Green marketing at the store

The socio-material life of a t-shirt

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Abstract

Green products are becoming part of contemporary consumer cultures and part of everyday life. But how are green products constructed? And how do they work? This paper is concerned with the role that marketing plays in the making and circulation of green products. My aim is to illuminate the process of green making. Departing from an understanding of marketing as socio-material practice I analyse how a green outdoor product - a t-shirt - was constructed as green through the marketing practices of the Nordic Nature Shops. Focusing on this retail corporation and examining the practices of trail making, attending and selling I suggest that these t-shirts become green through a process of socio-material inscription. Through marketing practices green moral is generated and linked to the t-shirts giving and potentially making them desirable consumption objects to be used in the construction of consumers green identities. But, this process of green making is, I argue, a difficult accomplishment with ambiguous outcomes. The greening of consumer culture is not an easy accomplishment and commercial greening might also have a number of negative societal consequences.
Introduction

Green marketing literature focuses for the most part on understanding how to accomplish the marketing of green products in an efficient and profitable manner (see also Kilbourne 1998; Meriläinen, Moisander et al. 2000; Ählström, Macquet et al. 2009). Attention is primarily devoted to understanding who the green consumer is (e.g. Burke, Millberg et al. 1993; McEachern and McClean 2002; Baker, Thompson et al. 2004; Dickson 2005), how green consumers make purchase decisions (e.g. Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Harper and Makatouni 2002; Schröder and McEachern 2004), how to communicate with this segment (e.g. Banerjee, Gulas et al. 1995; Zinkhan and Carlson 1995; Charter and Polonsky 1999; Peattie 2002) and if and how to develop green marketing strategies and programmes (Grove, Fisk et al. 1996; Wong, Turner et al. 1996; e.g. Charter and Polonsky 1999; Peattie 2002; Nair and Menon 2008; for an overview of green marketing research see Chamorro, Rubio et al. 2009). For the most part these studies produce highly abstracted, linear and rational accounts of green marketing and green consumption. The work of circulating green products is depicted as a manageable and straightforward matter. To promote green products, to make them part of everyday life, companies need only to find and categorize green consumers, develop offering that will fit this segments and communicate the benefits of the green products effectively. In this literature, green marketing is simply a matter of adapting traditional marketing to environmental issues.

Although very useful from a managerial point of view, what this research misses is the social, cultural and material complexity involved in both the marketing and consumption of green products. As culturally inclined consumer research and critical marketing studies have shown (see Arnould and Thompson 2005; Tadajewski and Maclaran 2009 for overviews of these fields) marketing (like consumption) is socio-cultural. Products are consumed not simply to accomplish certain tasks but to maintain certain ways of lives. Products are part of consumers identity projects (Featherstone 1991; Goulding, Shankar et al. 2002), they can enable the participation in certain consumption collectives (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), be status markers (Holt 1997; Holt 1998) and much more. And marketing practices do more than promote products and make these available to consumers. In contemporary consumer culture, marketing entails more than finding a segment and communicating the benefits of one’s products. Marketing, research has shown, involves making products meaningful to consumers
through different means and in different ways (e.g. Peñaloza 1999; Thompson 2004; Svensson 2007; Fuentes 2011).

Against this background, one can ask, how are green products constructed as meaningful consumption objects by marketing practices? What kind of green products are constructed? And, what happens as these green products are constructed?

While socio-cultural studies of green consumption have clearly shown that green products are used as symbolic resources in the construction of consumer identities (Cherrier 2006; Cherrier and Murray 2007; Connolly and Prothero 2008), the formation of consumption communities (Cherrier and Murray 2002; Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Jonsson 2006; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007) and the production of consumption experiences (Soper 2007; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007) there are to date few studies that explore how marketing constructs green products as meaningful material-symbolic artefacts. This is the gap I want to address here. My contention is that marketing green products involves making these products meaningful for consumers (see also Prothero and Fitchett 2000; Connolly and Prothero 2003). It involves constructing material-symbolic artefacts that make sense to consumers and fit into their lives and their practices.

The aim of this paper is to contribute a socio-cultural and critical understanding of green marketing by exploring and illustrating how marketing practices work to construct green products as meaningful material-symbolic artefacts in practice. Understanding this, I suggest, is important if we are to understand how green marketing works in contemporary consumer culture.

In the sections that follow I do mainly three things to accomplish this task. First, I sketch out a socio-material practice perspective. To understand how marketing practices work to make green products one must have a perspective that acknowledges the social, cultural and material character of marketing. If we are to analyse how products are constructed we should do this with a theoretical framework that takes material artefacts seriously. Drawing on a specific strand of practice theory I will develop an approach that acknowledges the socio-material aspects of practice. As I explain in more detail in the next section, from this perspective practices always both involve and simultaneously transform a range of material artefacts. Practices are thus not only social and cultural but also material.

Second, using this specific practice framework, I analyse how one green products – the Save the Artic Fox t-shirt - is marketed at the Nordic Nature
Shop – a Swedish chain of outdoors clothing and equipment retailers. This specific case serves as an example of green marketing. What I offer is an empirically based and theoretically informed reading of how the marketing practices carried out at the Nordic Nature Shop outlets construct green products. The argument developed will be that green products are made green by being inscribed with a certain environmental morality. I will show how the Save the Artic Fox is, through the marketing practices of displaying, attending and selling, constructed as specific type of material-symbolic artefacts.

Third, I discuss some of the implications of this perspective. That is, I discuss what it might mean to start thinking of green products as material-symbolic artefacts made in and through marketing practices.

**Socio-material practices**

It is becoming increasingly common across the Social Sciences to think in terms of practices (Schatzki, Cetina et al. 2001; Reckwitz 2002). Practice Theory - as this loosely interconnected school of thought is sometimes called - has been discussed and used within a number of fields. Theories of practice are, for example, used in organization studies (Orr 1996; Schatzki 2006; Miettinen, Samra-Fredricks et al. 2009), strategy research (Whittington 2006) consumption studies (Shove and Pantzar 2005; Warde 2005; Schau, Jr. et al. 2009), design studies (Ingram, Shove et al. 2007; Shove, Watson et al. 2007), marketing studies (Araujo 2007; Andersson, Aspenberg et al. 2008), and many other fields. With this dispersion comes also diversity. There is today no unified practice approach. Instead one can find a range of different approaches that go under this label (Schatzki 2001).

Despite the many differences practice theories have some things in common. Practice advocates argue that the social consists of nexus of practices and that it is within these practices that social life is organized, reproduced, and transformed (Schatzki, Cetina et al. 2001). Accordingly, practice scholars contend that the field of practice is the appropriate place to study issues as diverse as meaning, agency, ethics and power (Schatzki, Cetina et al. 2001). But what, exactly, are practices? Following Reckwitz we can say that a practice is:

“a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a
background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotions and motivational knowledge” (Reckwitz 2002: 250)

Common for all practice approach is a focus on the doings as well as sayings. Practice approaches differ then from discursive analysis in that they look at more than language and text and they are also different from phenomenological approaches in they are interested in more than minds (Reckwitz 2002). Practices are “temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 1996: 89), they are ways of moving, handling objects and understanding the world. Practices are social in the sense that they are ways of thinking and acting that appear in different time-space and are carried out by different individuals (Reckwitz 2002). The individual is here “only” an enactor of practice and the meeting point for multiple practices (Reckwitz 2002).

Although most practice theorist would agree that practices involve both human and non-humans elements the role that these elements are assigned divides practice theorists. For the most part practice theorists are view practices as (purely) human practices. These scholars focus on the skills, knowledge and understandings involved in practices. For them, material artefacts are part of practices but have no agency of their own. They are simply passive tools or background. There is however what Schatzki calls an important minority of “posthumanists” (Schatzki 2001). Posthumanist practice approaches, often closely connected to the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), draw attention to the presence of non-human entities in practices arguing that these entities do much more that simply mediate practices (Preda 1999; Schatzki 2001). The non-humans are in these accounts considered crucial to the making of social practices. In fact, artefacts are argued to “play an active part in the generation, stabilization, and reproduction of social order” (Preda 1999: 349). Things (materiality, material artefacts, objects) play a crucial role in the reproduction of social practice.

It is this second strand of practice theory that interest me here. As the term socio-material practice indicates, what I formulate is very much a materialist approach. In formulating a socio-material practice perspective, I make use of concepts and ideas not only from practice theory but also actor-network theory (ANT) (e.g. Law and Hassard 1999; Latour 2005). This is not a completely novel approach. Theories of practice and concepts from ANT have previously been combined to study and discuss issues such as market making (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006; Araujo 2007; Kjellberg and
Helgesson 2007), the invention and re-invention of consumption practices (Shove and Pantzar 2005), and role of design (Ingram, Shove et al. 2007). My intention is to continue in this vain by applying a socio-material practice perspective to green marketing.

Practices are, I argue, heterogeneous and performative. Practices are heterogeneous in that they draw on a number of different elements – both human and non-human (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006). Practices are then simultaneously social, cultural and material always involving an assembly of different entities. To think in terms of socio-material practice is then to treat materiality and its meanings, image and things, humans and non-humans simultaneously and as intrinsically interlinked.

Practices are also performative in that they do not simply make use of heterogeneous materials but also transform them. Borrowing ideas and concepts developed within actor-network theory (e.g. Law 1991; Law and Hassard 1999; Latour 2005), one can say that practices make assemblages – they interconnect ideas, emotion and understandings with material artifacts and bodies. But the relationship is one of mutual dependency: as assemblages are made they in turn shape practices in different ways. Assemblages then are constructed in practice but they also have the ability to affect practices – they have agency.

The world is, from this perspective, hybrid and performed. Also, the socio-material practice approach sketched out here is clearly constructionist in that it avoids essentialist accounts. It is, however, different from social construction. In a socio-material practice perspective the world is not only socio-culturally constructed but also materially. Social reality is “a materially heterogeneous relational effect” realized through on-going practice (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006: 840).

So with this in mind I turn now to the specific issue of marketing practices. Drawing on the socio-material practice perspective developed above, I make three claims. First, I claim that marketing can be fruitfully understood as a set of practices aimed at facilitating exchange (Araujo 2007). Their goal is to circulate products. They do this, however, in numerous ways. They do this by, for example, relating product design to product use, by embedding, if you will, products in specific contexts (Araujo 2007). But marketing practices also attempt to facilitate exchange for specific products, services and corporations by constructing attractive brands, segmenting markets, distributing products and so on. Second, I argue that marketing practices are heterogeneous. Marketing is heterogeneous involving a range of different human and non-human elements. More than that, marketing involves hybrid actors – heterogeneous assemblages that “do” marketing in
different ways. Third, I argue that marketing practices are performative (Araujo 2007) – they do not only act in the world but actively constructs it (Fuentes 2011). Thus, the marketing of any product involves a range of different elements – knowledge, artifacts, a specific understanding of the world and so on - but it also transforms these elements. From this perspective the marketing of products is thus unavoidably also the transformation of products.

Shadowing a t-shirt: an ethnographic study

At the time of writing, the Nordic Nature Shop chain consists of 27 stores, located both in larger and smaller cities across Sweden. The stores are almost exclusively to be found at city centres. They are often well organized and decorated in accordance with the “nature” theme. The products marketed include backpacks, sleeping bags, camping tents, hiking boots, sandals, jackets, t-shirts, stoves, cooking gear and various books. The Save the Arctic Fox t-shirts are among the most visibly “green” products at the Nordic Nature Shop outlets. The stores serves here as an example of how green products are constructed and what happens as they are constructed.

As is often the case in ethnographic studies, the material analysed was produced through a combination of different data collecting techniques (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

I carried out approximately 80 observations during a period of 40 months. I begun the fieldwork in April 2006 and carried out the last observation in August 2010. Of these observations 70 were carried out at 13 different Nordic Nature Shop outlets and 10 at other outdoors and sports stores. The stores were located both in smaller and larger cities in Sweden. The observations were thus spatially and temporally dispersed covering different times of the day and different seasons as well as different locales. The observations lasted between 10 to 45 minutes and field notes where written within a day, usually directly after a session to produce as much detail as possible (see Emerson, Fretz et al. 1995 on the importance of writing fieldnotes). During my visits to the stores I also collected marketing material available and took photographs of the stores and display windows.

I also conducted ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979; Holt 1997) with consumers and company staff. To get an idea of how outdoors practitioners enacted their worlds I carried out 12 interviews with 12 outdoors practitioners that also shopped at the Nordic Nature Shop. The
consumers differed in terms of gender, age, and educational background, occupations and outdoors interest. The interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and revolved around three broad themes: their outdoor practices and the role that products played in them, the Nordic Nature Shop and the outdoors world more generally. Informants were encouraged to talk in detail about their outdoor practices, the products they had, how these products worked and were they were bought and why as well as talk more freely about nature and the outdoors world. The interviews were transcribed in full. In addition, to get a better understanding of those working at the Nordic Nature Shop and how they co-produced the outdoors world I also carried out interview with store assistants. I interviewed two store assistants about their work and also their outdoors practices. These interviews were lasted about 50 minutes in length and were also transcribed in full.

Finally, I have also carried out what I refer to as “collecting” – that is, the gathering of different artefacts available and deemed relevant for closer for analysis. I used mainly three different collecting techniques. First, I collected different artefacts while doing observations—collecting, for example, catalogues, brochures, tags, and products from the stores. Second, I also collected texts using the Internet. I used this form of virtual collecting to get hold of company documents, reports on the outdoors industry, marketing material, newspaper articles (using web based databases) and to study the webpage’s of outdoors companies. Finally, I also collected “regular” newspaper clippings from both magazines such as Outside and “Utemagasinet” (Sweden’s largest outdoors magazine) and they day press.

Together these research practices produce the materials that make up the empirical database used in the analysis. One can say that I “shadowed” (Czarniawska 2007) the Save the Artic Fox t-shirts in two different ways and at two different times. First, I followed them as they were moved through the stores when carrying out my observations. Later on, when conducting the analysis, I followed them through the material, searching the fieldnotes, interview transcripts, photographs, documents and products in order to examine what happened to these t-shirts as they moved from practice to practice within the stores. The analysis was guided by three overarching questions: what kinds of practices are carried out here? How do these practices work to green this outdoors products? And how can the green products made transform consumption practices?

In what follows I describe the marketing practices carried out at the stores and their results. I use field notes and interview extracts in combination to illustrate the practices.
Greening t-shirts

So, how are green products made in practice? To investigate this question I examine the Nordic Nature Shop and the marketing of the Save the Artic Fox T-shirts. The practices discussed will be recognizable to those familiar with the world of retailing. To be clear, my ambition is not to “discover” new marketing practices. Nor am I saying that these marketing practices are specific to green marketing. Instead what I want to do is to examine how these common marketing practices worked to construct green products.

Showing the t-shirts: inscribing green products

I entered the Nordic Nature Shop outlet and took a look around. The décor was dark green in color. The walls, some of the racks and the cashier counter were all made of wood. There were also some benches made out of log and surrounded by plastic grass. Somewhat surprised I realized I could hear birds singing. The sound, I soon found out, was coming out of small speakers cleverly positioned throughout the store. As I examined the décor more closely I also noticed that there were several stuffed reindeer heads mounted on the walls.

I continued into the store. Almost immediately I fell into to the rhythm of the other shoppers. Guided by the trails I browsed through products, looking, touching and even smelling them at times. I picked up products, examined them and put them back after a quick look. I read brochures that were laid out and looked at posters. It was all rather pleasant and I soon I felt comfortable enough to start trying out products.

I was looking to try out a Save the Save Artic t-shirt. I had seen the t-shirts during a previous visit to the store and was now contemplating buying one. Sure enough I found a similar displaying table where the t-shirts were stacked. I walked over to the table and started going over the t-shirts looking for my
size. I found a t-shirt size medium and headed for the dressing room (Field notes, 2007-05-14).

First, and perhaps most importantly, the Save the Artic Fox t-shirts were made green through the marketing practices of *trail making*. By trail making practices I refer to a set of marketing practices performed by store assistants aimed at constructing a trail for consumers. The aim of trail making was to organize products and store space in a way that facilitated exchange. The underlying idea is simple: to make the products visible and available for browsing. The products were unpacked, labeled and arranged by store assistants on a daily basis. T-shirts were folded and put on display tables, jackets were put on rails, GPS devices were placed in display cupboard and hiking boots were mounted on shelves. The products were organized according to different logics. Some products were organized according to product category. One could for example often find an entire section of the Nordic Nature Shop outlets devoted to backpacks. Other products were instead organized around an activity, brand or intended user.

Through the practices of trail making a number of materials were interlinked. The decorative elements, products, display arrangements, poster and signs were interlinked constructing a socio-material assemblage designed to facilitate exchange. This socio-material assemblage facilitated exchange by being both informative and enjoyable – it enabled consumers to find their products but also put these products into a context. That is, like many other contemporary retailing spaces the Nordic Nature Shop outlets performed a multitude of social, cultural and economic tasks in order to market their products (see for example Sherry 1998; Peñaloza 1999; Gotttdiener 2000; Kozinets, Sherry et al. 2002). Informants talked about the “atmosphere” of the Nordic Nature Shop outlets and seemed to enjoy and appreciate both the more “experiential” aspects of this shopping space and the fact that the Nordic Nature Shop had a broad assortment of outdoor products and information.

You get a special feeling when go in [to the Nordic Nature Shop outlet]. You get an outdoors feeling…I don’t know exactly what we bought there but we sure visited the stores a lot (interview with David).

In this interview extract it becomes clear that the stores were appreciated for more than their assortment of quality products.
It is then within this enjoyable and informative retailing space that the Save the Artic Fox t-shirts were put on display. And it is through the practices of trail making that these t-shirts were constructed as green. The Save the Artic Fox display arrangement could be found in most of the Nordic Nature Shop outlets. They were often similar in terms of design and location. Normally, a display table made of wood and dark green in colour was placed close to the cash register. On this display table stores assistants would fold two stacks of t-shirts according to colour. In one stack there would be the t-shirts in the colour “olive”, in the other those in “graphite”. A sign explaining the Save the Artic Fox project was placed behind the t-shirts. On the sign, which consisted of a plastic frame and a sheet of paper with letters in black font printed on it, consumers could read:

Save the Swedish Artic Fox! The Swedish Artic fox has long been threatened by extinction but now the situation is worse than ever. New genetic analyses conducted by the Zoological Department at Stockholm University shows that the Artic fox population has slowly but surely genetically deteriorated. SEFALO is a Swedish – Finish - Norwegian cooperation project and the Nordic Nature Shop and the outdoor company Fjällräven have join together to provide economic support to SEFALO’s work. For each t-shirts sold 50 Crowns are donated to the project. (Text from Nordic Nature Shop website 2007-06-05).

This artefact was one of the most visible actants of the arrangements and gave them an informative character. The signs clearly signalled that there was information to consider when purchasing these t-shirts.

Of course, the signs were not the only communicative actant of the display arrangements. On the chest and sleeve of the t-shirts the text “Save the Artic Fox” was printed in large letters accompanied by the image of a white fox contrasting against the green (or grey) background. The brand – Fjällräven – and its signature red logo depicting a fox were placed on the sleeve, on the chest and inside the t-shirts.

A paper tag was also attached to each t-shirt. On these tags the Fjällräven brand and red logo figured no less than three times accompanied by the address to the Fjällräven webpage and information about price, size and colour of the t-shirts. Also, the word “Travel” and an image of a caravan of camels walking in the dessert figured on the t-shirt indicating that this item was part of the Fjällräven “Travel” concept. The travel concept is one of
five concepts that Fjällräven uses to categorise their products. On the tags consumers could read:

Travel means adventure no matter if you go to the archipelago of Stockholm or the rain forests of Amazons. Our Travel products will simplify your adventure and you will always be able to put your trust in them. The result of our product development gives you UV protection, multipurpose function, low weight, fast drying and easy care products (Tag on the Save the Artic Fox t-shirt).

What I am describing is the construction of socio-technical assemblages. Through the marketing practices of trail making a specific arrangement of artefacts and ideas were interconnected to perform a specific marketing task. Together the display table, t-shirts, sign and tags worked to show consumers that the Save the Artic Fox t-shirts were desirable products. These assemblages communicated a particular message with the aim of attracting consumers. And indeed, they seemed successful. At the Nordic Nature Shop outlets one could observe a stream of consumers passing by these arrangements at different hours of the day. Some consumers only glanced at them before moving on, others approached to get a closer look. Some only showed interest in the t-shirts, others read the sign carefully and with apparent interest. A few, attracted by the t-shirts design, the message on the signs or a combination of the two, interacted with the t-shirts. The t-shirts were then carefully examined. Consumers touched the material and checked the tags. In some instances the t-shirts were carried away to fitting rooms and tried on.

But how were the products constructed as green? My argument is that green products were made green by inscribing them with specific moralities. That is, these products were, through socio-material marketing practices, connected to a specific set of understandings and ideas of right of wrong. In arguing this I am drawing on specific notion of morality, or rather moralities, as materialized. As Jelsma so eloquently puts it:

this socio-technical landscape is also a moral landscape. It reflects the collective notions of the good life. As a result of earlier inscriptions, the scripted materiality of the landscape creates all kind of gradients for behaviour, encouraging and rewarding what is acceptable, desirable and comfortable while
counteracting what is strenuous, contemptible and forbidden.
(Jelsma 2003: 107)

So, artefacts are moral. I will show how the marketing practices of the Nordic Nature Shop inscribe (Akrich 2000) the Save the Artic Fox t-shirt with a specific morality. In the practices of trail making green moralities were produced, or rather materialized, in the connections made between different actants. The key actant in the construction of moral was the sign displaying the SEFALO project text. Drawing on a scientific discourse this text argued that the Artic Fox is in great danger. It made clear that there was a pressing need to take action. The environment should be preserved and it should be preserved through consumption. The t-shirts on display also promoted this message. The text written on the chest “Save the Artic Fox” connected to and supported the text on the sign. In the same way, the soft texture and grey and green colours of the t-shirts, as well as the dark green colour and wood material of the display tables came together to collectively produce this “green” message. That is, the different actants were configured to produce this specific message. But what kind of message was it?

When interconnected in practice, the different materials of the Save the Artic Fox display produced a specific morality that told consumers two things. First, it instructed them that biological diversity was good. And second, it told them that they had a moral obligation as consumers to contribute to biological diversity through their purchase choices.

At first glance what we see is a common message. After all, the idea that consumers, as individuals, are responsible for ecological damage produced by modern consumption is at the centre of all forms of green consumption (Connolly and Prothero 2008). But if we examine the work of this specific socio-technical assemblage more closely we can see that what is produced here is a specific type of green moral – one that differs from a variety of other green moralities. Allow me elaborate. The idea of biological diversity implies a specific outlook on nature and animals. Animals are important primarily as carriers of their species. This means that the protection of animals is only pertinent when the species is in danger. Biological diversity takes a system approach to animal life. Here the ecological system is what matters and the ideal is genetic diversity. Value is attributed to the species rather than the animal itself. This contrasts with, for example, the moral promoted by animal rights activists in where the protection of all animals is important. Their position is that all life forms capable of suffering should be respected. That is, animals should not be treated as property or resources of humans (www.djurensratt.se) but as “individuals” with their own rights.
Nature is in this case not “just” a natural system but is conceived of as comprised out of different life forms to which we as humans have a moral obligation. According to this latter view the animals have rights of their own; they are not only carriers of a species.

So, a green morality emphasising biological diversity was produced and linked to the Save the Arctic Fox t-shirts. That is, through the marketing practices of trail making the t-shirts were inscribed with a specific morality. This inscription was also embodied and reinforced by the t-shirts design. The “Save the Arctic Fox” text printed in large letters on the chest accompanied by the image of a white fox is a clear materialization of this morality.

This was, however, not the only inscription produced in these practices. This green product was inscribed with more than a green message. Although these particular human and material assemblages clearly produced a specific type of green moral this was not the only moral they produced and materialized. For example, on the small paper tag attached to the t-shirts consumers could also read about the pleasures of travelling. These t-shirts were part of the “Travel” concepts and imagery of distant landscapes was used in their marketing. Through these texts and reinforced by the retailing space of the Nordic Nature Shop outlets - a commercial space completely devoted to the promotion of travel in different forms - the “mobility is good” principle so closely connected to capitalism and modern life (Sheller and Urry 2006) was being inscribed into the Save the Arctic Fox t-shirts. The mobility moral is in many ways contradictory to the green moral discussed above. As has been noted in the past, the production of a travelling culture in where flows of people travelling across the globe in search of adventure (Franklin 2004) has severe environmental consequences (Hall 2005). Also, although these assemblages promoted green consumption, they had little to say regarding the level of consumption and environmental degradation. In fact, the assemblages were configured to promote a form of green consumption that does not, in contrast to for example voluntary simplicity (Cherrier and Murray 2002; Cherrier and Murray 2007), take a critical stance towards the overall level of consumption. Built into these socio-technical assemblages was the notion of economic growth as both necessary and good that is so central to contemporary market economies. The work of these assemblages involved selling more products, boosting not only the Save the Arctic Fox t-shirts but also the products of both the Fjällräven Company and the Nordic Nature Shop. In the end, what is materialized through this assemblage is a hybrid and contradictory morality, one that tells consumers to preserve nature but also to travel around the world and consume.
Talking about the t-shirts: re-forming green products

As I came out of the dressing room a store assistants approached me. “Can I help you with anything?” he asked in a friendly tone. The store assistant was in his 20’s, looked fit and was dressed in outdoor clothes and a t-shirt with the company logo printed on the chest. “I think this medium was a bit too tight on me” I said. “We have them in large too” The store assistants replied and turned around to get a t-shirt in size large for me. “Thanks” I said as he handed me the t-shirt. “Just let me know if you need any more help” he said as I went back into the dressing room (Field notes, 2007-05-14).

The marketing practices of attending also played a crucial role in the construction of the Save the Artic Fox t-shirts. By attending practices I refer to practices that aim at providing direct service to consumers. Attending practices can thus involve answering consumers’ questions, greeting them and helping them to choose among the products of the store.

Attending is usually considered an important part of the provision of service in marketing literature. How to treat customers, the training of the service personnel and the connection between “good” service and purchase are all crucial topics with marketing literature in general and retail marketing in particular. These issues are given topics in most marketing textbooks (e.g. McGoldrick 2002; Grönroos 2008) and are now often considered by retailing companies (Bäckström and Johansson 2006). The Nordic Nature Shop seemed to be no different. At the stores visitors were usually greeted within seconds of entering by cheerful and helpful store assistants. The typical store assistant was a man in his 20s (although there were both female and older store assistants) – an athletic active outdoors person with extensive knowledge about both the products on display and outdoors life in general. They were therefore in a position to give advice not only regarding products but also regarding the outdoors in general.

Many informants characterized stores assistants as knowledgeable and reported that they relied heavily on their advice. The shopping assistants undoubtedly played an important role, adding a great deal of credibility to the Nordic Nature Shop and enforcing the stores role as central nodes in Swedish outdoors life. The staff’s role as “experts” on the outdoors was intrinsically linked to their image as active outdoors people. Or as Lars, one of my informants expressed it:
You get the idea that they know what they are talking about...cause they are active themselves... the personnel working at the Nordic Nature Shop seem to be interested in the outdoors. That’s important, after all it’s pretty expensive stuff...(interview with Lars)

In this specific case, attending involved knowing about as well as answering questions concerning the Save the Artic Fox t-shirts. Sometimes consumers needed more information than what was supplied by the Save the Artic Fox display arrangement. The signs and tags so carefully arranged and displayed were not always enough. In these cases, consumers interacted with store assistants asking a range of questions. Most questions concerned the t-shirts themselves and focused on issues such as fabric (e.g. does the fabric breath?), form (e.g. do they have women’s models?) and availability (e.g. do you have the t-shirt in stock or can you order it? How long will I take to deliver?). Other questions concerned the SEFALO project and campaign. In order to answer questions store assistants made use of more than their knowledge; they looked up answers on the Internet, checked the Nordic Nature Shop catalogue or consulted colleagues. In other words, they relied on other, non-human actants to carry out the task of providing service.

What the practices of attending did was to modify the t-shirts in different ways. In these practices the green moral inscribed into the t-shirts was sometimes reinforced and sometimes weakened. Every time a consumer enquired into the issue of the Artic fox preservation he or she was strengthening the production of green moral, contributing to the green inscription. Every time the store attendant responded, the production of green moral was supported, undermined or simply altered. When store assistants provided an answer that reinforced the “green” aspect – such as accentuating the importance of buying the product or providing more information about the SEFALO project – they were contributing to the green inscription by coupling new ideas and making new supporting links. When they instead produced an answer that ignored or marginalised the “green” aspect – such as responding that they simply do not know much about this project or telling the consumer that the product is basically the same as any other product – they were weakening the production of green moral by decoupling the green links established by other practices. The observations indicate that both types of answers were common. That is, the green moral produced in the practices of trail making was both strengthen and weakened by the practices of attending.
Moving the t-shirts: mobilizing green products

I had decided to buy the Save the Artic Fox t-shirt. I approached the counter and asked the store assistant “do you take visa?” “Yes we do” he answers, registered the t-shirt using a barcode reader, took my visa card, swiped it and gave it back to me. The machine on the counter started to process the information and printed two receipts, one for me to sign and one for me to keep. Meanwhile he folded the t-shirt and placed it in a green bag with the Nordic Nature Shop logo on it. I signed the receipt. When I was done he handed me the bag and the receipt. I placed the receipt in the bag and walked out of the store pleased with my purchase (Field notes, 2007-05-14).

The third marketing practice involved in the construction of the Save the Artic Fox t-shirts was selling. Of course, without selling practices there would be no market for the Save the Artic Fox t-shirts. Also, selling is considered an important part of service provided by the store. It is a last chance to produce a favourable experience and an important aspect included in almost all service quality studies (Underhill 1999).

The simple yet consequential practice of selling involved registering sales, charging money and producing a receipt. During the minute or so it took to sell this product a number of technologies were put to use and electronic registrations made that linked the company, product and consumer. For the consumer, the most visible evidence of this linkage was the receipt he or she obtains. This piece of paper contained information regarding what was bought, where it was bought, when it was bought, who the seller was, the price of the product, taxes paid, and - if one used a credit card - information about the consumer as well. Hence, selling was a practice that produced numerous connections. In addition, as part of the selling practice, store assistants also answered, or tried to answer, any last minute questions such as “How long is the guarantee valid?” or “Is it possible to return the t-shirt if it does not fit?” It was at this moment that questions not asked before were dealt with and for many consumers this was the only interaction with store assistants they had. The selling point was also important in that it offered a last opportunity to market the stores and their products. One could see special offers on display close to the counter, the
opportunity to sign up for the Nordic Nature Shop newsletter and other point-of-sale arrangements.

Selling practices offered an opportunity to reinforce the green morality of the Save the Artic Fox. Here store assistants could comment on the t-shirt, say something about the SEFALO project or mentioned the “toy fox” stuffed animal also connected to the project. This opportunity was however seldom taken and most of the time the t-shirt was simply registered, charged and packed without any comment that would reinforce the greening process. However, selling still constituted a crucial moment in the making of the Save the Artic Fox t-shirt as a green product but for another reason. Through these practices the green product and moral inscribed into the t-shirts was mobilized. The Save the Artic Fox t-shirts were moral artefacts that could, through purchasing, move and potentially become part of other practices. These t-shirts could facilitate the greening of consumption practices. That is, by promoting green moral and green uses these t-shirts could play a part in the re-invention of consumption practices (Shove and Pantzar 2005) or the establishment of new ones. For example, the use of a Save the Artic Fox t-shirt when walking in the woods has the potential to transform this practice, from a “mere” hike to hiking as an environmental friendly practice.

In summary, as the t-shirts were removed from the display table to the cash register the greening work of the stores was completed. It had, at least in some cases, been able to qualify a product (Callon, Médel et al. 2002), load it with green moral and other values, and send it own its way. So, although the travel of green moral certainly is possible through the simple browsing of the t-shirts, its full potential to travel was not realized until the Save the Artic Fox t-shirt was sold and bought. As this happened green moral could travel and be translated into other fields of practices. It could now spread.

Green products as moral artefacts

I have in this section argued the Save the Artic Fox was made green through a process of moral inscription. I showed how these products were inscribed with a specific environmental morality through the marketing practices of displaying, attending and selling. Through this marketing practices the t-shirts become moral artefacts that can, potentially, be meaningful to consumers. By being inscribed with this particular message these products are singled out as being “green” and can thus be incorporated into different green identity projects (Cherrier 2006; Cherrier and Murray 2007; Connolly

Conclusions

In this paper the argument has been that products become green through a process of socio-material inscription. Through mundane marketing practices a specific environmental morality is generated and linked to green products. This practice analysis contributes to the field of green marketing studies by questioning the simplistic accounts generated by managerial green marketing research. That is, it shows what is often implied but seldom studied in socio-cultural green marketing/consumption studies; that green marketing is a complex social, cultural and material accomplishment.

More specifically, the critical socio–material practice approach taken here has generated an account of the marketing of green products that differs from that of managerial green marketing research in some important ways.

To begin with, the account developed here differs in that it illustrates the active, complex, socio–material, and political role that marketing plays in constructing green products. In contrast to managerial green marketing research, the socio–material practice approach taken here demonstrates that the marketing of green products involves more than the “the uncritical application of various methods, tools and ways of thinking in relation to marketing activities” (Tadajewski and Brownlie 2008: 4). And, the marketing of green products is more than “purely” socio-cultural. The marketing of green products is instead seen to involve a set of complex socio–material practices that result in the construction of green products through a process of moral inscription.

This analysis also indicates that the construction of green products is at times a complex accomplishment with uncertain outcomes. In contrast to the rational, abstract and highly simplified accounts of green marketing found in the mainstream literature it shows that the construction of green products could be difficult and messy and that and the “green” quality constructed is specific. The making of green products required marketing practices to be configured to inscribe a specific green morality. Proper display arrangements
had to be organized and store assistants had to be educated and willing to talk about the green project. As we saw this was not always the case. Even when marketing practices were configured to inscribe morality what was produced was not a “pure” green product. Although the t-shirts were inscribed and in turn promoted the green morality of biological diversity they also promoted other contradictory morals. These green products did not only encourage the preservation of the Artic fox but also worldwide travelling and increasing consumption. And even if the inscription of the Save the Artic Fox would work, in the sense that they read the products in the way they were intended to be read, there is no guarantee that consumers’ will find this products relevant to their lives. That is, there is no way of being completely sure if this specific green product is meaningful to consumers. The construction of green products is clearly a complex social, cultural and material accomplishment that is difficult to control.

With this in mind it is difficult to be overly optimistic about the possibilities of using the marketing and “commodity discourse” to bring about a greener consumer culture (Prothero and Fitchett 2000; Prothero, McDonagh et al. 2010). The recoding of capitalism is certainly not an easy task. And, not only does the accomplishment of market lead greening seem to be a difficult endeavour, one can also be critical of what happens as we engage in the commercialization of green. What does it means for our society that morality is being so forcefully commercialized? While this tendency to inscribe commercial products with morality might be seen as an indication of the development of a more ethically reflexive consumer culture, it can also be argued that it simultaneously leads to the commercialization of morality. If more dilemmas are solved through the purchase of specific products, what does this mean for our moral reasoning? And what does it mean for our society if corporations are now responsible for the production of morality?

**Acknowledgements**

This study is part of the research project “Green Retailing” 2006-2011 financed by Sparbanksstiftelsen Skåne and Helsingborgs Stad. I am grateful to Per Skålén, Markus Fellesson, Johan Hultman and Hervé Corvellec for comments on previous versions of this paper.
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