Tweaking ethical consumption: Civic branding in Starbucks cause-related marketing

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Abstract

This paper investigates the rhetorical production of citizenship within contemporary models of ethical branding. Specifically, it examines two cause-related marketing campaigns of Starbucks within a critical-semiotic framework, by drawing on Kenneth Burke's concept of Identification and Jacques Lacan's concept of Desire. I argue that traditional theories of argumentation and ethical consumption fail to illuminate the burgeoning sophistication of ethical branding, which I label civic branding. As I illustrate in this paper, civic branding attempts to untie the problematic "cash nexus" of ethical consumption and interpellate branded citizens rather than ethical consumers. It displaces the ethical commodity with a sense of direct civic engagement, while also exploiting logics of Desire by perpetually enticing individuals back to the well of civic brand identification.

Keywords: ethical branding, cause-related marketing, citizenship, ethical consumption, Starbucks.

0. Introduction: From ethical to civic branding

The past decade of consumer cultural research is defined in part by the ubiquitous upsurge in consumer activism and ethical consumption. Individuals now encounter a plethora of ethical commodities and services, ranging from hybrid automobiles to organic clothing, free-range farming, no-logo t-shirts, and fair-trade coffee, not to mention the resurgence in local farmers' markets and community-centered thrift shops. As activists educate consumers on the social, cultural and environmental impacts of their purchases, culture industries train consumers to perpetually reflect upon their ethical-consuming personas. "Go green," "buy local," "eat organic," "make trade fair," "support independent music," and "keep *our city* weird" are just some of the imperatives headlining contemporary commercial discourse. Increasingly fewer areas of consumption remain safely detached from apparently ethical decisions and/or issues of public controversy (see Lewis & Potter 2011; see also Soper & Trentmann 2008).

Today's intense demand for responsible consumption has in turn created a lucrative market (Nichols & Opal 2005). Corporations engage in fierce initiatives of social responsibility and cause-related marketing, branding themselves as world stewards, committed to making good before making a profit. Indeed, almost all marketers today and many consumers appear to participate in some form of philanthropy or civic action, making ethical consumption nearly impossible to avoid. Put another way, consumer culture is steadily consuming the realm of civic engagement (see Bauman 2008).

This paper investigates the rhetorical production of citizenship within the marketing semiotics of the coffee giant Starbucks. I chose Starbucks primarily because it has been an innovative brand-marketing leader over the past two decades. Then, coffee consumption is uniquely and historically linked to civic engagement. Given its controversial division of labor in the developing world, the

penetration of urban cityscapes by a handful of coffee distributors, and the historical connotation of the coffee house as a haven of public discourse, coffee consumption remains a significant site of ethical consumer culture and an important artifact of cause-related marketing and ethical branding (see Ehrenhalt 2013: 38; see also Ellis 2004: 185-206; Hates 1999; Habermas 1991: 32-59; Wild 2005; and Vogel 2006: 1-2). Specifically, this paper will examine Starbucks' voting campaign of 2008 and the Create Jobs for USA Fund of 2011. I argue these initiatives demonstrate a noteworthy development in ethical branding, which I label *civic branding*. Civic branding goes beyond the semiotics of traditional ethical branding, by displacing ethical narratives and philanthropic initiatives with a sense of direct civic engagement for the consumer. Further, it does not attempt to establish a corporate ethos so much as to invite consumers to participate in the ethos of civic brand identity. I begin my analysis with a literature review of prominent theories of ethical consumption. I then draw on Kenneth Burke's theory of Identification and Jacques Lacan's concept of Desire to consider ethical branding as a site of civic recognition. I situate this literature in the context of Starbucks civic branding. Specifically, my analysis critiques Starbucks' attempt to situate itself outside what Constance Ruzich calls the "cash nexus" of the third space, effectively reinscribing the commercial-public binary into a field of pure civic engagement. I conclude with a brief commentary regarding the political and theoretical implications of civic branding.

1. The status of ethical consumption

Despite widening consensus regarding its scope and significance, theorists differ in their attempts to conceptualize ethical consumption as a cultural practice. While some extol it as an innovative vehicle for social change and corporate resistance (see, for example, Turcotte 2011; Harold 2004; and Lasn 1999), others remain skeptical regarding both its effects and motivations (see, for example, Potter 2010). The situation is complicated by the recent confluence of ethical consumption and brand marketing. Ethical branding shifts attention from the relationship between consumers and commodities to that between consumers and the more nebulous brand dynamic. As Lury (2004) explains, the brand is a precarious interface between the consumer and the corporation that perpetually keeps the brand "objective" just beyond the consumer's grasp. Likewise, many argue, ethical branding functions to disproportionately redirect ethos and political autonomy from the consumer to the brand entity, thereby disempowering ethical consumers in the process. According to Bertilson (2014), the ethical brand is ultimately nothing more than an oxymoron. Similarly, Giesler & Veresiu (2014) recast the socially informed, ethical consumer as an articulation of neoliberal governance regimes. Walz et al. (2014) rethink ethical consumption from a sacrificial practice aimed at social change to a hedonistic experience of "thievish joy." According to the authors, ethical consumers operate under no misguided pretense of changing the world through their purchases. Instead, individuals merely pretend to believe the ethical brand narrative, while simultaneously deflecting responsibility onto the brand itself. Lehner & Halliday (2014: 24) endorse a guarded optimism, noting that while ethical brands "have become retailers' favored tool to introduce sustainable consumption," there remains considerable risk in letting

brands redefine social causes to accommodate their corporate interests. In the light of these realities, Wilson & Curnow (2012) illustrate how many consumer activists are beginning to circumvent ethical brands altogether, favoring direct engagement with their regulating bodies, such as the Fairtrade Foundation.

Others remain steadfast in their optimism. Arvidsson (2014) rejects the cynical aversion to ethical branding in favor of an affective model of entrepreneurship. Arvidsson (2014: 123) argues ethical brands facilitate an economy "where value and virtue coincide" within an entrepreneurial subject. Similarly, Pezzulo (2011) re-contextualizes ethical consumption from a policy oriented endeavor to a vital means of communal affect and civic engagement. Wilson and Curnow (2012) argue that consumer activists are motivated neither by naïve aspirations of social change nor by a hedonistic joy of self-esteem, but by a feeling of solidarity with the exploited and the marginalized. Still, the circulation of criticism appears to outweigh its endorsements.

The dominant criticism of ethical consumption appears to stem from a general skepticism concerning the public aspirations of private entities. Thus, the largest obstacle to ethical branding appears to be the corporate brand itself. Many scholars—and increasingly many consumers—remain unconvinced that profit-driven, corporate brands can facilitate significant social change. In turn, brand marketers are compelled to combat such skepticism—and the cynical consumer it fosters—in their efforts to vie for the loyalty of ethical consumers and consumer activists alike. As argued in this paper, the most sophisticated forms of ethical branding today function by reinscribing the ethical brand outside the cash nexus, thereby facilitating a sense of direct civic engagement with the ethical consumer.

The proliferation of ethical consumption is perhaps best explained by Sassen's (1999) theory of economic citizenship. In the light of the corporate encroachment of public space and an increasingly privatized global economy, Sassen (1999: 112-113) predicted individuals would begin to explore alternative avenues of civic engagement, e.g., ethical consumption. As financial institutions such as the World Trade Organization (hereafter WTO) and International Monetary Fund (hereafter IMF) begin to play increasingly larger roles in regulating public policy, she predicted, many citizens would opt to lobby these non-governmental organizations instead of their elected officials. Mathieu's paper poignantly foreshadowed the historic Seattle protests of December 1999, where both the WTO and Starbucks became targets of public criticism. The events would have a profound impact on the burgeoning phenomena of both economic citizenship and cause-related marketing, particularly for Starbucks.

Mathieu (1999) offers one of the earliest rhetorical critiques of Starbucks ethical branding. Mathieu situates the ethical brand narrative within Sassen's framework of economic citizenship. She argues the narratives help interpellate ideological subjects, i.e., consumers, by inducing a form of *scotosis*, or selective blindness, encouraging consumers to remain "thinking and acting within the frames offered" (Mathieu 1999: 115). The narratives translate needs such as "I am sleepy" into the need for gourmet coffee or, more specifically, "a doppio almond espresso ristretto from Starbucks" (Mathieu 1999: 118). Alternatively, Starbucks also creates ethical narratives illustrating its good will, thereby translating the desire to help the poor into that same need for gourmet coffee (Mathieu 1999:

122-123). All of these narratives cooperate to "justify themselves, their products and the economic system" (115). Eventually, consumption and civic engagement become two sides of the same coin.

Mathieu's focus on ethical narratives reinforces the rationalist paradigm of rhetorical criticism. Historically, critics have treated advertising as a form of argumentation, which can be discussed in the argumentative model outlined by Stephen Toulmin (1957): claim, evidence and warrant. Advertisers persuade consumers that a purchase is worthwhile (claim) based on verbal or visual statements about a particular commodity or service (evidence), which are presumably desirable to the potential consumer (warrant). For example, *Buy this soap because it is stronger, and stronger soap will make you cleaner, which will make you smell prettier*, and so on. Gradually, cultural critics developed more sophisticated theoretical frameworks, by drawing on branding, psychoanalysis, semiotics, simulacra, symbolic capital, etc. Interestingly, however, critiques of ethical consumption appear stuck in the model of rational argumentation outlined above. For example: *Buy this product (claim) because it supports a good cause (evidence), which will make you feel better as a citizen-consumer (warrant).* Although the framework is useful to consider the interpellation of citizen-consumer subjects, it ultimately fails to address the rhetorical production of brand marketing.

Lury (2004: 3) defines the brand as "a set of relations between products (or services) in time". Contemporary brand marketing became popularized in the mid-80s as innovative companies began to emphasize brand image over product functionality (Lury 2004: 58). This strategic marketing shift dramatically changed the landscape of consumer culture, particularly concerning practices of conspicuous consumption (see Veblen 1994). From a Lacanian perspective, the logic behind brand marketing is that of Desire. Marketers do not so much rationally "persuade" consumers to purchase commodities as much as "invite" them to find recognition by participating in a fantasy world of cultural values—the brand dynamic. Still, the brand "objective," as Lury calls it, is never attained, thereby perpetually fueling the need to consume. Rhetorically put, brand marketing favors identification over argumentation. According to Kenneth Burke (1952), humans induce each other to action not through rational argumentation, but through a process of *Identification*, the point at which separate interests are mutually joined (Burke 1952: 55-59). The prospect of Identification is made possible through the process of *Consubstantiality*, the practice of being with one another. Whereas absolute Identification is ultimately impossible, as the two parties remain substantively distinct, consubstantiality functions as the perpetual commitment to overcome difference. We may think of ethical marketing as the commercial practice of consubstantiality. Marketers exploit the consumer need for recognition/identification by offering a host of consubstantial practices, none of which can satisfy the consumer's Desire. As Lury explains, "[T]he brand is not a matter of certainty, but is rather an object of possibility" (Burke 1952: 2). Although the brand objective remains perpetually out of reach, consumers are allowed to temporarily connect with it through material purchases. Thus, we may consider the commodity as a physical placeholder of the elusive brand objective—what Burke calls consubstantiality, or what Lacan (2004) calls the objet petit a. I argue the elusiveness of brand marketing, coupled with the disappearance of civic space outlined by Sassen, is precisely what fuels the logic of civic branding.

Before moving forward, let us consider some exemplary statements regarding the dominant critique of ethical branding. Mathieu (1999: 122), for example, explains: "The advertisement of [Starbucks'] donation practices, as well as a health-care package available to part-time employees at its retail stores, allows Starbucks to create a reputation as an ethical, global-friendly coffee purveyor". Similarly, Potter (2010: 123) describes ethically branded water as "the linking of ethical associations to already existing brands". Scrase (2011: 65) observes, "an important element to Fair Trade has been the stories of its social and community successes that accompany the marketing of its products". Keywords here include, "reputation," "associations," and "stories." In other words, companies sell themselves to consumers based on ethical narratives and other classical appeals. Such critiques function to reinforce the classical model of argumentation, and specifically the Aristotelian notion of ethos, outlined above.

Harold (2004) provides a valuable alternative. In her paper, "Pranking Rhetoric: Culture Jamming as Media Activism," Harold draws a distinction between "culture jammers", on the one hand, and "pranksters" on the other. Jammers, she explains, attempt to overturn the system, sometimes by force and at other times through mockery. In either case, they oppose the system by exposing its contradictions in the hope of overturning it. Perhaps the most notable example of culture jamming is Kalle Lasn's *Adbuster's Magazine*, which features satirical ads poking fun at corporate consumer culture. Pranksters, by contrast, comprise a small contingent of consumer and media activists who do not attempt to overturn the system so much as play within it, pushing its boundaries to their extremes and ultimately rearranging them. They engage in a form of "rhetorical jiu-jitsu," which utilizes the logic of consumer culture to their advantage, rather than oppose them directly (Harold 2004: 191). In this way, pranksters "reconfigure the structures of meaning and production on which corporate media and advertising depend" (Harold 2004: 209). An example of pranking would be to post a nonsensical advertisement in the white pages, that is neither genuine nor satirical, but instead calls into question the form and function of advertising itself. In doing so, pranksters reinscribe the commercial-public binary into a larger textual field and renegotiate the power dynamic between corporations and the public. Whereas culture jammers reinforce the dominance of commercial culture by opposing it, pranksters blur the boundaries between the public and private spheres altogether.

Pranking rhetoric offers a valuable lens through which to consider the evolution of cause-related marketing. We may consider civic branding an attempt to prank, or "fold," the private-public binary by playing with the logics of corporate social responsibility and civic engagement. Traditional models of corporate philanthropy and ethical narratives only reinforce the private-public binary by emphasizing the corporate need to give back to the community. Civic branding, by contrast, reinscribes the private-public binary into a larger textual field of civic engagement. Instead of crafting consumption and civic engagement as two sides of the same coin, civic branding aspires to melt the coin into singular practice.

2. Starbucks "ethical marketing" history

Coffee consumption has long occupied an important space in public culture. Historically, the coffee house provided the primary material space for civic and intellectual discussion (Cowen 2005; Hattox 2002; Habermas 1991). Yet, by the mid-90s, controversy began to surround the coffee house itself, as corporate chains, most notably Starbucks, began to permeate their urban environments. Many perceived Starbucks as bullying its independent competitors out of business, while also sterilizing the once authentic "third space" of the coffee shop. Criticism percolated as consumers learned the economic exploitation of cheap labor that undergirded coffee production in the developing world. Civic unrest came to a head outside the WTO summit in Seattle 1999, where ten thousand protesters flooded the streets to voice their concerns with unrestrained global capitalism (Meyer 2009: 45-46). Although the WTO bore the brunt of the protests, NGOs were not the only targets. Corporations such as Starbucks, GAP and Nike became brand metonyms for the dark side of global capitalism (Thomas 2000: 158). Iconic images of brick-smashed storefronts became a haunting reminder of public frustrations, exercised ironically by some of Starbucks' ideal clientele—civically engaged youth with disposable income—and exercised ironically in Seattle, Starbucks' birthplace (Meyer 2009: 43). In turn, the Seattle protests compelled Starbucks into the foray of ethical consumption and engage in a swift onslaught of cause-related marketing campaigns by the turn of the 21st C.

In 2000, a few months after the Seattle protests brought media visibility to the social and economic realities of global capitalism and Starbucks' participation in this process, Starbucks teamed with TransFair and the Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International (FLO) to begin purchasing a limited amount of fair-trade certified coffee (Starbucks 2008). By many accounts, the gesture helped bolster the coffee behemoth's fledgling public persona. Yet in 2001 Starbucks developed its own ethical sourcing guidelines, CAFE (Coffee & Farmer Equity), making it difficult to independently evaluate its measures (Starbucks 2012a). For example, while a 2008 article revealed that only 6% of Starbucks' sales were fair trade certified (Hickman), Starbucks nevertheless bragged that 86% of its coffee was CAFE verified in 2011 (Starbucks 2008b). While Starbucks also boasts about being the largest purchaser of fair trade coffee, the statistic is arguably less impressive relative to its size as the world's largest coffee proprietor. Nevertheless the company did make a number of significant changes to its coffee production. In 2004, it opened its first Farmer Support Center in San Jose, Costa Rica. Starbucks then switched to an environmentally friendly paper cup in 2006 (Starbucks 2012a). Two years later, it was forced to increase its cause-related marketing after receiving a firestorm of criticism for allegedly wasting significant amounts of water in its UK cafés (Sweeney 2009). These programs and campaigns would ultimately culminate in the 2008 Shared Planet Initiative, still practiced today.

The Shared Planet Initiative comprises a host of environmentally and economically philanthropic programs, operating in both Starbucks cafés and its international sourcing centers. Ethos Water, for example, donates five cents of every bottle sold to its water, sanitation and hygiene-education

programs across the globe, having thus far provided over six million dollars in support of regions where Starbucks coffee is produced (Starbucks 2012c). Starbucks launched its RED credit card in 2009, which contributes to the RED Foundation, dedicated to fighting the spread of AIDS in Africa (Starbucks 2012d). Thus, it is difficult to find a global issue Starbucks has not addressed over the past decade. Additionally, Howard Schultz remains one of the most politically outspoken CEOs today. In 2012, Shultz even inserted the Starbucks brand into the national debt controversy, encouraging baristas from the Washington DC area to write "Come Together" on all of their cups the day before the "fiscal cliff" deadline on the final week of December (Eidelson 2013). Schultz also sponsors and occasionally guest hosts the MSNBC talk show *Morning Joe*. Perhaps one of the most controversial issues embarked by Starbucks was U.S. unemployment, as evidenced by its Create Jobs for USA Fund in 2011, that is examined in the second part of my analysis. Indeed, no area of public discourse appears outside the realm of Starbucks civic engagement.

The ethical narratives of Starbucks have garnered significant scholarly attention over the past fifteen years. Still, its innovative rhetoric of civic branding demands further investigation. In the following analysis, I critique the discourse of civic branding in the Starbucks voting and jobs campaigns. I make three claims: First, Starbucks does not merely appeal to pre-existent ethical consumers (Geisler and Veresiu 2014). Drawing on a Lacanian framework of Desire, I argue Starbucks interpellates a citizen-consumer-subject whose civic recognition may be found in the Starbucks brand. Second, by drawing on Ruzich (2008), I argue Starbucks designs its campaign outside the cash nexus to assert itself as a genuine civil servant rather than merely a philanthropic corporation. Third, I argue these strategies function to construct a Starbucks-civic-brand identity in which the brand itself becomes the ethical-consumer-citizen's ultimate objective and source of civic identity.

3. Coffee for Voting

In October 2008, one month before a U.S. presidential election of monumental proportions, Starbucks engaged in a provocative campaign. Those entering their coffeehouse on Election Day would receive a free cup of coffee after simply telling the barista she or he had voted. No purchase necessary, no strings attached. One the on hand, the gesture of good will emulated a long tradition of political candidates treating their voters and staff to a cup of coffee after a hard-fought campaign (Trent, Friedenberg & Denton 2011: 327-332). On the other hand, it demonstrated a provocative rhetorical shift in Starbucks ethical branding. Starbucks marketed its initiative through a one-minute television ad, an unusual choice given its scarce use of commercial advertising (see Schultz & Yang 1997: 248). The brand typically favors savvy product placement over direct commercial engagement, perhaps speaking to the sophistication of the Starbucks brand and its ideal consumer. The strategy is especially common for high-end retailers who view the outlet of the advertisement as a reflection of the brand itself. The voting commercial is not an artless aberration from its proven marketing formula, however. As I will discuss below, Starbucks' typical un-involvement with commercial advertising helps facilitate the public spirit of its endeavor.

The one-minute commercial features only a written text. The entire message is set against a simple gray backdrop, which only the most distinguished consumer will recognize as a patented trademark of Starbucks. The image is accompanied by an abstract piano solo, which reaches crescendo at the precise moment the ultimate purpose—as well as Starbucks' authorship—of the advertisement is revealed. Through an anonymously written script, the Starbucks (2008a) advert begins:

> What if we ALL CARED enough to vote? Not just 54% of us, but 100% of us? What if we CARED as much on NOV. 5th as we care on NOV. 4th?
> What if we CARED ALL of the time the way we CARE SOME of the time? What if we CARED when it was INCONVENIENT as much as we CARE when it's CONVENIENT? Would your COMMUNITY be a better PLACE? Would your COUNTRY be a better PLACE? Would our WORLD be a better PLACE? We think so, too.
> If you CARE enough to VOTE, we CARE enough to give you a free cup of COFFEE (Period replaced by the image of a Starbucks coffee cup).
> Come into STARBUCKS on NOV. 4th, tell us you VOTED, and we'll PROUDLY PROUDLY (in even bigger font) give you a TALL cup of brewed COFFEE on us.
> You & Starbucks: It's BIGGER than coffee. (Spot ends with an image of the Starbucks Coffee logo).

The message communicates citizenship rather than coffee. It thrives on civic engagement rather than consumption. It also goes beyond the attempt to interpellate citizen-consumers. To fully appreciate the public quality of the message, one must consider that the ad circulated during campaign season, when television viewers are bombarded with political messages throughout the evening and the week. Individuals grow accustomed to televised messages interpellating them as citizens rather than consumers. The dynamic allows Starbucks to minimize its commercial presence. Its signature name and iconic siren logo do not appear until nearly the end of the commercial, which, only then, do individuals recognize as a commercial. The ad aims to interpellate a public citizen exhorted to vote, rather than an ethical consumer exhorted to purchase. The notion of ethical consumption is eclipsed by the prospect of pure civic engagement. The ideal audience is not an ethical consumer at all; s/he is first and foremost an engaged citizen. Consumption becomes an afterthought—literally a reward—for civic engagement rather than one's vehicle. As Harold (2004: 196) contends, Starbucks "folds" the advertisement into the form of a public service announcement.

Additionally, Starbucks constructs a framework of civic engagement that is intentionally vague. As Lury (2008: 15-16) explains, brand marketing thrives on abstract and ambiguous discourse. Rather than utilize specific narratives to exhort consumption, marketers must situate the brand within a fantasy world of cultural values to which individuals can aspire. Likewise, the voting initiative defies narrative discourse. It refuses even to entice individuals with the promise of philanthropy. The text opens with a provocative question: "What if we all cared enough to vote?" The question then quickly transforms into a series of new questions regarding citizenship and community. No substantive answers are provided.

It offers more questions than assertions. Viewers are left with only a vague sense of citizenship embodied by the Starbucks brand. It utilizes ambiguous concepts such as CARE, COMMUNITY and PLACE alongside those of VOTING and STARBUCKS. In effect, Starbucks does not so much link itself to a charitable cause as much as it *becomes* civic engagement. Whereas traditional cause-related marketing typically situates the purchase as a means to philanthropy, Starbucks treats civic action as an avenue into the Starbucks brand. Civic engagement becomes the brand-objective.

Non-traditional presentation reinforces the ad's alternative form. With no actors or spokespersons present, the entirely written text appropriates the zine-screen aesthetic of a bare-budget social advocacy group (Dunn & Farnsworth 2012: 136-137). Nor does the text appear in the traditional linear, top-down, left-right format. Instead, words appear from all directions on the screen, interrupting old sentences to form new ones, often contradicting the meaning of the previous sentence by adding or changing a word. The playful sequences and disruptive presentation of the message synecdochally reinforce the campaign's ultimate aim to disrupt and subvert the traditional cause-related marketing formula. It also disrupts the linear logic of ethical narratives typically situated within cause-related marketing campaigns. Even the Starbucks name appears as an unexpected surprise to the otherwise public message.

Above all, the voting initiative facilitates Starbucks' stake as an authentic "third space," originally theorized by Ray Oldenburg. In his seminal work, *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg (1989) argues that third spaces are necessary to the maintenance of civic discourse in a democratic society. Shultz (2011: 278) remains vocally committed to protecting the sanctity of the third space, where people are invited to stay and converse, rather than consume and leave. Still, not everyone is convinced. In "For the Love of Joe: The Language of Starbucks," Ruzich (2008) turns to Oldenburg directly:

> . . . [T]he development of an informal public life depends upon people enjoying one another outside the cash nexus. Advertising, in its ideology and effects, is the enemy of an informal public life. It breeds alienation. It convinces people that the good life can be purchased. (as cited in Ruzich 2008: 11)

Ruzich argues the cash nexus precludes Starbucks from operating as a genuine third space. Starbucks may appear a harmless community center, but at the end of the day it is just another corporation interested in profit over people. Interestingly, Ruzich's article also appeared in 2008, the same year as the featured ad.

I argue the 'Voting' campaign demonstrates a sophisticated attempt to untie the cash-nexus dilemma. By drawing on Harold (2004: 191), the ambiguous branding initiative aims to reinscribe the commercial-public binary into a "larger textual field" where individuals are invited to challenge the proper roles of corporations and social activists. While this may not officially move the Starbucks Corporation outside the cash nexus, it nevertheless helps reinscribe the Starbucks brand into the realm of civic engagement for many consumers. Specifically, the absence of a cash transaction allows for the emergence of Starbucks as a "civic brand," a nebulous site of public signification lacking any specific, tangible or political content. Unlike commodities and causes, which are localized and temporalized,

brands appear to transcend time and space (Lury 2004: 44). The brand is nowhere and everywhere all at once. Whereas a cup of fair-trade coffee or a bottle of Ethos Water is spatially and temporally constrained by a specific narrative, the voting initiative is abstract and elusive as it eternally absorbs civic engagement into brand signification.

The voting initiative raises the stakes for ethical branding. In many ways, it functions as an implicit response to the dominant critique by scholars such as Ruzich. The campaign appears to be well aware of Ruzich's (1999) cautionary remarks to ethical consumers:

> Consumers who patronize the chain should examine the in-store language for what it is—an advertising campaign, which to be successful must have an element of truth, but which, like all advertising, should be scrutinized and recognized as a high-stakes effort to manipulate, persuade, and sell. (Ruzich 1999: 440)

In the light of Ruzich's warning, Starbucks carefully refrains from advertising, persuading and selling. Instead, it folds the traditional binary of ethical consumption into a new form of civic-brand engagement, devoid of commodities and cash transactions.

To summarize, the Starbucks 'Voting' campaign indicates a transition in ethical branding from the construction of ethical narratives to the construction of direct civic engagement experienced as brand identification. It undermines the dominant critiques leveled against ethical consumption. It also makes it increasingly difficult for consumers to determine where commercial culture ends and where public culture begins. By removing the ethical commodity from the equation, Starbucks effectively reinscribes the commercial-public binary into a field of civic discourse embodied by the brand itself. Voting becomes a sign of Starbucks, and Starbucks becomes a sign of civic engagement. According to the logic of civic branding, there is little distinction between the two.

4. Create Jobs for USA Fund

In 2011, Starbucks ventured into a new realm of civic engagement as it attempted to tackle the economic recession. Specifically, the coffee purveyor invited individuals to donate five dollars to its Create Jobs for USA Fund, established to help fight unemployment and boost the American economy in the wake of the 2009 recession. The initiative came at a precarious moment for the nation's economy, as the unemployment rate had reached over 10% for the first time in 26 years (Goodman 2009). The fund was particularly cavalier in its attempt to engage a sensitive and partisan political issue. Whereas corporations typically choose non-divisive causes to obviate public controversy, Starbucks chose public controversy as its site of civic engagement. In this Section, I critique the Create Jobs campaign by advancing my three initial claims. First, Starbucks aims to interpellate citizens rather than ethical consumers. Second, Starbucks continues to move outside the cash nexus, this time by removing the ethical commodity rather than cash. Third, these dynamics cooperate to reinscribe the commercial-public binary into a flattened field of civic engagement. I situate these rhetorical strategies within Lacan's theory of Desire and Burke's concept of Identification.

Starbucks announced its Create Jobs campaign through a provocative television commercial, adopting a similar aesthetic to that of its voting initiative three years earlier. Accompanied by classical music and set against a zine-screen backdrop, a written text begins to unfold. Again, Starbucks hides its authorship until nearly the end of the ad. Against a red canvas with a white, cartoonish sketch of the United States placed center, a statistic in blue writing appears (bold font is used here to demarcate where Starbucks employs a deep blue):

> 8.3 % OF US REMAIN OUT OF WORK. TOGETHER WE CAN CHANGE THAT. SMALL BUSINESS: IT'S THE BACKBONE OF AMERICA'S WORKFORCE. WHEN IT GROWS JOBS GROW. AND WE HAVE AN IDEA THAT CAN HELP. DONATE $5 TO THE CREATE JOBS FOR USA FUND AT A **STARBUCKS** OR CREATE JOBS FOR USA.ORG. YOUR DONATION WILL GO INTO A FUND TO CREATE AND SUSTAIN SMALL BUSINESS JOBS IN COMMUNITIES ACROSS AMERICA. YOU'LL GET A WRISTBAND TO SHOW SUPPORT. **THE STARBUCKS DONATION** HAS DONATED $5 MILLION TO SHOW OURS. ALL OF US **WORKING TOGETHER**. INDIVISIBLE.

Interestingly, neither coffee nor consumption is mentioned throughout the ad. Instead, the commercial fosters a sense of national identity through the incorporation of American colors and the collective rhetoric of "us" and "we." Zine-screen aesthetics reinforce the tone of a grassroots activist campaign, while the durable, circular wristband functions as a symbol of American indivisibility. On one level, the message is clearly designed to induce a sense of American pride and empowerment facilitated by the Starbucks initiative. It also appears to perpetuate the traditional, philanthropy model of ethical consumption, where consumers are encouraged to donate to a given cause. On a deeper level, however, I argue the commercial fosters a provocative civic-brand identification that cannot be reduced to the traditional narrative appeals of ethical consumption.

First, Starbucks forges a new narrative in which the citizen-subject is split and forced to re-establish its ego through Starbucks brand identification. We may view the narrative from within the framework of classical dramatic structure: exposition, climax and resolution Starbucks exposes the issues of unemployment and economic stagnation. The ad eventually reaches its climax as Starbucks offers a solution to the problem. The resolution is the utopic implication of Americans working together. Interestingly, the perspective shifts at the turn of each stage in the drama. In the exposition, the pronoun *we* denotes an American public struggling to find work. There is a shared collective identity. The tone quickly changes, however, in the climax of the ad. The text continues, "We have an idea." At this moment, the universal *we* is broken into two groups, *we* (Starbucks) and *you* (the individual). For the first time, Starbucks distinguishes itself from the down-and-out audience. The schism functions to fuel the audience's desire for civic-brand recognition, which is ultimately offered in the resolution.

From a Lacanian perspective, the schism is analogous to the mirror stage of development, at which point the subject first recognizes itself and its environment as distinct from one another (Lacan [1966] 2006: 75). The double recognition is mutually constitutive. It is also twofold in that it produces

an independent subject on the one hand, but, on the other, it also produces a lack, insomuch as the subject will now perpetually attempt to restore the rift into its previously singular identity, the restoration of the subject and its Other. Lacan refers to the production of this lack as Desire. Although Desire cannot be fulfilled, as restoration is ultimately impossible, individuals will attempt to fill the void of the Other with endless finite objects, what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*. Here the work of George Rossolatos and Margaret Hogg (2013) proves especially valuable. In their recent examination of the consumption of music commodities, the authors supplement hedonistic theories of consumption with a Lacanian reading of jouissance. They explain, "In the case of jouissance consumption, subjectivity yields to a loss of selfhood through a ritualistic act of fusion with others" (17). In turn, the theoretical framework moves "from perspectives which presuppose the existence of distinctive egos towards an approach that prioritizes 'fusion' and 'communion' among consumer-group members" (29). Similarly, I argue, jouissance consumption is a vital component of civic branding.

In the jobs initiative, Starbucks consciously distinguishes itself from the ethical-consumer subject. The Starbucks brand of civic engagement is inserted into the realm of the Other, forcing the ethical-consumer subject to struggle for recognition through the objet petit a of the donation. Starbucks then distinguishes itself further by noting its $5 million opening gambit, a number impossible for most Americans to match. In this way, Starbucks both severs the citizen-subject from its collective identity and simultaneously offers itself as the only viable path to restoration. The prospect of restoring the collective American *we* is made clear in the resolution of the ad. Through "your donation," the individual *you* is provided an opportunity to rejoin the American *us,* once again, "Indivisible." In Burkean terms, the donation functions as a practice of consubstantiality with fellow Americans. Still, the subject is prohibited from full identification. The Starbucks brand appears more American than the American citizen subject, as evidenced by the deep blue used to distinguish its name from the rest of the text. The prospect of reestablishing American indivisibility is offered only through brand participation. Interestingly, as Raymond Williams (1977) observes, the term *individual* originally connoted one's indivisibility from his or her larger social collective (161). Here Starbucks appears to exploit both connotations, capitalizing on the individual-social split, while alternatively offering the wristband as a method of consubstantiality or, for Lacan, the objet petit a. It is just as much a drama of personal identification as a drama of employment.

Second, the narrative functions to reinscribe the commercial-public binary further outside the cash nexus. Individuals are never solicited to buy or consume. Rather than donate commercial proceeds, Starbucks establishes a separate fund. It even employs a .org address, repositioning the brand alongside independent charities as opposed to charitable corporations. The form of the campaign is parallel with its voting counterpart. Yet, whereas the voting campaign highlights coffee consumption devoid of capital, the Create Jobs campaign highlights capital devoid of coffee. Money is exchanged in the form of donations rather than proceeds. The distinction is crucial for Starbucks to distinguish itself from traditional corporate philanthropists and establish itself as a genuine civil servant. The public nature of the campaign is reinforced by the explicitly public nature of the issue it addresses.

As opposed to many corporate causes, national employment is a specifically public issue. Likewise, the interpellated subject transforms from an ethical consumer into civic servant.

According to Lacan, Desire takes form through acquisition of the *objet petit a*. In ethical consumption, the *objet petit a* typically takes the form of an ethical commodity. Yet, as we have already illustrated, the presence of an ethical commodity would only undermine Starbucks' attempt to remove itself from the cash nexus. Thus, Starbucks replaces the ethical commodity with the cause wristband. Cause wristbands are typically associated with philanthropic agendas outside commercial culture. Perhaps most notable is Lance Armstrong's Livestrong Foundation, fighting cancer. Other causes include fighting smoking, breast cancer, AIDS, racism, and bullying, among others. Wristbands are typically awarded/purchased upon donation to a given cause, each cause organized by color. The popular practice has merited both praise and blame. While generating charitable donations on the one hand, it also arguably reduces these charities to fashionable signifiers, on the other. It also casts a shadow of impropriety regarding the use of proceeds (see Pineda 2012). For better or worse, cause wristbands have become an icon of civic engagement, as well as an important visual metonym for many social causes.

By appropriating the cause-wristband, Create Jobs blurs the boundaries between ethical brands and nonprofit organizations. Replacing the ethical commodity with a cause-related wristband, Starbucks rejects the corporate model of philanthropy in favor of direct public action. In turn, Create Jobs appears almost completely outside the nexus of commercial culture. Starbucks also distinguishes itself from other corporate funds, such as the Ronald McDonald Foundation. Whereas the latter relies on donations typically taken in the form of change at the end of a commercial transaction, the Create Jobs Fund requires no commercial transaction whatsoever. The purchase of the wristband is carefully separated from the purchase and consumption of coffee altogether.

To summarize, Create Jobs extends Starbucks' endeavor into the realm of civic engagement by folding the logics of ethical consumption into the practice of citizenship. Through a host of semiotic devices, Starbucks preempts dominant critiques of ethical branding in its continued effort to untie the cash nexus in which it is implicated. It displaces philanthropy with social/political action, the ethical commodity with the cause-wristband, and the ethical consumer with the interpellated citizen. Finally, it exploits the logics of human Desire to perpetually entice individuals back to the well of Starbucks brand identification.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to illuminate the rhetorical production of citizenship within the semiotics of Starbucks civic branding. It illustrates an important shift in ethical consumption from the construction of ethical narratives and commodities toward the brand marketing of civic engagement. As evidenced by its respective coffee and jobs campaigns, Starbucks remains an innovative leader in cause-related marketing. The brand aims to push the boundaries of ethical-consumer culture and reinscribe the commercial-public binary into a flattened surface of civic engagement. Yet, by pushing discursive

boundaries, Starbucks also narrows the scope of its citizenship. To borrow from Mathieu, Starbucks facilitates a mode of scotosis where consumer-citizens must strain to see citizenship outside the framework of brand marketing. Through a sophisticated deployment of initiatives, Starbucks complicates the traditional criticism leveled against it. Furthermore, it incorporates innovative visual devices such as zine-screen aesthetics to foster a sense of grassroots activism. Starbucks removes the ethical commodity to situate itself outside the cash nexus and assert its coffeehouse as a genuine public (third) space. It aims to interpellate branded citizens rather than citizen-consumers. Above all, it thrives on consumer Desire as opposed to rational argumentation, inviting citizens to participate in a civic-brand dynamic they can never fully grasp. In light of these innovations, Starbucks forces rhetoricians, semioticians and consumer-cultural theorists to reevaluate some of our basic assumptions regarding the rhetorical force of ethical branding. In doing so, we may further combat the scotosis of consumer culture.

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