



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 (*croynance*) 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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