Repair practices in a virtual smartphone community: Fostering more sustainable usage through branding

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abstract

In recent decades, consumer culture has turned the mobile phone into a marketplace icon. Despite consumers' fondness for the functionalities of these devices, mobile phones come at a considerable cost, leaving both ethical and environmental 'footprints'. This article discusses consumer's repair and maintenance practices of smartphones as outcomes of the constitutive contexts that ethical brands may provide. The objective is to provide a better explanation for the emergence of such practices around organizations. Social practice theory approaches to consumption often consider teleo-affective structures or engagements to be key in transforming bundles of practices and material arrangements of everyday life. The article traces the idea that branding transports affects as consumers appropriate their phones through performances of tinkering and fixing. Inspired by a consumer culture theory reading of social practices, this article conceptualizes brands as an organizational vehicle needed to transport affects. Seen as cultural systems, brands therefore carry the potential to leverage affects towards repair and maintenance practices. Focussing on the role that ethical branding can play in the creation of public encounters with concepts, practices and embodiments of sustainability, the paper presents findings from a netnography of a brand community. In doing so it highlights how brands persuade consumers to introduce bystanders to repair and maintenance practices of smartphones. This article claims that leveraging consumer engagement through ethical branding is a practical and effective way to promote sustainability. Further suggesting that brand sustainability imperatives translate into cultural conversations and political processes that help to imaginatively examine and re-configure the intersectional challenges of sustainability.

Introduction*

Most information and communication technologies (ICTs) are produced in the Global South, where working conditions have exhibited a lack of social sustainability (Litzinger, 2013; Reardon, 2012). Social enterprises, which engage in efforts to improve manufacturing practices, also confront the fact that the bulk of dumped electronic goods enters second-hand industries in the Global South. At the end of its life cycle, a consumer electronic device has spent at most two years as a consumer's intimate companion. However, much of these devices or their components enter landfills, creating both health hazards and causing environmental degradation (Maxwell and Miller, 2012). More sustainable consumption patterns are sought-after to prolong ICTs' lifetime. Here, repair and maintenance practices can be understood as consumer actions that aim to address some of the wide-reaching challenges of sustainability.

Consumer research and cultural studies attend to the collective definitions of worth involved in repair and maintenance (Rosner and Ames, 2014). In contrast, research on marketing and brand management seldom considers repair and maintenance explicitly. Brands and branding contribute to the cultural phenomenon of 'throwawayism' that also prompts some consumers to resist their over-consumption (Albinsson et al., 2010). In sustainability marketing research, Dobscha and Prothero propose to consider exploring 'the overconsumption patterns of the North that then fuel environmentally devastating manufacturing and distribution practices' (2012: 387). As the discourse on conflict minerals has shown that the continuous consumption of scarce natural resources goes hand in hand with the spread of ICTs (Mantz, 2008). Production processes in the Global South are often governed by necrocapitalism, which in the present context circumscribes the way global capitalism profits from disparities in the distribution of wealth and the tacit acceptance of health hazards that govern production processes in the Global South (Banerjee, 2008; Grzinic and Tatlic, 2014). These critical perspectives highlight how labour is subjugated to capitalistic interests that serve to solidify socio-spatial injustices (Chouinard, 2014). Increasingly, brands are held accountable for the manufacturing practices that they assign to their suppliers

(Humphrey and Schmitz, 2001) as well as the burden their products pose to the natural environment (Iakovou et al., 2009). At the end of a product's life, consumers often store their old devices at home, instead of entering them into reuse or recycling systems (Speake and Yangke, 2015), which are in place in many countries.

Brands that diametrically oppose overconsumption and display greater accountability towards stakeholders challenge the prevailing consumption patterns, while working within the existing market system. There have been advances to conceptualize this phenomenon as ethical branding (Rindell et al., 2011) or as instances of social entrepreneurship (Peterson, 2013). These perspectives leave out the repercussions of ethical branding as found in consumer practices. In addition to the meaning that branding creates, consumers co-create meaning as they engage with the product and other consumers. This forms interpersonal relationships centred around brands (Fournier, 1998) yet until now, consumer research studies mention repair and maintenance practices with roots in ethical branding infrequently. The alignment of marketing and consumer research promises to surpass this blind spot and provide a better grasp on market phenomena taking place around organizations (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006).

The next section of this article contributes to an improved understanding of how brands may become emissaries of sustainable practices. This serves to articulate a re-definition of socio-political imaginaries (Castoriadis, 1987), integrating macro and micro perspectives on sociality to grasp consumer-marketplace interactions. In the empirical part of the paper, insights from a netnography on a smartphone brand community in social media illustrate how repair and maintenance practices are grounded in brand community practices. The concluding discussion highlights the significance of repair practices as organizing processes within the existing market system.

Brands as emissaries of sustainable practices?

Market logics are among the 'templates for action and understanding available to most people' (Papaoikonomou and Valor, 2017). Given the ubiquity of brands, it is fair to say that the process of branding is among the logics of capitalist markets into which consumers are socialized daily or learn to resist (Mumby, 2016). When the very process of branding is reworked and transformed away from un-sustainable practices and expresses resistance to capitalist realities, ethical branding stands in a more positive light. In such a scenario, ethical branding appears to be a pragmatic beginning directed at the creation of more sustainable markets (Lehner and Halliday, 2014). Brands that connect stakeholders inside

and outside the organization (Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015) may well pursue the objective of transforming consumerism through ethical branding (Arvidsson, 2011). This faces several transactional obstacles, which stem from macro and micro cultures, as well as legal issues. Yet, such work sees the solution to overconsumption in 'alternative economies as systems of exchange, production and consumption partly or fully disembedded from modes of capitalist exploitation, aiming to empower their subjects and to provision community-based and broader social-environmental welfare' (Campana et al., 2017: 126). Therefore, repair and maintenance practices have to be explained through their embeddedness in consumers' ongoing life and social context (Graziano and Trogal, 2017) rather than by relegating it to the realm of attitudes (Moraes et al., 2012).

For too long, marketing and consumer research located consumption in the realm of decision-making alone (McDonagh and Prothero, 2014). Inspired by methodological collectivism, consumer research increasingly regards consumers as practitioners in multiple everyday contexts. By defining the unit of analysis as repair and maintenance *practices*, the realm of social life that is targeted requires a research approach that is common in sociological approaches to consumption (e.g. Warde, 2017; Woermann, 2017). Such a focus on interactions among consumers targets recurring patterns of social action in order to discern the collective nature of a praxis.

Repair and maintenance practices benefit from an organizational vehicle with a broad reach. Through branding these practices may help transform the dominant mode of social and ecological organization, where it is hoped that brands targeting discrete areas of everyday needs can help to embed sustainability in ways which matter to consumers (Ottman et al., 2006). This would involve value propositions that are directed at the *value-in-use* in consumers' lives (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Brands that seek to foster sustainability have to connect to consumers' identity creation projects (Arvidsson, 2008), in addition to being of use to them. For example, this might be seen in the ways that consumers identify with an ethical brand's attempts to *safeguard* workers' rights in the Global South. Reckwitz (2012) considers artefacts to have a place in social practice theory as generators of affect. Unlike the term emotion, affect connotes with the human body (Massumi, 2017). Since practice studies take into account bodies and minds of participants to a practice affect is increasingly discussed in this literature (Gherardi et al., 2018).

A recent review article highlighted that 'affect maintains and strengthens a problematic social order as much as it contains the potential for transforming it' (Fotaki et al., 2017). This article endeavours to answer the question of how repair

and maintenance practices are nested within branding practices, and how these may lead to the formation of resistant consumer identities. To answer this question, I turn to the meaning that ethical brands give to the objects they produce and sell. This serves to gauge how the distributed nature of affects may arise and constitute latent potential for action (Rai, 2015).

In critical organization studies, resistance to the ruling consumerist paradigm has recently been labelled as insurrection, defined as 'discursive and non-discursive practices that are collective and public, owned and publicly declared, taking a stand, and thus unambiguously oppositional' (Mumby et al., 2017: 1163). Consumer practices of repair and maintenance are examples of insurrection amid a consumerist paradigm of *more and more*. Such phenomena are particularly puzzling when they originate in the branding processes of consumer goods. In post-work movements these practices have been understood as resistance practices (Graziano and Trogal, 2017), yet, simultaneously consumer culture has been regarded as the sole origin of collective consumer practices (Littler, 2009). To account for the meshing of brand and consumer practices, this article invokes Consumer Culture Theory to illuminate the constitutive context in which such repair and maintenance practices thrive.

Cultural approaches to brands offer a more nuanced understanding of the broader context in which consumption takes place, taking discourse and action into account. '[C]onceiving brands as cultural systems ...provides a framework connecting stakeholders inside and outside the organization' (Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015: 9). In critical marketing research such as Consumer Culture Theory, 'the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the market-place, and cultural meanings' (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 868) give rise to a perspective that regards consumption as a set of performances that 'actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods' (*ibid.*5: 871). In this article, Consumer Culture Theory perspectives help to understand the organizing processes emanating from branding. The approach is pragmatic since it seeks to understand how brands practically leverage consumer culture towards more sustainable practices. It thereby answers calls by Gibson-Graham (2006), among others, for a more in-depth understanding of alternative economies within the existing capitalist system.

Sustainability-oriented branding in the market for smartphones – A brief description of the netnographic site, the Fairphone community

The market for smartphones is characterized by few competitors and rapid innovations (Cecere et al., 2015). Most smartphone brands promote the rapid replacement of older devices and while the cost economies for higher-priced smartphones render professional repair worthwhile for most consumers, for the expanding segment of lower-priced smartphones, repair is not economical. The Fairphone (FP) is a pioneering, sustainability-focused brand in the smartphone product category. The FP project and its brand community, the Fairphone Community (FPC), have put forward definitions of *fairness* in this market. In the brand narrative, the term fairness applies to a key objective of the venture: to improve, and raise awareness of, the working conditions of blue-collar workers in the Global South. Labourers involved in the production of the Fairphone device enjoy welfare through fair wages and working conditions. FP also pursues the goal to set up a worker welfare fund to generate further positive impact for labourers. Furthermore, tungsten from a conflict-free mine in Rwanda is part of the current supply chain. These efforts to connect stakeholders around the organization (Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015: 9) can be said to forge 'new forms of solidarity, new forms of resistance, and give voice to marginalized and relatively powerless groups' (Clark, 2009; Mumby et al., 2017: 1175). In addition to manufacturing issues, further sustainability-oriented matters have come to be associated with the FP as users reinterpret brand meanings of fairness.

The first FP product, a smartphone developed exclusively for the European market, was far from 'bug' free. After one year on the market, a brand-hosted online platform was launched to facilitate interactions and mutual support among users, which also engendered a range of face-to-face user group meetings and 'brand fests'. The netnographic site of study, the online forum of the FPC, hosted the discussions that treated problem solving in relation to device malfunctions. A grassroots community who provided crowdfunding to get the production of the device started, remained faithful to the cause and later would often help by providing support to users struggling with the device. The first FP device was sold to 60,000 users within the European Union. This study covers the first 18 months, following the establishment of the brand community forum. Four years after the release of the first FP, the brand announced that they 'would no longer sell parts for the Fairphone 1, and have stopped developing the software upgrade to Android 4.4' (Fairphone, 2017). The economic feasibility to maintain this service over time diminished leading the FP to conclude that they needed to stop supporting this device. Instead, they would focus their efforts on supporting the recent version of the Fairphone. Like other electronics brands such as the Apple Newton, consumers' repair and maintenance practices

persisted, in spite of the brands themselves abandoning support for their own products (Muñiz and Schau, 2005).

Netnographic procedures

This research applies netnographic procedures by using publicly available online information about interactions among users in order to explore the culture of consumption communities (Kozinets, 2002). Most of the data for this research consists of postings that members send each other via the English language community forum. This forum is the primary place in which repair and maintenance practices are shared and discussed. The author has engaged in non-participant observation and after six months began using a FP device. This author's brand community membership provided an additional auto-ethnographic perspective that helped to further empathize with the community practices and its mission. The theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978) towards 'sustainability' guided an initial manual selection of 58 discussion threads (topics) from approximately 200 topics in the Fairphone forum. Some of the selected themes covered included cultural practices, such as day-to-day routines, the work that is performed during smartphone use, and troubles coupled with cognitive aspects or meanings (Lofland et al., 2006); for example: engagements with other electronic devices oriented towards fairness and brand-related conversations. In order to gain an understanding what sustainability means in this context open, and then focused, coding (Saldaña, 2016) was applied to the selected postings. The analysis followed the constant comparative method (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973) and evolved until the cultural themes of the constitutive context were sufficiently condensed.

Findings

> I think FP has a much more innocent image than other big ICT companies and clearly FP owners don't just want to possess the device but spread the word about important issues [societal challenges] as well. (posting)

> Too many people I know have iphones. Every day commuting to university I see the overpriced hardware from a company supporting child labour and slavery. It is exactly the opposite of what we support here. (posting)

These statements from two members of the FPC illustrate that for these sustainability-oriented users, the smartphone is a distinct and controversial consumer product loaded with social, political, and ethical meaning. The conceptual framework of brands introduced earlier serves as a basis to interpret the data. This section delves into the political, social, aesthetic and functional distinctions that the brand community uses to distinguish itself, where repair

and maintenance practices are part of these bundles of distinctions. They are non-discursive performances that provide a form of overt distinction when carried out in public, or they become discursive practices when reported online. Following this, I then describe the performances of *doing* sustainability-oriented smartphone consumption within users' social environments, which implies a diffusion of repair and maintenance practices. Finally, the last section unveils how this brand community endeavours to redefine socio-political imaginaries of smartphone consumption. As the brand is addressing several sustainability challenges, like fair wages for the production workers, product design for reparability, and hosting a peer-to-peer problem-solving platform, the brand's tangible input encourages users to join the *praxis* of sustainability-oriented smartphone consumption.

Repair and maintenance as brand use against 'throwawayism'

High involvement goods are possessions with a marked cultural significance and a utilitarian value (McCracken, 1990: 144). Smartphones belong to this category. Some even go as far as to proclaim that the smartphone has replaced the automobile as a bearer of cultural significance and status symbol. Buying mobile phones once was an exceptional purchase but mass production has made these devices very affordable. Smartphones break down as a normal condition of their existence. For users such technical breakdowns routinely cause a personal crisis, demanding adjustments in users' on-going life (Schatzki, 2016). Buying a new phone to replace an old one was the only option available to most consumers. The repair and maintenance practices that accompany the FP brand promise insurrection to *throwawayism*. The dissemination of such novel practices through the FPC help to contest the routine way of dealing with broken smartphones. The meaning attached to these performances carries a vision of breaking the routine practiced by the throwaway society. Ethical branding provides culturally specific affordances that enable repair and maintenance practices. In this sense, ethical branding, consumer culture and design for repairability have a role to play in transformations towards sustainable practices. In what follows, the meanings that ethical branding attaches to the smartphone device will be discussed.

Evangelizing as found in the practice of disassembling the smartphone

There is a general understanding among brand community members that the movement for fairer electronics thrives on enlightened practitioners who are capable of instructing new comers by two means: online and on-site. In consumer studies to 'evangelize' usually means to promote something enthusiastically, almost as if preaching the gospel. Therefore, evangelizing for sustainability-oriented repair practices is not restricted to a specific brand. Text-

based interactions online provide peer-to-peer problem-solving. Users perform the brand narrative, as they carry out problem-solving procedures on-site. This means that the brand's vision becomes enacted in bodily-mental performances. When a phone is broken, it is sometimes necessary to disassemble it – the tutorials and narratives posted online present how easy it is to take apart the Fairphone, enacting a powerful product feature. This feature is a strength that is directly tied to the value of fixing, which many community members embrace. Committed members promote such practices to inspire people in their social environment to use the FP and *join the movement*. Disassembling the phone simply for one's amusement is a performance feature in itself and part of the impression management users carry out in favour of the brand's mission. Through Fairphone's design for repairability, consumers have the capability to routinely carry out maintenance practices and act on their desire for environmentally sustainable consumption. Bystanders, who witness the performance, become introduced to the perceived benefits of the brand. By evangelizing for the brand, participants display their commitment to the phone's social and ecological justice mission. Seen as performances of sustainability-oriented smartphone consumption, repair and maintenance practices are not isolated phenomena, but are tied to the brand's wider cultural logic. These performances are directed at solving a problem, exercising care and educating bystanders.

The notion of goods as bridges to displaced meanings

The term *displaced meaning* (Barthes, 1972; Derrida, 1976) refers to the process through which humans give meaning to cherished objects and to their relations with them. This term has been widely appraised in Consumer Culture Theory (cf. Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; McCracken, 1990: 116), and also refers to consumers' longing to access 'cultural reserves' (Davis and Kravets, 2005). Pursuing greater fairness in consumer electronics can be such a cultural reserve; it is an example of a higher end that requires the performance of several tasks in order to achieve it. For Barthes (1972) mythification facilitates access to affects. Through participating in the community, users may enter 'affectively significant relations' (Arvidsson, 2011). When product design incorporates cultural reserves, mythification can evoke new affects. With this understood, smartphone devices have the potential to become bridges to displaced meanings of sustainability in the smartphone industry if at least some components of the product display the desired orientation towards sustainability.

> Groups make objects the "objective correlative" of ideals that have been transposed to the [...] future. These objects can be [...] the emblem of any group that looks forward to the realization of ideals that are now unfulfilled. (Firth, 1973; cited in McCracken, 1990)

Branding attaches meaning to the item and therefore usage of the FP device makes sustainability appear accessible, providing a bridge to symbolic-functional notations. Repair and maintenance practices make sustainable usage tangible.

Distinction

The FP is a front-runner in sustainability-oriented smartphones, being also referred to as fair ICT (Herzog, 2015) and is distinctive in this domain. Its marketing approach is based on 'the ability to create affectively significant relations' (Arvidsson, 2011: 268), leading to an 'ethical surplus' (Lazzarato, 1997, cited in Arvidsson, 2011) which is shared and created by the brand *and its community*. This notion entails a:

> sense of the ability to create the kinds of affectively significant relations, the ethical surplus, that are able to tie participants to a project, motivate them to keep supplying their productive input, and give a sense of meaning and purpose to their participation. (Arvidsson, 2011: 270)

The spread of repair and maintenance practices benefits from this ethical surplus. Maintaining the functionality of a device is necessary for any user, therefore, it should be a straightforward task. However, many users would find maintenance difficult, if it were not for benevolent community members, who provide their advice in peer-to-peer problem-solving forums. The brand consists of at least two distinct sub-groups: ethical consumers and hackers. These two sub-groups vary greatly in their level of expertise and their commitment to repair and maintenance practices.

There are *political distinctions* at the brand's core, which are clear and outspoken messages that the brand embraces. Here, the brand narrative about fairness is circumscribed by the term 'agreeableness', namely being appreciative of others, supporting, and expecting others to be equally helpful. The brand's story, deriving its legitimacy for its care for workers, is transposed to the object, arousing positive sentiment in consumers in anticipation of a purchase. Some of the testimonials posted on the FPC-forum exemplify this sentiment:

> Hearing about the Fairphone project got me so enthusiastic about their method of going for a fairer and sustainable electronics market that I wanted to have one to vote with my wallet for electronics that are made with other principles than just profit and cost-efficiency. In addition, the whole vision of Fairphone and the way they are working to make that vision come true makes me very happy and turned out to work like an anti-depressant when reading the site. (posting)

The ethical branding of the FP transports affects with a collective orientation in favour of social and ecological justice. The above posting by an admirer of the

brand may be explained through the anthropological concept of object-meaning: the FP device 'comes to concretize a much larger set of attitudes, relationships, and circumstances, all of which are summoned to memory and rehearsed in fantasy when the individual calls the object to mind' (McCracken, 1990: 110).

The FP device is designed for reparability, so that individual components can be easily replaced. Users are encouraged to do basic maintenance on their phone without needing the support of professional repair technicians. Through collaborating with iFixit (2018), FP users have also published a number of lay-repair guides. Users can carry out repairs with smaller budgets and consequently users also interpret *design for reparability* as fairness vis-à-vis consumers. As this example shows, consumers routinely rework brand meaning; so that, the ethics of fairness become a benchmark for anything the brand plans or decides.

The *social distinctions* within the community are those phenomena that result from immediate contacts among FP users and their social environment outside the group of enthusiasts. The marketing system for smartphones fosters disregard for blue-collar workers in the global supply chain. FP users share an additional political reason for using this device; consumers sense the industry's callous disregard for the external stakeholders involved in manufacturing smartphones. Major players in the industry have become associated with unethical conduct. Within the narrow confines of everyday consumer actions, users resist this development.

A further example of a bridge to a displaced object meaning may be observed in the FPC-forum. One user, introducing himself as a friar from a religious order in the Mediterranean, posted an open question to the community: 'Will agreeableness be accessible to me?' (posting). This user contemplated the purchase of the FP device: 'I promised to live in poverty, chastity and obedience' (posting). While contemplating the use of the FP device in his immediate social environment, this user expressed the desire to proclaim proudly: 'It's possible to be fair and sustainable and free!' (posting)

For highly committed FP users, spreading the message about socio-spatial disparities in the global economic order is second nature. Therefore, dedicated users consider it their obligation to produce a sustained impression of the brand object in their social environment. Bystanders' reactions, or lack thereof matters. Sometimes when the social environment does not respond with sympathy or appreciation, FP users would return to the online forum to discuss what went wrong. Users also shared advice on how they have managed to convince people to buy a FP device, 'evangelizing' (Muñiz and Schau, 2007) by carrying out overt performances of the brand:

> Thing is, I've often heard people complaining that the FP (the device) isn't agreeable at all but these people just have no idea what's behind the whole movement. I most often tell them about the worker welfare fund in the factory in China and the selection of conflict free mines. Those are examples that people understand. Generic comments like "more ethical", "fair" and stuff like that doesn't hit home with many people. (posting)

Product design offers opportunities to accentuate political and social distinctions, in addition to the well-known functional distinctions of smartphones in general. Yet it also offers *aesthetic distinctions* of the product, supporting the meanings that consumers construct (Du Gay et al., 2013). The FP is a future-oriented vision; the individual object (in this case, the FP device) integrates symbolic features of the brand narrative into the design of the product itself. Distinction is a well-known concept in product innovation and bears the advantage of endowing the brand community with a tangible reference point. Signs facilitate that the brand's shared meanings become materialized in the product. Aesthetic clues help FP users to recognize other FP users in their social environment, examples include, the brand's specific ringtone, or the easily removable outer coating. Other, subtler aesthetic clues include an image of a star, which adorns the device and is represented in the corporate logo. When the FP device is disassembled, an image of the contours of the political boundary lines of the Democratic Republic of the Congo appears, as the country hosts a mining industry that supplies ores like tantalum, tungsten and tin, all essential for smartphone components. The star is a common symbol of liberation, and by using the star FP aims to draw attention to the working conditions in the Global South, and visually serves as reminder that for example, the FP is in a struggle to improve working conditions for miners in the Congo, as well as for production workers in China, where most smartphones are currently assembled.

The FP device is a product that aims to make agreeableness accessible. Consumers use it to realize their ideals; thus, it promises an ethical surplus, in addition to the use value of a smartphone. At present, only some ethical objectives may be realized. This marketplace offering has been transformed from a concept of computer ethics into a smartphone. The concept of displaced meaning defies an empirical test in the strict sense (McCracken, 1990: 110). The ethical surplus, which users co-create, is attributable to the affect generated by ethical branding. A dominant cultural theme that emerged from interpretive analysis is that of *the ideal is possible*. This theme reflects the (im)possibility of an absolutely *fair* smartphone and the progress that the brand and its community have achieved towards the sustainability ideal.

The *Functional distinctions* of FP products are concerned with the usability. The FPC draws users with a range of different influences and desires. These users do

not boast that they have the most high-end smartphones on the European market, but rather in terms of hardware design, the pragmatic notion 'for now, this is as good as it gets' applies. Many in the community have product-related knowledge and acknowledge the downsides of using a micro-computer with several bugs, built by a company that is independent of major players in the industry. This trade-off between agreeableness and ease of use shows in this post:

> Even though my FP has some small spleens and childhood diseases I'm quite happy with it. (posting)

There are also dissatisfied users whose expectations vis-à-vis the smartphone were disappointed. Some of these *converts* also share their experience of joining and leaving the FP *movement*. Such public contestations of brand legitimacy are a call to arms for admirers of the brand, who then engage in discussions to find out whether the claims are justified.

Many members of the FPC are highly involved in brand consumption: the practice of evangelizing is combined with displays of product-related knowledge and user experience.

> I have been crunching for science on my FP since day 1. I changed the settings of BOINC [Berkeley Open Infrastructure for Network Computing] to only run at 100% battery charge just to be on the safe side (standard is 90%?) and use all 4 processor cores (was only 2). So far I haven't found any problematic issues. (posting)

In addition to the meanings that the brand narrative projects onto the FP device, a user-culture with distinct sources of meaning has formed around this smartphone. Calls for additional 'functional distinctions' of future models originate in a multitude of locales. For example, in 2014, roughly 30% of users reported having a technical or engineering background (Fairphone, 2014). Many of these tech-savvy users are committed individuals who dedicate their spare time to support newcomers seeking help with the FP device through the forum. Often in online communities the norm of generalized reciprocity serves to lend support to others without an immediate compensation (Onyx and Bullen, 2000). Some tech-savvy FP users, also known as hackers, want to be recognized *as contributors* to the FP which they see as an open innovation project. For them, functional distinction lies in the open design of the FP. Committed users may even threaten to abandon their instant support for newcomers on the FP forum when they perceive Fairphone's lack of appreciation for their contributions :

> We are left absolutely in the unknown about the features of the new device. I personally must say that the whole FP thing cannot be a one way street, I have

posted so many replies in the repair forum to help less experienced users, I somehow expected a bit of appreciation, at least some information [about the release date and features of the new device. It] feels like we are left completely in the dark. For the future, I think information management of the FP can be improved, otherwise I'm out. (posting)

Discussion and conclusion

Earlier accounts of repair and maintenance practices often focussed on grassroots initiatives, which can be seen as subcultures of consumption in their own right (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010). Ethical branding however, recruits consumers with diverse motives towards repair and maintenance practices. The consumption community considered here displays within-group differences, regarding their aptness for repair and maintenance, and their zeal for the social and ecological justice mission of the sustainability-oriented smartphone. The community sub-group of hackers displays a high commitment to tackle the intricacies of consumer electronics and gets involved in problem solving. Here the design of material arrangements transports affect (Rai, 2015) through ethical branding, while the aesthetics of the brand narrative remind users of the sustainability objective that they have pledged to support. Consumers who are less committed to micro-practices of fixing and tinkering benefit from online peer-to-peer problem solving platforms. The online brand community that has formed around the FP is an example of a social context that experiments with devices and strives to develop new practices. The brand community facilitates social interactions by assuring members of their conduct and applying their acquired skills to engage in evangelizing in the social environment. The work-arounds carried out in problem-solving may depart from existing routinized practices. Such deviations may be required while 'generating more sustainable practices [...] before being replaced and re-made in more sustainable ways' (Hargreaves, 2011: 84).

The findings reveal that a constellation of shared distinctions – such as fair ICT in the domains of workers' rights, open software and reparability – combined with peer-to-peer problem-solving-knowledge forms the social foundation of the brand community. This shared meaning ties in with an emotionally laden goal to bring about more sustainability in the smartphone industry. For members of the brand community, the device represents a proof that the ideal is possible. FP users not only share the brand's *good news*, but they also carry out performances of dis- and re-assembling products. These micro-social practices serve to display other aims of the FP project, such as increasing the longevity of smartphones.

Inspired by a social practice-theory approach to consumption, this article has used netnography to redraft sustainability-oriented consumption as an intended rupture of mainstream routines around smartphone consumption to focus on repair and maintenance practices. For critical marketing research, this conceptual shift towards social practices and material arrangements reveals the nexus that exists between everyday practices, the surrounding social environments and online brand community practices.

Ultimately, this paper underlines that the context of product-use tackles sustainability challenges of smartphone consumption *and* production. The limits of repair emerge in the provision of spare parts and presupposing that more smartphone brands will promote repair and maintenance of their devices in the future, more independent suppliers are likely to set up business in the trade of spare parts, bypassing the impasse. Here, initiatives that invest in ethical branding to evoke affects have advantages over the grassroots initiatives who do not. The affects tie users to products and at times manage to install significant social ties among them. Smartphone platforms can provide consumers with the opportunity to break out of routines that hamper sustainability-oriented efforts, for instance, through an easily dismountable phone. Another option might be the disavowal of mainstream product ecosystems through the provision of free software solutions, which might form the basis for specialty brands that compete for broader social-environmental welfare. Repair practices are just one example of how overall e-waste generated through smartphones' short life cycles might be reduced. A break from problematic consumption activities draws closer, when sustainable smartphone practices use branding as an organizational vehicle.

In the digital age, consumers are increasingly connected, possess more information and increasingly demand their consumer electronics goods to be more transparent. Initiatives that draw attention to the origin of their goods and the labour conditions in the production process have begun to garner appreciation for the intersectional challenge of sustainability. While consumers continue to experiment with identity creation projects, identifying and developing opportunities for more sustainable product offerings through a culturally sensitive approach is of increasing value in marketing practice (Thompson, 1997). Companies adopting a service-dominant logic will increasingly work with consumers to co-create products and services to promote an ethical surplus in brands.

Brands are both meaningful objects and costly symbols (Yuran, 2016). Despite the monopolizing tendencies of all branding, and despite its baggage of capitalistic spiritualism, ethical branding uses symbols that interconnect all stakeholders of the organization. Primary value judgements of ethical branding,

which form a visible part of marketing practices, display substantial progress in an industry dominated by the rule of shareholder value. A redefined socio-political imaginary thus entails an ethical surplus through which repair and maintenance practices may become more common. The affectively significant relations that connect stakeholders hold the potential to transform a throwaway society and curb the number of smartphones that end up in landfill.

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