected economy of today). The company here turns into a service-provider rather than a seller of goods, with its main objective to facilitate consumers' attempts to create value for themselves and manage to live a good life in an increasingly complex world (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Competitive advantage for a firm is not so much connected to the control of resources, but the ability to apply skills and knowledge in a way that makes most sense in a consumer's emotional and social life. Central to this idea is the 'value in use' concept, which locates the value creation process not in the production process of a product or the moment of exchange but the moment(s) of usage in a consumer's daily life. As Vargo and Lusch (2004: 7) explain, 'firms can only make value propositions', while the value definition happens in the context of consumption, somewhat detached from the firm's sphere of influence. This is a highly subjective process of value creation with differing outcomes for each consumer. For a firm to successfully adopt this ideal, it is argued that the cultivation of a relationship in which customers participate in the development of customized offers is crucial. To achieve this, the firm has to accept that it does not have total control over its strategy and goals and so be willing to leave it to the consumer to decide the brand meaning for themselves (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). This form of value-creation, which is commonly referred to as 'value co-creation', therefore describes a seemingly chaotic and uncontrolled – one might argue 'postmodern' (cf. Brown, 1993) – process of value-creation which takes place in consumers' daily lives – their buzzing and vibrant social networks – rather than the market as primary site of value definition (Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody, 2008). The value co-creation ideal makes the boundaries of the firm less clearly defined, it is claimed, with customers and their communities having much greater influence on the overall strategy of a firm (Leavy and Moitra, 2006). Value creation more and more becomes the result of processes happening within groups of consumers under the influence of the wider societal discourse. In Zwick et al.'s (2008: 174) words, the company turns into 'a facilitator of social communication and co-operation'. Through the sharing of the firm's superior knowledge and abilities and offering it to the customer for customization within various settings and social networks the final decision how to best use the company's resources to create value is outsourced to the social world of consumers (*ibid.*). Maffesoli (1996) calls these groups 'neo-tribes', which Cova and Cova (2002: 602) describe as 'network of heterogeneous persons ... who are linked by a shared passion or emotion; a tribe is capable of collective action, its

members are not simple consumers, they are also advocates'. 'Value in use' is therefore defined by how well an offering fits the living situation an individual consumer finds herself in, not least influenced by the social communities she is embedded into. The strong relational aspect of value co-creation connects with the fact that valuing, or giving worth, is a community endeavour and based on prior assumptions largely shared in groups (Foxall, Goldsmith and Brown, 1998). People are social beings whose attributes and actions are conditioned by their location within networks.

Brands as platforms for collective efforts and social engagement

'People ... might bowl alone, but they socialize around brands and fan culture', is how Arvidsson (2008: 327) describes the increasingly social and collective nature of brands. Almost 20 years ago Holt (1995) understood that consumption increasingly focuses on brands and today, more than ever, individuals use brands in their self-identification and group identification process (Halliday and Kuenzel, 2008). Brands are increasingly understood as symbols available for individuals to appropriate in constructing their selves 'from a kaleidoscope of social meanings that define the 'who' I can be ... [using] the resources of culture and society' (Anderson and Schoening, 1996: 214). In a consumer culture, the quest for personal meaning has tended to become inseparably linked to brands (Fournier, 1998; Halliday and Kuenzel, 2008; Holt, 1995; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002). These connections between consumers and brand messages are, in today's fragmented social order, claimed to be less the result of 'marketer-provoked social manipulation' and more individually owned development of 'differentiated selves' (Arnould, 2007: 102). Consumers are no longer perceived as on the receiving end of the branding process, but rather as 'active agents in the creation of ... linking value' (Cova and Dalli, 2010: 17), and they will more and more 'lock out all but a minuscule subset of the sponsored world' (Holt, 2002: 88). This development is seen as a consequence of the 'increasingly cynical attitude toward all forms of overt marketing and advertising assaults (Frank, 1999; 2000)' (Zwick et al., 2008: 171). Holt (2002: 88) explains that '[the] proliferation of narrowly focused consumption communities, regardless of their particular content, can be understood as a defensive posture toward consumer culture'. Holt (2002), in his dialectical theory of consumers and branding, concludes that '[r]esisting the market's cultural authority in order to enact localized meanings and identities produces a new consumer culture in which identity projects are aligned with acts of consumer sovereignty' (p. 79). Prahalad and Ramaswamy state that:

[d]ialogue is no longer being controlled by corporations. Individual consumers can address and learn about business either on their own or through the collective knowledge of other customers. Consumers can now initiate dialogue. (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000: 80)

According to Holt (2002), we are entering a crisis of meaningless marketing where brands perceived as artificial will find it difficult to remain successful. At the same time, those brands that manage to appear genuine and meaningful will gain unprecedented levels of importance. O'Guinn and Muniz claim that,

[b]rand communities and other social aggregations of empowered consumers are not going away. In fact society's need for trust and security have rarely been more profound. (O'Guinn and Muniz, 2005: 270)

This changes the logic according to which brand-owners have to engage with consumers. Arvidsson (2008: 334) writes that '[t]he basis of power is the ability to create community – making people feel that they belong to something greater, nobler, and more powerful than themselves'. In the future, corporate brands will increasingly have to not only live up to consumer preferences but also give a feeling of societal meaningfulness to succeed.

Shared values between consumers and the firms they trust have a motivational or aspirational role in individual and corporate lives, 'they keep the transactions together as a relationship entity' (De Ruyter et al., 1997: 303). By letting a brand be shaped by the values of its brand community and credibly pursuing these values, it is assumed that lasting relationships can be built for which brand communities are willing to lend their loyalty to the brand. 'The perception of shared values ... may play a role in the development and maintenance of trust by providing a firmer basis for deciding to bestow (or reaffirm) trust' (Halliday and Christy, 2003: 9). The brand then becomes a platform on which common purpose and direction can be formed. Arvidsson (2011: 268) claims 'the most important source of value in brand communities are those practices that are able to install affectively significant relations among members of the community, and between the community and the public at large'. The most valuable brands are those generating 'ethical surplus' for the community or society at large. With ethical surplus he refers to value 'produced by ethics, or by the ability to install affectively significant relations' (Arvidsson, 2011: 273). This ethical surplus is the result of what the members of a community together define as their values.

The future this logic depicts is one of brands capturing communities' concerns and ethical preferences and translating them into market offerings. In a world significantly influenced by discourses about the dangers of climate change, the risk of biodiversity loss and the need for clean water and a cautious use of non-renewable resources, brands should therefore increasingly be influenced by

ideals of sustainability. In such a scenario, ultimately the collective of ethically oriented brands operating successfully in a market will then in its totality represent ever more closely the multitude of societal concerns and find market solutions to the problems raised in respect to sustainability. A prerequisite for this is of course that the societal discourse surrounding sustainability influences consumer attitudes sufficiently to seek brands that help them to incorporate these values into their identity-creation project and connect to others with similar concerns. Despite the above-mentioned lack of consumer action, numerous studies repeatedly pointing at an increasing consumer consciousness concerning sustainability (see, for example, European Commission, 2009, for a collection of survey data; cf. also Prothero, McDonagh and Dobscha, 2010) provide evidence that this scenario is not unreasonable.

This discussion surrounding identity creation through brands, collective value co-creation and the increasing role of sustainability in society clearly counters the fear of marketing in general, and branding in particular, to fool consumers and lead to ever increasing levels of raw-material consumption and waste creation. The fears raised earlier in this paper might therefore be, as Arnould (2007) claims, a backward-looking perspective to the metanarrative of modernity, which fits the 1960s a good deal better than today.

Sustainable branding in practice

Over the last decade, many companies have shown increasing willingness to engage with SCP issues (Hughes, 2006). These efforts have often developed around brands. One prominent and highly visible example of this trend is the food retail industry, and today most major retail chains can point towards actions taken towards increased levels of sustainability on the markets they operate in. Observable efforts from retailers' brand-led sustainability work have been campaigns, product and service innovations, and co-operation with non-commercial (i.e. civil society, government agencies) and commercial partners (i.e. independent certification organisations, producers). Examples are elaborate origin tracing tools (e.g. 'Meet your farmer' at Marks & Spencer³), co-operation with NGOs to educate consumers and increase the availability of sustainable products (such as The Co-op UK's work with Fairtrade) or change behaviour (e.g. the 'Love Food, Hate Waste' campaign in the UK). Retailers have also proven willing to support sustainable trends and become a driving force behind a certain cause. In Sweden, Coop Nordic has pioneered a sustainable fish policy. Based on

3 As one of only few retailers, Marks and Spencer was in early 2013 able to stand out by not being involved in the Europe-wide scandal of illegal horsemeat from drugged old horses finding its way into the food chain in many beef- and pork-labelled products.

co-operation with the WWF, Coop has delisted all red-listed fish, which has helped to change the entire retail industry with all major Swedish retailers following Coop's example. In Austria, Rewe International has started to use its well-known 'Ja! Natürlich' ('Yes! Naturally'; own translation) brand of organic food products to promote home gardening with the launch of organic seed and other gardening products, TV and radio spots, a blog, and the launch of (urban) gardening workshops. The 'Ja! Natürlich' brand is also used to create a positive image of organic farming in general, promotes holidays on organic farms and showcases Austria's national parks. In another example from Austria, the discounter Aldi in 2006 launched the 'Zurück zum Ursprung' brand ('Back to the origins'; own translation), which not only lives up to the legal standard for organic agriculture, but also exceeds it and establishes its very own higher brand-related standards. All 'Zurück zum Ursprung' product ingredients are exclusively sourced and processed in Austria (with elaborate source tracking possibilities for each product), the contracted farmers use 'traditional farming techniques' (e.g. only grass feed for milk cows, sour dough for bread production, no use of additives and no use of genetically modified organisms), and the brand supports small scale farming in alpine regions by providing better-than-average contract conditions for participating farmers including long-term co-operation and price premiums above normal (Lindenthal et al., 2010). The brand further invests considerable efforts into consumer education about the 'ecological footprint' concept, with every product containing information about its CO₂, water, and biodiversity performance. With the 'Zurück zum Ursprung' brand, Aldi Austria reaches out to schools (education material about the ecological footprint is available for free) and concerned consumers (via social media). Some retailers have even engaged in political debates, informing the public and pushing politicians to take action. In the UK, The Co-op has long been a vocal supporter of the Fairtrade movement, engaging in the public debate for fair trade-practices between the rich and the poor world. In Austria, as a response to the pesticide and bee-protection debate in the EU and the Austrian government's initial decision to vote against the ban of the blamed 'nionicotinoids', the two retail giants Rewe (in Austria: Billa) and Aldi (in Austria: Hofer) joined the chorus of critics and outspokenly demanded more efforts to protect bee colonies. Billa aired a TV commercial vilifying the sellers of these pesticides and started to promote bee-friendly gardening. A similar 'brave' act had been performed by Coop Nordic in Sweden in 2002, who aired a TV commercial vilifying pesticides in general and arguing for the superiority of organic food. However, back then Coop Nordic was taken to court for this advertisement, which was eventually banned.

Many of these retailers have also developed their own sustainable 'super brands' to cover their activities under one brand name ('Pro Planet' at Rewe, 'Änglamark' 'Angels' land'; own translation at Coop Nordic) or created specific brands for a

specific cause (as witnessed in Austria, where the German retail chain Rewe has managed to make its own organic brand 'Ja! Natürlich' a synonym for organic agriculture (Vogl and Darnhofer, 2004)).

Many of these examples have received much public attention and are praised for their commitment and effectiveness. In England, Marks & Spencer was awarded 'Responsible Retailer of the Year 2011'⁴ for its ambitious 'Plan A'⁵ to make the company 'the world's most sustainable retailer'⁶. In Scandinavia, Coop Nordic has strongly linked its brand name with organic agriculture and been named 'Sweden's most sustainable brand' in both 2011 and 2012 by the Sustainable Brands survey (which surveyed 3000 Swedish households)⁷. The German retail giant Rewe was, in 2010, awarded the 'German Sustainability Award' in the categories 'most sustainable initiative' and 'most recycling-friendly company'⁸. In 2009, Aldi Austria was awarded the 'Austrian Climate Care Award' for the 'Zurück zum Ursprung' brand.⁹ The Finnish market leader Kesko boasts of having been one of the 'Global 100 Most Sustainable Corporations in the World' since the index was initiated in 2005 (thus for eight consecutive years)¹⁰.

All these cases can be said to be examples of business using their brand names to pick up on, operationalize and internalize into the market societal concerns aired through the broader public debate (or small but dedicated groups of citizens promoting specific sustainable causes) and thus contributing to the overall societal goal of SCP. Further, these empirical observations illustrate the theoretical claim that branding possesses the potential to fulfil two essential aspects necessary for the success of SCP. First, it provides an informal institutional solution to the information asymmetry caused by existing formal institutional settings of the market. The trust brands are able to build between consumers and firms regarding the reliability of sustainable claims and therefore the justification of price premiums provides the basis for a market for sustainable products. Second, due to the property rights assigned to brands, they offer a means for firms to internalise positive externalities connected to the active development of the market for sustainable products, thereby encouraging them

4 Oracle World Retail Awards

5 Marks & Spencer advertises this bold commitment with the slogan 'There is no Plan B'.

6 <http://plana.marksandspencer.com/about>

7 <http://www.sb-insight.com/companies-in-sustainable-brands-2013/ranking-2013/>

8 <http://www.rewe.de/nachhaltigkeit/listing/nachhaltigkeitspreis.html>

9 <http://www.klimaschutzpreis.at/start.asp?b=68&vid=95&id=79>

10 <http://www.kesko.fi/en/Responsibility/Topical/Kesko-on-The-Global-100-Most-Sustainable-Corporations-in-the-World-list/>.

to take the societally demanded active role in the promotion of SCP. This, one could argue, is an early sign of postmodern marketing dreams of co-creational and co-operational value-creation coming true, where private business (meditated through brands) picks up on societal concerns and develops market solutions. This supports the claim that markets indeed will be able to create answers to the sustainability debate without necessitating external interference (i.e. rules and regulations).

Sustainable brands and public scrutiny

We have argued above that the food industry is showing signs of adopting a value co-creational approach to accommodate societal demands for more pro-active corporate behaviour and that brands have become retailers' favoured tool to introduce sustainable consumption into their customer interaction. We illustrated this claim with examples of big food retail brands that have invested considerable efforts into positioning their brands within the sustainability discourse.

These developments must of course be ascribed partly to the attention of civil society and policy-makers to the retailer role in the food supply-chain, and the resulting pressure. Because retailing has an increasingly central role in the food supply chain it has increasing power to change production and consumption patterns (Dobson and Waterson, 1999; Harris and Ogbonna, 2001; Ogle, Hyllegard and Dunbar, 2004). Retailers have for some time now been in the focus of the discussion on how to implement SCP in the food supply-chain (Jones, Hillier and Comfort, 2011; Anselmsson and Johansson, 2007)¹¹. This has led retailers to develop sustainability, and particularly the biggest among retailers have managed to not only comply with public demands, but to exceed them (Havas Media, 2010). The fact that brands are both valuable and very fragile constructs dependent on credibility is believed to effectively prevent empty claims and fraud (Klein and Leffler, 1981). A brand is an investment in marketing communication, increasing customer loyalty and what is being termed customer equity (Kotler and Armstrong, 2004), and the opportunity cost for a firm caught cheating would be high. For not only would trust in sustainable product offerings be undermined, but revenues would reduce, as would the (expensively built) brand value to the firm. Societal pressure cannot be claimed to be the only motivator for retailers to develop a pro-active approach to SCP – cost savings,

11 Several governments and other stakeholders across Europe have initiated attempts to influence retail practices; i.e.: The EU's 'Retail Forum', the Nordic Council's 'Retail Forum on Sustainable Consumption and Production', or the 'Visioning sustainable retail' workshops in the UK.

resource scarcity or internal moral hazards, to name but a few, can be other drivers. However, the continuous efforts to build sustainable brands despite often-disappointing market demand (retailers sometimes seem to act almost against better knowledge of what the market demands¹²) point towards the powerful role of societal debate and public expectations in the willingness to invest in sustainability and use brands as tools to convince the market of the advantages of sustainable products and services. This claim is in line with Arnould (2007: 105), who finds that ‘because markets are an institutional apparatus that can be put to many social ends, they also provide space for progressive political action’. This claim is further supported by Neill, Stovall and Jinkerson’s (2005) study of stakeholder pressure and its positive impact on CSR activity. Retailers, we therefore argue, increasingly use privately owned brands to follow the societal discourse. Continuous discussions and the resulting expectations make them focus their efforts on finding solutions for many of today’s most pressing environmental and social problems. The use of brands to introduce sustainability into their interaction with customers and fine-tune it to various customers’ preferences increases the success of such efforts. In this respect retailers can therefore be described as a partner for society to identify and develop solutions for the challenges subsumed under the term sustainability. Retail brands can be seen as useful tools to implement these solutions.

Defining sustainability

Sustainability has from the day it was coined by the Brundtland commission in 1987 been an only vaguely defined term, open to much interpretation. Historically, the term was given meaning by scientists, policy makers and – not least – civil society. The ideas and ideals sustainability-oriented brands build upon thus come from outside the brand-owners’ sphere of immediate influence. Without a history, Holt (2004) claims, a brand is not a brand. For sustainability-oriented brands to be successful they have to closely align with the societal ideas that make up consumers’ understanding of sustainability. Sustainable brands need to make sense historically and give meaning and thus resonate with consumers. They need to live up to the ethical standards of the society they are embedded into. As Arvidsson (2008) argues, consumers are prone to only pay attention to those brands that provide them with a feeling of meaningfulness, of shared values and of social ties and connectedness with others. To Arvidsson

12 British Sainsbury’s, for example, has recently launched a new milk packaging system, which saves 75% of packaging compared to a milk carton but requires consumers to adopt new behavioural routines. This is despite Waitrose’s 2010-decision to stop selling a similar packaging system (introduced in 2007) due to insufficient customer-uptake.

(2011) the ability to create economic value and ethical values coincide. The food retail industry, as we have shown above, is an example of this emerging ethics-based value co-creation approach in which brands turn into a platform on which to integrate all kinds of ethical concerns and moral values into the creation of new products and markets. In the example of Aldi Austria's sustainable brand 'Zurück zum Ursprung', the values it builds upon are clearly emerging from the Austrian culture (regional food, fairness towards farmers, traditional production methods) and the dominant scientific and political debate (climate change, biodiversity, water consumption).

Here we also find the biggest risk with the increasing role of brands as tools to introduce sustainability into markets. This risk lies in brands becoming not only the main stage for sustainable action, but even gaining predominance within the sustainability discourse. Arvidsson (2011) tells us that the expansion of the 'ethical economy' can only work if business accepts that consumers do not provide their co-creational potential for free. What they demand is a 'sense of meaning and purpose to their participation' (p. 270). He does not discuss, though, the importance of where this meaning and purpose derives from. Earlier in this article we discussed the scepticism that meets the brand-led development from some scholars and civil society organisations. This scepticism is largely based on the claimed ability of marketing in general and brands in particular to not only inform but influence consumers' preferences and desires. With the market share of sustainability-oriented products increasing, there is the distinctive risk that business will use the discursive power offered by a well-established brand to influence consumers' sense of meaningfulness and purpose. This increases the risk that ideas about sustainability end up being significantly influenced by the 'marketing laboratories' of brand-owners. Moisander et al. (2010) criticise business for its role in shaping the dominant view on the consumer today, which they judge to be all too individualistic. This has given rise to the idea of the citizen-consumer, who reacts to her declining power as citizen (due to reduced power of nation states in a globalized and market-dominated world (Cova, 1997; Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle, 2006)) and adapts to this reality by using purchasing power as 'vote' to shape society. Though, as Soron (2010: 179) points out, functioning ethical consumption would mean that consumers have to analyse all aspects of their life and change their behaviour in dozens and dozens of ways: a highly unrealistic prospect. Zwick et al. (2008) argue that the development in marketing towards 'value co-creation' increases corporate power over consumers. For under the cover of working for the freedom of the consumer, value co-creation really only serves to strengthen corporate power and gain discursive dominance over the sustainability debate. They also claim that value co-creation undermines non-market action to handle the sustainability challenge.

Under normal circumstances it would appear that the interplay between dominant and resisting discourses results in the emergence of new ways to dominate and, therefore, new ways to resist (Hall, 1996). Under the specter of co-creation however, even collective ideological resistance becomes creative mass collaboration that is then often seamlessly incorporated into the product itself. (Zwick et al., 2008: 185)

They conclude,

Management and marketing thinkers celebrate the new logic of collaborative value creation as a moment of consumer empowerment and transfiguration of marketing to a model of equal, satisfying, and mutually beneficial relationships between producers and consumers. Yet, the crux of value co-creation, to paraphrase Deleuze (1992), is to provide the surest way of delivering the customer over to the corporation. (Zwick et al., 2008: 186)

That this risk is real was demonstrated by Caruana and Crane (2008) in their study of commercialising 'green holidays'. They find that consumer responsibility is 'constructed in the discursive domain of corporate communications about responsible tourism' (p. 1514). Caruana and Crane describe the 'contested discourse about what it means to be a "responsible" consumer' (p. 1495) as increasingly dominated by corporate communication. They state that their findings 'suggest that the organization of objects, subjects and concepts [by the corporation] provides a morally meaningful category for consumers to identify with' (p. 1496). Their study thus exemplifies the risk of discursive dominance by business and the central role brands play in it.

Opportunity and risk behind a brand-based approach to sustainable markets

Building on the insight that sustainable markets will most likely not be the outcome of informed consumer choices alone, one can anticipate two effective approaches to SCP. One necessitates the redefinition of the institutions that have led to the flawed market settings discussed in this article – a process that will most certainly require major society-wide efforts and bear considerable risk for failure. The second is where business makes use of brands to capitalize on the sustainability debate by integrating it into their (brand-) equity and thereby creating incentives for companies to become a more active force in the promotion of sustainable consumption. This second approach could be a much quicker, more stable and controllable process and therefore appears as a more practical solution to the problem.

Following this latter approach, brands are in this article described as a practical way to develop the market for sustainable products. They aid in overcoming two

institutional shortcomings of the current market institutions, 1) the information asymmetry with which consumers are confronted when choosing sustainable products, and 2) the fact that market development in sustainability results in potentially large positive market externalities but little profit to be captured by the individual firm. Brands address these issues for every individual market participant, and enable individual firms to engage in the promotion of more sustainable market transactions. Property rights connected to brands also provide a disincentive for companies to undermine market expectations and allow companies to capture part of the created positive value for society emerging from higher levels of sustainable consumption, while they nevertheless create positive externalities that lead to improvements for society overall. Thus, adding brands to the equation considerably increases the chances for a single market actor to act as a positive force for SCP.

We illustrated this with examples of food retailing, showing how companies have already started to follow this logic. Food retailers have invested considerable efforts into the branding of their products and operations as sustainable. This has led to initiatives and efforts (undertaken by retailers) that would be difficult to imagine without the use of brands. Unless society decides to institutionalize SCP by regulatory means, brands must therefore be seen as a welcome 'ingredient' into the market equation. The re-branding of existing strong brands and the creation of new sustainability-focused brands to integrate sustainability issues should, according to this logic, be welcomed as fuel for engagement and innovation, with positive effects for firms, consumers and sustainability alike. It should lead to the creation of 'ethical surplus' for brand communities and society at large (cf. Arvidsson, 2011) and result in corporate competitive advantage. In this article we therefore argue that brands bear considerable potential to positively add to the societal quest for SCP.

At the same time this article raises doubts over the long-term effectiveness of a (purely) brand-focussed approach to sustainable markets. We claim that, indeed, business has proven receptive to public top-down (i.e. policy makers) and bottom-up (i.e. social movements) pressure, and that intensive public scrutiny has resulted in markets developing in line with public interests. However, we raise concerns about increasing corporate dominance not only over the exchange process connected to SCP, but also over the societal discourse in which SCP is continuously made sense of. This dominance we identify as the most significant risk with the commercialisation of the sustainability discourse and stress the potential negative effects this poses for the long-term effectiveness of markets to bring about more sustainable production and consumption. This risk is aggravated by the fact that it establishes itself over time, and it is this somewhat insidious stepwise process of brands gaining discursive power within the

sustainability discourse that can render the process invisible to brand communities' and the public's attention. We argue that societal discourse provides the foundation for how brands operationalize sustainability, and its co-option by economic short-term interests undermines society's ability to achieve a system of sustainable market exchange (whatever this may ultimately look like). For the future of sustainable brands to look as Arvidsson (2011: 269) describes ('a disparate array of practices that are beyond the organisation itself') the understanding of the meaning of sustainability has to continue to emerge not from marketing departments but from within consumer communities and society at large. The biggest risk we see in a brand-focussed approach to SCP is therefore the possibility that the corporate world could come to dominate the sustainability discourse itself. Should this become the case then those 'shared' values that are the foundation for consumer trust in sustainability brands would actually only emerge from within corporations. At this point there would be a real risk of the sustainability ideal being twisted towards economic short-term profitability rather than the creation of Arvidsson's (2011) 'ethical surplus'.

Whether or not this risk is likely to materialize depends upon the outcome of a discursive struggle between civil society and corporate marketing within the sustainability debate. This risk, we believe, is limited as long as societal interest in sustainability is high and civil interest groups show enough enthusiasm to engage in the sustainability debate and fight for their values and concerns being heard, or – if ignored – engage in the creation of new ethical consumption niches (such as described by Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) for the case of corporate co-option of organic agriculture and the consequent creation of 'community supported agriculture'). Once sustainable brands achieve a status of 'generally trustworthy' to act in the best interest of the consumer communities they 'serve' (as may already be the case for some of the most successful sustainability-oriented food brands in Austria, Sweden or the UK) this balancing counterpart might disappear, though. (In a world where brands are considered both more effective and trustworthier than civil society to achieve sustainability there is no need for alternatives.) At this point the danger of brands giving in to the strong incentive that exists for them to gradually redefine consumers' understanding of the cause their brand serves, in order to better fit their business interest becomes real, with potential negative effects for society and the environment.

Directions for future research

The exploratory nature of the argument promoted in this article must be stressed at this point. Whether market incentives for business to invest in SCP, as one of

many stakeholders, are strong enough is uncertain, just as the exact role of civil society as ‘watchdog’ for brands remains unknown. We therefore suggest the need for more case study research on the functioning of sustainability-oriented brands and their interaction with both consumers and civil society and other stakeholders. The crucial question here is to what extent sustainable branding draws from the wider societal debate and under which circumstances it turns into a (negative) force that re-frames the debate away from sustainability and towards consumption.

We propose the following research questions:

- How are the values on which sustainable brands are built defined and operationalized?
- How persistent is brand-led commitment to sustainable causes over time?
- Which are the prerequisites for Arvidsson’s (2011) ‘ethical surplus’ to materialize in brand-based CSR?

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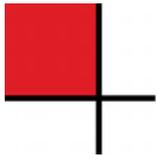
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Ethical commodities as exodus and refusal*

Robbie Fordyce and Luke van Ryn

abstract

At the same time as brands and branding dominate our contemporary mode of capitalism, brands also claim an ethical position based on a critique of their competitors (Lury, 2004; Arvidsson, 2006). This paper hopes to contribute to the understanding of 'ethical brands' from an autonomist Marxist perspective by showing that, although ethical claims do not offer a way out of capitalism, they do begin to assemble an alternative mode of production. The autonomist concepts of 'exodus' and 'refusal' (Tronti, 2007; Virno, 1996) are employed to provide a frame for action across different ethical bases, and beyond the production of commodities. This frame is applied to two examples: Molleindustria's app *Phone Story* (2012) and the Diaspora social media project (2010 – present). In their own ways, these projects critique existing modes of production and offer pathways to alternative practices.

Introduction

As we witness a rise in 'ethical branding', we should interrogate which practices could have any effect on ethical concerns. Capitalism generates the need for ethical consumption and benefits from its sale. Ethical practices must move

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beyond the sphere of consumption; likewise, analyses of ethical branding should address communication and networking. What we need is a concrete understanding of how brands communicate information about themselves. This can reveal that alternative ethical practices are not only possible, but are already occurring.

For this paper, 'the ethics of the brand' is an attempt to understand the ways that particular branded commodities offer footholds for ethical practice. We are interested in the kinds of concerns they make available or foreclose, rather than investigating of the morality of brands. Our choice follows Deleuze's distinction between ethics – as a 'typology of immanent modes of existence' – and morality, which 'refers existence to transcendent values' (1988: 23). Drawing on two case studies, we analyse the claims to ethics that brands make, so as to contribute to an understanding of 'ethical consumption' as a whole. This approach shifts the stake of the ethics of the brand from a form of proscription that charts its successes in terms of competition between businesses, to an interest in the development of productive networks outside of capital.

In our discussions of ethical claims, we wish to focus on the forms of behaviour that individuals take on in response to claims that brands make about themselves. The claim is a statement made by a brand about its mode of production. Our goal is to address how these claims provoke consumers to surpass a form of life reliant on capitalist exchange; here, our conception of the ethical claim bridges the gap between material things and immaterial representations. In the present work we focus on the ethical claim as it relates to the production of goods beyond capitalism.

The power of consumers to change capitalism is at stake in discussions of ethical branding (Arvidsson, 2013). Marketing texts advocate for a new level of consumer sovereignty (Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt, 2010), cultural studies scholars address practices of 'ethical consumption' (Lewis and Potter, 2011), and autonomist thinkers conceive of a 'multitude' threatening to dissolve capitalism (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Hirschman (1970) describes relations with capitalist institutions in terms of 'exit' – quitting a job or changing one's purchasing habits – and 'voice' – communicating one's critique by complaining or protesting. Yet such critiques are intelligible within capitalism as the expression of a market preference (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 42). The autonomist concepts of 'refusal' (Tronti), and 'exodus' (Virno) provide a means of understanding social action that goes beyond capitalism. Further, the Italian autonomist Marxists provide a perspective onto ethical practice that allows for individual ethics to change and mutate over time. The methods of resistance developed by the autonomists are specifically geared towards a political, ethical life that is not

beholden to any particular ethic, and, most importantly, do not form a political or organisational totality. This means that ethical practices can remain individual and outside capitalism, without gaining the uniform position of a deontological approach, or lapsing into a market liberalism that is only capable of finding a solution through the directed exchange of currency.

The conventional means of assessing ethical branding tends to lead to moral orthodoxy. By assessing unusual objects within the discourse of ethical brands, we expose hidden practices. We have chosen the Diaspora social networking platform and the activist videogame *Phone Story* as case studies for our project. Diaspora and *Phone Story* illustrate particular resistant behaviours that are far from unique. Our choice of these examples directs the discussion beyond changing patterns of commodity consumption: to software (*Phone Story*) and social networking (Diaspora). *Phone Story* is a videogame that takes on the Apple iPhone, and calls for a refusal of Apple's device ecology. The choice offered by *Phone Story*'s critique is binary – buy, or do not. The situation becomes more complex in our next case. The Diaspora software package is both an ethical criticism of Facebook, and a solution in itself. Building on each of these case studies, we can expose patterns of behaviour that have a political component.

Phone Story

The art-game *Phone Story*, produced by Molleindustria, provides an example of the connection between ethical claims and refusal. This game, produced in 2011, reflects and contributes to what we might call the 'becoming-problematic' of Apple Computers: the troubling of the smooth corporate image maintained by the Californian computer company and the upsetting of their accounts of the production history of their devices. The sleek and glossy finish of an Apple product does nothing to suggest its origins. *Phone Story* is shown to call for a refusal of consumption on the basis of both the exploitation of workers involved in the production of iPhones and the 'phantasmatic individualism' of consumer demand (Clemens, 2013).

The labor practices that surround the production of an Apple iPod, iPhone, or iPad remain largely undiscussed in the marketing of these commodities, although they have garnered increasing critical attention in the mass media (see, for example, Duhigg and Barboza, 2012). Academic attention has also focused on the political economy of the coltan that is necessary in iOS device production and the war economy maintained by the economic drive for the next generation phone (Dyer-Witheford, 2010: 492; Nest, 2011). Also excluded from the brand are the labor practices of the factories at Foxconn – the contract manufacturer for

many electronic components – where laborers have threatened, and at times attempted, the ultimate form of biopolitical refusal: suicide en masse. In 2012, some 150 workers massed on the roof of Foxconn’s factory in Chengdu, threatening suicide to protest working conditions (Moore, 2012). Until recently a relatively invisible link in Apple’s supply chain, Foxconn must now make ethical claims of its own, such as a ‘devotion to greater social harmony and higher ethical standards’ (Foxconn, 2012).

These conditions of production for Apple’s portable devices are obviously not something that Apple engages in. Its corporate site does contain Supplier Responsibility Progress Reports that cover the auditing of the production process for Apple’s devices, as written by the non-profit Fair Labor Association (Apple Inc., 2012). Yet given that the Fair Labor Association lists Apple as a core affiliate (Fair Labor Association, 2012), there is a risk of a circular logic collapsing upon itself here: Apple leans on the Fair Labor Association to support its ethical claims, but what does the Fair Labor Association have to support its claims to be a reliable auditor but its relationship with Apple? Political economic analysis of these claims reveals these feedback loops.

Phone Story critiques this situation (Molleindustria, 2012). *Phone Story* is a videogame that offers users a brief window into the production history of Apple devices, and of the future that awaits the device once we dispose of it. Though its lifespan on the App Store was only a few hours, it remains available on the Android Market and as a Flash game on the Molleindustria website. In the game, players are called on to perform tasks that mimic each stage of the iPhone production process. The narrative positions this production as quickly meeting the demands of consumers, and shares a genre of gestural gameplay with games such as *Cooking Mama* (Office Create, 2006). *Phone Story* opens up four moments of production: the mining of rare earth elements in central Africa, preventing workers from suicide in China, throwing iPhones to hordes of consumers in an anonymous urban setting, and lastly salvaging recyclable e-waste parts in India. Throughout the game a voice-over narration connects the onscreen action to the production of the device on which it is being played. These issues are raised as direct criticisms of the device’s legacy: *Phone Story* claims that the iPhone has an innately destructive existence. These claims call upon the player to question the ethics of their iPhone.

This critique of the iPhone platform is complicated by coming from within the device; playing the game on the Molleindustria website seems empty in comparison. *Phone Story*’s logic seeks a case where the game is unable to be played, yet once the game is playable on a smartphone it is already too late to be innocent of the situation that the game criticises. Ethical practices that respond to

this are not simply redirecting consumption habits, but calling for an avoidance of consumption altogether. We can see this goal evident in *Phone Story*, and also in the game's online branding materials:

When you purchased this phone, it was new and sexy. You've been waiting for it for months. No evidence of its troubling past was visible. Did you really need it? Of course you did. A lot of money was invested to instill this desire in you. You were looking for something that could signal your status, your dynamic lifestyle, your unique personality. Just like everyone else. (Molleindustria)

Once the player has completed the final task – sorting the e-waste components for recycling – the game unlocks 'obsolescence mode': an ever-accelerating, looping version of the game. There is no end in sight for the cycle of production and consumption, a thought which the designers hope will stick with the player after the words 'game over' appear on the screen.



Figure 1: Phone Story, Molleindustria, (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0)

Phone Story's importance comes not from its representation of the supply chain of mobile devices, but its self-critique as part of a software-hardware assemblage. The presence of the ethical claim on the platform does something that a story about the device, outside of the phone, cannot do. Playing the game is a performance that attempts to render visible what is already inside the phone.

Although the game operates on many platforms, it is most cutting in its critique when played on an iPhone: the voice-over addresses the user from the point of view of the phone itself, relating its story. *Phone Story* was swiftly pulled from the App Store by Apple's 'quality control' department. iPhone could no longer speak of their own history, muting their ethical criticisms, irrespective of *Phone Story's* availability elsewhere.

Phone Story's target is Apple devices, but the production cycle of Samsung or HTC Android phones is not greatly different. Indeed, components for many of these devices are produced in the same conditions. The game is then in the awkward position of offering a cathartic critique of Apple without similarly exposing the origins of other consumer electronics. These electronics are almost uniformly constructed using Congolese coltan, Chinese labor, Californian aesthetics, and await a future disassembly in countries that ignore the great physical and environmental cost of e-cycling. This highlights the fact that *Phone Story* limits its criticism to iPhone, and only the iPhone.

Our analysis indicates that a switch from iPhone to Samsung Galaxy is not sufficient. An examination of the supply chain of each device would have difficulty turning up some essence present in one that is not in the other. Given that *Phone Story* seeks the demise of the iPhone, the ethical telos of *Phone Story* is its own irrelevance. Molleindustria's scope of effects is rather limited in as much as it does not make a profit from the game. Rather than capitalising on sales to fund further commentary, their 'non-business model' invests much of their earnings in charitable donations to grassroots organizations. Clearly something more than a switch from Apple to Samsung is required. This 'something more' will be discussed in terms of the concepts of refusal and exodus, which emerge from streams of Marxist thought in Italy. Before that, however, it is necessary to complicate the notion of the 'brand'.

Brands and claims

Acknowledging the centrality to brands in everyday life (Lash, 2002: 250), we focus on the prevalence and function of ethical claims in the marketplace, which we see as opening up the mode of production to criticism and resistance. This section begins with a discussion of the properties of brands as 'complex objects', drawing on the work of Lury and Arvidsson. It then discusses the turn towards 'ethical' brands, and branding as a means of practicing 'ethical consumption'. In order to critically examine the values that underpin ethical branding, we turn to Boltanski and Thévenot's 'economies of worth'. The ethical claim – the claim to

some ethical position – is presented as the unit of analysis most fitted to the task at hand.

Brands

As *Phone Story* illustrates, a brand is a complex thing. Brands are heterogeneous assemblages of information and material, which attempt to capture consumers' esteem (Lury, 2004: 5; Arvidsson, 2006: 10; Cochoy, 2007: 205). Brands are a means of collecting, aggregating or assembling the 'ethical surplus' produced in the immaterial labor of consumption (Lazzaratto, cited in Arvidsson, 2006: 10). The claims to quality that brands make are not necessarily verifiable, yet the resulting ethical practices of consumption can have real effects. Research has already addressed the effects of ethical consumption on workers and environments in specific contexts of production, such as Mexico (Renard and Pérez-Grovas, 2007), South Africa (Kruger and du Toit, 2007), Nicaragua (Utting, 2009), and India (Scherer-Haynes, 2007: 228).

As 'dynamic platforms for practice', brands share a family resemblance to devices such as 'standards' and 'certifications' (Lury, 2004: 4). The certification offered by fair trade organisations depends upon trust in the certifier, while many standards may be international in reach but offer a bare minimum of ethical behaviour. Primarily interested in competition between goods in the market, standards have difficulty addressing non-market forms of worth (Thévenot, 2009: 802). The term 'regulation' or 'standard' implies that there is a degree of national jurisdiction involved, as different legal systems limit what can or cannot be mentioned. The insufficiency of these is exemplified by the United States Department of Agriculture, which requires only that animals have 'been allowed access to the outside' – with no mention of duration, frequency or quality – in order to be described as 'free range' (USDA, 2012). Certification is supported only by reference to a certification organization and the rigor of a particular standard. Fair Trade Certification is one such standard that operates in a consistent fashion worldwide (Fairtrade Foundation, 2011; Reinecke, 2010). Other standards vary from country to country. In the context from which we write, Australia, there is no governmental standard for organic products; successive governments have left a solution up to the market (Organic Foundation of Australia, 2009). The most prominent certification scheme is that provided by the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia, which requires that 95% of produce be organic for certification (NASAA, 2012: 23). It is important, then, to consider branding and certification in terms of the networks that support the claims that are made.

Ethical brands and ethical consumption

There exists an easy slippage from thinking of ‘the ethics of the brand’ to so-called ‘ethical brands’; that is, from an analysis of the claims that brands make to a discussion of certain brands already understood as morally good. We feel that to approach ‘ethical consumption’ as an object (Devinney, Auger and Eckhardt, 2010; Newholm, 2005; Lang and Gabriel, 2005) is already to grant too much ground to the production and marketing of these commodities as ethical.

‘Ethical consumption’ encompasses many different critiques of capitalist production, from animal welfare, to social justice, to environmental sustainability. Such a concept is problematic when it assumes that certain commodities are ethical without examining the claims that they make. Because ethical consumption accepts the purchase of commodities as a political behaviour, it is totally recuperable within the cycles of capitalism (Coles, 2011). Because ‘ethical commodities’ tend to cost more than conventional alternatives – due to more expensive production methods, higher wages, or regulatory oversight – they reinforce class tensions by promoting a mode of consumption not available to all (Guthman, 2007). Furthermore, the privileging of particular commodity genres, such as coffee, as arenas for ethical practice ignores the extent to which all commodities are products of labor and thus raise ethical concerns. ‘Normal’ consumption, such as receiving ‘value for money’ when shopping for one’s family, is still a form of ethical practice (Littler, 2011). Here the ethics are based on the exploitation of the self through an evaluation of one’s wages against a commodity’s price. By operating through the purchasing of commodities, ethical consumption can only reorganize the capitalist economy. Yet the move to large-scale ethical consumption despite additional costs points to a social desire for a change in contemporary modes of production. This is a desire that persists irrespective of whether we can trust the claims of ethical brands or not.

The primary issue is, however, that ‘ethical commodities’ share an aesthetic but not necessarily an ethic. This aesthetic leads paradoxically to a less-ethical engagement with consumption – where the effort of an ethical life is offloaded onto a set of expert systems, such as *Ethical Consumer Magazine* in the UK and the ‘Shop Ethical!’ apps for iOS devices, with no consideration of alternatives such as reduced consumption, or finding solutions outside of the marketplace. These expert systems vary in their conceptions of ethical behaviour (Littler, 2011). When these institutions bring together a broad range of practices into a single term they risk neutralizing the intensity of ethics. Ethical consumption, in this sense, leads to an ideological closure of investigation rather than an opening up of critique and debate (see Reinecke, 2010: 578). This is the source of the slippage, and paves the way to the current problematic case of ‘greenwashing’, where packaging mimics a ‘green’ aesthetic. What is needed in these cases is to

find ‘the ethics of the brand’. Refocusing on the ethics of the brand, rather than ethical consumption, means that analysis can address production. Once this happens, we no longer need to become fixated on the marketplace as the site where responses to branding occur, and a wealth of systematic and productive responses begin to reveal themselves. More importantly, ethical branding can lead to real changes in the mode of production, and we can see this through the device of the ‘claim’.

Claims

Social science research – and everyday practice – needs to be able to grasp an object for analysis from within the brand. The otherwise nebulous nature of the brand assemblage resists analysis. We propose the ‘ethical claim’ as a solution to this problem. The claim is a specific and tangible node within this assemblage that enables research to address the brand in its own terms.

The ethical claim is the element of the brand assemblage that exposes the brand to ethical criticism. A claim expresses something about the history of the commodity that it is attached to: being ‘sweatshop free’, ‘halal’, and so on. We might distinguish our idea of the claim from other parts of the brand assemblage, such as promises of future health, happiness or success, or accusations that commodities make about each other. While these latter statements tend to address the future – particularly the consumer’s future – the claim makes concrete statements about the history of its own assemblage. The claim allows us to analyse a brand’s statements about its own political economic concerns, and thus opens up the production process to critique and resistance. This is why playing Molleindustria’s *Phone Story* on another platform has a different form of critique compared to playing it on an iPhone. The claim also acts as a site for critical inquiry: if certain goods are to be understood as ethical, how are ethics communicated, where are they instantiated, and what are they directed at? If ‘ethical consumption’ is a discursive formation, then ethical claims are the ‘statements’ of which that formation is composed (see Foucault, 1972: 107). In the frame of the ethics of the brand, we consider the ethical claim to be the assets of a commodity’s branding that attempt to put stake in the commodity’s origins, primarily at the point of production, but also at the point of resource extraction. While it is practically impossible to become certain about the nature of commodities, and hence of the validity of the claims that brands make, these claims nevertheless provide an object that brands and researchers have in common. By having an idea of what a brand claims, we can determine that, in fact, most brands claim very little about their history. The policing of ‘health claims’ is common enough in national contexts (Pollan, 2008: 155), but ethical claims are much more difficult to test. Therefore we call for attention to the

networks that support particular claims. Such an approach has already assisted our analysis of the relationship between Apple and the Fair Labor Association. We can consider further examples: Fox News brands its journalism as 'Fair and Balanced' (Fox News, 2013), and Google's Code of Conduct has 'Don't be evil' as its core tenet (Google, 2012). Because they make no reference to an external standard, these claims are very difficult to test. We need to focus, therefore, on the claims to ethics that brands make, and the way they mobilize justifications (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

In general, ethical claims argue that existing market relationships do not adequately account for the market relation – whether in terms of externalities such as pollution or internalities like wages – and aim to improve the efficiency of the market by incorporating these externalities into the market relationship (Callon, 1998). Ethical brands position themselves as more accurately accounting for these externalities. The vagaries of consumer demand expose workers in the developing world to great fluctuations in price, not to mention toxic chemicals. In response, the Fair Trade certification scheme reframes the exchange to protect farmers from health and financial risks (Reinecke, 2010). We should be wary of 'stakeholder colonization' (Banerjee, 2008: 72), however, which understands only one mode of existence – that of the 'stakeholder' – and sees money as the only solution to problems of production.

The 'ethics' in ethical claims are vast, variable, and highly subjective; a consumer can choose to withdraw from a particular brand for many different ethical reasons: labor rights, animal treatment, religious practice, or otherwise. Similarly, ethical claims may target production, the mode or location of resource extraction, or the cost of distribution. For instance, Fair Trade is one of many attempts to brand production as equitable or sustainable for workers. The label 'organic', in turn, suggests the protection of the environment from fertilizers, hormonal treatments, or anti-fungal agents. Organic production often appears in conjunction with claims in other ethical directions: soil health, food miles or animal welfare yet, as Julie Guthman's (2004) research on the Californian organic industry shows, large-scale organic production recreates much of the same exploitation of labor as conventional agriculture. The production of any commodity mobilizes a vast network; the claim is what opens this network up to ethical critique.

The grapes that sit upon the supermarket shelf are mute; we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation upon them or tell immediately what part of the world they are from. We can, by further enquiry, lift the veil on this geographical and social ignorance and make ourselves aware of these issues (as we do when we engage in a consumer boycott of nonunion or South African grapes). But in so

doing we have to go beyond what the market itself reveals in order to understand how society is working. (Harvey, 1990: 423)

This quote from Harvey exemplifies the contemporary shift towards an ‘ethics of the brand’. Today, the market speaks voluminously about the provenance of a large degree of its produce. Less packaged commodities, such as fresh vegetables, might with more difficulty have ethical claims attached to them, but increasingly claims to ethics have become part of the commodity itself. Because of this process we are currently experiencing an abundance of ‘organic’, ‘fair trade’, and ‘green’ commodity brandings or, described more sceptically, ‘designer hair-shirts’ (Sloterdijk, 2011: 47). Regardless of their veracity, ethical claims engage in a form of subjectivation and have effects upon the form-of-life of capitalist subjects, calling for them to be ethical (Foucault, 1991: 352). Yet we do not believe that consumption – ‘more capitalism’ – is sufficient to produce shifts in post-Fordism: systemic change must be found elsewhere.

Refusal and exodus

The post-autonomist political tactics of refusal and exodus allow us to understand non-market responses to ethical claims. This section of the paper articulates these autonomist modes of resistance in new ways. Refusal, from Mario Tronti, can be repositioned as a means of resistance to the social relations of capital. Refusal has historically been the refusal of work. We extend this concept from the sphere of production to the sphere of consumption – where acts of purchasing, or joining a network, are a form of labor (cf. du Gay, 1996; Terranova, 2004; Fuchs, 2010). Exodus describes the emergence of new modes of production when refusal finds its limits (Virno, 1996). Ethical claims, as we have described them above, call for forms of resistance to capitalism. By approaching ethical claims through the lens of refusal and exodus, we show how these practices of resistance can escape rearticulation within capital.

The concept of refusal emerged from the discourses within Italian Marxism during the 1960s, and was formalised in Mario Tronti’s 1965 publication, ‘The Strategy of Refusal’ (2007). Tronti presents a new methodological perspective which highlights the capacity for change as located within the working class, without need for violent revolution. Resistance comes first in identifying that the laborer has the power to conduct this change without smashing the state. Capitalism, for Tronti, is simply one of many methods for the ‘civilization of labour’, in the sense of pacifying rather than ennobling the worker (Tronti, 2007: 30). In Tronti’s view, genuine resistance – a ‘refusal’ – has a very specific space for expression, and must come before the engagement with capitalism occurs. For the exploitation of labor, this must occur before the worker has assented to

their domination through a contract or a wage, as this engagement is the precise act of 'giving up' on the matter. This is obvious enough, as most labor strikes do not seek less capitalist oppression, but rather 'fairer "participation" in the profit of capital' (Tronti, 2007: 30).

While refusal has been associated with labor and production, this paper applies refusal to consumption. Acts of consumption are understood as a form of labor because they produce value from the affective ties between individuals (Arvidsson, 2005: 240). Paul du Gay likewise notes that distinctions between production and consumption are blurred in contemporary management discourse (1996: 76). Affective labor is a form of labor that monetizes social connections, identified by Hardt and Negri (2000) as constructing biopolitical networks between society and capitalism. This colonization of social life by forms of unpaid labor seems both immeasurable and intractable, but also presents opportunities for resistance at every turn.

Refusal can be applied to consumption in three senses, only one of which we consider to be 'true' refusal, as capitalism accommodates for the others. The first is the abandonment of one commodity in favour of another: to drive a hybrid car rather than a petrol fuelled vehicle, for example. Often such commodities are produced as a premium component of a product line, and thus pose little threat to a particular corporate enterprise. This is how refusal understands 'ethical consumption': as an abortive attempt to mitigate the effects of capitalism. The second sense is the aversion to a commodity genre, such as the choice to eat no meat, to never own a car, to never adopt Facebook. This practice of refusal, too, has limits: it drives the consumer out of a relationship of communication with the processes of production – in Hirschman's terms, it robs them of their 'voice'. Furthermore, this practice is rarely driven in response to explicit criticisms, but rather in response to long-term or non-economic considerations. Applying refusal from wage labor onto consumption labor in the context of ethical commodities means that refusal cannot simply mean buying a different commodity. Just as autonomist politics calls for a 'liberation from work' (Weeks, 2005: 120), 'true' refusal must include the refusal of consumption.

Refusal is, however, not sufficient alone to address the role that ethical claims play in the cycles of capitalism. In calling for 'exodus', Hardt and Negri suggest that refusal itself is

the beginning of a liberatory politics, but it is only a beginning. The refusal in itself is empty. ... What we need is to create a new social body, which is a project that goes well beyond refusal. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 204)

Exodus is not a singular step away from a capitalist system, but is rather a perpetually critical mode of existence that is engaged in producing new economic conditions. As a method of resistance, it can never be completely recuperated within market capitalism – as might ‘exit’ for Hirschman (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 42). Instead, the concept of exodus fights to go beyond capitalism. Exodus can, however, be used to describe the types of action taken on by those invested in ethical consumption. Those engaged in the practice of exodus do not seek to simply deny this world, but rather seek to actively construct the next one. Paolo Virno provides a definition:

I use the term Exodus here to define mass defection from the State, the alliance between general intellect and political Action, and a movement toward the public sphere of Intellect. The term is not at all conceived as some defensive existential strategy—it is neither exiting on tiptoe through the back door nor a search for sheltering hideaways. Quite the contrary: what I mean by Exodus is a full-fledged model of action, capable of confronting the challenges of modern politics ... a realm of common affairs has to be defined from scratch. (Virno, 1996: 197)

Exodus is an attempt to produce a destination beyond capitalism that is already prepared for our arrival (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 301-3).

In the context of ethical consumption, exodus signifies the simultaneous refusal of a mode of production and the development of alternatives. If we restrict ourselves to the geographic metaphor, in exodus people construct a new space to be occupied as they quit a previous space. Compare this with the practitioners of refusal, which only ever leave and abandon – or, perhaps, they are ‘fleeing, yes, but while fleeing looking for a weapon’ (Deleuze, quoted in Raunig, 2010: 57). In this case, for those concerned with the ethics of production the weapon has been found, and it is a new mode of production beyond capitalism. When these weapons are communicated and networked, then the solution is no longer individual, but becomes common, and opens on to a possibility for exodus. The social networking site Diaspora, to which we now turn, presents an exemplary – if not untroubled – case of exodus from one means of social media production to another.

Diaspora

The social media project of Diaspora brands itself as a destination for those who wish to leave Facebook, in response to the site’s treatment of privacy, data ownership and free labor. On a more abstract level, it resists the colonization of communication by post-Fordist capital (Lazzarato, 1996: 140). Yet the ethics of Diaspora are more than discursive: the site’s open-source code short-circuits

some ethical concerns entirely. It therefore represents an example of exodus, albeit one that is problematized by the low number of users who have migrated.

The project for a distributed and open-source social network, Diaspora (2012), emerges precisely out of the question of exodus. Four graduate students at New York University, dissatisfied with their own investments of personal information and free labor on the Facebook platform, began programming ‘Diaspora’ a ‘privacy-aware, personally controlled, do-it-all, open source social network’ (Diaspora, 2012). The launch of a Kickstarter crowd-funding campaign aligned with a renewed wave of anti-Facebook sentiment and the Quit Facebook Day campaign (Singel, 2010).

The project addresses three critiques of social networking sites: the creation of value through ‘user-generated content’, the protection of privacy and the control of one’s data. Using Facebook and Google is conceived as free labor because the content – both for users and for advertising – is produced by the users themselves (Pasquinelli, 2009). Yet, as the debate between Fuchs (2010) and Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012) identifies, the degree to which users of Facebook can be said to be exploited is still an open debate. A second concern for users is Facebook’s potential abuse of user data, such as targeted advertising based on demographics (Fuchs, 2012). Third is the question of control over one’s data, hosted in the United States, subject to American law: the extent of data capture is notoriously difficult to determine. Lastly, Diaspora addresses a more abstract idea of Facebook as a disciplinary technology: ‘the convenience of putting all of our information in the hands of companies is training us to casually sacrifice our privacy and fragment our online identities’ (Diaspora, 2010). As these concerns become progressively more ephemeral, it becomes more difficult to resist Facebook on its own terms.

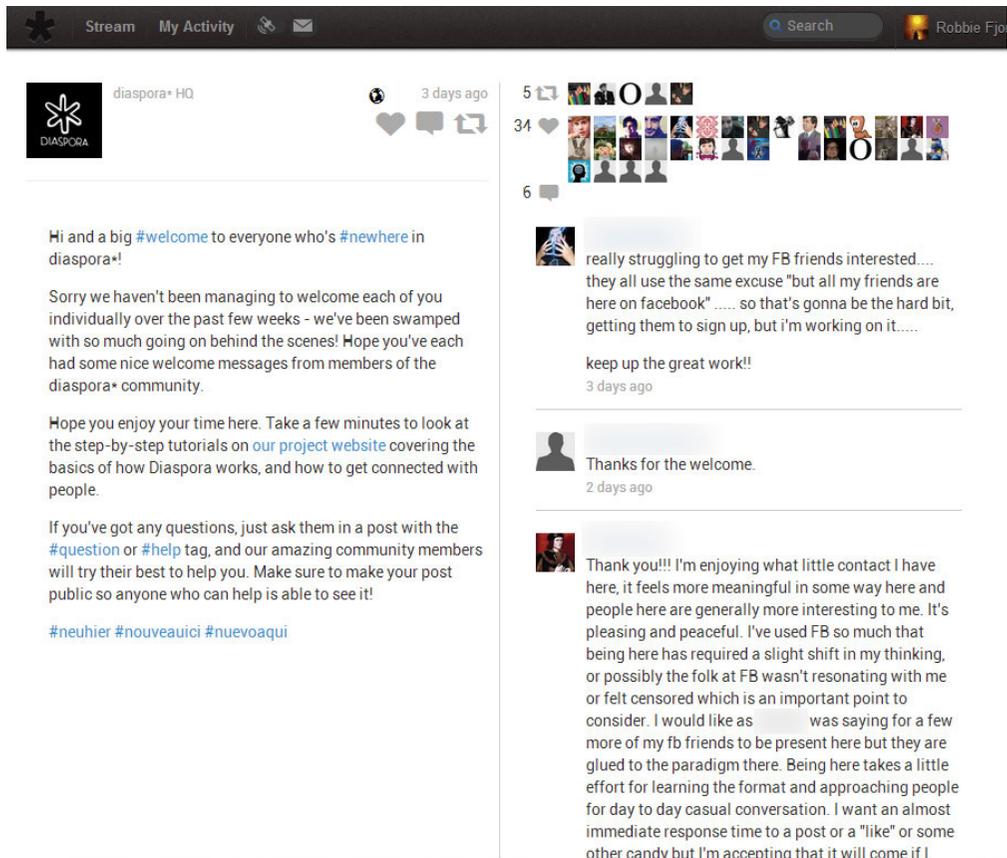


Figure 2: Diaspora, Diaspora.org, (CC BY 3.0)

Where *Phone Story* aims at its own irrelevance, Diaspora's telos is an exodus from Facebook. Diaspora attempts this transition through its visual appearance, the affordances of its architecture, and the legal status of the project's code. At the level of interface, Diaspora's form of communication is similar to Facebook's: users have 'walls', 'feeds', and 'tags'. However, users need not provide a 'real' name, are free to export their data at any time, and they determine others' level of access to their personal information. At the level of architecture, Diaspora users choose where to host their data: either on their own server or one of a number of 'pods' established for the purpose. These pods vary in location – and hence connection latency and legal jurisdiction – as well as reliability and patronage (Diaspora, 2013). Lastly, Diaspora exists as a number of implementations, or 'forks'. The 'right to fork' – the right to take a project's code and freely implement it elsewhere – is enshrined in free and open source software movements, and has been exercised by a number of developers to offer their own versions of Diaspora. It is therefore difficult to speak of Diaspora in a singular sense, since implementations vary in their features, popularity, and

interoperability with each other. One popular implementation is even interoperable with Facebook through an API, minimizing both the 'cost' of leaving Facebook and the 'leaving' (Diaspora, 2012).

Diaspora represents an exodus from Facebook, but not an untroubled one. Diaspora does not propose an exit from 'social networking' altogether, in favour of more 'immediate' personal networks, but rather focuses upon two points: the freedom of movement and creation of value. Diaspora addresses the well-documented difficulty in removing one's data from Facebook, which for some users will represent years of elaborate cultivation. The ethics of Diaspora are based on its claim to allow users 'freedom', implying a contrast to the Facebook platform. Where Facebook stores all data on its own servers and adopts control of the intellectual property of the information that it stores, the Diaspora protocol allows each user's computer to become a server and to retain rights to the information they host. In addition to one's own data being portable, the entire project's code is freely licensed as part of the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement. This license maintains Diaspora outside of copyrighting and prevents the capitalisation of users' 'free labor'. Through the 'right to fork' the Diaspora project allows those who wish to stage their own alternatives to easily attempt to do so, although as the size of the project increases so does the difficulty of such an undertaking (see Tkacz, 2011). One aspect of exodus that is problematic for considering Diaspora is the question of destination: exodus is 'exodus to' as well as 'exodus from'. Diaspora exists in several implementations, some of which require more expertise than others. Remaining barriers to entry are both technical – Diaspora requires a greater degree of computer literacy compared to Facebook – and social – as Metcalfe's law suggests, the 'value' of the network is linked to the number of people that it connects. Although the project has not strictly failed, it has not been adopted to any great degree. It is no longer an imaginary destination for exodus but has yet to make exodus imaginable for a wide range of people.

Conclusion

Our discussion moves past seeing ethical branding as an aesthetic, and points to responses that propose alternative ethical habits. Post-Fordism is predicated upon an ever-greater scrutiny over workers, goods, and consumers, yet increasing communication also factors into practices of resistance. It is precisely due to the proliferation of communication that ethical critiques can cut diagonally across borders of class and nation. When these practices can be recirculated in informational forms, such as in *Phone Story* and Diaspora, then

these forms-of-life become vibrant and political, something more than a barometer of dissent.

We have provided a means of interrogating the ethical brand through the lens of the ethical claim. This produces a methodological approach that can unpack the ‘economies of worth’ underpinning ethical branding. We can thus point to substantial tensions within modes of production and consumer behaviour. The call for refusal posed by *Phone Story*, and the new possibilities of social media proposed by Diaspora, point to two applications of autonomist thought in ways that present real opportunities for political action. We see the ‘right to fork’ – written into Diaspora’s architecture – as one of many practical applications of refusal which cannot be reincorporated by Facebook. Diaspora is capable of things that would compromise Facebook’s unity as a business. The application of critiques of Facebook at the level of Diaspora’s code builds a destination for exodus that can avoid colonization. The consumption of commodities will never lead to a new mode of production. In the absence of a total revolution, the politicization of consumption does suggest a partial exodus, and a partial refusal.

The ethics of the brand, understood through specific ethical claims, stages a criticism across capitalism, calling for an examination of consumption and encouraging a move to independent production. Claims provide a foothold for critical analysis and resistance; both are most productive when they conceive of economies beyond capital.

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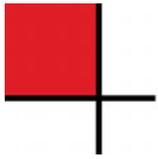
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The magic of ethical brands: Interpassivity and the thievish joy of delegated consumption^{*}

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abstract

Over the past 20 years, *ethical brands* have risen to prominence. The prevailing discourse implies that this trend has emerged as a result of consumers wanting to make a difference through their consumption. We argue that the popularity of ethical brands is due, at least in part, to their universal appeal, which can be understood by analyzing ethical brand consumption from a perspective beyond marketing and management logic, focusing on hedonistic motivation. Introducing Robert Pfaller's work on *illusions without owners* and in particular using the concept of *interpassivity*, we argue that consumers can derive pleasure in the form of *thievish joy* (diebische Freude) from consuming ethical brands without believing that their purchase will result in the purported outcomes. We aim to extend the typology of consumer ideologies, as they pertain to ethical consumption, through Pfaller's conceptualization and offer yet another explanation for consumer motivation beyond peer pressure or impression management. Following Pfaller's description of interpassive delegation as the magic of the (self-described) civilized man, we call the potential for ethical brands to enable an enjoyment surplus through thievish joy the magic of ethical brands. The paper's contribution is twofold: first, by linking Pfaller's conceptualizations to ethical brand consumption we hope to offer a unique and productive way to reflect on brand consumption and second, this paper introduces Pfaller's original work to the scholarly discourse on consumption and organization studies.

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The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1989: 167)

Introduction

Since the mid 1990's, 'ethical brands have become a global phenomenon' (Szmigin, Carrigan and O'Loughlin, 2007: 396). *The Body Shop*, which claims to be 'the original, natural and ethical beauty brand' (The Body Shop, 2012: webpage), rose to prominence with its environmental protection and animal rights ethos and was eventually purchased for £652.3 million by cosmetics giant *L'Oréal* (L'Oréal, 2006). Similarly, consumers have shown strong support for the ethical treatment of foreign workers and in 2010 the global retail sales of *Fair Trade* products soared to an astounding €4.36 billion (Fair Trade International, 2012). There are numerous potential explanations for the success of such *ethical brands*, including the rise of political consumerism (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007) and the perceived added value of ethically branded goods over otherwise equivalent products (Szmigin et al., 2007).

The complex issue of what an ethical brand is or how a brand can be called ethical lies beyond the scope of this paper as there is no clear, widely agreed upon definition or understanding of what constitutes ethics within a branding context (see also the editorial, this issue). Given the focus of our analysis, an evaluation of the morality of brands or brand consumption is not essential. Most relevant for our analysis is the fact that there are brands that are positioned as being ethical and that consumers buy them, presumably because they consider them morally superior purchasing choices. Using the concept of interpassivity we intend to explore an alternative explanation for these purchasing choices and advance our current understanding of the appeal of such brands beyond standard explanations.

Research in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has long stressed the importance of brand consumption for individual identity projects and the role of consumers as active interpreters of consumer ideologies (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Pfaller's (2002: 43) notion of 'thievish joy' through interpassive delegation offers an avenue to extend typologies of consumer motivation and also offers a novel way to interpret consumption of ethical brands. Within CCT there are different ways to speculate on consumer motivation and to conceptualize consumption. Holt (1995) draws a distinction between consumption as experience, integration, categorization and play. He, however, does not explicitly discuss the motivation behind the consumption activities as he tries to discuss *how*, though not *why*, consumers consume. More recently, Cluley and Dunne (2012) shift the focus

towards a less optimistic understanding of consumption. They highlight the narcissistic dimension of consumer behavior when explaining why consumers that do not believe in the promise behind ethical brands still consume those products. So while these consumers claim to not believe in the message of those brands, they still behave as if they believe. These ‘as if’-moments of consumption are our focus as well. But while their metaphor offers an explanation grounded in narcissistic pleasure and fetishized commodification, where the consumer derives pleasure out of having something at the expense of others, we are using Pfaller’s notion of interpassivity to argue (more optimistically if you like) that these ‘as if’-moments of consumption give the subject an opportunity to momentarily escape the pressures of being a responsible consuming subject. Cluley and Dunne (2012) are aware of the productive force of behaving *as if* when they emphasize the role of the fetish in keeping incompatible ideas alive. Still, their analysis focuses on the power of a narcissistic and destructive desire as an explanation for enlightened consumerism.

While we follow their view that ‘as if’-moments are essential to better understand our contemporary consumption culture, we also adopt the idea that consumption can be explained by intrinsic motivation of the consuming subject. Szmigin and Carrigan (2005) emphasize that the experience of an ethical purchase can provide the subject with hedonistic pleasure. But whereas these authors go on to describe ethical brand consumption as an expression of love of others, we argue that ethical brands offer the individual a momentary interpassive escape from the obligation to be a responsible consuming subject. We claim that the success of ethical brands is due, at least in part, to their universal appeal that goes beyond offering an avenue to express concern and human kinship, in that they offer a momentary dis-identification with the consumer role through interpassive delegated consumption.

Our argument, therefore, contributes to the discussion on hedonistic consumption within CCT. In a consumption context, pleasure may be derived from various sources (Schaefer, 2005) and while virtually all of these sources of pleasure are relevant in an ethical consumption context, the consumption of ethical goods or services adds a new layer of complexity that has, up to now, been discussed rather minimally. The extant literature on hedonistic pleasure, as it relates to ethical consumption, has primarily explored the hedonistic outcomes derived from the purchase itself and the expected positive outcomes the purchase may bring about for others (Szmigin and Carrigan, 2005). Applying the work of Pfaller, we suggest that consumers can derive pleasure in various, less obvious ways when consuming ethical brands and that this can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical brand purchasing experience and the universal appeal of ethical brands. By utilizing Pfaller’s conceptualization of

illusions without owners, interpassivity, and thievish joy, we argue that consumers, even without believing that their purchase will result in the purported outcomes, can derive pleasure from consuming ethical brands. By introducing Pfaller into the discussion we offer an alternative explanation for the current popularity and success of ethical brands, which extends beyond marketing and management logic. But whereas others (see Fleming and Spicer, 2005; Gabriel and Lang, 2008) emphasize the cynical streak within consumer motivation and the externalization of morality within enlightened consumerism, we add yet another motivational layer, namely the individual's attempt to escape the responsibility of consumer sovereignty and consumer society altogether, albeit just for a brief illusionary moment, and paradoxically through consumption. This view of consumption as based on interpassive enjoyment offers one possible way of applying the insight of the Frankfurt School that consumers feel compelled to buy and consume products despite the fact that they can see right through them. Taken a step further, our analysis might offer an opportunity to reflect on brand consumption in general.

In what follows, we will first discuss different conceptualizations of brands and their role in hedonistic consumption. Then we will introduce the notions of illusions without owners and interpassivity. Ethical brand consumption will then be conceptualized as a process enabling a double delegation through the logic of interpassivity and, using idealized consumer types, we will argue for the universal appeal of ethical brands. We conclude with a discussion of the limitations of this paper and a short closing discussion.

Buying into brands

As a concept, brands first came into relevance through their function as mere demarcations of the belonging of a commodity to a particular artisan or firm (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo-Riley, 1998; Barwise, Dunham and Ritson, 2000). This provided the possibility of symbolically representing the rather elusive concept of the firm and its offering, which is one possible definition of what a brand does, often by simply stamping a symbol on the packaging of a product. Once symbolically represented, the firm and its offering can be assigned characteristics, which in turn means that the belonging the brand indicates can be made to serve as a proxy for almost any meaning, attribute, or message. From a classical marketing perspective, the characteristic of quality has been a popular choice for marketers. However, the implications of a brand's symbolic capacity are significant and transcend commercial relevance. McCracken (1988: 71) notes that '[c]onsumer goods have a significance that goes beyond their utilitarian character and commercial value ... their ability to carry and communicate cultural

meaning'. Thus, it would seem that although brands may have commercial relevance in their DNA, they have indeed evolved into something beyond that.

Many of the seminal works on brands in fact take their point of departure from the notion that the relevance of brands has transcended marketing. For example, brands have the potential to function as an organizing principle with significant implications for management (Hatch and Schultz, 2008). Brands can also function as components in the identity construction of consumers (Arvidsson, 2005) as a result of their capacity to transform consumption into communication (Levy 1959; Belk, 1988). Furthermore, it has been argued that brands have fundamentally reorganized how production and consumption are linked (Kornberger, 2010).

Brands also have a palpable political dimension. Expressed simply, the consumption of a particular brand can be conceptualized as an approval, as a buying into as opposed to just buying (Holt, Quelch and Taylor, 2004), or at the very least, as a failure to resist the activities and ideology of the firm which the brand represents. Brand consumption in this sense truly becomes a buying into of the message the brand is perceived to transmit. Some consumers do not simply buy a cup of coffee at *Starbucks*, but rather they take the opportunity to buy into a whole system of values contained within the *Starbucks* brand (see Žižek, 2009).

The opportunity to buy into a system of values, as suggested by Žižek (2009), also leaves consumers with the opportunity to not buy into a system of values she does not agree with. This enables consumers to act out their ethical commitments through daily consumption, in line with the logic that in a free-market consumer society people vote with their wallets (Shaw, Newholm and Dickinson, 2006) and live the ideology expressed in a culture of consumer sovereignty (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992). If the consumer is the sovereign, brands provide him or her with a tool to govern. This provides a sufficient motivation for firms to attempt to be perceived as possessing positive or attractive values. The consumption system in which brands exist is also apt at absorbing resistance (Kornberger, 2010) and if a great enough number of consumers perceive an ethical deficit in the current brandscape, this concern becomes something that can be leveraged by firms. When this leveraging occurs, the brandscape can be said to have effectively absorbed the concern directed towards it. This is one way to make sense of why ethical brands are now prominent fixtures in the modern brandscape (Thompson and Arsel, 2004).

In this sense the phenomenon of ethical brands can be understood. These brands present themselves and are seen by some as morally superior purchasing

choices. An example is a brand such as *The Body Shop*. While one might argue that truly ethically-centered brands are still a fringe phenomenon, ethical conduct or at least a discussion of the ethical dimensions of business through brand communications, has reached the mainstream with virtually every global firm committing to some form of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity. Some brands even communicate that their ethical commitment is their primary objective, apparently having a genuine interest in doing good beyond the scope of their respective firms. Consider the following quote from the concentrate-free fruit juice purveyor *innocent* (2012: webpage):

We sure aren't perfect, but we're trying to do the right thing. It might make us sound a bit like a Miss World contestant, but we want to leave things a little bit better than we find them. We strive to do business in a more enlightened way, where we take responsibility for the impact of our business on society and the environment, and move these impacts from negative to neutral, or better still, positive. It's part of our quest to become a truly sustainable business, where we have a net positive effect on the wonderful world around us.

The *innocent* example is used as an exemplary ethical brand that we find in today's consumer market; it stands in as a typical ethical brand. Aside from promoting its ethical characteristics, this particular brand is notable for the playful and humorous way in which the brand is communicated. It seems as though their marketing communications have been designed to speak to the cynic in all of us or at least fully embraces post-modern discourses. While this paper is a theoretically informed speculation on alternative motivations for consumption, *innocent* will be used as an illustration of the interpassive enjoyment of consumers.

Consumer motivation

Arguably, consumers appear to increasingly care about the way their commodities are produced, sold, and marketed. There seems to be growing awareness and concern for ethical issues, be it working conditions (i.e., *Foxconn*), exploitation (i.e., *Fair Trade*), or the nature of the product or service itself. There are different ways to explain this growing consumer awareness. We could speculate about the impact of globalization, the rise of powerful, multinational corporations, and a number of other contributing factors (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007). For our argument it is enough to assume that there are ethical brands and that they are often seen as a positive expression of enlightened consumerism and a venue for consumers to act out their sovereignty. Consumption can be conceptualized in different ways. Holt (1995) for example talks of four metaphors that capture consumption: consumption as experience, integration, categorization and play. While such metaphors cannot fully capture the

complexity of consumer choices and consumer motivation, our own approach primarily fits within the notion of consumption as integration. Whereas Holt (1995: 6) mostly speaks to the integration of the consumption object into a consumer's identity, we argue for consumption as a form of momentary dis-identification; in Pfaller's language, a playful act that enables us to momentarily enjoy freedom from the pressures of being a consumer and being a subject, by utilizing fictional others. Beyond the metaphors for consumption, scholars also reflect on what motivates consumers (e.g. Bargh, 2002; Bayton 1958; Seth, Newman and Gross, 1991). As we have mentioned earlier, one possible focus is the role of hedonistic pleasure. The next section will discuss hedonistic consumption, followed by an introduction of Pfaller's understanding of interpassivity. Then these concepts will be linked as both view people as being primarily motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

Hedonistic consumption and ethical brands

Consumer society, which is primarily directed by the consumption and accumulation of material goods, is viewed as being inherently hedonistic (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002). Hedonism has been understood in various ways throughout history. Here we use the works of Sidgwick (1962), who wrote that egoistic hedonism consists of the belief that the ultimate good is the happiness of the individual whereas universalistic hedonism involves acting in such a way as to bring about the most pleasure for the most individuals in the long term. Pleasure, in the broadest sense, consists of 'all pleasant feeling or experience, such as elation, ecstasy, delight, joy, and enjoyment' (Moore, 2011). With regards to consumption, there is a notable distinction between pleasure and satisfaction. Satisfaction results from the intrinsic utility of some good, such as the ability of food to relieve hunger, whereas pleasure is not a property of stimuli, but 'refers to the capacity to react to stimuli in a certain fashion' (Campbell, 2005: 61). Therefore, pleasure is a more malleable experience and thus potentially more open to influence by the individual's perceptions and/or her environment.

In the consumption of conventional, non-ethically branded goods or services, pleasure may be derived from the act of shopping (i.e., retail therapy); from the use of the good or service; or from possessing the goods themselves (Schaefer, 2005). The pleasure derived from hedonistic consumption is purely egoistic. Within the domain of ethical brand consumption, pleasure can be derived from two sources: 'In choosing to purchase ethical goods, consumers can be said to be acting hedonistically both in relation to their own feelings of pleasure from the purchase and in terms of the good they may bring to others' (Szmigin and

Carrigan, 2005: 610). Therefore, this particular understanding of ethical consumption involves both egoistic and universalistic hedonism.

As mentioned earlier, a somewhat darker side of hedonistic consumption is discussed by Cluley and Dunne (2012), who emphasize the externalization of morality made possible through ethical brand consumption. They point towards the imaginary delegation that seems to be at work in consumption when they claim that ‘the narcissist enjoys their ability to act reprehensibly through consumption’ (Cluley and Dunne, 2012: 262). While our argument does not concern the actual political impact or potency of ethical brands, we agree that ethical brands offer an opportunity to analyze other modes of consumption beyond rational choice and sovereignty; where hedonistic consumption drives conscious or subconscious purchase choices. This is not necessarily a new perspective on consumption. For example the links between psychoanalytic theory and marketing and advertising are well documented (through the work of practitioners like Dichter, Bernays or books like Packard’s (1957/2007) *The Hidden Persuaders*). However, Cluley and Dunne (2012) have recently added another perspective to this interpretation of consumption and consumer motivation. They insist that while we know about the hidden persuaders and the quasi-magical characteristics we assign to brands as vehicles for identity construction, ‘to date, no one has explored the *as if* moment of enlightened consumption through these perspectives’ (Cluley and Dunne, 2012: 262 [emphasis original]). ‘As if-moments of consumption are situations where the consumer (subjectively) knows very well that a product is produced under sweatshop conditions or that a behavior has negative consequences but still behaves (objectively, so to say) as if they did not know. Such behavior is often described as cynical, as a consumer might denounce his or her belief in something but then act as if they believe.

However, following Böhm and Batta (2010: 347), this pleasure experience inherent in such fetishized consumption can never be made fully understandable. There seem to be paradoxical and contradictory forces at work. It is fitting that they emphasize the ethnological roots of the word fetishism in magic (Pietz 1985: 5 in Böhm and Batta, 2010) to capture this un-understandable dimension of fetishism. In a similar way, Pfaller (2009: 151) talks about interpassive delegation as the ‘magic of the civilized man’ in order to capture the counter-intuitive aspects of interpassive delegation and concepts like ‘illusions without owners’. Echoing Freud, interpassive delegation is described as magical because a symbolic activity takes over the full meaning of what it is supposed to have symbolized (i.e., the usage of a voodoo doll takes over the meaning of actually harming the person in question) (Pfaller, 2002: 39). Pfaller (2009: 152)

also adds that while the so-called ‘uncivilized man’ might be well aware of the magical nature of his rituals, we, the ‘civilized’ lack this awareness.

Approaching consumer motivation through idealized consumer types

Consumption practices can be explained from different angles (see Holt, 1995). For our discussion we will introduce different exemplary types of consumers. These idealized consumer types illustrate different ‘masks of the consumer’ (Gabriel and Lang, 2008), different potential motivational impulses of consumers when engaging in brand consumption. As consumption can be understood through different metaphors (Holt, 1995), so too can consumer motivation be conceptualized through idealization, like Holt’s (2004: 131-153) distinction between followers, insiders and feeders in his discussion of iconic brands. This idealized typology of consumers represents a synthesis of characteristics into unified archetypes and serves as a means of approaching an understanding of the different motives underlying the consumption of ethical brands. They should not be thought to necessarily have an empirical correlate, or to exist as a real persona, but rather to represent a possible mode of thought. Therefore, they are a simplification of motives, which will facilitate our speculation on ethical brand consumption using a framework based on Robert Pfaller’s (1998; 2002; 2008; 2009; 2011) works¹.

The specific types of consumers employed in the present text have been labeled ‘the indifferent’, ‘the activist’, and ‘the cynic’. These types are used as heuristics that allow us to think about individuals’ reasons to consume a certain brand. These three types are not directly based on research about consumer attitudes but are more based on common sense ideas about consumer motivation, not unlike Holt’s (2004) typology of follower, insider and feeder. Each of our consumers is thought to be able to derive hedonistic pleasure from his/her consumption of ethical brands by virtue of social rewards or as communication in a society that values responsible consumption. However, these consumers differ in their capacity to derive hedonistic pleasure from the consumption of ethical brands. The *indifferent* consumer derives no direct hedonistic pleasure from her consumption of ethical brands as their message lacks meaning to her; she simply makes no judgment of the ethical nature of brands and thus is not affected by it. She could however experience pleasure by purchasing ethical brands as a tool of impression management or social conformity. Her attitude is contrasted with that of the *activist*, who buys into ethical brands and derives

¹ Our discussion will focus primarily on his 2002 and 2009 books in which interpassivity is a central concept.

hedonistic pleasure from her consumption of them. To the activist, the consumption of ethical brands represents a believable delegation of ethical action through consumption and she derives hedonistic pleasure from the action that results from this delegation and thus is enabled by her consumption. The *cynic*, on the other hand, acknowledges the meaning conveyed by ethical brands but rejects it as a falsehood or as something without significance. At a glance it would appear that only the activist consumer type would derive hedonistic pleasure directly from the consumption of ethical brands. However, in the next section we will examine how Pfaller's framework can provide a different understanding of how hedonistic pleasure can be derived from the consumption of ethical brands.

Pfaller's *illusions without owners*

In his 2002 book, *Die Illusionen der anderen*, Austrian-born philosopher Robert Pfaller discusses how human beings believe and what psychological functions these beliefs serve. From a perspective informed by psychoanalytic writing and starting with Mannoni's (1985) distinction between superstitious belief (*croyance*) and adopted creed (*foi*) and Huizinga's (1956) emphasis on the link between play and culture, Pfaller (2002) focuses on a specific kind of illusion, which he calls *Einbildungen ohne Eigentümer* (illusions without owners). While common sense suggests that an illusion must have an owner, i.e., a person possessing the illusion, and that once the illusory nature of a belief is recognized it ceases to exist as an illusion, Pfaller argues for the possibility of a form of illusion that is not suspended even if its illusory character is realized: an illusion that cannot be ascribed to a human subject. While these illusions appear to be without owners, they nonetheless seem to exist and serve a purpose for individuals. Several examples of such illusions without owners are listed, like Veyne's (1987) example of the Ethiopian tribe that believes that the leopard is a Christian animal, which respects lent, but still guards their cattle during that time. Also relevant are Žižek's (1991) thoughts on the function of canned laughter in American sitcoms, where it seems as though the task of laughing is outsourced to a fictional sitcom audience; they laugh for us, they do the work and we are still left with the feeling of having been amused. So while we are aware that it is illusory that the laugh track is laughing for us and that we can actually outsource our laughing to the object of consumption, i.e., the sitcom, we still act as if we can outsource our personal enjoyment/laughter. This fetishist attitude permits us, despite our knowledge to the contrary, to behave as if we hold the illusory belief. Or in Mannoni's (1985: 9) famous words, *Je sais bien... mais quand même* (I know full well... but nonetheless). To explain the puzzling fact that we seem to act in line with the content of our recognized illusions, the notion of interpassivity and the

idea of delegated or externalized enjoyment/consumption will now be introduced.

The *interpassive* subject and delegated consumption

The concept of interpassivity in Pfaller's work was initially developed for the purpose of conceptualizing an alternative to the interactive consumption of contemporary art, mainly based on the work of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek (see Pfaller, 2009: 48). When discussing consumption, Pfaller describes interpassivity as a system of saving through delegation, such as when an urban buyer of an off-road jeep saves herself the actual off-road trip into the wild by driving a vehicle that was constructed to drive off-road (Pfaller, 2009: 22). This process can be described as passive, since consumption is often conceptualized as a passive act compared to the activity of production (Pfaller, 2009: 35). He further illustrates the paradoxical nature of interpassive consumption by reflecting on examples from art and memorials. For instance, he asks if a Holocaust memorial is a place of active remembering and honoring the victims or if it is passive in that it frees the individual of the work that keeping the crime in one's memory would require (Pfaller, 2009: 38-39). Finally, he defines interpassivity as the delegation of passivity, i.e., consumption, onto others (Pfaller, 2009: 296).

The major motivation for interpassive behavior is the enjoyment individuals derive from the process of delegation. Through interpassive consumption, enjoyment is delegated to the object and the belief in the illusion is placed onto a (fictional) naïve observer (Pfaller, 2009: 15). This double delegation allows for what Pfaller calls *diebische Freude*: the thievish joy of having escaped the task implied in the activity as well as the belief that such a delegation is possible. The common German idiom expresses a form of secret or covert rejoicing, a form of joy that is based on some trickery or misconduct. Literally, it describes the joy of a thief when committing or getting away with a theft. It is translated as mischievous joy, malicious joy or even as perverse delight. For the purpose of this paper we will use the literal translation.

Functionally, thievish joy is similar to the fetish in Freudian psychoanalysis, which stands in for a belief that the subject has lost (Pfaller, 2009: 32). To illustrate thievish joy further, Žižek's (1998) example of the use of VCR recorders as a medium of delegated consumption is relevant. The film lover might record many movies with the aim of watching them in the future. But quite often she will end up not watching them at all. However, Žižek claims that the act of recording them will leave her with a sense of satisfaction, as if she had actually

watched the movies. It seems as if the VCR recorder, by recording our favorite movies, frees us from the actual act of watching them. Similar to the function of canned laughter mentioned earlier, we seem to delegate the consumption to the object, i.e., the VCR recorder, and from this we are subsequently able to derive some form of satisfaction. Again, while we may be fully aware of the illusory nature of such an act of delegated consumption and we would probably claim that we do not believe in it, we still act as though we believe in it. So while subjective experience may not be in line with such an interpretation and the individual, i.e., the film lover, might not believe in this form of delegated consumption and would object if confronted with such an interpretation, her behavior suggests that she still acts as if she believes. Pfaller calls this the *objective* character of the illusion. The often-quoted example for this objective character is Žižek's (1989: 34 [emphasis in original]) description of Tibetan prayer wheels (a device within which a small piece of paper containing a prayer is placed. The individual spins the wheel and it is believed that the wheel then prays for the individual): 'The beauty of it all is that in my psychological interiority I can think about whatever I want, I can yield to the most dirty and obscene fantasies, and it does not matter because whatever I am thinking, *objectively*, I am praying'.

The act of distancing oneself from or negating such an explanation seems to be a crucial part of this delegated consumption. Another example, perhaps closer to the readers of this article, is bibliomania. Often the purchase and display of books seems to free us from the time consuming and arduous task of actually reading them. We act as if simply taking possession of the text allows us to in some way consume it. The compulsive redirection inherent in such an activity is what Pfaller describes as the magic of the self-described civilized man (or woman), in the sense that a symbolic act (the book purchase), acquires the meaning and function of the original symbolized activity (the reading of the text). Pfaller (2009) uses the term magic to highlight the fact that we, thinking of ourselves as civilized, erroneously assume that the so-called uncivilized actually believe in their magic and rituals. Conversely, the 'civilized' assume that they only behave in line with what they actively believe. For the civilized, being rather obsessed with authenticity, everything one subscribes to must be fully believed and therefore it is assumed that rain-dancing Native Americans also fully believe in their ritual. Thus, because the 'civilized' individual does not actually believe that she is engaging in any sort of magic, she does not recognize the nature of her own ritualistic behavior.

Pfaller (2009) argues that this magical act of interpassive, delegated consumption satisfies us and we are therefore motivated to take part in such behavior. He develops this idea further and argues that delegated consumption is

the general principle of cultural pleasure; it is a technique applied to increase enjoyment. It is a narcissistic source of joy in what Pfaller describes throughout his work as a culture shaped by American capitalism with strong ascetic tendencies and displaying hostility towards (especially destructive) pleasure, such as that derived from cigarette smoking. We seem to live in a time of constant crisis where people appear to accept that they should abstain from excessive pleasure seeking behavior. Žižek's (2003: webpage) famous examples of consumption in *cultural capitalism* come to mind where:

We find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness.

While this is a simplified and rather brief summary of Pfaller's argument on the form and function of interpassivity in today's cultural capitalism, it provides us with a basis to discuss an alternative interpretation of ethical brand consumption. In addition, we hope that this paper will also encourage the readers to see the potential contribution of Pfaller's work to consumer culture theory and organization studies.

But Pfaller also stresses that some form of interpassive delegation might have a quite useful effect on the individual level. In his discussion of interpassivity, Pfaller argues that interpassive escape is appealing because it allows us to escape Althusser's (1969/1977, in Pfaller, 2009: 180) interpellation, which is the need to recognize ourselves as the subject being spoken to by dominant ideology. For Pfaller it can be a strategy for 'critical de-subjectification' (Butler, 1995, in Pfaller, 2009: 182). Contrasting it to Butler's (1995 in Pfaller, 2009: 183) notion of 'passionate attachment', Pfaller sees interpassivity as a passionate detachment of enjoyment practices, to avoid the effort of subjectification and open a passage to pleasure through self-forgetfulness. So while the interpassives give up pleasure, they win access to the even greater enjoyment of thievish joy, as they have momentarily resisted the pressure to be a subject.

For Pfaller, interpassivity is a powerful tool of resistance, a strategy of critical de-subjectification in a culture dominated by a quest for appropriation (Aneignung) and authenticity. Pfaller claims that (self-proclaimed) civilized people today are blind to the pleasure accessible through objective belief and interpassive enjoyment and therefore, mainly experience neurotic pleasure through pleasure avoidance or un-pleasure (Unlust). Interpassives on the other hand play

consumption (Pfaller, 2009: 243) and escape the constant pressure for subjectification and open up a space for momentary self-forgetfulness.

Implications for brand consumption

As Pfaller explicitly reflects upon consumption practices, it is not farfetched to apply his ideas to brand consumption as well. Given the understanding of brands as symbolic identity devices (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998) it seems reasonable to assume that some brands might be conducive to thievish joy through interpassive delegation. Not surprisingly, Pfaller and Žižek also refer to brands, like *Jeep* or *Starbucks* when discussing interpassivity. In CCT it seems to be more common though to understand consumption rituals as an activity where meaning is transferred from goods to a person (McCracken, 1988). The customer enters a relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998) mostly with the aim of enhancing the self (Banister and Hogg, 2004). Much of the research that focuses on the symbolic dimension of brand consumption seems to talk mostly about customers that buy into the message of the brands – using them as identity devices and consuming them in order to enhance their self-image or self-esteem. From a practitioner perspective brands that are not seen to be used in this way are categorized as failing or losing touch with customers and consumer culture in general (see, for example, *Saatchi and Saatchi's* CEO Kevin Roberts' (2004) idea that brands need to develop into lovemarks). But assuming that some brands, for example an ethical brand like *innocent*, offer an avenue for thievish joy through interpassive delegation also enables us to see the appeal of brands beyond the often assumed loving relationship between customer and brand (Albert, Merunka and Valette-Florence, 2008).

Seeing brand consumption as an interpassive ritual, the magical rain-dance of the civilized post-modern consumer, adds to our understanding of the 'as if'-moments of consumption. With the aim of deriving joy from a temporary escape from the constant pressure to act as a responsible consuming subject, cynical or indifferent consumers denounce the symbolic meaning the brand wants to convey, but still use it as an act of what Pfaller describes as passionate detachment. This form of brand consumption is then not so much motivated by the communicative potential of the specific consumption activity, but by the individual experience of joy through acting as if, under the eyes of a fictional naïve observer. The wish to escape the pressures of being a consumer, not self-actualization, is the primary focus of the interpassive subject.

If we now return to our three idealized consumer types and apply the case of *innocent* fruit juice, we can see how the indifferent consumer should not view

innocent as any different from other brands in the same category as the ethical message lacks meaning to this type of consumer. The activist would, in contrast, conceptualize her consumption of the *innocent* brand as a delegation of the ethical actions thought to be carried out by *innocent*. The cynic (and potentially the indifferent), however, would not believe the ‘message of ethics’ of *innocent* but could still derive hedonistic pleasure from its consumption in the form of thievish joy resulting from seeing through the ethical message but still playing along. However, this hedonistic pleasure would come not from buying into the message, like Szmigin and Carrigan (2005) described, or from some form of narcissistic enjoyment on the back of others, like Cluley and Dunne (2012) argued, but rather from behaving interpassively. Paradoxically, the cynic can escape the call to be an ethical subject by behaving as if she is an ethical subject within the framework of free market capitalism and consumer sovereignty. As interpassives play consumption in general (Pfaller, 2009: 243), she plays ethical consumption to avoid subjectification and, for a brief moment, to escape the pressure of cultural capitalism. Such playful consumption can be seen as mirroring rituals of the so called ‘uncivilized’ and borrowing from Pfaller, one can describe the thievish joy that interpassive ethical brand consumption enables as the magic of ethical brands.

The magic of *ethical brands*

As mentioned earlier, the ethical dimension of a brand can certainly be debated. The notion of ethical brands as brands that are produced and sold according to a code of conduct that is perceived as ethically superior by key stakeholders implies that there are morally superior purchasing choices that are available to some consumers. Therefore, ethical brands should attract *political consumers* (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2005) that believe in their ethically superior brand promise, such as the activist consumer type. Ethical brands also allow these consumers to ‘portray themselves as positive change agents, forces for good’ (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004: 694) both to themselves and others, which could be an explanation for why the indifferent consumer type engages in ethical brand consumption. The cynical consumer type should be expected to be less interested or even completely disinterested in these brands. However, by applying Pfaller’s perspective, we argue that the consumption of ethical brands can indeed be a rewarding experience for all consumers, including the activist, the indifferent, and the cynic. Following Pfaller (2002) and Žižek (1989), when the indifferent or the cynic consumes an ethical brand they are still *objectively* behaving as if they believe in it, not only out of peer pressure or some kind of modern version of the selling of indulgences, but because their consumption provides a surplus of enjoyment; they experience the hedonistic pleasure of

thievish joy. Borrowing from Pfaller's observation of the self-proclaimed civilized individual's peculiar view of magic when observing the rituals of the uncivilized, we argue that this universal appeal results from what can be described as *the magic of ethical brands*. To put it differently, all of the mentioned consumer types can experience pleasure through ethical brand consumption regardless of the beliefs they hold about the effectiveness of ethical brands. Thievish joy offers an alternative explanation for how ethical brand consumption can provide a rewarding experience even for the indifferent and cynical consumer.

Pfaller admits that this double delegation of enjoyment and belief through interpassive consumption motivated by thievish joy is a riddle, but a worthwhile one as it allows us to question not only delegated consumption but also consumption as such (Pfaller, 2009: 32). Thus, we believe that Pfaller's work can contribute to our understanding of brand consumption and our paper is a first attempt at introducing his language to these areas. To better understand the notions of interpassivity, thievish joy, and illusions without owners, one needs to remind oneself that in Pfaller's context, public appearance, as opposed to the psychological interiority of the individual subject, is crucial for describing a situation (Pfaller, 2009: 60). Given the psychoanalytical elements of his theorizing, this might seem counterintuitive. However, this explains why he and others can talk of the objective dimension of behavior, for example when discussing Tibetan praying wheels. Interpassive enjoyment is more than just an act of distancing oneself through projecting agency onto an object. He describes it as enjoyment through the other (Pfaller, 2009: 56), as the 'external processing of the psychological' ('externe Abwicklung von „Psychischem“' (Pfaller, 2009: 64)). Ethical brand consumption can be seen as an illustration of this external processing as ethical aspects are outsourced to the commodity. Still, the motivating factor for this outsourcing is the individual experience of thievish joy.

Let us return to the example of *innocent* fruit drinks. Have they not built an ethical brand par excellence? They sell a healthy drink, with ethical ingredients, sustainably produced, packaged to minimize environmental impact, and in a charitable gesture they even redistribute their profits through their own foundation. But even more striking is their tongue-in-cheek approach to communicating both their product and their company. In a typically post-modern fashion, potential criticism or cynicism seems to be disarmed by their humorous approach towards their business and their agenda. They are aware that they might sound like 'a Miss World contestant' (innocent, 2012), and the little stories they tell on their bottles are light-hearted anecdotes filled with pop culture references and feel-good stories. The message seems clear: We do not want to hurt anyone, we just want to play! Their post-modern approach disarms their potential critics and the cynic in all of us. *innocent* fully embraces a world in

which an ethical brand is more about lifestyle than anything else. It's more about drinking the latest fruit mix with that little berry that Oprah has hyped up (as written on one of their bottles). Additionally, the name of their smoothie ('innocent' adorned with a halo, no less) pushes this self-referential, cynical attitude even further, ridiculing their own agenda and their customers. While being outspoken about their limited impact and extremely humble about their objectives, they still claim innocence for their product and potentially for themselves and their customers. It does not seem as though they actually believe that they and their customers are innocent or that drinking their fruit juice will bestow innocence upon anyone. But aside from reflecting the typical cynical distancing of a post-modern consumer, might it not be that the innocence they are talking about is the innocence of thievish joy, of having escaped in a double sense?

Thievish joy, this enjoyment surplus, gives us an alternative perspective of the growing consumption of ethical brands. Being doubtful of the potential of ethical brands as vehicles for change and seeing through the illusion that the evils of mass consumption can be addressed by mass consumption, cynical or critical consumers can behave as if and subsequently derive satisfaction from supporting ethical brands. Therefore, as a consequence of working according to the logic of interpassivity, ethical brands not only appeal to the activist or the indifferent, but also to cynics as they provide the surplus pleasure of having escaped.

The magic of ethical brands and their ability to 'make consumable' the resistance to praxis illustrates a more fundamental characteristic of brand consumption in general. The consumption of ethical brands, in the case herein presented, is revealed as an interpassive delegation of ethics, towards which consumers formulate an understanding and adjust their consumption practice accordingly. However, action related to ethics is by no means the only thing that can be interpassively delegated in this manner. Indeed one may argue that an important aspect of how a brand is consumed lies in what action its consumption can be thought to interpassively delegate. Theoretically at least, it seems as if most, if not all brands, have the potential to bestow interpassivity upon their consumers. 'Ethics' is but one category of ideology and action that can be bestowed in such a way. The understanding of interpassive, delegated action through the consumption of brands also makes understandable the action potential of brands as illusions without owners since the consumption of a brand, thought to infer a particular meaning, is enjoyable through the imagined beliefs of a naïve observer. However, the actual belief isn't actually held by anyone in particular. Thus, brand consumption in general can be viewed as a modern iteration of the magical ritual in Pfaller's sense of the word.

Limitations

Our approach, based on the work of Pfaller and Žižek, faces many of the issues that come with adopting a psychoanalytic approach. For example, it 'is difficult to assimilate within the theoretical and methodological framework of organization and management research due to the specificity of Freud's concept of the unconscious, according to which an individual never really knows what he says or does' (Halton, 1994, in Arnaud, 2012: 1122). Claiming to possess knowledge of consumer motives is difficult if not impossible, almost regardless of theoretical perspective. By constructing idealized consumer types, we of course did not resolve this issue. But again we emphasize that our distinction is a theoretical simplification of consumer motivation used in order to highlight the universal appeal of ethical brands based on a pleasure or enjoyment surplus. The consumer types are based on assumptions that are commonly made about consumers and, if nothing else, are at least attitudes that the authors of this paper are familiar with and have themselves experienced.

When explaining the complex and paradoxical nature of interpassive enjoyment several examples were given, mostly taken from the works of Pfaller and Žižek. Taken alone these examples can be viewed as problematic and can easily be criticized. Ultimately, this difficulty is linked to problems of psychoanalytic theorizing. Following Glynos (2010: 14), the question of whether 'psychoanalysis is true' and whether we are 'true to psychoanalysis' might be asked here as well. However, this has not stopped psychoanalysis from being recently applied to social and cultural phenomena (Glynos, 2010). Still, acknowledging the problems of psychoanalysis, we aim to illustrate the counterintuitive concepts by referencing these different analogies in the hope that this will enable the reader to get a better understanding of nature of interpassive enjoyment.

Given the problems of the psychoanalytic approach, Arnaud (2012) emphasizes that an inclusion of psychoanalytic work requires the reworking of analytical concepts. Facing similar problems with the complex and, at times, paradoxical description Pfaller offers us when discussing the experience of thievish joy, we are attempting to rework his concept in the context of brand consumption. While by doing so we run the risk of simplifying or misinterpreting Pfaller's conceptual ideas (and as we discuss later, some developments in Pfaller's work suggest that we may have done this) we hope that our psychoanalytically derived concept offers a fruitful avenue for reflection that contributes to the understanding of the 'as if'-moments of ethical brand consumption in particular and to brand consumption in general. As Arnaud (2012: 1124) hoped for organization studies, we hope to contribute to an alternative language; offering 'another type of

meaning', a 'different form of rational behavior' and a methodological focus on the unsaid and on ignorance.

Our argument, based on the presented ideas of interpassivity and illusions without owners, resembles the arguments made by Fleming and Spicer (2003; 2005) on the possibility of transferring beliefs onto objects. However, their discussion of cynical distance as ideological had a more political impetus when criticizing cynicism as stabilizing the status quo. While organizational scholars analyze these effects in terms of control and organizational power, such as Muhr and Pedersen's (2010) application of interpassivity on social media usage, we focus on their role in daily consumption. If one follows Pfaller's basic argument on the form and function of illusions without owners in capitalistic cultures, brands appear to be an appropriate avenue by which to introduce his argument into business studies.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the argument that the consumption of symbols, in this case brands, is not only a practice of identity formation and communication through consumption (Belk, 1988; Arvidsson, 2005) but also interpassive delegation (Pfaller, 2002). While it may be the case that we 'gain pleasure from responding to what we consider to be our moral obligations' (Szmigin et al., 2007: 401), we propose that the nature of the response determines the source of the pleasure derived. By analyzing ethical brands through the lens of hedonistic consumption and by employing theoretical consumer types, we argue that even a cynical consumer, i.e., a consumer who does not believe in the message of ethical brands, can derive a special kind of enjoyment, i.e., *diebische Freude*/thievish joy, from ethical brand consumption. While the cynic may see ethical brands as political pseudo-action via the proxy of consumption and as essentially disarming resistance by converting it into behavior that supports the very system it was meant to change, she can still partake in ethical consumption and, through interpassivity, delegate the ethical responsibility as well as the belief in this responsibility. For the cynic, these brands' status as vehicles for positive change can be described as an *illusion without an owner*. The notion of an interpassive act of delegation can provide an explanation for the potentially universal appeal of ethical brands. Even the cynical consumer can experience thievish joy from having been able to escape the illusion as well as her responsibility, as she is behaving as if she believes.

We hope that this alternative perspective on ethical brands will inform future discussions on consumption theory and inspire future research pertaining to the

understanding of brands. It seems that interpassivity can easily be applied to brand consumption in general and that a theory of brands as illusions without owners might offer fruitful insights into consumer behavior. Finally, there seems to be an interesting conflict with Pfaller's (2008) diagnosis of our times as narcissistic and coined by appropriation (Aneignung) and subjectification. It seems strange that we see interpassivity present in mainstream brand consumption when Pfaller has claimed that interpassive enjoyment is responded to in a progressively more hostile manner (with 'ressentiment'). One could argue that such a shift of ritualized action into everyday phenomena supports Pfaller's idea that in our current societies this dimension of enjoyment is forgotten and not in line with the overall quest for authentic behavior. However, brand consumption seems a much more dominant behavior than bibliomania, for example. This tension between Pfaller's diagnosis and brands as a potential interpassive medium offers a starting point for future engagement with Pfaller's work. For example, one wonders if brands paradoxically are a tool to resist a pressure of appropriation or if perhaps Pfaller's diagnosis needs to be reformulated.

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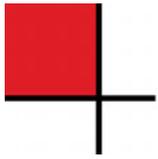
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The elite ethic of fiduciarity: The heraldry of the Jack Wills brand*

Daniel Smith

abstract

The Jack Wills brand claims to be *Outfitters to the Gentry*. This article argues that Jack Wills' marketing ethos institutes a means to achieve this promise. This promise is investigated as instituting a form of heraldry through its corporate program of Seasonnaires and monopolising the spaces and symbols of elite social standing for their branded products. Heraldry is concerned with making the symbols of the peers of the realm distinctive and within an exclusive set. I call this enterprise 'fiduciary' as the heralds are persons trusted to preserve the symbols' sanctity. Overall I claim that the Jack Wills brand seeks this through its corporate program. Imitation-heraldry is a means to create the value of the brand as 'fiduciary value', community trust in the products and its worth. The ethic and politics that accompany the brand-ethos is concerned with making the name 'Jack Wills' come to stand as an eponymous character that embodies the social actions and unity of the social group the brand outfits. Jack Wills institutes an ethical economy that allocates the branded goods to those within the Seasonnaire economy of distribution, an economy that centres upon upholding fiduciary value.

Introduction

In the award winning British comedy-drama about university students, *Fresh Meat*, the character of JP is the victim of 'the worst kind of racism: money racism!' when his house-mates refuse to let his old-school friend Giles move into

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their shared house. They claim he's too posh and they 'don't want another JP' to which he exclaims: 'Are you seriously saying that something I want isn't going to happen *because of you*'. These ironically conceived comments are ones often attributed to the archetypical public-school, upper-middle class type that JP portrays – a self-assertive, privileged and entitled 'posh kid'. To British student audiences, JP's remarks, manner and views can all be distilled in the name that adorns his clothing, 'Jack Wills'. Jack Wills is the name of a brand name corporation yet is often rendered an imaginary person that encapsulates a character-type the named clothing materialises. To see JP or his old school-friend, Ralph, in his pink Jack Wills jumper may be a trivial occurrence [Fig. 1]. For 'Jack Wills', these colours and logos have deeper significance. Their outward display lets other students know where Ralph comes from, what he's like, even how to act toward him. That the pink Jack Wills jumper Ralph wears allows other people to recognise him as 'a toff' or 'posh' is not merely a result of how people conflate the brand name with a social personality but derives from the cultural significance of Jack Wills.



Figure 1 Ralph on British comedy-drama, *Fresh Meat* (2012) www.channel4.com/4od (accessed: 30th Oct 2012)

This article argues that Jack Wills seek to use branding as a form of heraldry. With *Outfitters to the Gentry* as Jack Wills Ltd.'s brand-slogan, they conjure up a herald-like image for themselves. Heraldry is a central marker of social distinction in upper-class modes of group identification, its role being 'to distinguish a person by means of symbols clearly recognisable' (Woods-

Woollaston, 1960: 1) as these symbols refer to descent from an ancestor who founded a lineage that restricted the use or display of these symbols. By viewing the use of branding devices – logos, slogans, colours, names and icons – as homologies to the stylistic devices of heraldry – termed field, motto, tinctures, title and charge – I argue that Jack Wills Ltd.’s brand symbols strive to act as heraldic markers of social station.

Following Adam Arvidsson’s (2013) suggestion that brand name personages rest upon an *ethos* in the Aristotelian sense of character disposition, ‘Jack Wills’ will be treated here as an (imaginary) ancestor of the British gentry. Arvidsson argues that brand name personages develop an ‘excellence of character’ whose affective qualities support ‘the ability of a brand to provide a particular consumer experience’ (2013: 377). The ‘consumer experience’ that the Jack Wills corporation seeks to achieve is that of its named-commodities having a role much akin to heraldry in British society. Jack Wills Ltd. act *as-if* they were a herald in their marketing devices and brand image. Jack Wills Ltd. do so in order to foster the reputation of ‘Jack Wills’, the imaginary character, as an (imaginary) ancestor of the British gentry that the corporation seeks to outfit. Branding, as surrogate heraldry, deals with the same concern of keeping elites in elite clothing and non-elites out of elite cloth. Such a perspective is utilised to demonstrate that heraldic-branding has the unintended consequences of strengthening and consolidating the social group that Jack Wills Ltd. outfit. The term gentry is used *very* loosely. Historically, gentry is accompanied by the prefix landed. The landed gentry were an intermediate group of landowners between the middle class and the aristocracy. The term gentry lingers on as a term for this intermediate class as historians and gentry persons in British society have argued in greater depth (Nicholson, 2011; Coss, 2003; Heal and Holmes, 1995). Jack Wills’ gentry designation is used to intimate the character excellences that Jack Wills Ltd. finds in its core-customer. Heraldry is the ethos that is most apt to this marketing strategy and its sociological consequences.

The question I pose is: *how is this gentry designation achieved? How does a network of young elite arise through branding practices?* As the ethics of character espoused by gentry persons (e.g. Ralph above) are manifest in their outward appearances, I argue that the corporation actively seek to maintain the sanctity of these clothing symbols as indicative of elite social standing. The equity value of the brand is only retained if the symbols of social station retain their elite, networked association. This social goal was once the concern of heralds appointed by kings (Fox-Davies, 1969; Wagner, 1957) and, mirroring this in brand ethos, the perspective of heraldry will help us shed light on the Jack Wills brand. As I view them, heralds are *fiduciary* persons, a technical term for those in whom the monarch placed trust; as third party preservers of his peers. Heraldry have an

obligation to achieve fiduciarity, the trust of their patrimonial masters (monarchs) in their role of surveying the monarch's peers and gaining peer loyalty. I shall argue that this fiduciary trust is what Jack Wills Ltd. seek to achieve for their imaginary ancestor 'Jack Wills'; to preserve 'his' products with a public confidence that the promises made by the brand – to be *Outfitters to the Gentry* – is being kept to. I use the term fiduciarity to evoke the heraldic concern with the sanctity of material emblems; the goal of the herald is 'fiduciarity'. By analysing Jack Wills Ltd.'s branding devices and strategies, I argue that the *ethos* of heraldry establishes the value of the Jack Wills brand in equity terms.

As a contribution to this special issue on 'The Ethics of the Brand', I suggest that the arcane notion that virtue of character is synonymous with the economic value of material emblems may apply to the Jack Wills brand. I see this as a contribution to Arvidsson's 'ethical economy' (2008; 2013; Arvidsson et. al., 2008). Firstly I position heraldry within in the brand literature. Subsequently, I outline the *politics* of such an ethical economy by drawing upon my field research and some of its findings. The link between the ethics and politics of the brand is sought through Aristotle, as in Arvidsson's ethical economy (2013; Arvidsson et. al., 2008). Aristotle's *Ethics* (2002) ends by stating the next stage of inquiring is *Politics* (1999) and these two works were the intellectual basis for Karl Polanyi's (1957) notion of an embedded economy. I argue that Jack Wills Ltd. acting as a herald is a political concern with upholding the character ethos of 'Jack Wills'. Heraldry is a device utilised in an embedded economy, i.e. an economy where distribution of articles of wealth go hand in hand with the upholding of status bound character virtues (Polanyi, 1957; Finley, 1973; Castoriadis, 1978). The decisions about 'who gets what' (distributive justice) for the corporation Jack Wills Ltd., (which we are accustomed to calling 'marketing devices'), forms the political side of the brand and goes hand in hand with the ethical character of 'Jack Wills persons'. My empirical illustrations come from ethnographic fieldwork (see methodology below) following the brand's promotional and lifestyle events. My primary informants were members of Jack Wills' promotional team, 'Seasonnaires', and the patronised university societies of the brand. I demonstrate that these promotional activities are as much a means of distributing branded goods as they are about the celebrating the lifestyles of the persons gaining the goods.

Ethical branding: Jack Wills and heraldry in brand literature

Peter Williams, founder and CEO of Jack Wills, created the brand in 1999 at the young age of 23. After visiting Salcombe, an up-market holiday town on the Devon coast, Peter conjured up the idea for a premium brand that encapsulated

the hedonism of university and romanticised the care-free holidaying that one associates with a leisured life of inherited wealth. Peter named his brand ‘Jack Wills’ after his grandfather John Williams. Changing John to its old-English nickname ‘Jack’ and shortening ‘Williams’ to ‘Wills’ (more gentrified because of its association with the Wills family in the British peerage), Peter Williams created his own (imaginary) ancestor. With no money for advertising, Peter convinced the local public-school holidaymakers in Salcombe to wear his (imaginary ancestor’s) eponymous clothing as gifts of favour. Through these gifts, he outfitted them in his (imaginary) ancestor’s household coat. This was the beginning of the central mandate that Peter Williams established for ‘Jack Wills’:

If you’re not our target customer, *we actively want you to never have heard of us...* What we want to do is build authentic, grassroots locations and lifestyle specific relations with our target customers. (Williams, 2011, emphasis added)

And:

My aspiration is that we hide from everybody. It doesn’t feel comfortable being in the public domain. ...We’re a niche premium brand. We have no interest in the mass. We’re all about viral. I want the brand to be discovered. (Williams, in Greene, 2011)

These statements demonstrate a heraldry logic because the mandate is to outfit only those who adequately recognize ‘Jack Wills’ as a personage worthy of integrating themselves with.

Those grassroots locations and lifestyle specific relations are where ‘Jack Wills’ wishes to be acknowledged as *the* outfitter and the brand demonstrates its fidelity to this end by establishing a networked series of persons in these communal spaces. These location specific relations take place in small upmarket sites that are surveyed by Seasonnaires. Seasonnaires are ‘the mouthpieces of the brand... their job for the summer is to make friends, throw parties and be in the right places seeding the brand. They never sell directly – that would piss people off’ (Williams, in Walsh, 2012). The heraldic logic of Jack Wills Ltd. is hinted at, as the Seasonnaires are heralds-of-arms announcing the arrival and messages of the corporate body. Described as mouthpieces, the Seasonnaires become messengers of ‘Jack Wills’ and divvy out ‘his’ goods as gifts. They are not sold, for heraldic insignia is something *inherited*. As one Seasonnaire remarked during the giving out of free apparel on a skiing trip:

That’s what we’re into – we’re into real friendships with people, like the people we’ve met here. We’ve got our i-pads for people’s numbers and twitter so we can just send them a text, tell them what we’re up to and say come along. We’re not trying to just sell people clothes. (Fieldnotes)

The distribution of clothing is the gift that consolidates a group of networked persons through friendships in the vicinity of a life-style practice¹.

Consolidating the group is crucial to the brand's image in terms of value of products and equity of the brand. Heraldry achieves value/equity through eponymous insignia – notably 'household coats' where the names of families are written onto ancestral valuables (Stallybrass, 2002). While farfetched, I want to suggest the use of eponymous naming in brand corporations follows a similar logic to heraldic inheritances and its logic of social distinction predicated upon such inheritances. One may trace this in the brand literature. Certain contributions to the literature draw upon how heraldry is both patrimonial domination and economic standing.

In this guise, Mazzarella (2003a; 2003b) argues that brands draw upon connotations of an idealised world and that this obliges persons to inhabit these imagined universes in product use. Idealised worlds express and contextualise aspirations and enact identity in the heraldic guise of eponymous obligation: 'visual signs (logos, trademarks) operate like nothing so much as royal insignia: consumers who wear these signs on their bodies are thus literally incorporated as loyal vassals' (Mazzarella, 2003a: 55). Mazzarella points out, in his case-study of EMW Mobile, 'respondents...had explained that he expected to be looked after by EMW "as a father looks after a child"' (Mazzarella, 2003a: 55). Mazzarella emphasises patrimonial domination as the father-to-child outlook is steeped in the insignia of the quasi-Royal body of the brand name².

Celia Lury (2003) makes a similar argument by stating that branded colours and graphics act as surrogates for kinship and group membership. These surrogate kin-devices function as metaphors for the longevity of 'brand' which is key to its economic prowess. Heraldic insignia branded onto bodies is indicative of the 'time' of global capitalism. As heraldry refers to traditional authority based upon custom, it seeks to make the personage under such insignia immortal. This temporal modality of immortality in brand name guise rests upon the fact that 'the durability of the brand is ... independent of the durability of the products which are its effects'. Brands, like heraldry, seek 'to displace the temporality of

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- 1 It should be pointed out for non-British readers that, unlike other European nations, the British class associated with skiing is restricted to the upper-middle and upper classes.
 - 2 Anthropologically speaking, eponymous naming identifies descent from an ancestor and obligation 'to bring the eponymous ancestor 'back to life', i.e. succeed him in responsibilities and powers" (Bourdieu, 1977: 36) and inherit economic prowess: 'the rights to land belonging to the case of sale'. (Bourdieu, 1977: 36). cf. Harold Perkin's theory of neo-feudal hierarchies in multinational capital (1996).

fashion altogether' (Lury, 2003: 393). Heraldic insignia passing down generations are the perfect analogue to the immortality that branded corporations seek for themselves, e.g. 'Est. 1776' and similar product insignia. The immortality of the brand may be linked to the patrimonial aspect of heraldry: it obliges persons to take on an eponymous character (the brand name). The name is a lingering reminder of the person who founded the corporation.

Additionally, David Hopper and Charles Vallance (2013) bring the name to the forefront in contemporary branding. Eponymy, for them, is the defining feature of the economic landscape of the twentieth and twenty-first century and they call eponymous brand-owners *The Branded Gentry* (Hopper and Vallance, 2013)³. They do so in a way which has bearing upon heraldry as concerned with both patrimonial loyalty and economic standing. Eponymous products (Dyson, Boden, Sainsbury etc.) act as marks of fidelity. Eponymy makes persons dearly responsible as the product embodies their personal values (Hopper and Vallance, 2013: 300). Yet Hopper and Vallance suggest the opposite for invented persona: 'faux personalities designed to evoke the life style of an illusory founder without any *real* person taking the gamble; names like Jack Wills...' (2013: 300, original emphasis). Hopper and Vallance underestimate 'Jack Wills' in this respect. Not only does Peter Williams state fidelity to his product as much as eponymous brand names but Williams' pseudonym brand name 'Jack Wills' follows a naming and obligation complex that *mirrors that of his stated social group, the gentry*. Gentry personages are known by the name, listed in elite surveys (e.g. specialist periodicals such as Debrett's or Burke's peerage). Gentry names carry an entire history. For example, (Lord) Julian Fellowes has the insight in his novel *Snobs* (2005) that gentry persons practice what he calls 'name-exchange': surnames come to be used as currency for those using them to mark out the 'right people'. Heraldry mirrors this as it makes the name a fetishized device that designates a character-type and series of past deeds that founded lineages via names marked upon their material valuables.

The name 'Jack Wills' having the status of an imaginary ancestor is predicated upon the sociological role that ancestors have amongst the British upper-echelons: they designate character excellences. As such, Peter Williams' stated aims of sticking so firmly to target customers in locations and authentic relationships, of friendships and word-of-mouth, demonstrates fidelity of purpose that is akin to the filial obligation that gentry persons owe to their

3 See Elizabeth Hirschman's (1990) concept of 'secular immortality': the upper-middle classes in American society seek to make a 'name' for themselves over and above expensive purchases or ventures; e.g. name capitalists such as Trump, Rockefeller, Vanderbilt or Rothschild.

ancestors. It is in this respect that a heraldic perspective on the Jack Wills brand reveals Williams' brand strategy to be an ethical stance. In Aristotle's *Ethics* (2002), we learn that all acts have an end or 'good' – the chief good is an end that is sought in-and-of-itself, not dependent upon anything else or subsumed to other ends. In the case of (pseudo)eponymous products, creating brand name commodities of superior quality/use is not the sole end of branding. Product quality, while important, is subordinate to the sole end of demonstrating the name as synonymous with the values of the corporation. The name is a fetishized device that becomes 'a direct expression of the values and beliefs of the founder' (Hopper and Vallance, 2013: 300). When one hears Apple, for example, one associates its virtues with excellences that are *not* rationalised in product use *per se*, but rather become moral ones (Arvidsson, 2013: 379). The name Jack Wills aims at name recognition similar to that described by Fellowes in *Snobs*: to be exchanged with the 'right' persons and stand for the values of that community. Heraldry is concerned is with the names of persons to be unified under recognisable symbols. This heraldic concern is found in the brand striving for the ultimate end of desired customers to personify brand values and ethos through adoption of products bearing the brand name. This corporate outlook can be elaborated with Arvidsson's 'ethical economy' (2008; 2009; 2013).

An 'ethical economy', Arvidsson (2008) argues, is one in which corporations seek fidelity to non-market principles which, ironically, create the economic prowess of the brand name. The value/equity ('profit potential') of brand name corporations, Arvidsson (2008; 2005) points out, is largely dependent upon financial markets (cf. Lash and Lury, 2007; Beil, 1993). Equity comes from the perceived trust investors have in the brand to remain solvent. Asking how this equity may be generated, Arvidsson demonstrates that it rests upon fostering a powerful attachment to the brand, a respect and sense of friendship (*philia*) for the corporate efforts. By doing so, the brand creates a network of persons associated with it and this social capital becomes embedded with the brand's promotional activity and product range. Arvidsson's empirical insights come from the service economy, and he states that bonds of *philia* and respect come from charismatic personalities – DJs, rock stars and promoters. In Jack Wills' case the Seasonnaires described above, their role as quasi-heralds – distributing the goods and message of Jack Wills Ltd. – concerns what Arvidsson sees as the central paradox of the ethical economy: it is an economy built around a series of disinterested, affective community-based ties upholding the values of a lifestyle *and* interested corporate gain (cf. Arvidsson, 2008: 333). *Philia* turns into monetary value, in short (Arvidsson, 2009: 22). In an ethical economy, brand-value is 'contingent on the ability to produce ethnically significant ties, and its currencies – networks and respects – are for all intents and purposes a measure of that ability' (Arvidsson, 2008: 344).

To sum up this review of the literature and its relation to Jack Wills, I have pointed out that in the branding practice the patrimonial domination of a named personage is written into the economic relation of selling named goods. Eponymous naming has as its core an ethical stance. The chief good is the brand name, which is synonymous with the target customer's networked sociality. Such networked sociality is the basis of sustained equity of the brand. With a brand intimately associated with the cultural values and outlook of the British upper classes, the perspective of heraldry in branding encapsulates these value criteria where a brand name may become a surrogate ancestor-name. I will now develop this argument of networked sociality through explication and elaboration of my research findings with Jack Wills.

Methodology and the embedded economy

The methodological strategy for research on the Jack Wills brand has been to 'follow the brand', a strategy developed by others (Lash and Lury, 2007: 19-21) and found in the value theory of Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986). Following the major marketing activities of the brand was a means to study their use of 'The Season', a corporate strategy which mirrored the once famous, now faltering, 'Season' of British 'upper to upper-middle class' society (e.g. Royal Ascot Races, Henley Regatta, Royal Academy Exhibition, Chelsea Flower Show, etc.) (Stanley, 1955; cf. York and Barr, 1983; York and Stewart-Liberty, 2007: 174-185). This Season was key to networking and consolidation of elite persons (Nicholson, 2011: xiii). For today's generation the method remains the same: as Peter York puts it, 'New Sloane [*sic* upper-middle class person] Networks demonstrate entirely vital Sloane family values (keeping others out)' (2007: xx). Jack Wills' Season demonstrated such a value.

It was through this ethnographic endeavour that the importance of a quasi-heraldic logic to the Jack Wills brand marketing/value-creation strategies suggested itself. The season has sociological significance in reforming this once top-of-the-pile, now reforming social group in British society. The Jack Wills brand utilises the 'life-style' activities of the upper-middle classes as its key viral marketing and the mode of distribution of its merchandise. I positioned the ethnographic fieldwork within the activities of the brand so as to operationalize and problematize this concept. The Jack Wills brand runs a 'brand strategy' which is premised upon seasonal activity so as to forego what Peter Williams calls 'the promiscuousness of advertising relationships' and instead opt 'for very deep relationships with very small numbers of customers' (Williams, 2011). With this concern for only a core, small number of persons in mind, I attended as many Jack Wills events as possible so as to investigate both the 'deep relationship

with customers' as well as to find out the internal dynamics of this policy. This was conducted through contact with societies and individuals involved with the brand's strategies but not those directly associated with the brand itself because of a privacy policy by which Jack Wills Ltd. abide (Pryia, Jack Wills, personal communication Jan. 2012). The Seasonnaires I spent time with and interviewed have now left the corporation and the Oxbridge club members I spent time with are now graduating. Also other university students I interviewed were not directly associated with the Season but experienced 'Jack Wills' as a name circulated amongst the student body, itself a talking point for the concerns of class and social standing.

Each winter/spring Jack Wills sponsor the British Universities Snowsports Council's 'Main Event' week where they play host to parties and après ski. The Main Event week was established in 2011 and, in 2012, saw an attendance of circa 1,500 university students from the UK. Each summer they put on the 'Jack Wills Varsity Polo' match, which includes matches of Cambridge against Oxford, Eton against Harrow and Harvard against Yale at the historic and prestigious Guards Polo Club in Windsor Great Park (Berkshire). This event is a restoration of the Varsity polo match between Oxford and Cambridge dating back to c.1879 and is the biggest Jack Wills event. It began in 2007 with an attendance of c.700-1,000 and in 2010 attracted 7,000-8,000 in 2010 attendees (Jack Wills Varsity Programme, 2012; Symle Creative, 2010). Additionally the Jack Wills brand provides a 'Summer Seasonnaire' program where a series of university students are hired by the brand to live in affluent seaside towns (Rock in Cornwall, Salcombe in Devon, Abersoch in North Wales, Burnham Market in Suffolk and Alderburgh in Norfolk) and to put on beach parties, store parties and partake in life-style activities (notably, boating, fishing, sunbathing). They would also promotionally film and photograph the events with other seasonal employees, i.e. those working in local stores and hang outs (bars) or as boating instructors. Again, the attendance here is confined to a core group of around 20-30 persons and 2 Seasonnaires with intermittent members who spend 2/3 weeks on holiday but are connected to Seasonnaires through school or university. Jack Wills uses this institutional and locale nexus explicitly to outfit its target customer, these institutions/locale being exclusive and age-based. As Peter Williams states: 'We want to pick you up as a late teen and then you just naturally grow out of the brand' (Williams, 2011).

This ethnographic data reveals the central finding: the brand creates an *ad hoc* promotional team through granting *free clothing* to those being *be-friended*, itself generating deep, *lasting social ties in these exclusive locales*. As an ex-Seasonnaire explained:

We would kit them out in as much free clothing as they wanted, really; and they could give some to their friends. The idea was to make it a genuine relationship. ... Both were really well looked after and the hope was, in return, they'd love the brand or at least our relationship and at least do it for the brand. ... And, you know, some of them are still really good friends – in fact one of the Seasonnaires I stayed with is visiting right now, we've kept in touch. I think while they may have moved away from Jack Wills, they loved the time.

In line with that, during the seasonal activities I attended, the clothes were spoken of not in terms of 'for how much?' or 'commodities for sale': instead they were called 'stash', a term used by university students for society products, and 'for free'. A *genuine* relationship is, therefore, a *non-commodity exchange* relationship. This became clear when one Rock informant stated:

There are two sides to Jack Wills. There's the clothes and then there's the lifestyle. ... I have thought a bit about it, after spending the summer there and the status of Jack Wills on campus as, you know, very public school and that sort of thing.

After spending the summer engaged in lifestyle activities, which she had done for most her adolescence, this informant along with others all agreed that the friendships made during the season became much more paramount. In consequence, buying the clothes was a residual concern and demonstrated less connection with life-style networks. In these excerpts we see the emphasis upon friendships and the development therein of an elite network of persons who, through *ad hoc* unpaid work of promotional activity for a brand name, itself develops a series of locale-based group associated with the brand name. They not only promote the brand name but themselves come to embody the characteristics that are valued in that name. The brand's promotional imagery is a refracted mirror image of those living the lifestyle of the gentry. This lifestyle is not merely evoked in imagery, it is actively lived and conducted via relations in a restricted (but, indeed, transatlantic) group of elite personages.

Equity value for the Jack Wills brand (which I call 'fiduciary value') utilises the season as an embedded economy (Polanyi, 1957) which has as its sole aim the forging of an image – mediated through film, photography and social media (Facebook, Twitter) documentation of the lifestyle practices. As brand theorists demonstrate, brand-equity rests upon creating an image based around a common, shared lifestyle (Arvidsson, 2005; Beil, 1993; McCracken, 1993) but what I am demonstrating here is that this brand-image is manifest *in the process of forging an elite group that is marked off against the average (non-elite) 'consumer'* in an embedded economy. Embedded economies, according to Polanyi's (1957) classic account drawn from a re-reading of Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*, are ones where distribution of valuables are 'embedded in non-economic institutions' and economic allocation of resources are distributed through such institutions, so

much so that ‘the term ‘economic life’ would here have no obvious meaning’ (Polanyi, 1957: 70). In our case, the embedded allocation of branded goods does not seem economic because the allocation of branded goods occurs by means of (a) membership to a private ‘society’ – polo society, skiing club, university club / fraternity / society, holiday enclaves whose population consists of high-income second home ownership – and (b) the branded goods come either heavily discounted or ‘free of charge’, or are mandatory for entry and participation. Hence, I conceive of this as heraldry in this respect.

The end of the Seasonnaires, as acting heralds in the distribution of branded apparel to persons with a specific lifestyle has the end of fiduciarity. Fiduciary value and fiduciarity (aiming for it) are ends that act to secure the fidelity of a (seemingly) ‘naturalised’ hierarchy of persons in the stations of British society. As one British herald pointed out, heraldry works on a 17th century aphorism: ‘things more excellent than any symbol are expressed through symbols’ (Woods-Woollaston, 1960: 16). The central point is that social worth is conflated with material symbols and the duty of the herald is to act as a fiduciary entity, i.e. to guarantee their legitimacy and authenticity and to provide trust to the recipients of armoires. The category of fiduciarity is a subordinate end to the higher good of maintaining the excellences of persons loyal to a patrimonial authority (the imaginary figure ‘Jack Wills’). From the perspective of Aristotelian ethics, the distribution of branded goods to those who embody gentry’ characteristics is a *political* issue. The brand is identified with a character-virtue – ‘gentry’ – that is founded in the life-style enclaves within which the brand is embedded. Maintaining this character virtue, which is attributed through material symbols, requires a notion of ‘who gets what’ (distributive justice), the correct handling of which gives fiduciary value to branded products.

For Aristotle (1995; 2002), what is just is how the person described as just contributes to the flourishing of the community through their virtues⁴. As such, heraldry seeks fiduciarity precisely because this end is one that serves the *higher end* of the communal solidarity of those who personify the Jack Wills brand name. The development of an embedded economy is the political end of fiduciary value for the products. Fiduciary value may be conceived as the professionalization of ostensibly marketised principles of distribution of goods. As Harold Perkins noted of professions,

they existed to provide services which were esoteric, evanescent and *fiduciary* – beyond the knowledge of the laity, not ... productive of concrete objects, and thus having to be taken on trust – they could not accept a market valuation of their skill

4 The term used by Aristotle is ‘eudaemonia’, one that may be translated as ‘happiness’, ‘human flourishing’ or ‘welfare’.

but demanded that society should accept their own valuation... (Perkins, 1989: 16, emphasis added)

In contrast to market economics of supply and demand, Jack Wills Ltd. uses the embedded economy to maintain the sanctity of their elite symbols. Fiduciary value sits upon the assumption that the brand knows best. Heraldry concerns brand symbols that rest upon an aristocratic notion of virtue: only 'the few' or 'best' (*aristo*) are worthy of sustaining their meaningful associations with gentry characteristics.

Heraldry and the end of fiduciarity

In this section I analyse the heraldry aspects of the embedded economy by drawing upon my fieldwork as an ethnographic illustration of the use of heraldry-like practices in branding so as to consolidate the social group around clearly recognisable symbols of elite standing. By first suggesting a homology between the design principles of branding and the artistic devices of heraldry, I then demonstrate with ethnographic data the principles of distribution according to the virtues of gentry, virtues connoted through branding symbolism.

On the surface, brands have a similar purpose to heraldry. Both brands and heraldry are concerned with forging difference from other brands/coats of arms by means of design devices. As Scott Lash (2007: 7) observes, brands operate via 'difference' as no brand is equivalent to another. While products – e.g. polo shirts – may be similar in tangible, physical qualities, the brand qualities – logo, colour, slogan etc. – are particular to the brand. The principle purpose of branding, therefore, is to create a product that is self-sufficient and not subordinate to its individual commodities. Similarly, British heraldry authority, Fox-Davies (1969), has argued that heraldry is the 'science' of 'differencing' armours. The sole purpose being that the symbols become ends to venerate the bearer. While others suggest that heraldry arose for the practical purpose of distinguishing persons in battle, the true purpose is nothing more than what Fox-Davies (1969: 16) called 'vanity'. Vanity was the prime driver in this science of differencing arms as 'the son would naturally take pride in upholding the fame which had clustered round the pictured signs and emblems under which his father had warred' (Fox-Davies, 1969: 17). In this vein of symbols for their own sake, brand devices (slogans, logos, colours, names) come to figure as analogues (in aesthetic form and sociological function) to heraldic devices (of mottos, charges, tinctures, titles and 'houses', respectively). In Table 1, I merely wish to illustrate how the devices used by heraldry to difference arms are mirrored in the devices used by brand corporations.

Heraldry	Brand	Jack Wills
Field	Logo	Pheasant in top and tails with walking stick
Motto	Slogan	'Outfitters to the Gentry', 'Fabulously British'
Tinctures	Colours	Public school colours
Charge	Icon	Pheasant

Table 1: The homologies between heraldry and branding

What makes Jack Wills Ltd.'s approach different to branding *per se* is that of its embedded position in elite, gentrified institutions. Within the brand literature, we notice how the distribution of goods is embedded in social processes whereby brand values are celebrated, notably lifestyle events (Moor, 2007: 49f; Arvidsson, 2013: 379) or sponsorship which creates notions of possession to alienable commodities through fictional characters or celebrities (Newell, 2013; McCracken, 2005). Jack Wills' use of branding to imitate the characteristics of heraldry comes from their desire to have their products signify an unbroken link from British society's aristocratic past. This aristocratic past is inherited, by the target customer, in the present. This historical link is evoked to create an idea of their target customer's imaginative, largely fictional, descent from this past. I will now outline this using the categories of name, logo and colours.

Names

The heraldic significance of names has been alluded to already. The ancestor name that exists in the pages of history has a laudable reputation and fame to it. The continued use of the name signifies *descent* from the person who bears the name and imitation of the excellence of reputation it carries. 'Jack Wills' seeks such an association; those bearing the name bring the ancestor's qualities 'back to life' in the present. In Jack Wills Ltd.'s case, the brand name *actively sought this purpose*. As one Seasonnaire informed me:

We were all told to tell a story that it was Pete's granddad: John Williams shorted to Jack Wills. ... I always thought it was [true] but I have heard some people say it's not. Perhaps his granddad was named Jack Williams, I don't know. I can't remember the exact time that I heard rumours that it wasn't true but the story seemed pretty simple enough to be real. It's a pretty harmless story. I guess I'll never really know, unless I do some family tree digging.

The story is simple, and despite rumours of its falsity, the central sociological fact is that the corporation is creating a surrogate ancestor for those who bear the name. The Seasonnaires, by re-telling this story, give it credence and it is *their lifestyle and brand image* that make plausible this imaginary ancestor that embodies the characteristics of gentry. The Seasonnaires' goal, when telling this story, is to be associated with the gentry character, for as they tell the story *they themselves are associated with such a social-cultural ideal of names as designating character virtues*. One ironic example of this is a satirical hip-hop song performed by spoof rapper MC Tarquinius, a comic grotesque whose song 'Jack Wills' disparages the name:

So you're heading out to uni, but you can't look whack,
 Let me introduce you to my friend, his name is Jack
 Not Jack Daniels with his whisky, Or Jack Frost with his chills,
 But that suave mother fucker, that's my boy Jack Wills

... Jack Wills got you covered, from your tip to your toe
 If you wanna hit the lake, take your boat for a row,
 Or just kick it with your homies sipping vintage Bordeaux
 Jack Wills is the name that you all will soon know



Figure 2 Mc Tarquinius – Jack Wills
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rO6nWsgZa7U>

In this satirical take on the brand, the intention of which is to undermine the corporation and its ethos, the song itself details the character excellence that *supports* the notion of an imaginary person. It does so by focusing not only upon the clothing (in the video) but also the virtues or cultural activities (in the lyrics) that the name intimates: notably punting, rowing or drinking of fine wines. The brand name has become indicative of the whole notion of persons and

encompasses their whole life, a branded life (cf. Land and Taylor, 2010: 407). 'Jack Wills' becomes a personage as the name is further used to indicate characteristics of persons. One informant, whose cousin was involved in the Jack Wills Seasonnaire program, described her as a 'Jack Wills girl'. When I asked her what she meant, she replied:

ha, um, I guess it's the whole, you wear the clothes, but then you have the attitude to go with it; like wearing the clothes, kind of outdoorsyish, maybe. ... horrible to say but I guess it's that you think you're better than everyone because of the way you dress, little model type ... Jack Wills, model girl.

From this respondent's observation about 'outdoorsy' personality, one infers 'countryside' as associated with the British gentry and the use of the term 'model' signifies the *ideal and yet distinctly perfected 'Jack Wills'*, to which people immediately refer. Such use of the name is crucial to the qualities of the character that it carries. As one former University of Durham student stated:

you kind automatically think, they're wearing Jack Wills, they went to public school' and sometimes you meet people and you always associate that brand with a bit of snobbery and people always looking down on other people and I can see why people think that...

Such a notion of assumed social elitism was evident not only to this informant at Durham but especially to those at Oxford University. During an interview, a Varsity polo player from Oxford University stated: 'If I buy a shirt from Ede and Ravenscroft [17th century shirt makers in Oxford] people wouldn't care or know about it but if I buy a similar one from Jack Wills, I'm a dickhead toff!' That the name 'Jack Wills' indicates pejorative characteristics imitates a key aspect of heraldic naming, the name recalls the fame of the ancestor; most notably, elite status. Despite this name belonging to a fictional person, these interviewee excerpts (taken from the locales that Jack Wills Ltd. seeks to monopolise for its brand-image) themselves demonstrate a surrogate kinship association. This is what Sahlins (2011) calls 'mutuality of being'; despite each person being different, the brand name is utilised to designate generic characteristics that give credence to the heraldic significance of the ancestor's name.

The brand name embodying the characteristics of a gentry personage 'Jack Wills' is an aspect of fiduciary concern for only persons who also embody these characteristics deserve this name as their pseudonym. The brand name intimates snobbery, elitism or upper-class tastes but, from the perspective of the brand, which seeks out characteristics for an imaginary person, this is *precisely the point*. If persons *not* bearing these character virtues begin to bear the name, literally through wearing the clothing, the *name is defamed and devalued*.

Logos as Charges

In the case of logos, which make tangible the intangible qualities of the brand (Lury, 2004: 74), we see an extension of the same problem as in the case of the name. One means of prohibiting persons, who do not have the characteristics of the name buying the clothing, is to restrict store location and advertising. This is precisely what Jack Wills Ltd. have initiated (Williams, 2011). A further means is to embed the logo in institutions whose primary role is not commercial but rather unified around other ends. Since Jack Wills Ltd. sponsor and patronise university societies, the wearing of Jack Wills clothing becomes mandatory for membership of these societies. The societies Jack Wills patronises are Oxbridge polo and rugby clubs and the elite sports clubs of St. Vincents (Oxford) and Hawks (Cambridge). Entrance into these clubs requires adoption of Jack Wills clothing in order to fulfil one's role within them: to play polo for Oxbridge requires wearing jerseys that bear the Jack Wills logo; to be granted membership to St. Vincents or the Hawks clubs requires the adoption of blazers that signify membership to these clubs, blazers made by Jack Wills Ltd. and embroidered with the Jack Wills' logo (as an equivalent to a heraldic charge).

In heraldic terminology, the right to wear these garments are part of the prerogatives of membership to the house that bears these emblems. By embedding themselves within the Oxbridge system of clubs and societies, Jack Wills Ltd create for themselves the same association of honour that is associated with entrance into these restricted, elite private clubs. To play on the Varsity polo team at the historic Varsity Polo (c.1879) is a triumph of polo prowess *and* an honour of historic significance. To enter St. Vincents or the Hawks Club is a triumph of sporting ability in gaining what is known as 'blues', colours awarded on sporting merit. Achieving these two feats brings with them the honour of donning the Jack Wills' logo on exclusive garments. As a consequence, the logo signifies the same honourable qualities.

In the allocation of the logo to persons in these elite institutions, distribution becomes an honour of membership and distribution is the prerogative of the elite club. The design of the Jack Wills logo (pheasant), which imitates the heraldic designs of animals depicted on the elite, ancient societies has the effect of establishing the brand corporation as akin to these ancient institutions (even though it was established in the recent past) [Table 2]. The Jack Wills logo imitates the designs of animals of on heraldic coats of arms. The design is crucial to signifying association with the cultural milieu of heraldry in British society purely in visual terms. Heraldic animals are depicted in stances dubbed 'attitudes' and a limited number of stances are available: e.g. Volant, Vigilant, Rampant etc. These attitudes have a stylistic rationale: Jack Wills' logo imitating

the animal (pheasant) in attitudes is a device that seeks to achieve a sense of culturally ‘belonging’ to the elite institutions it patrons and embeds the distribution of its garments as honours of membership. In this way, the brand logo is more a heraldic charge, sociologically speaking, than a commercially ‘bought’ logo. The process has fiduciaity as its end, since the stylistic choice is an end undertaken to symbolise the higher, immaterial end of the honours it grants the wearer.

House / Elite club	Prerogative / ‘stylistic attitude’	Charge /Logo
Cambridge university	Coat of Arms	
Cambridge Polo	Lion Rampant	
Hawks Club	Hawk-Volant	
Jack Wills patronage	Pheasant Vigilant	

Table 2: Elite club (‘house’) and heraldic style (‘prerogative’) and logo (‘charge’)



Figure 3: Cambridge Hawks Club, c. 2012: <http://lookatmyfuckingredtrousers.blogspot.co.uk/> (NB: Hawks blue blazers' manufactured by Jack Wills)



Figure 4 Jack Wills | Oxford and Cambridge Varsity Rugby | Formal Club blazers: <http://vimeo.com/37189897>

Colours

Colour follows on from the honours systems of elite club membership. Owing to their origins in Salcombe, the Devon seaside town that boasts a seasonal influx of public school holidaymakers, and also to their marketing policy of gifting public school head boys and girls hoodies (Goodman, 2009), it is no surprise that Jack Wills Ltd. uses the public school house-colours [Table 3].

The public school colour system is a derived honour system from the heraldic tradition: the coats of arms of the schools derive from the founders or royal patrons (e.g. Eton’s coat of arms mirrors that of the House of Lancaster as its founder was Henry VI). As sociologists and historians recognise, British public schools are key sites for the consolidation of elite membership and perpetuation of the gentry’s traditions (Weiner, 1980: 10ff; Hartmann, 2007: 61ff).

Stylistically, heraldry is concerned with ‘proper’ colours, ones that must not overlap or mix: the heraldic colours are red (gules), blue (azure), sable (black), vert (green), purpure (purple) and argent (white/silver) (Woollaston, 1960: 6). On an aesthetic level, the colours system of the nine top British public schools (‘The Clarendon Nine’) demonstrates how the public school system utilises the heraldic colours of red, blue, green, black, white and purple (maroon) to perpetuate this sociological scheme of honour through colour codes. Jack Wills’ imitation of these heraldic colours comes from the same concern with being ‘Outfitters to the Gentry’. A historic concern for these ‘proper’ colours is also evident in their choice of colour schemes. But along with logos, the use of colours aims at the same restricted circulation of colours so as to use them as honorific devices.

‘Clarendon’ Schools	School Colours	Jack Wills items with same colour scheme (c. 2010) (one example of each)
Eton	Blue	Forstal Rugby
Winchester	Blue, Brown, Red	Nye Nevis Shirt (partial match)
Westminster	Pink	Hinckley Oxford Shirt
Charterhouse	Pink, Blue, Maroon	Ibberton Striped Rugby
St. Paul’s	Black, White	Castleton Rugby
Merchant Taylors	Black, White	Castleton Rugby
Harrow	Blue, White	Yateley Rugby
Rugby	Blue, White, Green	Crakehill Rugby
Shrewsbury	Blue, White	Forstry Rugby

Table 3: Clarendon school colours and Jack Wills clothes



Figure 5: Jack Wills Varsity Polo, Guards Polo Club, June 2012 (photo by author)



Figure 6 Etonian leads his horse out onto Guards Polo club for the Varsity Match, 2012 (source: www.jackwills.com)



Figure 7 'Look at my red trousers' - Jack Wills Varsity Polo, June 2012 (photo by author)



Figure 8 Cordings/Jack Wills 'dandy coloured cords' – from: www.jackwills.com

With the colours being used as honorific devices, the distribution of Jack Wills clothing is *by implication* the distribution of elite colours – that is, colours which are designated for elite persons. The lifestyle events – as Figures 5-7 show – demand the adoption of these colour schemes as appropriate attire and their distribution at key lifestyle enclaves is bound up with the distribution of free clothing to those befriended by the Seasonnaires. In the granting of free clothing, the Seasonnaire are *also* gifting the honour of colour wearing. These colour schemes, distributed at key localities, are a unifying symbol of membership to a social group. The colours are intimately related to a gentry tradition from heraldry, to public schools and *finally* to Jack Wills; they are not corporate colours (Coca-Cola red or Pepsi blue) but *gentry colours* referring to the social group itself.

Take the Season. The summer time saw sunglasses and t-shirts handed out to those who assisted in the marketing activities; the sunglasses especially were adopted with zeal as the activities of boating and days spent on the beach required them but they also had a heraldic significance as the colour differed with locality, localities which were in competition with each other to put on the best summer program. As such the colours of the locality utilised heraldic colours for the 'stash' (sunglasses) in the competitive drive: Rock was green, Salcombe was blue, Alderburgh was red, Burnham Market was maroon/purple and Abersoch was pink [Fig. 9]. Colour becomes an oblique device that brings together schools/universities in Varsity and localities together in a unified way as the colour is the common entity in elite localities dotted around in the UK.



Figure 9 Jack Wills Summer 2012: the heraldic use of colour for competition between seasonal activities

Moor (2003) has recently argued that brand promotion is an extending/embedding of itself within spatial patterns of everyday life. Promotion provides not an enticement of purchase but ‘a remembering of the event’ (2003: 50). The colours are used to recall the summer season but *also* links into the brand’s concern with fiduciarity. As the colours-schemes refer *back in time* to the British ancestors who founded them in aristocratic houses, elite schools and universities, they also project a notion of redeeming these traditions through involvement in the activities in the present. In so doing, colour acts an oblique symbol of alliance between groups to marshal them to this common activity of upholding these British traditions and the gentrified lifestyle.

Concluding remarks

The ethical aim of Jack Wills Ltd. is to be the *imaginary totem of the social group’s identity*, itself manifest in the name ‘Jack Wills’. In *Politics* (1995), Aristotle deals with the question of how to distribute things according to virtues. Virtues are all or nothing, in this case, as they are acquired dispositions (‘gentry’) in one’s persons. The question of ‘what is just?’ pertains to fully realising these virtuous characteristics. Justice is what is granted so these virtues become fully exercised in the community (Aristotle, 1995: 103, III.9, 1280a7) As such, this notion of justice is one where people are unequal: ‘where people differ from one another there must be a difference in what is just and proportionate to their merits’ (Aristotle, 1995: 113, III, 12, 1282b14). It seems as though Jack Wills Ltd. have picked up upon Aristotle’s philosophy in practice. Jack Wills’ ethos suggests that *not all people can provide the virtues of gentry and those who do are the most worthy*

recipients of the clothing (cf. Polanyi, 1957: 79f). For our purposes, the heraldry role of divvying out goods to those who are members of the life-style and its institutions is a form of distributive justice: a mode of distribution to those whose membership is equal to the virtues membership requires. It would be unjust to distribute Jack Wills goods to those who do not exhibit the excellences of person ('social profile') that the brand-imagery and lifestyle represents. Free goods or mandatory adoption of garments in membership of the lifestyle and its networks of sociality: these are just forms of distribution as they preserve the flourishing community. Furthermore they maintain the equity of the brand because they achieve fiduciarity – trust in persons in the community – as distribution is accorded to those who preserve the virtues of the community.

Heraldry is a pre-modern notion of economic value, one where 'value often seems to wear itself on its face' (Stallybrass, 2002: 277). Despite brand being an immaterial power in *meta*-physical capitalism (Arvidsson, 2005; Lash, 2007; Foster, 2005) we still need to, as Stallybrass points out, 'note the persistence of non-capitalist practices well into the twentieth century' (Stallybrass, 2002: 283) – especially in the context of a social group whose cultural values are orientated toward pre-capitalist notions of group identification.

The idea of brand as akin to heraldic coats of arms seems counter-intuitive to our modern sensibilities. Stallybrass notes that heraldic notions refer to a 'form of power' that is distinctly pre-capitalist in its conflation of 'person and thing' (2002: 276-277). The analysis of modernity treats commodities as alienable objects open to purchase by the impersonal means of money (Carrier, 1994), a view that permeates the sociological classics (Marx, 1976; Simmel, 1990). Additionally we think of people as pervaded by a depth of inward expressiveness that comes through articulation of thoughts, not their material appendages (Taylor, 1989). What we've witnessed here is the opposite – the clothing itself reveals a notion of virtue and the ethnography demonstrates a conviction of just distribution to those who do it justice, in the ancient sense.

Viewing brands in a pre-modern guise illuminates the resilience of old notions of group cohesion in the modern age. One often forgets that Jean Baudrillard's (1981) structural analysis of sign-value is indebted to Lévi-Strauss' (1973) analysis of the Cadeuvo face-tattooing, a practice Lévi-Strauss analysed explicitly in relation to European traditions of heraldry. The analysis of brands is, if anything, not a return to but continued realisation that pre-modern ideas of status and virtue are bound up with the allocation of material and symbolic resources. When Appadurai (1996: 71) suggested that globalisation realises the ever-increasing move from sumptuary law to fashion, he pointed to a problem for status practices of elite distinction in the allocation of resources. By way of the

brand name, which we know to be often built around a personality (Aaker, 1995; McCracken, 1993; Hooper and Vallance, 2013), the ethics of character that it creates also gives rise to the need to develop a political economy based around such a character ethics: Who are the best persons for such a product? To answer is to also conjure up a notion of just distribution, the aim of which is fiduciary value for the products so as to preserve the ideal of the personage the brand epitomises.

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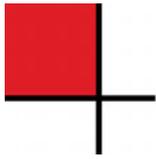
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Brands, welfare and welfare-cool*

Ignacio Concha-Ferreira

Introductory cool



Figure 1: Jerry, ICA. (<http://www.gladahudikteatern.se/ica-jerry/#.Uw34sfRg4Vk>)

What do brands have to do with the welfare state and ideas about welfare? More than one might think. With the remarkable omnipresence and activity of brands and advertisement in contemporary society where commercialized and commodified welfare today is a fact, indeed brands claim the role of protagonists in the world of social welfare. I mean brands do this by introducing and seducing us with what could be called *welfare-cool*.

Being experts of cool, brands turn to the territory of welfare where the logics of cool find new, virgin grounds. Elegantly, brands remake the welfare world and the welfare recipient by dressing them up in colorful outfits and contextualizing them in entertaining and educative commercials, giving welfare the fundamental quality of cool. Brands seem to be in love with welfare.

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The purpose of this note is to address the emergence of what might be called brands' welfare-cool or brands' fabrication of welfare-coolness. I will begin with presenting and tentatively interpreting the case of a remarkable commercial televised in Sweden in 2009. After proceeding by suggesting ways of understanding the logics of brands' welfare-cool fabrication and hunt for it, this note will end with a short discussion contextualizing welfare-cool in today's welfare climate, which is predominantly shaped by a neoliberal and market-oriented welfare ideology.

A case of branded welfare-cool



Figure 2: Jerry, ICA (<http://www.sotochsnygg.se>)

In today's hyper-mediatized and advertisement-thick world, the notion that 'a picture says more than a thousand words' is somewhat of a cliché. Logically, the moving pictures we are relentlessly fed with, by means of commercials on-line or on TV, certainly reinvigorate McLuhan's famous 'the medium is the message'-thesis.

That commercial and corporate interest has colonized the life-world in general (cf. Deetz, 1992), but in particular our life-world of pictures, both still and moving, must today be seen as a huge understatement. Arvidsson (2005: 236) underlines this truism and points out how our everyday life is indeed packed with attempts from brand management to steer how we produce truth, beauty and utility around goods, paraphrasing the notion of the truth-regime in Foucault's works by suggesting the existence of a kind of brand-governmentality that frames our consumer behavior and consumer minds.

Commercials, ads and brands are literally everywhere; the commercial gaze is omnipresent and panoptic, as if it were the oxygen that our capitalist existences need to breathe.

On-line, on television, in the metro station, on the bus, well, in all public spaces, brands pontificate. The brand is what spearheads the message: about our need of the particular commodity, its price, and the beneficial effects on our identity as owner of the particular item, of being seen in and belonging to certain market-spaces and consumer cultures.

The brand, of course, also makes us feel connected to, and indeed sparks a feeling of certain *coolness*. Coolness is gold. Corporations and brand-empires desperately hunt, scout for cool and if possible fabricate it for their own interest (cf. Klein, 2000). And as corporate interests enter new fields and territories, it seems that we see the development and fabrication of new types of cool, as if coolness also could add to a product's and a corporation's legitimacy.

Creating welfare cool: Say hello to Jerry the trainee!

Please have a look at the pictures above. The pictures are taken from a very popular televised commercial aired in the fall of 2009 in Sweden, which was produced by one of Sweden's and northern Europe's largest food retailers (the logo and name of the firm is clearly shown in the picture, naturally) through one of Sweden's best and most renowned PR-firms (King.se). The commercial (a mini-series) was a tremendous success and stirred up huge public attention and even some controversy. Indeed, in a novel, original, humoristic and astute way, the company and ad-firm not only created a real and gigantic buzz around the brand, but also about the serious matter of the contemporary welfare state, a welfare state that seemed to need a remake, needed to be freshened up by the magical powers of a brand. How to do it? By engineering welfare-cool.

Yes, the person in the middle of the picture has Down's syndrome and is the main-character in the commercial. To Swedish viewers he quickly became 'Jerry the trainee' or 'ICA-Jerry'. The character of 'Jerry the trainee' or 'ICA-Jerry' became a star, a celebrity, and a kind of bearer and spreader of branded welfare-cool.

Please have a look at how welfare-cool takes the scene, welfare-cool in motion, fueled by and driven forward by brands. Here are the clips¹ starring 'Jerry the trainee'. The storyline is the following: the ICA store needs more staff and the manager (Stig) introduces a newcomer, a trainee. It is Jerry, and Jerry is quite

1 <http://youtu.be/RrYkX3ofHwA>

special. Jerry has a distinctive disability and will, in several eye-opening and charming ways, challenge the staff's, and us the viewer's, preconceptions of a person with a disability.

The first clip (1) shows Jerry being presented to staff by the manager. Jerry reacts to the staff's very surprised faces displaying their (and our) intuitive reaction to employing a disabled person by asking: 'what are you staring at – have you never seen a *trainee* before?'

(2) Jerry is shown the ropes by one of the staff (Ulf). Ulf treats Jerry as if he were retarded (or an infant, a common phenomenon in the meeting between 'normal' and 'deviant'). Ulf speaks extremely slowly and loudly assuming Jerry is totally incompetent. Jerry goes to manager (Stig) and asks him: 'Hey Ulf, he is not quite all right in the head is he?' whereby Stig confirms this. This scene problematizes and turns up side down the notion of who is normal and not, and who has the power to decide it.

(3) Jerry is eating from the company products. Ulf tells him off, but Jerry responds that the manager Stig has agreed to this behavior, 'it is ok!' This makes Ulf set about doing the same thing with a smile on his face. Surprised by the infuriated manager, Ulf says 'but Jerry said it was ok!' Jerry, however is not to be seen. Ulf is severely criticized by the manager, Stig, for so dishonestly and cheaply 'blaming the trainee', in other words blaming a vulnerable, defenseless disabled person. Jerry himself underlines this by popping up behind manager Stig and saying, 'hey Ulf, you mustn't blame the trainee!'

On the logics of branded welfare-cool



Figure 3: Jerry, ICA (<http://www.gladahudikteatern.se/ica-jerry/#.Uw34sfRg4Vk>)

A simple question comes to mind: why is this such a seductive and indeed a cool spot²? Unmistakably, this particular company and brand (ICA) maximises its socio-cultural powers, its potentials and craft as a cultural activist (Holt, 2002; 2004). Impeccably this brand taps into and strikes a vibrant chord of social actuality, re-contextualizing an acute socio-political issue in the heart of contemporary welfare thought. Tapping into the classical problem of the welfare state, even its *raison d'être* – the care and integration of those who are deviant or different, the ‘vulnerable’ members of society – the brand elegantly and seductively infiltrates and co-opts the welfare idea. This brand is astute. It stakes out a grave question. The brand gives us, as consumers, a wake up call while laughing³. And the commercial is indeed well-crafted; truly a charming, funny and thought-provoking fusion of entertainment and commerce (Ritzer, 1999) with a powerful dosage of education. The brand wants to enlighten you.

As viewers, we follow the charming character of ‘Jerry the trainee’ as he so enchantingly handles reality in the supermarket – indeed a central institution of society, it is society – and we recognize ourselves as members of society, citizens of the welfare state, all of us having more or less embarrassing stereotypes about persons that don’t fit the norm, people with handicaps of some sort, persons in need of support, in need of our understanding, reflection, awareness, and compassion. Are we finally seeing the much-awaited coming of so-called compassionate capitalism, beautifully branding and re-commodifying welfare; replacing traditional de-commodified welfare thought?

Additionally, with the immense interest from mass media and the peculiar hype around persons with disabilities that has been seen over the last few years, one wonders – paraphrasing Marx’s intricate analysis of how the commodity in capitalist society gains a fetishlike quality (Marx, 1996) – if disability is being fetishized in the commercialized, commodified, branded welfare state. Welfare-cool today seems to love what just yesterday was the most uncool you could think of: disability.

2 Rendering the character of Jerry about 500 000 friends on Facebook while the actor, Mats Melin, has attained celebrity status and is invited to all kinds of talk shows etc. Merchandise with the logo ‘I love Ica-Jerry’ is also for sale (<http://icajerry.spreadshirt.se/i-heart-ica-jerry-vit-munktroeja-A11049064>)

3 *With* or *at* Jerry? Or both? Surely the edge is pointed at you the viewer, you should laugh at our own stupid prejudices (while feeling compelled to go to shopping at ICA).

What is (un)cool about welfare-cool?

There are of course a number of perspectives from which to continue analysing and interpreting this spectacle of the coming of a kind of subtle but powerful brandscape of welfare and brand-engineered welfare-cool. Putting the display of ICA-Jerry in a broad contemporary political context, branded and brand-engineered welfare-cool is a perfectly rational manifestation of the neoliberal zeitgeist of today. Today, welfare isn't primarily a right, but a technology of governance in the lean, market oriented, activating, and enterprising welfare state (cf. Bonoli and Natali, 2012; Considine, 2001). The growing presence of corporate brand logics in welfare, and in welfare discourse, mean greater manifestations of brands in welfare and welfare activity, like the one portrayed in this note⁴, which radically redefine our way of understanding the welfare state and the idea of welfare.

The gap left by the withdrawing traditional public welfare logics is enthusiastically filled by corporate brands and is commonly styled like the equally fashionable and cool trend of Corporate Social Responsibility (which we could call a kind of responsibility-cool).

This is perhaps not that peculiar; a society that has given more and more welfare responsibility and welfare tasks to the market is a society that expects the corporate world to show welfare awareness. We expect corporations do what they do the best: scout for cool and cool ways of packaging and branding what they want to sell back to us. After all, why on earth should we buy the product, the service or the idea of a commercialized welfare state, if it isn't cool?

Commercially, welfare-cool is cool based on a simple basic fact of consumer conduct – that we are what we have (Belk, 1988). In a consumer society, there is no way of ducking a brand that so elegantly taps into such a central and potent idea as the idea of our social welfare. Or, as Arvidsson (2005: 248, emphasis in original) returns to, 'it is not the brand in itself that counts, but what you can do with it, what you can *be* with it'.

Disturbing however, and utterly uncool, is the fact that brands today take the liberty of being kind of novel welfare experts; prominent welfare educators with a self-imposed duty to make us aware; to teach us something acute, something relevant about our society, how to treat fellow human beings that happen to be

4 Corporation ICA means business and launched a campaign called, 'We can do more' to offer persons with disabilities trainee positions in their stores. This makes me think that our economy indeed needs its 'epsilon-persons', made famous in Huxley's 1932 dystopia, *A brave new world* (1969). But this is another story.

different and need support from the welfare system. This brand tells us, because it knows, because it has authority on the question of how the welfare state should be, look, work and cost. These commercials, these brands embracing welfare and deviance, which in some sense depict an ideal-society in miniature, are in fact striking expressions of the brand, the corporation, and the market, *being* the welfare state. The branding of welfare could also be seen as a sharp and updated expression of the unmasked *political entrepreneurs* (Crouch, 2011; Lazzarato, 2007; 2009; Palmàs, 2011) taking new leaps into and colonizing new territory: the territory of welfare. Brands today seem very confident (and cool) in suggesting an ideal welfare future; the perfect and harmonious welfare state, a colourful, happy, where-we-all-are-shopping kind of welfare state. A funny, branded welfare state decorated with price-tags and liberated from prejudice because, as we all know, the market has no prejudice, the market is free. And what is cooler than freedom?

Brands in the world of welfare do what they always do, what they are designed to do: they frame and sell us a sense of freedom, at least a feeling of freedom. If not a ‘Starbuck-moment’ (Klein, *Ibid.*) then, as in this case, a cool ‘enlightened welfare-moment’. Freedom from the uglier sides of our personalities; freedom from our prejudiced minds; freedom from the colourlessness of the traditional welfare state’s way of addressing welfare problems – so urgently un-cool and un-branded. The ICA brand-make-over makes welfare seem to be a very cool endeavour. It makes us be cool, feel cool, about the reality of disability and disabled fellow citizens. In a sense, ICA makes even disability per se seem cool. Lazzarato’s (2007) analysis of brand logic and publicity – like Benetton’s (in)famous commercials – reveals the political entrepreneur’s strategy to not just provide information about, but to constitute the market. In line with Lazzarato’s analysis, brands infiltrating welfare constitute the market through a powerful interactive relationship with the consumer, addressing her needs and above all her (our) desires; our desire to be part of a open, inclusive and good, well-functioning and just welfare society.

Cooling down

Brands don’t ever stop scouting for new profitable territories to decorate and remake, it is all about making reality appear as much as possible like a welcoming, seductive and shining brandscape. By reflecting upon the popular commercial by Swedish food-retailer ICA, addressing, and indeed penetrating, issues of social welfare and disability, this note has suggested ways of interpreting the emergence of corporate brands scouting for and fabricating *welfare-cool*.

In a neoliberal, market-oriented society where traditional welfare is minimized, looked down upon and seen as obsolete, it is no surprise that political entrepreneurs, market-actors, corporations, ad-gurus and brands are playing energetic roles as the new welfare creators and welfare experts and are generating unexplored linkages between brands and welfare. In order to feed off the world of welfare (and its inhabitants, like Jerry) and still maintain legitimacy and grow in popularity, brands need this to be an utterly cool thing – that’s why brands need welfare-cool.

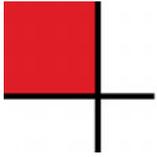
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Public brands and the entrepreneurial ethics

Adam Arvidsson

At a first glance brands would seem to be the opposite, or indeed the negation of ethics. Built on superficial sign values instead of substance; glitzy surfaces instead of depth, and vacuous promises *in lieu* of bounding commitments, brands are part of the edifice of post-modern consumer society that, as Zygmunt Bauman (2008) and many others before him have argued, tends to negate the very possibility of ethics. Brands target isolated ‘individuals and their families’ to use Margaret Thatcher’s terms, that operate in the absence of any ethically binding sociality, without any common values, exchanging, at the most, *quid pro quo*, on markets. From this point of view ‘ethical brands’ appear as the epitome of cynicism: They are an attempt to make loose and largely unsubstantiated and unverifiable claims to ‘do good’ in some vague sense in order to promote marketing goals. This way, ‘ethical brands’ mark yet one more step of the real subsumption of values and passions under the logic of capital.

This interpretation also makes sense from an empirical point of view, as corporate spending on ethical branding and CSR is consistently dwarfed by expenditure on the communication of such social responsibility and on publicizing ‘good deeds’. Conversely, studies show how ethical consumer choices are highly situated and at any rate such choices are mostly the result of institutional factors (i.e. consumers tend to buy *Fairtrade* coffee if supermarkets stock it (cf. Devinney et al., 2010)). So from this, conventional, point of view, the current focus on ethical brands seems to be a dead end.

But there is a different way in which brands might operate as ethical devices. In particular personal brands might play this role. Once again, personal branding, as it is taught by personal branding guru’s like Tom Peters (1999), is a manifestation of utmost cynicism. Or rather, as Tom Peters keeps pointing out,

cynicism keeps lurking under the surface, and to avoid it one must constantly motivate oneself — preferably by chanting self help mantras — into keep believing in the sanctity of one's own success. The cynicism is a clear and present danger that needs to be constantly exorcised. And how could it be otherwise if personal branding is a matter of devising and impersonating one's own authentic self, in order to cultivate an authenticity that in the end serves the purpose of packaging one's ever more generic skills and competences in ways that are, in themselves, generic and commonplace? The branded self needs to be distinct in its blandness, unique in its generic combination of values like 'success, trustworthiness, engagement, empathy, commitment, curiosity, interest creativity' etc. You need to stand out and be different while remaining compatible with everybody else. But there is interesting evidence that suggests that personal brands are evolving into something quite different. Personal brands are increasingly becoming public devices.

This transformation is linked to the on-going re-organization of knowledge work. Knowledge workers, from the start the 'self-branding class' *par excellence*, are delinking from the security and stability of corporate careers. In part this is driven by post-materialist motivations: it is surprising what people will risk for the opportunity to 'transform my passions into my profession' — a mantra of self help books since at least the 1980s, that continue to motivate managerial flight today. But mostly it is driven by the automation of knowledge work and the over-supply of educated knowledge workers, which, along with online connectivity and new kinds of digital platforms, leads to increasing outsourcing of knowledge work. Knowledge workers, and in particular the younger generation, are increasingly forced to 'go freelance' because steady corporate jobs are becoming much rarer, and even those who find a corporate career are forced to operate as if they were freelancers, maximizing their opportunities and their human and social capital, in order to pursue it. This has rendered knowledge work — both within and outside corporate careers — more precarious and more entrepreneurial. But precariousness and the turn to freelancing do not simply imply individualization and fragmentation of labor markets (although this is a prevalent tendency).

Recently freelancers have begun to devise new forms of self-organization. It is quite common that tasks and projects are resolved by temporary assemblages of freelance workers — what Alessandro Gandini (2014) calls 'networked modes of organization' — where different aspects of a project are outsourced to people with different skills. In some cases such temporary network organizations develop among people who know and trust each other (a prevalent example is found in the ever more prevalent, co-working spaces, where freelance knowledge workers rent desks in common offices with the promise to take part of a

common skills pool; a General Intellect that can add on to their own resources). But often this happens in the absence of trust, as freelance workers need to seek partners outside of their circles of strong ties, within a local scene connected by weak ties. In those cases the personal brand serves as a way to publicize one's skills, social competence and trustworthiness.

However contrary to Tom Peter's recommendations, the value of brands in these networked scenes is not primarily an effect of the skilful performance of personal authenticity. Rather such brands are valued by the public of peers that constitutes the scene in which the individual freelancer operates. This continuous peer-estimation of the public value of personal brands is facilitated by social media platforms that have become a default device for organizing such temporary formations of knowledge work. Social Networking Sites like Facebook, Linked-in and Twitter have the capacity to objectify one's impact in terms of both the quantity of likes, re-tweets and Klout scores. Indeed these platforms render compatible endorsements and positive or negative judgments that might originate from a wide variety of a diverse value horizons, transforming them into quantitative manifestations of a common 'substance' a new General Sentiment, which conveniently operates as the measurement of the General Intellect on which such freelancing scenes are built. The technological possibility of such constant peer judgment leads to an instrumentally oriented logic of sharing, according to which freelance workers feel obliged to share resources — their time, knowledge, advice, part of their work — with their peers, because they are aware that such sharing is a strategically suitable way for them to establish a valuable brand that will eventually give them better possibilities to land more lucrative jobs and projects (indeed, Gandini's research suggests that there is a direct link between such peer reputation and economic prospects in creative freelancer scenes). Here the brand operates as a public estimate of the value of individual freelancers that institutionalizes a direct link between their virtue as members of particular scenes, and their value as economic agents.

But this is not simply a matter of the instrumentalization of sharing; the subsumption of some pristine peer-to-peer logic to the iron law of markets and profits. At the same time, the public nature of brands supports the emergence of common values: In some scenes this is more pronounced: Among social entrepreneurs, for example, the ability to create the perception that one is a person who has 'an impact' is a precondition for actually arriving in a position where it is possible to really have an impact. For example, in order to attract funding for one's 'changemaking' enterprise one needs to already have established a reputation as a 'changemaker' (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013). Consequently, a lot of work needs to be put into appearing to have an impact. This work is, to no little extent a matter of what Gabriela Coleman (2005) has

called ‘ethical labour’ – an expression that would have made Hannah Arendt cringe. Ethical labour is the ‘labour’ of adapting oneself to the expectations of one’s peers, in order to become a virtuous individual in the eyes of the *polis* in which one operates and to contribute to its strength and good fortune by helping others, socializing new members, resolving conflicts and disputes and generally sharing one’s generic competences. In other scenes this ‘ethical’ dimension might be less pronounced, but there is still a strong sense of common norms; of not being a disloyal competitor, of not infringing on other people’s possibility for livelihood while pursuing one’s own legitimate profit motive. Such public virtue combines with excellence in the technical exploitation of common resources – the virtuosity (Virno, 2004) that is a precondition for developing a distinct service, a flexible response or a product that, while technically similar to others still stands out as distinct and inimitable – as a parameter for establishing public recognition of one’s value as an actor in a specific scene.

Social media presence is marked by a similar ethics: in order to have a successful online presence it is important to operate as an excellent curator — to keep procuring content that is interesting and useful for one’s public. But at the same time it is important not to infringe on other people’s ability to do this: not to steal or copy, and to give other people reasonable opportunities by, for example, ‘liking’, re-posting or re-tweeting their messages in the same way that one likes to be liked, re-tweeted or re-posted oneself.

While still fragile and overshadowed by an overwhelming impetus towards what Illana Gershon (2011) has called ‘neoliberal agency’, this ethics of the (personal) brand might point towards a new economic ethic. This would be an ethics of sharing and balanced competition where the market imperative is counteracted by a sort of entrepreneurial solidarity – a solidarity between small entrepreneurs, each exploiting a common set of shared skills and competences and each eking out a living on the margins. In a certain sense this ethic approaches Adam Smith’s concept of *prudence*, a quality of the pre-corporate market actor who, while caring for his own well being in competition with others, nevertheless behaves with *propriety* so as to conserve the respect and admiration of his peers, knowing well that this respect and admiration is what allows him to partake in the market game in the first place. The difference is that now ‘respect and admiration’ is objectified, quantified and rendered publically visible and comparable in the form of a personal brand, which at the same time acts as a direct determinant of the value of a subject and his actions. This means that, in contrast to the prudence and propriety of pre-corporate entrepreneurs, who operated with a backdrop of communitarian values and norms – think of Max Weber’s example of pre-modern wool merchants – the contemporary freelancer operates with a publically visible brand that objectifies his value in terms that are

globally valid (a prominent twitter profile is worth just as much in Europe as in Asia, among Christians as among Muslims). As William Davis has suggested in the case of what he calls neo-communitarianism, the publicity of data enabled by the digital remediation of social relations points beyond the neoliberal paradigm in that it renders the illusion of atomized market actors impossible: the post-neoliberal subject is visibly embedded in social relations, and from a point of view of government ‘human beings must be understood as social learning animals, whose behaviour reveals certain common patterns and flaws’ (Davies, 2010: 775). Public brands operate according to this principle. They visibly embed entrepreneurial actors in relations of affect and appreciation, which immediately presents them as situated subjects, with a history and a potential. And since this history and potential also influences their economic value, the publicity of brands necessarily invites prudence and propriety in conduct.

It would seem that the atomized entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism is on its way to becoming re-socialized within a new social, based on the technical affordances of social media. This new social comes with an embryonic new solidarity, which is different from both the pre-modern ‘mechanic’ solidarity and the modern ‘organic’ solidarity in that it does not so much act as a counterbalance to the market, but rather emerges from and is intimately fused with market action. It is a solidarity that is intrinsic to a new kind of ethical economy (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013) where value and virtue coincide.

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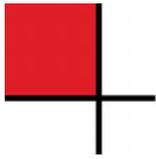
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The slippery relationship between brand ethic and profit

Jon Bertilsson

Introduction: The complex nature of ethics

For the past two decades the concept of ethics has become increasingly connected to the notion of brands, branding, consumers (consumers' decision making & choice) and consumption both within academia and the business world. The relevance-making of ethics within the marketing sphere seems to be connected to a widespread idea that consumers nowadays, to a larger extent than before, include ethical considerations when evaluating and choosing between different brands. Several marketing studies have (consequently) been performed in order to identify and reveal the preferences, attitudes, values and behaviors of typically 'ethical consumers' (see e.g. Prothero, 1990; Shrum, McCarty and Lowry, 1995; Schlegelmilch, Bohlen and Diamantopoulos, 1996; Strong, 1996). Simultaneously, and in light of this recognition, marketers have realized that ethics or ethicalness may constitute a viable and important dimension for the differentiation and positioning of the brand on the market in a way that provides the consumers with added benefits and awards the brand with a competitive edge over its rivals. Ben & Jerry's and Body Shop (now owned by the global giant L'Oréal) are illustrative examples of firms that have been successful in employing ethical branding. The branding potential identified in ethics has therefore according to Caruana (2007) prompted a commercialization of 'fair trade' (*The Day Chocolate Company*), a production and distribution of 'ethical' and 'sustainable' products (*Ecover*), in addition to a 'greening' of notorious brands such as *BP* and *Honda*. However, as will be illustrated later on, using ethics as a tool for branding and differentiation is a slippery business.

The risk of employing ethical branding may be traced to the multifaceted meanings attributed to the concept of ethics by both marketers and consumers. A common definition and a consensual understanding of what the concept of ethics refers to, and what it really means to be ethical seems to be lacking¹. Adding to the complexity of what constitutes ethical conduct and behavior is the fact that ethics within a business, marketing and consumption sphere seems to be connected to a plethora of ethical categories such as sustainability, fair-trade and corporate social responsibility. This in turn gives rise to considerations regarding environmental impacts, employee welfare, child labor, consumer privacy and safety, charity, donations and the degree of the brand's contribution to the overall well-being of society. What further adds to the complexity is that the ethicalness of firms may be considered, evaluated and judged on different levels. Crane (2001) suggests that the ethicalness of a brand and its products may be considered on four main levels, (1) the product (2) marketing (3) corporation (4) country. The product level pertains to such ethical issues that are directly related to the product or offering itself and its potential for generating individual/social good or harm; while the marketing level relates to the ethical issues connected to way in which a product or brand is marketed to its customers – such as the ethicalness of different marketing campaigns. The corporate level pertains to the ethicalness of the corporate brand supplying the ethical product – it's the ethical stance of the entire company as such (see e.g. Body Shop). The country level concerns the associations being made with the ethicalness of the country from which the brand and its products originate. The importance of this level has been mirrored in previous consumer boycotts of brands and products originating from countries that have been considered to engage in unethical actions and practices such as nuclear testing (France), apartheid regimes (South Africa) and military dictatorship (Chile) (Crane, 2001).

The different ethical categories and the different levels on which a brand, corporation and product may be ethically evaluated and judged, together with a lack of consensus between companies and consumers of what it means to be ethical generate not only complexity, but also open up for inconsistencies, paradoxes and even confusion for all parties involved. Theoretically a company can simultaneously sell and distribute ethical products while still being perceived by consumers or customers as an unethical brand or corporation. Conversely, a brand that sells traditionally harmful (for individuals, society or the environment)

1 A fruitful definition of ethics is supplied by (Crane and Matten, 2010: p. 8) who define it as being '.... concerned with the study of morality and the application of reason to elucidate specific rules and principles that determine right and wrong for a given situation'. It is those principles that constitute ethical theories. One may therefore argue that ethics is concerned with the formal rationalization of morality – of the values, norms and beliefs that define right or wrong (Caruana, 2007b).

products may simultaneously be perceived as ethical. Hence, depending on what ethical category is in focus and which level of a corporation is scrutinized, a brand can be considered as ethical and unethical at the same time. These inconsistencies and the confusion they may generate are problematic for various reasons. First of all, it makes it hard for end consumers to establish which brands are genuinely ethical, which in turn may prevent them from making informed choices and to effectively exercise their consumption-based political power within the frames of the market. Secondly, it may be unclear for firms what they need to do to be considered ethical brands. Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly, nurturing an ethical brand image that is not mirrored in a firm's business practices involves an element of deception, which in turn may generate a cynical attitude among consumers. Why bother buying ethical brands at all if ethicalness is just a façade that helps companies to earn more money? In spite of these complexities and contradictions, and the associated risks of ending up in public disgrace, brands still strive to position themselves as highly ethical in the minds of consumers and customers.

In this note I argue that the inconsistencies in brands' ethical behavior, indicate that it is often impossible to reconcile the creation of an ethical brand image with complete ethical conduct. This is illustrated later with an empirical example from IKEA. The case informs us that the firm works actively to establish a brand of sustainability and ethicalness, while simultaneously engaging in ethically dubious practices. I trace this impossibility to the tension between firms' self-interest/profit maximization motivation and the public good/non-profit motivation underlying ethics. In the end, I propose that firms may approach the issue of ethics as a form of duty that is expected from them (as for all actors and citizens in society), rather than as a tool for brand differentiation and positioning.

The inconsistencies in ethical brand behavior

A company that explicitly tries to brand itself as an ethical and sustainable organization is the Swedish furniture retailer IKEA. They are very explicit about their work on social and environmental responsibility. They have set up IWAY, which stands for "The IKEA Way on Purchasing Home Furnishing Products". IWAY represents a code of conduct that serves to specify the minimum obligations placed on suppliers regarding the protection of the environment, child labor and working conditions (IKEA FAQ-Social & Environmental Responsibility, 2013). According to IKEA, they work closely and actively with partner organizations such as UNICEF (<http://business.un.org>), to prevent child labor and to tackle its underlying causes, and with WWF in order to ensure the supply of certified wood from environmentally responsibly managed forests. All

the suppliers that work with IKEA need to supply documentation that enables IKEA to trace the origins of the supplied goods and material. IKEA even work with the third-party organization, Smartwood, for an external verification of their auditing routines, and also monitors the suppliers on a regular basis in order to check that the conditions of IWAY are met. Loading the IKEA brand with strong associations of ethicalness and sustainability thus seems to be an integral part of the company's strategy and may constitute a way through which IKEA may gain a competitive advantage over its rivals.

At first sight, IKEA seems to have been fairly successful in nurturing a brand with an image of ethicalness and sustainability, at least on the Swedish market. In 2012 they were ranked as the third most sustainable retail brand in Sweden by the organization Sustainable Brand Insights, which is one of Scandinavia's largest insight and analysis firm focusing particularly on sustainability (<http://sustainablebrands.idg.se>). However maintaining consistent ethical and sustainable standards throughout a global organization with operations in a plethora of countries and different cultures is not an easy task, even for successful and well-organized companies such as IKEA. In Danville, USA, IKEA's fully-owned subsidiary Swedwood (which produces 'Expedit' bookcases, 'Pax' wardrobes and 'Lack' side tables) is bitterly criticized by its employees and union representatives for racial discrimination, for persecuting its employees (frenzied pace, mandatory overtime and threatening disciplinary action), for breaking a number of its own rules, and for not allowing the union into the factory (<http://articles.latimes.com>). Fingers point all the way up to the top management. It is implied that the corporate culture runs from the top down, and that it is sanctioned by the Swedish top manager, Bengt Lundgren. The working conditions at Swedwood's factory in Danville are portrayed as exploitative and they do not seem to match the IWAY code of conduct set up by IKEA themselves. Bengt Lundgren argues though that:

There are rules and regulations. And we follow the rules and regulations that are in place. Dialogue is handled via the employees. I have absolutely no dialogue with the union. That's how the American system works. (Elghorn, 2013)

Simultaneously Per-Olaf Sjöö, head of the Swedish union for Swedwood factories, was puzzled by the conflict in Danville stating:

Ikea is a very strong brand and they lean on some kind of good Swedishness in their business profile. That becomes a complication when they act like they do in the United States. (Popper, 2011)

The articles on the Swedwood factory in Danville thus indicate that an important element of a global brand's business practice is to adapt its operations to the legal

and cultural premises and conditions of the local context – a strategy often referred to as glocalization (see e.g. Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006; Robertson, 1992; Thompson and Arsel, 2004). IKEA, as a Swedish-owned company, appears to constitute no exception in this instance, even though such practices may be in conflict with the ethical code of conduct set up by the firm itself.

IKEA's global adaptation strategy has recently proved to generate further conflicts, or inconsistencies, between their projected/communicated ethicalness and their ethical behavior. As the IKEA brand largely draws upon the notion of good Swedishness, where values of equality and women's rights are highly cherished and defended, many people were stunned when the Swedish free newspaper Metro, revealed that women were skillfully airbrushed out of the Saudi-Arabian IKEA-catalogue (www.telegraph.co.uk). A picture of a mother, father and their children in the bathroom was edited so that only the father and the children were visible. In another picture they replaced a woman with a man. In photos where it was tricky to make such changes, both men and women were edited out (Malik, 2012). The Swedish equality minister, Nyamko Sabuni issued the following comment regarding IKEA's actions: 'For Ikea to remove an important part of Sweden's image and an important part of its values in a country that more than any needs to know about IKEA's principles and values – that is totally wrong' (www.telegraph.co.uk). Despite the claim that the editing was performed by a third-party franchise it is very unlikely that nobody at IKEA was conscious of the edits. In this case there has evidently been a conflict between financial concerns and ethical values, but it wouldn't be the first time that a western organization has prioritized business interests over women's rights (Malik, 2012).

The preceding empirical examples, which could just as well have come from any other global brand, are particularly interesting as they point at inconsistencies between the construction of an ethical brand image, and firms' ethical behavior (and the lack of it). It would, in this instance, be relevant to ask whether this inconsistency is predominantly a consequence of top-management failure in disseminating and enforcing the ethical values of IKEA within all its divisions; or if it is a conscious, and somewhat cynical, strategy to build a global brand image of ethicalness and sustainability in order to deflect public attention away from an opportune usage of beneficial local conditions to increase profit. It is however unlikely that the public would get a truthful answer to such a question.

The inconsistency and compartmentalization of ethical consumption

Contemporary consumers seem to have internalized the notion that their consumption choices not only have implications on/for themselves, but also on the surrounding world and society. Coupled with an understanding of themselves as sovereign citizens comes the realization that their brand choices may be employed actively in order to make political and ethical statements regarding working conditions, the environment or political systems and actions. Herz (2001), for example, argues that the most effective manner in which people show their political stance in today's society is not, in a traditional way, by putting a vote in the ballot box, but by exercising that political right at the supermarket (i.e. via consumption) or at the shareholders' meeting. Occasionally consumers therefore engage in boycotting and buycotting behavior (Micheletti and Isenhour, 2010), displaying their political and ethical stance by refraining from buying products from certain brands while supporting brands they believe to be particularly ethical. Being an ethically responsible consumer is then important because it involves more than one's self-interest – it incorporates wider political and social considerations (Caruana and Crane, 2008). In contemporary society, ethics thus lies and is displayed in consumers' brand choices, rather than in their duty as citizens. It is these politically and ethically aware consumers that contemporary firms are trying to capture, and appeal to, by integrating aspects of ethicalness and sustainability in their brand image.

However, despite consumers' increased reflexivity regarding corporate social responsibility and the political-ethical implications of their own consumption choices, it is not automatically mirrored in an increase in ethical consumer behavior. Pelsmacker, Driesen and Rayp's (2005) survey on Belgic fair-trade coffee consumption revealed, for example, that the consumers' buying behavior was not consistent with a positive attitude towards ethical offerings. They found that the majority of the respondents were not willing to pay the current price premium for fair-trade coffee. Consumers may very well have personal values that generate a very positive attitude towards ethical consumption but, when facing a brand choice, they might be unwilling to actually pay for it. It is therefore important to recognize that inconsistencies in ethical behavior do not only apply to global organizations that seek to build strong brands. It may also be observed in the brand behavior of consumers. Both firms and consumers then seem to overlook ethics if it implies potentially negative financial outcomes. For firms, a loss of profit and revenues, and for consumers, higher expenses.

So how much do consumers really care about ethics when making consumption choices? A majority of consumers probably do care, but perhaps only as long as their financial situation allows them to do so. Cynical reason therefore seems to

prevail among consumers in this instance. To Sloterdijk (1987), cynical reason represents a wrongful state of play combined with a confession to still playing along. ‘Yes I know, I shouldn’t buy those brands because of the bad working conditions of the workers at their outsourced production plants, but they are cheap, and everybody else buys them’, is a typical example of cynical reason. Although ethically enlightened consumers (perhaps with an explicit fair-trade lifestyle), with honorable intentions stand a good chance of also acting ethically, they still sometimes fail to see that their consumption choices and their behavior are ethically inconsistent. A consumer who sees him/herself as ethically responsible may ironically first hang-out at his or her favorite local fair-trade coffee shop, but after having consumed his/her coffee, walks across the street and enters the global low-price clothing store (without any deeper reflection) to pick up a pair of cheap jeans manufactured under bad working conditions in a distant country. Sloterdijk (1987) would argue that such a case is an example of what he refers to as moral inversion; which represents a shift where one area or situation of a person’s life or reality knocks the ethics of another area upside down. Consequently, the ethics of one area in reality are systematically turned on their heads, making what is senseless and absurd in one area sensible and reasonable in another. Sometimes these areas even interrelate and overlap. As the consumers then move from one area/context of their consumer reality to another, shifting the focus to the moral issues of the new area it may blind them to the fact that the morality of the two areas are contradictory and inverse. In such an instance consumers’ ethical behavior is compartmentalized and stays within one or a few particular consumption categories or activities. Being completely and consistently ethical as a consumer in all one’s consumption activities therefore seems as hard, or even as impossible, as it is for a big global brand to be ethically consistent in all its operations throughout the world.

The make-believe marriage between brand ethic and profit

The inconsistencies in the brand behavior illustrated in the previous examples points to an underlying tension. I would argue that it is this tension that produces the inconsistencies (foremost) in firms’ ethical behavior. The tension is sometimes not revealed until firms ultimately need to choose between staying/being (completely) ethical and staying/being profitable, such as when thinking of entering a new market controlled by an ethically dubious political system or form of government. The economist Amartya Sen (1993) provides a fruitful explanation for this tension and subsequently for why the relationship between brand ethic and brand profit sometimes becomes problematic. Amartya Sen traces this tension to the binary motivation for exchange, self-interest/profit maximization and the public good/non-profit motivation. Sen argues that as the

public good often involve 'externalities', (public health, basic education, environmental protection, and human rights etc.) that are non-exclusive or non-competitive (everybody can benefit from fresh air and a good environment) and works outside the market, the market cannot be there to allocate the effects of good or bad. The rationale of the self-interest-based market mechanism of profit maximization consequently comes under severe strain. When that strain is experienced as too burdensome and firms discover that business ethics no longer promote capitalist success, firms, it seems, need to prioritize between self-interest/profit maximization or being ethically consistent, and supporting the public good. As self-interest and profit-maximization is bedrock of capitalist society and key to market survival, brands tend to prioritize profit maximization over ethics in instances where these two types of interest collide. Consequently, inconsistencies emerge in firm's ethical behavior. For the famous economist Milton Friedman (1970), this priority is an easy and clear one as firms' only social obligation is to make profit, and it is only by being profitable within the confines of the law that firms are ethical and responsible. Social responsibility is the task of the state while the objective of the firm is to stay profitable and create dividends for its shareholders. As that is their duty, nothing else should be expected from firms. The problem for brands in contemporary society is that they no longer only have to answer to the demands from the shareholders, but to several other stakeholders in society on which their operations depend.

When brands then engage in ethical branding in order to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to appeal to ethically conscious consumers, it seems to be just a matter of time before they need to start making priorities between ethic and profit. The examples collected from IKEA illustrate this issue fairly well, particularly the example on the Saudi-Arabian catalogue where women were airbrushed out in order to adapt to the local conditions and the Saudi-Arabian market. Long term, it therefore seems hard to credibly marry the underlying motif of self-interest/profit maximization with the underlying interest in public good as basis for ethical behavior. In this light, being ethical with a self-interest and profit-maximizing motive appears in itself as a paradox, as ethicalness per se is thought to be built on a non-profit interest in the public good.

So how do firms deal with this conflict of interest? Interestingly it doesn't seem to constitute a profound problem to big global brands, at least not in the short-term. In his enlightening article, Banerjee (2008) argues that the emancipatory discourses of corporate citizenship, sustainability and social responsibility are originally constructed by narrow business interest to restrain the interest of external stakeholders. Rather than serving an emancipatory purpose these discourses and subsequent ideological movements then work to legitimize and

strengthen the power of big firms. The construction of the ethically responsible brand and the socially responsible consumer is therefore largely the work of the marketing apparatus with the purpose of developing new market segments, and offering the consumers a richer plethora of pursuable identity positions (Caruana and Crane, 2008).

Ironically then, the complexity and ambiguousness of what constitutes an ethical brand actually offers firms an increased opportunity to build up a strong brand image of ethicalness, while simultaneously engaging in unethical practices. A strong ethical image may thus not only be valuable to a firm as a tool for differentiation and as a truthful representation of an organization permeated by ethical practices. It may also be valuable as it deflects various stakeholders' attention away from firm practices that, under closer scrutiny, would be considered as ethically dubious. An image closely linked to ethicalness may thus be created as it allows the firm to do things behind the scene – to conceal or hide unfavorable aspects of the organization. Ironically then, firms finding themselves in ethically dubious industries (such as within tobacco or arms dealing) and thereby carrying unethical brand images, could actually engage in supply chain practices that are really more ethical than the practices of firms who consciously and explicitly strive to build ethical brands.

Final reflections

The incorporation of ethics in the capitalist system and as an important tool for brand building and differentiation has shown to be a complex and tricky matter. Although Sen (1993) argues that a self-interest and profit maximization as a motivation for exchange can co-exist with ethical behavior and the public good, it seems that this co-existence depends on the profit potential of ethics. Both firms and consumers are willing to act ethical as long as it can be aligned with a capitalist logic of making profit or reducing costs. When being forced to prioritize between the two, ethics seems to be considered less important. However building a brand image with clear ethical associations may still serve organizations well. It may function as both a tool for brand positioning and competitive advantage simultaneously as it may deflect the public's attention away from parallel but doubtful company practices. Concurrently, consumers buying ethical brands may experience the well-being of contributing to a better society and environment, where consuming ethical brands becomes a way by which they construct an individual identity as ethically aware and responsible persons. In contemporary society ethics is therefore increasingly exercised via peoples' sometimes fickle and contradictory consumption choices rather than through a consistent political or public policy engagement. Discursively

constructing a market of ethics and the consumer as ethically responsible then offers brands novel opportunities for differentiation, at the same time as it supplies consumers with additional and plausible identity positions.

Interestingly ethics and corporate social responsibility are often used actively by brands to communicate a distinctive position and to attain a competitive edge over their rivals by being different. Being ethical is thus something that is to add value, both for the firm and for its customers, beyond what is expected. A different, and perhaps enlightening, approach on ethics would be to regard it as a hygiene factor (as opposed to a tool for differentiation), where acting ethically and responsibly is something that people would take for granted and expect from brands. From such a perspective ethics or acting ethical becomes a matter more of duty than of free choice.

The *ethics of duty*, which emanates from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), has been one of the most influential theories within business ethics. His theory consists of a set of eternal, unchangeable and abstract principles or maxims that may be employed to test the ethicalness of every possible action (Crane and Matten, 2010). Consequently these principles may fruitfully be used to scrutinize or test the ethicalness of brands' actions. Kant's Maxim 2: 'Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only', seem to constitute a particularly fitting criteria in this instance. In light of Kant's maxim, employing ethics as a means to an end, thus as means to position your brand and gain profit, would according to his ethics of duty, fail the test. The twist almost becomes ironical. Firms' engagement in ethical actions for the sake of their brand instead of for the sake of ethics (per se) makes those actions non-ethical.

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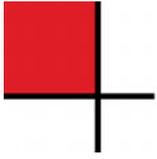
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Brands beyond good and evil?*

Martin Kornberger

Either / or?

Most debates about ethics or the lack thereof are framed around two opposing schools of thought. On the one hand, liberal philosophy advocates values of freedom, the private and the individual; on the other hand there is a more loosely connected set of ideas that advocate society, the common good and justice (Rorty, 1989). The liberal tradition, with its emphasis on free markets leading to all other freedoms including democracy and personal freedom, dominates the debate in mainstream economics and business literature. The brand plays an important role in the defence of free market principles: brands create accountability, loyalty and value. The more critical tradition sees brands as part of the problem, not the solution. Brands are the lubricants of free markets in which the consumption mentality comes to colonize all other forms of life. Brands are the avant-garde of the capitalist quest for world domination, spearheading the invasion of culture and privacy (or what's left thereof).

When people talk about brands and ethics, they normally join one or the other camp. Their ideas miss each other, like ships passing in the night. Both can draw on a set of well-rehearsed arguments that support their perspective whilst subverting the other's point of view. It is an undecidable question, it seems: for what is at stake when the Tibetan independence struggle features prominently in Benetton's communication, or when the Ghetto turns into the cultural resource and reference for lifestyle brands? Is the economy becoming human, finally? Or

* Some of the arguments put forward in this essay have their origin in my book *Brand Society* (Kornberger, 2010).

do brands colonize and exploit the last human refuge – culture, meaning, and identity?

I will argue that these are the wrong questions to ask. Ethics can be neither an exact guide nor a superior judge in regards to what is wrong or right, and what one ought to do, as Wittgenstein (1929/1972) put it in his *Lecture on Ethics*:

Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.

Ethics, Wittgenstein argued, is not a science that can prescribe what is right or wrong. Only ‘facts’ can be right or wrong, but what ‘is’ will never tell what ‘ought to be’. Ethics are not matters of fact, because they cannot be deduced from science; nonetheless Wittgenstein argued that we are in dire need of ethics. It is because of this tension between the impossibility to deduct ethics scientifically and the necessity to base one’s action on it that makes ethics a ‘tendency in the human mind’ that Wittgenstein respected so deeply.

Brands, lifestyles and ethics

How can we theorize the relation between ethics and brands if it evades the practices and procedures of scientific analysis? Perhaps one strategy to escape the conundrum would be to move from a concern with the ethicality of brands towards an investigation of the conditions under which a brand is equipped with ethical potentiality. In other words, rather than investigating some kind of ‘ethical substance’ we suggest asking under which conditions something (a brand) becomes the condition and medium for an ethical practice. This resembles a Nietzschean move: rather than asking: ‘what is ethics?’, he asked under which circumstances the dominant values have become powerful in the first place. Similarly, we can read brands as problematizations in which things collide, forming a space in which ethics are *at stake*: this space is neither ethical nor unethical *per se*, but provides the conditions for an ethical practice (see Clegg et al., 2007). And it is this space which an analysis of the ethicality of brands may want to investigate.

The concept that delineates this space is that of lifestyle. Edward Bernays, godfather of Public Relations, argued that every form of propaganda, including selling products, must, in order to be effective, manipulate the context in which decisions are made. Rather than trying to influence the decision directly, the manipulation of its framing is a more powerful way of influencing outcomes. For

instance, Bernays argued that a piano will not be sold through praising its qualities, but through demonstrating that a proper household should have a music room. Bernays advised staging events and ceremonies in which influential people anchor the idea of a music room as a symbol of culture and progress. People will then start buying pianos because their idea of what makes a proper home and a decent life has been changed. The actual purchase of the piano 'will come to him [the home owner] as his own idea', Bernays concluded (1928/2005: 78). What he took seriously was the notion of 'custom' in 'customer': first and foremost customs had to be changed so that products could appear as desirable. 'To make customers is the new problem', Bernays declared (1928/2005: 85), and the method of producing them was through changing their customs.

Implicitly, Bernays framed public relations as form of governing life: his strategy was to influence cultural values and manipulate symbolic meanings in order to sell products. Nowhere is this more evident than in his talk from 1950, entitled 'How American Business Can Sell the American Way of Life to the American People'. He argues that the American Way of Life is too focused on producing and consuming products: cars, breakfast cereals, washing machines and so on. For Bernays, business has to go deeper than satisfying material needs; it has to understand, shape and satisfy the social and cultural values of people. The business of business is neither producing nor selling goods; it is to lead communities through the 'engineering of consent', 'by persuasion and suggestion to insure that the community will reach its highest goals in health, housing, education, safety, public welfare, and other fields. What helps the community helps business' (1952: 345).

For business, the only way to interact with what Bernays called the community was to expand its boundaries and start thinking in terms of culture, meaning, values and eventually life itself. Brands have fulfilled exactly this role. They have brought about a new way of living life: the ubiquitous, pervasive yet little analysed notion of lifestyle encapsulates brands' power to quite literally stylise life. Brands, we shall see, provide the raw material that we use to build our individual lifestyles. Lifestyles form the context in which individual decisions are made. Through structuring lifestyles, brands frame those decisions. The power of brands is insinuated in the notion of lifestyle: through lifestyle, brands start to manage, control and 'style' life itself. The juncture where the individual relates to objects and uses this relationship to make sense of and give meaning to life, – this juncture is the birthplace of lifestyle. It marks the moment when life was given form and styled through the consumption of brands.

Ethically speaking, this marks a decisive moment: In the past, social structure and status were established through one's position in the production of things:

you are what you produce. Traditionally, class, religion, gender and other social stratification mechanisms co-determined life patterns. In contrast, lifestyle-identity is based on what you consume and how you appropriate brands. Identity becomes a function of brands, appearances and playfulness as opposed to pedigree, substance and tradition. Implicitly, patterns of class, race, religion, gender and so on represented barriers for marketing. Rather than developing products to fit into lives that were based on these more traditional patterns, lifestyle became the powerful context from which individual needs would emerge in the first place. Lifestyle melted all social categories into air and promoted consumption practices as building blocks for individual identity. Brands set out to be the alphabet of that new-found language. Lifestyles are based on people's consumption patterns. They cut across older sociological concepts such as class or status. Lifestyle defines people by what they consume; and this increasingly covers every aspect of life, including leisure, health, politics, work, education and so on. Lifestyle is our grammar, brands our alphabet: Club Med would tell us how to spend our holidays, IKEA how to live, McDonald's what it means to have a family meal, and Nike how to turn hobbies into high-performance activities. Brands are about a form of life, a way of living: brands express the quest for the self-actualization and lifestyle reveals the 'truth' of the individual. Consequently, brands start to govern life itself. And it is from this vantage point that we can start investigating the relation between ethics and brands.

Trojan horses

The analysis of ethics and brands does not follow the clear lines of good and evil: rather than forming an iron (golden?) cage brands have the tendency to subvert and undermine their own rationale. As argued, the possibility of ethics is framed through lifestyle. Paradoxically, lifestyle is a power that individualizes while it has totalizing effects at the same time. The sociologist Simmel (1911-12/2000) has identified the paradox – or tragedy, as he put it – of style at the heart of culture. According to Simmel, culture has an objective and a subjective element. The objective element is the style of a particular school of painting or music. It is what artists share and what makes them part of a larger movement. The subjective part represents the individual's expression, her ability and willingness to create something new. This 'something' is unique and individual as we relate it to a particular creator and her oeuvre. It is in the clash of the objective and the subjective where Simmel sees the tragedy of culture unfolding: the objective structure annihilates the individual, forcing conventions upon her, while the individual attempts to break free from conventions. While one force pushes the individual towards pure expressionisms, the other force deprives individual imagination of its oxygen through empty formalism. The problem is resolved

through what Simmel calls style. Style prescribes clear conventions and objective structures; at the same time, it allows the individual to satisfy his need for distinction and difference. Style allows an individual to identify with a certain group or movement and be part of an objectified culture. While it connects with others, style simultaneously allows one to differentiate oneself from others. Style elevates and equalizes; it creates envy and approval. Lifestyle resolves the old metaphysical conflict between individual and society by combining the two: like fashion, style homogenizes as it forms patterns that the individual has to accept as given. At the same time, style (and fashion) allow us to be who we are as they offer a repertoire for self-expression. According to Simmel, style paradoxically performs both functions: it makes us increasingly the same while simultaneously allowing us to be ever more different. The aesthetization of life in a brand-driven society follows this path. Brands are ready-made props and scripts for individual identity: In a Goffmanian sense, people perform their selves – and brands are the stage equipment that allows them to accomplish that tricky act of feeling different, unique and individual through following conventions. Brands promise freedom and unique personal expression whilst simultaneously creating trends and fashions that homogenize the individual and strip it of its possibilities for expressing itself. Think of all those people who express their freedom, their uniqueness, even their resistance through buying Skater-brands or (if wealthier) a Harley Davidson (see also Smith, this volume). No doubt, brands link our *id* to the ad, offering space for identification, representation and differentiation whilst creating sameness.

Where does this leave us? For Deleuze (1990), the idea that corporations have souls is ‘the most terrifying news in the world’. On the other hand, for the first part of the 20th century, the concept of organizations as soulless machines and faceless bureaucracies was equally terrifying. With the notion of brands, capitalism reintroduces qualities into the market exchange (Lury, 2004). Brands supplement the cold logic of transaction with their chatty logic of interaction. Brands re-enchant the world, after capitalism has done its best to dis-enchant it. Brands substitute the cold bars of the iron cage with seductive images that form the invisible walls around our lifestyles. Brands represent a space in which attempts to challenge the order of things will be absorbed and digested by the system. The revolution is being televised, on HBO and YouTube, financed by ads for brands that have made revolution their business and change their status quo. As Holt (2002: 88) argued, ‘since the market feeds off the constant production of difference, the most creative, unorthodox, singularizing consumer sovereignty practices are the most productive for the system’. Lifestyle thrives on the exploitation of difference, which produces new brands and lifestyles. At no point does the search for difference threaten the market system itself, because consumer resistance ‘is actually a form of market-sanctioned cultural

experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself (Holt, 2002: 89). In this sense, brands are, as Askegaard (2006) put it eloquently, hegemonic engines of diversity: compliance and homogeneity would equal system failure. Brands explore and exploit difference: be it hip, cool or hop, brands absorb what's different and integrate it into their machinery. This relentless quest for difference turns brands into potential Trojan Horses. Therein lies brands' ethical potential and political power; they are neither ethical nor unethical *per se*, but provide the space in which struggle for ethics take place.

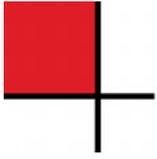
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Just what is it that makes today's employee branding so different, so appealing?^{1*}

Leo McCann

review of

Brannan, M., Parsons, E., and V. Priola, Eds. (2011) *Branded Lives: The production and consumption of meaning at work*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. 201 pp. (PB, pp. 201, £26, ISBN 9781849800921)

Introduction: 'Touching the core'

We are increasingly assailed by branding, straplines, advertising and slogans, in organizational, political, and 'everyday' life. Corporations have long projected 'visions' and 'values' to internal and external audiences, but now it seems every organization (and many individuals) are noisily broadcasting their brand narratives, clamouring for attention. Recent years have witnessed the endless 'rebranding' of political parties (see 'New' Labour), or of policy initiatives which require not just a 'launch' but continual 'relaunches' (see 'Big Society'). Companies issue punchy straplines that attempt to 'capture' the 'essence' of their values, workforce, and products. My favourite example comes from the secure money truck company Loomis – 'Managing Cash in Society' – a vision statement at once wonderfully matter-of-fact yet strangely vacuous. The production and brand name of the laptop that I wrote this review on has long since passed to China, yet the 'THINK' slogan of Thomas J. Watson's 1930s IBM lives on in the pre-installed desktop background. Public sector organizations follow the trend.

* With apologies to Richard Hamilton.

Universities, anxious to demonstrate their 'relevance to business', are hard at it with slogans of 'innovation, excellence, passion, and enterprise'. South Yorkshire Police muscled in with 'Dealing with the issues that matter to you most' (although that one now is sadly withdrawn it seems). Envisioned almost as personifications of the company, brands increasingly strain as they reach out ever closer to the slippery touchstone of 'authenticity'. But what purposes do these 'brand narratives' actually serve? What impacts (if any) do they have on employees who are exhorted to 'live' these brands?

Brannan et al.'s readable and timely text is a collection of chapters about employee branding – the processes whereby senior leadership attempts not only to set the public face of their organizations but also to inculcate these visions into the actions, behaviours, opinions, and 'mindsets' of staff, both inside and outside of work. Extending the frontier of marketing from sales to HRM, employee branding encroaches into the territory of recruitment and selection, in that prospective employees do not necessarily need to be encouraged to act 'on brand' as they would be expected to be 'living the brand' already as they are so 'delighted' and 'impassioned' by the company's 'authentic' and 'meaningful' products and services. The editors quote from evangelical marketing texts which claim that a brand should 'touch the core of why people work in the organization' (1) with employees only too willing to live the brand. If the 'right people' are brought 'on to the bus' then management need expend less time and effort in managing them. Employees enjoy work through their daily 'living' of a brand they 'love' and this enthusiasm rubs off on customers and service users. Effective employee branding, according to the mainstream views of marketers and branders, thus goes beyond a 'win-win' solution for management and employees; it's a 'win-win-win' solution for management, employees and consumers.

Thankfully this book probes well below the simple-minded shell of the prescriptive branding literature as it explores the multiple complexities and contradictions involved as employees interact with branding efforts. Many of the chapters explore the various ways in which staff receive, accept, translate, ignore, and often mock and reject managements' attempts to encourage them to lead branded lives. The authors draw on a familiar range of theoretical approaches, from labour process- and emotional labour-inspired critiques of branding as an attempt at managerial control, to discussions of employees as 'active constructors of brand meaning' as they reformulate the brand for the purposes of their own 'identity work' (129), or even 'appropriation work' (129).

Overviewing the chapters: Employee branding as 'flux, dynamism and contestation'

The volume opens with a characteristically attractively-written foreword by Paul Willis, and a solid introductory chapter by the editors that is extremely helpful in making an explicit bridge between the theories and themes common to management, work and organizational studies, and the often more prescriptive literatures of marketing, branding and HRM. A wide-ranging chapter by Hugh Willmott then embeds discussions of branding into the wider context of the financialization and marketization of everyday life, exploring the reasons why organizations are now so keen to construct, protect, and project 'brand value' and 'brand equity'. He questions who is 'measuring' and rating brand value (often in league tables), and for what purposes. While branding and sloganeering can often seem ephemeral and vacuous, this chapter makes a powerful case that it's actually a very serious business for firms and investors in that brands are increasingly valuable items with huge dollar values.

The chapters from there on until the conclusion are empirical, mostly based on individual (or sometimes paired) workplace case studies, and are strongly qualitative, with most based on ethnographic observations and employee interviews. The chapters cover a range of case studies, such as a supposedly 'ethical' and self-consciously 'counter-cultural' clothes retailer, an IT company, hotels, and the iconic IKEA; the outfit formerly known as 'the furnishing store from Sweden' now marketed around the concept of 'Home'. (Social Democratic politicians in Sweden tried to create 'The Peoples' Home' with employee wage-earner funds, wage solidarity, and tax-and-spend welfare. Now it's left to corporations to create our 'homes', ideally furnished with various configurations of the BILLY 'system' of bookcases.)

As the reader moves through the case studies, it becomes increasingly clear that a central argument of the book is the idea of branding having multiple meanings, sometimes even mobilized as a kind of 'resistance', or at least appropriated for aims other than those intended by management. Themes of authenticity, self-identity, paradox, and plurality are very prominent, especially in the single case study chapters by Christopher Land and Scott Taylor on the clothes retailer 'Ethico' and Sandra Smith and Margo Buchanan-Oliver on a large financial services corporation. Many of the book's case study companies have adopted versions of the faddish 'just be yourself' or 'work as play'-style management culture (see Costea et al., 2006; Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009), with all the complex forms of employee and consumer acceptance, translation, appropriation, and rejection that these (and perhaps all) methods of attempted cultural control entail. At 'Ethico', for example, one of the founders of the

company claimed that part of the assessment of new hires included consideration of 'what an employee could bring to the brand narrative as much as competence in performing the actual work' (48), yet such claims typically appeared empty when the researchers spent time observing and interviewing staff at work, who often appeared ignorant of, or untouched by, the brand narrative. At the bank case study in Smith and Buchanan-Oliver's chapter, staff taking part in the research were asked to draw diagrams depicting their own relationship to the brand which, combined with their comments from interviews and focus groups, threw up all kinds of interesting riders and complications, suggesting partial, conflictive, and often messy relationships of employee to brand (the illustrations are reproduced on pages 65-9). The case studies often also raise interesting issues of place and employee co-production and/or prosumption, in that employees are encouraged to 'live the brand' just as much outside the workplace as inside it, although the empirics reported in most of the book didn't always demonstrate that staff actually did this.

The chapter by Jean Cushen connects branding specifically to the processes and goals of human resource managers. She describes employee branding as the HRM practice 'de jour' (75), in which HR departments can try to ensure 'the ongoing sanctity of the brand' (76) through 'soft HRM' practices, perhaps as part of those tempting-sounding 'bundles' of high-performance practices. However, interviews and observations in her case study of the Irish subsidiary of 'Avatar Corporation' reveal that employee branding often generated the opposite effects to those intended by management, namely worker anger, resentment, and distancing. Branding attempts rang hollow given non-stop cost-cutting, reorganizing, and increased workload. HR did its best with roadshows, pro-brand reading materials and DVDs, and what one interviewee described as 'really cool' training days 'where you sat in beanbags rather than sitting in chairs and stuff like that' (79). But to little effect. Cushen notes that this problem has consistently dogged HRM for decades: despite the best efforts of some parts of management to project 'good' HRM, there's no employee buy-in because there's nothing for them to buy into.

This kind of 'just be yourself' management (beanbags, pool tables, dress-down Fridays) has become very familiar at IT companies or clothes retailers whose products are often pitched at younger consumers. But in the chapter by Stephanie Russell we learn how staff at the industrial manufacturer 'Aqua-Tilt' are just as strongly exhorted to 'live' the brand. As with any discourse, however, employee branding jostles for dominance with others, such as the pervasive discourse of customer sovereignty, raising the interesting theme of management, staff, and indeed customers, rather than all 'winning', are instead struggling to navigate complex, choppy, intersecting cultural currents. Some staff have 'bought

in'; one is even told by a co-worker that 'you *are* Aqua-tilt' (103), but most are keener to 'challenge and ridicule' (106) the narratives.

Similar discussions of the 'fit' between person and organization take place in Scott Hurrell and Dora Scholarios' comparison of employee recruitment and selection at the 'style' hotel known as 'Oxygen' versus the more traditional 'Fontainebleau' (chapter 7), and in Veronika Tarnovskaya's exploration of a Russian IKEA store in which two employees have quite different attitudes towards management's 'Home' theme. Throughout the book there are a range of reactions; a few staff seem to embrace the cultish branding with a wide-eyed enthusiasm that is almost scary. Others report a gentler satisfaction with their companies' image, style or working culture. Still others are cynical about, detached from, dismayed by, or oblivious to employee branding.

The penultimate empirical chapter by Melanie Simms explores the take-up of employee branding discourse in a somewhat different way, in the context of British trade union organizing. Facing decades of decline, unions face all kinds of problems 'marketing' themselves to potential members. Some of them have tried to do this by leveraging the brand and customer narratives of the companies where unions are trying to organize. Basing her chapter on a close analysis of union organizing campaigns at low-pay, service-sector case study organizations (charities, clothes retailers and casinos), Simms shows how union organizers attempt to turn brand narratives of customer care and service 'excellence' back on to managers, pressuring them to raise wages and increase staffing. If management claims the company's brand 'is all about quality service' then union members will try to hold them to these so-often empty promises. I was reminded of the fascinating paradox of the slogans 'On Strike for Boeing' or 'We Are Boeing' used by some of the striking engineers reported in David Kusnet's *Love the Work, Hate the Job* (2008: 208, 210).

Chapter eleven is also a change from much of the earlier content, with its more prescriptive-oriented discussion of the connections between employee branding and diversity. Martin Edwards and Elisabeth Kelan pose the interesting question of the extent to which companies' drives to inculcate branded workforces clash with the growing imperatives of diversity management. The editors return in chapter 11 with a useful conclusion which restates the aim of connecting critical organizational research across the boundaries of work and management studies and of HRM, marketing and consumption.

Evaluation: Unbranding?

This is a valuable collection. The chapters repeatedly produce interesting and at times amusing counterpoints to the often crass simplicity of some of the managerial attempts at employee branding and the prescriptive texts upon which these attempts are at least partially based. It remains, however, something of a mystery why organizations persist with what are often vapid and empty attempts at culture inculcation, and why, for some employees, it even seems to work. Perhaps it means – in another contradiction – that those who ‘buy in’ were from the start the ‘right people on the bus’, already ‘living the brand’ outside of work. Does this mean that, in cases where the workforce is already successfully branded, companies are effectively preaching to the converted? In other words, does the ‘right’ kind of recruitment and selection mean that companies can stop bothering with internal employee branding?

While this book is certainly a useful theoretical and empirical discussion of the employee branding trend, there were times when I was left feeling I wanted a little more. In addition to the paradox about ‘already branded’ workers/consumers hinted at above, I was never sure about the extent to which employee branding really differs from 1980s-style culture management in the Tom Peters mould or the more recent ‘just be yourself’ neo-normative control or moves toward ‘authenticity’ as discussed by Fleming and Sturdy (2009), Spicer (2011) and others. At times I wanted just a little more convincing that employee branding really was new and unique. The introductory chapter provides a good answer to this question in the section ‘Why employee branding? Why now?’ (6-8), in which some powerful points are made about the drivers behind the growth of employee branding, relating to the shift to services work, the end of ‘jobs for life’, the rising managerial value-added inscribed into emotional and aesthetic labour and, perhaps most intriguingly, the growing realization (perhaps among management, employees, and citizen/consumers alike), of:

the context of the failure of work to provide sustaining and life-enhancing meaning and narrative [into which] processes of employee branding are making attempts to resuscitate and rejuvenate tarnished images and ideals. (8)

However, in some of the case study chapters I wasn’t always convinced that what was reported empirically could meaningfully be labelled as employee branding as if it were something distinct from prior management fads around employee commitment, management ‘visions’ and cultural control. Organizations have for some time attempted to co-opt play, humour, and authenticity at work, often with odd and sometimes self-defeating results (Costea, 2006; Thomas and Al-Maskati, 1997). Quests for ‘authenticity’ and meaning in products and in work go back even further. The management ‘fads and fashions’ literature suggests

that there is nothing genuinely new under the sun, and employee branding is thus vulnerable to the charge of being empty and worthless, just like many other forms of branding, marketing and advertising, and indeed many of the acts of pro/sumption more generally. This could mean, perhaps, that the concept of employee branding may turn out to be fleeting, and will proceed through the familiar 'life cycle' of fads (Birnbau, 2001: 125-142), merging with other concepts, going through reboots and updates, before finally being 'revealed' to have been 'a failure' and is superseded by the next managerial concept that promises to 'move beyond' the 'limitations' of employee branding. Will it end up on the ashpile of concepts, like POSDCORB or the Planning Programming Budgeting System? Could employee branding turn out to be not 'so different, so appealing' to management, after all?

Of course, none of this means that we should not critically explore employee branding. But this book did leave me wondering that if employee branding is so often manifested so weakly and problematically in workplaces (194), then perhaps many will regard it as little more than a fad (indeed the editors suggest that some analysts do indeed look upon it this way (3)). If employee branding is destined to live out life as a fad then does that mean critical study of it is also necessarily faddish – perhaps even a 'brand' of sorts itself (with a life cycle, unclear boundaries with other concepts, and its effects exaggerated)? But would it matter if it did? There will always be a 'Fad Residual' (Birnbau, 2001: 196-213). Just as concepts are never fully new, they also never fully die. Instead, they persist somehow, like nostalgic YouTube clips of retired sport stars or children's cartoons, or some non-updated lecture slides (perhaps containing factual inaccuracies) forever domained on long-forgotten pages of a customizable Virtual Learning Environment.

These misgivings are minor. The editors are clearly well aware of this line of argument, and do provide a useful justification for their use of, and critique of, the managerial concept of employee branding. Just because employee branding may be faddish and its projection sometimes weak, it does not make it any less real or any less worthy of study. All of the chapters are well-written and engaging, and the volume is likely to be very useful for those researching and teaching across the fields of organizational behaviour, sociology of work, HRM and marketing. I found that the 2011 hardback edition that I received was at times let down by a few presentation errors, such as typos and missing references. This was rather a shame. On the plus side it is now available in paperback, so it has the potential to reach the large readership that it deserves. The attractive cover design is reminiscent of the mock-Soviet images one often finds in the culture-

jamming *Adbusters* magazine¹, suggesting a sinister, totalitarian, and deeply contradictory edge to branding and co-production. Having read and enjoyed this book I am now more eager than ever to 'unbrand' myself. Now how do I change the 'desktop background' on Windows 7, I wonder?

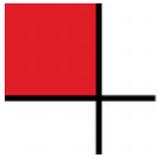
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1 www.adbusters.org



Demystifying expert branding

Charlotta Karlsdóttir

Review of

Lindstrom, M. (2011) *Brandwashed: Tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy*. New York: Crown Business. (PB, pp. 292, US\$13.81, ISBN 9780307956323)

Introduction: The broad strokes

Much like the title states, *Brandwashed* is structured as an exposé of methods companies and marketers use in influencing and/or manipulating consumer behaviour. Its author lists a number of tricks, untruths and hidden messages in marketing strategies and also touches on the various triggers for emotional responses aimed at boosting and furthering sales by attempting to manufacture a bond between the garden variety buyer and the brand. The book's unrelenting focus is on presenting underhanded practices companies use to affect and shape decision making. To that end the author uses several stories from his own career and personal experience.

Lindstrom is a professional marketer who has worked extensively behind the scenes of the branding wars for the last twenty years. His career has mainly been spent advising multinational companies as well as lecturing professionally on the subject of marketing (Lindstrom, 2011: 1). Lindstrom's previous book *Buyology* reached the best seller list in the U.S. and worldwide and was voted 'Pick of the year' by USA Today (Lindstrom, 2011: 292). He was named one of the world's most influential People in 2009 by Time magazine for his work on neuroscience and branding (*ibid.*). *Brandwashed* is his attempt at a relatable look into the

world of marketing and consumerism. In Lindstrom's own words, his inspiration for the book is to help the consumer to resist advertising and make smarter and more informed decisions (*ibid.*).

The book is divided into nine chapters, each with its own theme and conclusion in regards to the subject matter. Each chapter provides an overview of one specific way in which marketing firms utilise sensitive vulnerabilities with major trigger points such as fear, sex, celebrities, nostalgia, body image and peer pressure as well as employing data mining and word of mouth to exert even bigger pressure. As the book unfolds, the storyline describes how consumers become *brandwashed* (a little pun on brainwashed) as early as before they are born (Lindstrom, 2011: 8) and reveals countless tricks marketing companies use by triggering our fears and insecurities. Each chapter makes an argument for a specific subject and is supported by a multitude of stories and examples, which stress the point through constant repetition with the aim to 'blow the reader's mind' (Lindstrom, 2011: xi). A nice touch on Mr Lindstrom's part as most of them have ample entertainment value that more often than not divert focus from the science and are more likely to establish an emotional engagement from the reader by promoting feelings of either happiness or shock, as well as repeatedly hammering in the subject matter.

Although fairly easy to read and at times highly entertaining with many 'laugh out loud' examples, the book offers very little new insight and is mostly a collection of marketing extremes. The material is also likely to cater to a particular kind of reader, one that perhaps distrusts the inner workings of marketing strategies and is looking for validation of foul play. Lindstrom provides plenty of instances of sneaky corporate culture hell bent on hooking consumers on their products and boosting spending habits. However, I found that the real value of the book to be in reviewing and comparing these stories to personal experience and perhaps having the presence of mind not to apply them to every situation. As a point of interest, the author's constant reference to his own background and insights into the marketing industry seems to suggest that the content validates itself in light of his credentials. Given that the author has spent the majority of his life sussing out what makes consumers tick and how to exploit it, a critical reader might wonder why we should view the revelations in this book as anything more than another marketing antic; tapping into our insecurities in order to sell more products – this time books!

The book starts off with forewords by Morgan Spurlock, known for the movies *Super Size Me* and *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* setting a firm tone on how consumers are susceptible to manipulative manoeuvres. This line of thought continues throughout with examples and stories as the author moves from one

chapter to the next, constructing an image of the big bad corporate world. The book is meant to pick up from where *The Hidden Persuaders*, written in 1957 by the journalist Vance Packard, left off (Lindstrom, 2011: 7). Building on Packard's work, the subject matter is supposed to highlight more recently developed fields such as neuroscience, cognitive psychology and current research on consumer behaviour although I'm afraid it kind of missed the mark as the actual scientific results seem slightly fabricated with very little to back up the supposed conclusion.

Overview: Making the most of extremes

While I do find some value and entertainment in browsing through extreme examples (when read with a critical eye), the chapters are structured so that each extreme example is more or less pounded in as gospel and there is little or no room for interpretation. Here Lindstrom employs a formula by starting off with a personal admission on behalf of the author, which is both leading and conclusive, seemingly to establish common ground with the reader before putting forth a main example which then corroborates the author's personal message with a corresponding case. For instance, at the very beginning the author declares a brand detox for six months, giving the reader a sense of the author's personal achievement, or as the case may be, his ultimate failure in the war on *brandwashing*. The main argument being that it is almost impossible to escape brands in today's society. It is evident that the author is prone to interpret extreme cases in favour of the tone he sets in an attempt to create shock and awe, often completely bypassing any other explanation or mention of actual scientific validity of quoted studies. On the whole the book's general directive seems primarily to prove one point or another with possibly plausible, but ultimately rather thin, arguments. For instance to validate his findings, Lindstrom often refers to fMRI, which is a technology that measure brain activity. The subtext being that with a herd of neurologists, market researchers and computer experts it is possible to read your mind and sway your will. There are few factual references and the idea seems a little simplistic and overstated. In addition, the constant repetition of the firm's name throughout the book feels more than a little like product placement, which is one of the examples mentioned as hidden marketing ploy commonly used in big buck media productions.

It's clear the book's theme falls squarely into the categories the author claims to caution and inform on as he plays heavily on, for example, fear and paranoia, starting with our protective instinct towards family. One case in particular really touches a nerve when read at face value. The case in question describes how a Philippine candy brand distributed free coffee flavoured candy in maternity

wards to pregnant mothers, in an effort to develop dependence on the Kopiko coffee brand in their unborn babies. The same goes for statements that at times seem exaggerated with the sole purpose of proving a point and shocking the reader. One such statement is: *'What is the first word recognized by most kids all over the world? No, it's not "Mom" or "Dad." It's "McDonald's" (or "Ronald")'* (Lindstrom, 2011: 17). However, Lindstrom is quick to downplay the statement by saying that what babies actually do is recognize the McDonalds logo.

From a purely marketing point of view, it's actually quite clever to repeatedly establish mothers and infants as targets of unethical ploys this early on in the book. It evokes a protective side common to most people and the reader is more likely to suffer through other incredulous parts, just in case you miss something vital to the wellbeing of our more vulnerable members of society. Either ironically or deliberately, this scare tactic would be the very thing we have to be conscious of when dealing with branding experts. Nevertheless the overall effect of reading about excessive tactics is a refreshing look at one's buying habits and perhaps a healthy revision into how we see ourselves within consumer culture, either as puppets of market laws and trends or decision makers driven by our own needs and standards.

Outline of chapters: Brand washing from the womb to eternal youth

The book starts off with the ground-breaking argument that consumers are targeted as early as in the womb (Lindstrom, 2011: 10). On reflection I found it's not a huge stretch to imagine that in theory this is actually a possibility, however remote. After all, expectant parents are told to play music and talk to the little bundles of joy in the womb in order to establish a bond and a rhythm the child is likely to recognize and find both familiar and soothing. It's unlikely though, that the lulling sounds of Michael Bublé emanating from supermarket speakers is going to have a lasting impression on the little would be consumer, perhaps by spurring the adult versions into a buying frenzy of pregnancy cravings every time they hear 'Haven't Met You Yet' as Lindstrom seems to be suggesting.

Lindstrom goes on by explaining how marketers play on emotions like fear, paranoia (germs, disease, and future self) and other insecurities with the sole purpose of scaring consumers into buying their products. This little titbit is especially aimed at women as, according to studies, women are more prone to fear and guilt than men (Lindstrom, 2011: 39). Backing up this argument, he gives examples of how companies have used global health scares to boost hand sanitizer sales, preying on public panic. Continuing along these lines, Lindstrom explores brand addiction, zeroing in on elements such as social media, foods and

even how lip balm is made addictive and also the alarmingly young age kids are targeted with free online games where shopping is actually made a goal, thus conditioning them even further (*ibid.* 78). All of which are illustrated with funny stories and examples of how companies trigger these cravings with unconscious signals.

Moving on from mothers to men, chapter four is dedicated to the fact that sex sells. I am fairly certain it is not a huge surprise these days. Again the author refers to an fMRI study (Lindstrom, 2011: 89-90) that allegedly supports the most revealing point in the book: men actually notice and are attracted to physically fit men in underwear advertisements. Not a terribly surprising or shocking finding.

Half way through the book, I found an interesting chapter on the topic of peer pressure (Lindstrom, 2011: 104). Here the author points out what can only be described as herd mentality. We all like to think of ourselves as individuals but he makes the argument that, as a group, we tend to follow those who are more self-assured (Lindstrom, 2011: 107). He also implies that we want others to choose for us and we give up this choice instinctively for what we perceive as a consistent dynamic within a larger group we identify with on daily basis. Later in the book the author calls this effect: 'turning our brains off' (*ibid.* 177), meaning we actually prefer someone else to make choices for us. Be it a book, top news item or what face cream to buy.

Wrapping up, the author takes the reader through wonders of nostalgia and days gone by, fame and celebrity product endorsement, the power of spiritual enlightenment and how consumers buy into hopes in jars (Lindstrom, 2011: 181). He manages to illustrate in a very entertaining way how these are potent emotional triggers and effective ways in which companies go about *brandwashing* consumers. And last, but not least, Lindstrom hammers home the ever present big brother inference by enumerating the startling lengths companies go to in data mining. Even more disturbingly, just how much information we as consumers share with the world every time we use our credit card, loyalty cards, go online, update our status on Facebook or tweet. The list goes on and on. Now we are already aware of the fact that our digital footprint is likely to remain for the rest of our lives as Lindstrom very severely highlights (Lindstrom; 2011: 235). He suggests the consumer might resist by deactivating Facebook, cancelling credit cards etc., but makes the bold statement that 'We're far too *brandwashed* to do anything as drastic as that' (Lindstrom, 2011: 236). Here Lindstrom's point of view is more towards the invasion of privacy rather than information gathering as the price for consumer experience. Not taking into account that possibly it's a

voluntary invitation by the consumer, a little tit for tat, perhaps some info for the ease of card transactions?

Lindstrom finally wraps up this myriad of marketing exploitations with a social experiment based on a popular movie called *The Joneses*, demonstrating the influence of word of mouth and trendsetters, in which a family is hired to convince neighbours to buy certain brands, revealing the most powerful hidden persuader of all that is: 'your very own friends and neighbours' (Lindstrom, 2011: 239). Again he defers to fMRI studies to confirm that the greatest persuader is the influence consumers have on each other.

It came as a bit of a surprise that after building up the manipulative and decisive power of companies in the first nine chapters, Lindstrom seems to use the final pages of the book to soothe the readers' minds and insecurities. There is a complete turnaround and he wants the reader to know that it isn't all that bad and in the end it's us, the consumers, that own the brand and companies need to be aware of that fact (Lindstrom, 2011: 252). His final morsel of wisdom is that companies and marketing departments don't really hold the power as it's actually the people who are the driving force and deciding factor. He suggests brands of the future simply be transparent and live up to their promises. Stating that: 'Trust me any brand that doesn't, will be instantly and painfully exposed and reviled. That in the end is what this book is about' (Lindstrom; 2011: 252). The whole conclusion feels like an afterthought inserted late in the writing process, perhaps when reviewing more current research, and is not at all in keeping with the overall theme of the book.

Conclusion: What it boils down to

I have to say, I don't feel this book offers anything ground-breaking and really mostly relies on the notion of digging up the most outrageous marketing strategies to keep the reader interested. Despite the fact that the author draws attention to some aspects of marketing mania that are both interesting and worthwhile, the presentation tends to be repetitive and often overstated. The author seems most interested in taking the reader on a journey of his career. Sort of an unofficial biography told in an entertaining way. It's either deliberate or indicative of the author's writing style that he employs every trick the book itself cautions against and throughout he hits all the right trigger points. I think it's safe to say that consumers are indeed influenced by brands and marketing and buying decisions are not always conscious. This however does not entail a limitless power over free will.

I suppose that in essence my main problems with this book were: the assumption throughout the chapters of the absolute power of brands; the traditional sender receiver perspective; and how the topic was represented making it fairly easy for the reader to become a little suspicious of the book's overall intentions. I mostly feel it's a bit out-dated given all that has been written about consumers, marketing and brands. Such as Holt's (2002) argument, that brands are not capable of hiding their commercial motives as each generation of new consumers learns from experience. It's not until the book's conclusion that the consumers suddenly become empowered. Personally I would have found the subject matter more engaging if the book had focused on the latest developments in brand awareness, rather than different ways that companies and advertisers are possibly manipulating and brandwashing the consumer. Generally, the read left me with the feeling of a piece of work carefully constructed to provoke, rather than inform and perhaps to create enough of a buzz to land it on one bestseller list or another. I'm sure with the right timing and marketing it's a possibility.

Nonetheless I'll happily admit the book does provoke some thought into how to escape brands and perhaps to carve out a little personal space devoid of brand awareness. So all things considered it actually delivers on its main goal set forth in the first pages (Lindstrom, 2011: 255) of jolting the reader into making more informed and smarter shopping decisions. And perhaps the book's general cringe factor will shame us into better understanding buying habits as well as providing a few involuntary 'AHA' moments along the way.

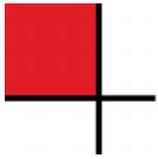
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The impossibility of ethical consumption *

Elizabeth Nixon

Review of

Devinney, T.M., Augur, P., and G.M. Eckhardt (2010) *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (PB, pp. 240, £24.99, ISBN 9780521 74755 4)

In this accessibly written book, Devinney, Augur and Eckhardt pool their differing disciplinary expertise to deliver a slap of realism to research on ethical consumerism. As scholars of strategy, information systems and marketing, the authors take aim at the hysteria of research purporting to show evidence of ethical consumers and large-scale demand for socially responsible products and services. Since so-called ethical products – or at least those marketed as such – are generally seen to have failed in the marketplace, the book sets out to investigate this discrepancy at the level of the individual consumer and their product choices. The bulk of this seven-chapter book therefore investigates ‘ordinary’ consumers’ consideration (or lack thereof) of the social features of products through a mixed methodology in different countries. The authors collate quantitative experimental investigation of individuals’ decision-making processes with reports from interpretive research on consumers’ rationalizations (chapters 3-6 and on the DVD which accompanies the book). Perhaps because of the philosophical tensions of mixed method work or possibly as a result of the multiple authorship, for me the book lacks some overall coherence and strength of message. As a result, the promise of the powerful argument captured in the book’s arresting title is only partially delivered.

* Thanks are due to Mike Molesworth for ever-insightful conversation

Devinney, Augur and Eckhardt's central concern in the book is to rigorously consider the 'facts' (xv) of individual ethical consumer behaviour, rather than advocate the need for ethical consumerism by reiterating consumer demand for ethical products or attempting to recruit more consumers to the 'cause'. The authors therefore claim to investigate consumers' decision-making processes through a 'scientifically skeptical lens' (184) in order to bring objectivity to discussions of ethical consumerism and 'guide corporate and public policy in an informed way' (9). The overarching argument that builds through the book is that the ethical consumer beloved by market research companies, international pollsters and even some academics, is an idealization; a mythical moral hero that fails to conform to the reality of nuanced, 'flawed, self-interested' (185) everyday purchasing. Or, if we were to approach the authors' topic from a post-structuralist perspective, we could say the ethical consumer is a version of the consuming subject created and reproduced through various discourses.

The first chapter opens with a lively exposé of misplaced enthusiasm and belief in the scale of public desire for so-called ethical products. Pointing to the niche position of such products in the marketplace, their low profit and lack of ethical credentials behind the positioning (e.g. the Toyota Prius), the authors go on to identify some of the fundamental problems with the majority of extant quantitative research in the field and the prevalence of that troublesome gulf between reported attitudes and actual purchasing behaviour. The book aims to discard the 'mythological baggage' (9) of ethical consumerism – because it represents an idealization of consumer behaviour – and instead offers up the apparently 'real' theoretical construct of consumer social responsibility (C_NSR). This is a helpful development we learn because the extent to which individuals consider and act on social components of products and services is now measurable and testable, morally-cleansed, and as chapter two explains, can dovetail nicely with the management concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

The book appears to be positioned as a remedial counterpoint to existing work on ethical consumerism/consumption (the terms are used interchangeably throughout) and written with a managerial audience of mainly CSR practitioners and policy-makers in mind. Though the authors understandably avoid attempting to summarise the mountain of scholarship on ethics and morality, there is rather too little discussion of what exactly ethical consumption – or as they prefer to call it *social* consumption – might *mean* in an everyday context for the individual. The possibilities, inconsistencies and hypocrisies are immediately obvious. Apparently suspending judgement as to what is to count as the 'ethical' or 'right' behaviour in the realm of consumption, the authors adopt a position of moral relativism early on: 'Linking consumerism to ethics, with its moral

connotations of absolute right and wrong, is difficult to justify in today's world' (5). However, though they state that their perspective is 'untainted by normative predisposition' (xv), value judgements about consumer behaviour creep into some of the empirical research and interpretation, and the authors round the book off with 'normative conclusions about what can be done to enhance social consumption' (14).

The central thrust of chapter two is to seat C_NSR within a corporate context and emphasise the interplay between customers and firms with regard to ethical purchasing. Though the book is largely pro-corporate, with the final chapter offering suggestions as to how firms can improve their CSR strategies, in this chapter there is some recognition of the ways firms can manipulate the purchasing context and claim social responsibility merely for an enhanced public image. However, there is surprisingly little problematization of the concept of CSR. Glimpses of a mildly critical view on corporate strategies in this chapter could have been coupled with an acknowledgment of how CSR initiatives themselves can act to distract from or even conceal continuing environmental and social damage on the part of corporations. CSR appears to be taken as an unalloyed good and, the authors argue, could be much improved i.e. made profitable, by embracing C_NSR . For those scholars concerned with the ways in which CSR can reduce issues of morality to economic logic and silence positions critical of free market ideology (see for example Muhr, Sørensen and Vallentin, 2010; Fleming and Jones, 2013), C_NSR is likely to be deemed an instrument that extends the colonizing power of neo-liberalism. At times the tone seems to suggest that if only the measurement of C_NSR – rather than the futile search for ethical consumers – was more accurate, corporations' CSR strategies could then be more successful, consumers would purchase more ethical products, and the market would be transformed so as to be less ecologically and socially destructive: 'For C_NSR to survive and not just be a passing fad it must integrate well with existing market forces...it is only when social value becomes core that it becomes relevant and has the potential to make macro-level changes in society' (36).

In chapters three and four, the authors attempt to deal with methodological biases in the literature but without deviating from measuring instruments based on that similarly pervasive mythical figure of the rational economic, information-processing consumer. Investigated in this way then, it shouldn't be surprising that the results of a battery of sophisticated quantitative measures suggest that the majority of consumers' professed intentions to buy ethical products evaporate in everyday contexts through a series of trade-offs with other product features. Compared to functionality and price, and relative to broader social/civic issues as detailed in chapter six, the conclusion is a familiar one to marketing academics and practitioners; 'the picture of the citizen-consumer we have drawn is one of

schizophrenia on the one hand and a modicum of consistency on the other' (164). For most consumers, the information that the workers who made the shoes they want work in sweatshop conditions, or whether they are paid a 'fair' wage is irrelevant. These are additional product 'features' and not very important ones at that.

It seems to me that attending to the consumer's decision-making processes and rationalizations without a more sustained consideration of market forces and capitalist structures can lead to some naivety when dealing with ethics in the purchasing context. At the etic level I found myself wondering not, 'why don't consumers behave ethically?' – the research question posed at the start of the DVD documentary – but rather, 'how could they possibly?' Indeed, the authors recognise the enormity of topics and issues on the ethical agenda when it comes to everyday consumption – from poor working conditions to single-use batteries, from carbon emissions to counterfeit goods (and there is no mention of palm oil) – and they do not fail to recognise the role of corporations in controlling the purchasing environment through their supply chain systems and product mix (29ff). Yet in several places, it seems that the responsibility for ethical deficiencies in business, the on-going damage caused by corporate practices and processes, is placed squarely on the shoulders of the individual consumer. For example, technical analyses of economic value in chapter two concerned with 'whether or not...consumers are prepared to act upon this perceived unfairness or the externalities that exist' (18) are interpreted to show how 'CSR without C_NSR will amount to little more than operational taxation and regulation...value creation from CSR is impossible without C_NSR' (27, 186). Consistent with a neo-liberal discourse of the autonomous sovereign consumer, the DVD commentary also seems to implicitly blame the consumer for 'exhibiting a lack of individual responsibility' and 'pushing the responsibility' to corporations, governments and the media. Confusingly, the commentary then claims that 'consumers demand [?] a model of behaviour from corporations and governments that they themselves do not follow' [23:47] and, after scrolling images of suffering animals and protest marches, a 'lack of the concept of individual empowerment with regards to consumer ethics issues' [15:41] is framed as hindering the development of more sustainable consumption on a macro scale.

An underpinning assumption in the book seems to be that science, that champion of objectivity and rational thought, can be used to debunk the misleading myth of the ethical consumer; a myth that apparently causes much consternation for big business. One consequence of this quest for the objective 'reality' of socio-political purchasing is that the book does not address the role of emotion, an aspect highly likely to be of relevance even in a narrowed focus on product choice (Carroll and Shaw, 2012), even if this 'emotion' is indifference.

Emotional experiences do not surface in the interpretive research either (chapter 5). Indeed, the continuing influence of *homo economicus* leads the authors to concentrate on an analysis of interviewees' rationalizations, when the depth interviews might have been used to dig beneath hypothetical situations and abstractions. This seems like a missed opportunity since, in other places (7, 114, 177) the authors recognise the importance of context rather than any individual's independent proclivity to social consumption issues.

There are other puzzling methodological slips here too. The interpretive research in the book is referred to as 'ethnographic' and a 'video ethnography' (5, 13) but both the DVD and chapter devoted to reporting this work are based on the results of semi-structured interviews using prepared ethical scenarios. The researchers' judgements are clear in their selection of three 'consumer ethics situations' (120) and expressed again when they state that they 'did not find a single participant who revealed "ethical" consumption behaviors' (123), though it remains unclear as to what these might be. Though projective questions were asked, these do not appear to have been deployed in their capacity to reduce or bypass individuals' rationalizations or defence mechanisms, both of which are usually considered a hindrance to developing deeper understandings of the complex, emotional and unreasonable facets of human behaviour.

One of the problems with presenting informants with the discrepancy between beliefs and behaviour – aside from the possibility that it might be a product of oversimplified theories and associated flawed methodologies – is that it forces them to search for plausible-sounding accounts of their actions, to become naïve scientists seeking causes and effects, as the authors acknowledge on page 133: 'When this dissonance was pointed out to them, there was a distinct uneasiness that was alleviated only by calling on the most culturally amenable justification'. Challenging the adequacy of participants' narratives in this way can lead to feelings of intimidation that inhibit self-disclosure. Unsurprisingly, many informants articulated rational-sounding justifications for what may have been a complicated emotional decision, or an action motivated by a confluence of different factors unknown to the narrators themselves. But this interpretive research does not illuminate this complexity. Rather than finding out about interviewees' experiences of consumption and producing an analysis of how and where morality and ethics enter such descriptions, this study has researched how people defend themselves in an interview situation and takes the informants' 'logic' (132) *produced* by the research process as accounting for their lack of ethical concern in their purchasing experiences.

With such a bold title, I expected the book to have a more radical hue. For critical management scholars, the most obvious weakness in a text such as this is

perhaps the lack of serious consideration awarded to a critique of political economy and, in particular, the pertinent insights afforded by an application of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. Though a few signs of a critical perspective pop up in the interpretation of interview data – where issues of labour, exploitation, capitalist production, free markets and economic growth are mentioned in the discussion *and* by participants – they remain undeveloped and sit alongside suggestions for how consumers might be dissuaded from buying counterfeit goods. For example, 'in India, China and Turkey, consumers...may begin to appreciate that higher wages and higher expenditures can benefit the economy' (132). A Marxist reading might therefore point not only to the oxymoronic nature of the 'ethical consumer' but the myth of ethics in capitalism. From such a perspective, it makes little sense to speak of types of social responsibility – consumer or corporate – because such relations are eroded for all by capitalist production and market transactions. Since the rule of the market separates workers from the products and activity of their labour, individuals are distanced from the production process, their fellow humans and themselves. No surprise then that more information about the production processes of consumer goods bears little or no influence on consumers' product choices, or that the majority of consumers surveyed revealed 'a remarkable reluctance...to make consumption choices that include a social dimension' (184). As Cluley and Dunne (2012: 255) observe in their work on ethical consumption, 'to overcome the fetishism of commodities is to overcome the nature of capitalist social relations themselves'. Consumers, managers and owners of capital are all 'freed' from any ethical or moral responsibilities by the hegemony of capital accumulation. Or, to put it more succinctly, they are alienated. Ethical consumption then is not just mythical, it is impossible.

By the end, it does feel a little disappointing that the spirit of the ethical consumer, whose exposure as false is the central argument of the book, seems only to find new form within the alternative construct of C_NSR, one in which researchers' value judgements are not suspended but are deeply engrained. Furthermore, the conclusion that ethical/social preferences are actually expressions of taste, suggests that actions of C_NSR turn out to be just 'consumption as usual...best understood as manifestations of consumption more generally' (39-40). Having lambasted belief in the ethical consumer as a delusion (14, 171, 186), the authors seem to undermine their own argument by promoting C_NSR in its place, thereby revealing their desire to believe in the autonomy of the sovereign consumer:

What we are saying is that people engage in consumption to satisfy their own needs, but are free to define those needs broadly so as to incorporate the welfare of others, even those unseen and at a great distance. This may include their

incorporating environmental, labor, and other social components into their decision calculus; equally, it may be that they choose not to incorporate this information...It is simply an issue of the nature of what diverse individuals find desirable and acceptable. (170)

Devinney, Augur and Eckhardt argue that the ethical consumer is a modern-day Prester John, the legendary king imagined to be riding to the rescue yet forever remaining out of reach. The ethical consumer is thus 'a mythological figure – one that does not, and cannot, exist in its idealized form but has enough human-like features for us to be deluded into believing that it is real because we need it for our salvation' (14). What seems to be missed, however, is that the notion of C_NSR rests on the similarly heroic neo-liberal figure of the sovereign consumer, the vision of the 'free' consuming subject that serves to sustain capitalism ideologically.

Though *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer* may be seen as rather too hard on the individual, too sympathetic to corporations and too naïve with regard to ideology (in consumption and in research), it does raise an important issue for wider debates for marketing and consumer culture scholars. It seems that whatever consumption behaviour is deemed to be ethical or social by researchers, when investigated empirically, it simply fails to possess enough of the radical flavour, socio-political mettle or the pro-active desire for market transformation that makes the field sociologically attractive. As a by-product, the book actually serves to capture something blindingly obvious that perhaps many researchers simply prefer not to see; the irritating conundrum that much of the time many consumers just don't care that much about what *researchers* care about or, indeed, the product, service or experience it is that individuals are seen to be 'consuming'. Taking this idea seriously opens the way to a greater sensitivity to other mythic figures and discursive constructions residing in the multitude of stories we have about consumption, but without neglecting to consider the ways in which these are assembled, by whom and for what reason.

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