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Images

01. UNEP circularity approach model (2019). Translated by the author.

02. Model of the circular economy according to the Ellen McArthur Foundation.

03. UNEP circularity approach model (2019). Translated by the author.

04. Life's Principles or Nature's survival strategies. Biomimicry Institute ©.

05. Diagram comparing the manufacturing process of a conventional material and a circular one. Modified from Ecovative®.

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Consuming Signifiers

Joel Blanco

Products speak; they speak of their history, their producers, their ingredients and materials, and undoubtedly, they speak of their owners. In this text, I set out to explore the link between responsible consumption, its labelling, and the creation of consumer identity; and how the industry takes advantage of this phenomenon when positioning products.

when you bring your own bag to
the grocery store



Often, certain slogans or labels can be problematic: "Vegan"; "Cruelty Free"; "Green Planet"; "Green Product"; "Biological"; "Sustainable"; "Conscious Consumption"; "Recyclable"; "Organic"; "Ethical"; "Palm Oil Free". There's a good chance that any of these labels may awaken in you a certain sense of guilt as a consumer. Guilt for not fulfilling their demands, for not adjusting to their definition of what it means to "consume responsibly", guilt for not fitting within their framework. Often, companies and providers appeal to the moral compass of consumers when advertising their products through slogans, prefixes and brands, endowing their products or services with these seals of confidence. Seals that guarantee the ethical nature of the product and give the client the most responsible or more ethical alternative when buying a cream, dinner, or in general, when investing their money. A logic that says consumption is not incompatible with making the world a better place.

Looking back at recent history, one of the most infamous cases in Spain was that of the "Bio" prefix. From 1993 onwards, the law dictated that the only products in the Spanish market that could include this denomination in their names were those that had been sourced organically - free from chemicals in their manufacturing process¹. This prefix did not only designate the class of product, it also made the implicit statement that products without this prefix were of lower quality. As may be expected, this did not go down well with large food corporations; they wanted a share of this trade but could not label their products as such. Additionally, as we have said,

the rise of biological food products gave their products an image of lesser value. Under pressure from these beleaguered companies, in 2000, the Ministry of Agriculture changed the laws involving the use of the "Bio" prefix, creating the "Eco" prefix to exclusively refer to organic products. From that moment onwards, anyone could use the original label for their products, which were still assumed by consumers to be biological, regardless of whether their origins were eco-friendly or not. This paved the way for the market exploitation and commercialisation of "biological" products, leaving those small pioneering producers with the costs of sowing the seeds of this trend while its benefits were harvested by the giants of the food sector. For example, the dairy company Pascual soon launched a drink called *Biofrutas*, whose ingredients were neither organic nor biological and the only thing "bio" about it was its name. Once government regulations changed, there were an increasing number of products in supermarkets with names that appealed to health-conscious and environmentally-aware consumers who were interested in naturally sourced products. Some examples that we can all remember are *Biocentury*, *Bio Activia* and others.

Years later, in 2007, the Committee for Organic Agriculture of Aragon (CAAE in Spanish) would condemn the decree that, for eight years, allowed companies to swindle consumers with the "Bio" prefix. The European Commission reacted by drafting a regulation that overrode the national regulation (Regulation 834/2007) and its implementation in 2009 put paid to these labels. The products that contained the prefix "Bio" and whose ingredients did not fulfil the legal requirements were forced to look for new terms with which to attract customers. This regulation was the reason behind brands such as *BioFrutas* becoming *BiFrutas* (not before attempting to seek middle ground with *Pascual Funciona*, a name that sought to imply certain benefits for one's health) or *Biocentury* becoming *Bicentury*, or Danone's *Bio* changing its name to *Activia*.

Although this conflict around the term "Bio" would appear to be a thing of the past, the phenomenon is still prevalent today. A more recent example is that of *LUSH*, a "store for cruelty free, vegetarian and vegan cosmetics, with a spa in Madrid" (retrieved from their Spanish website), that grounds most of its communications on its "cruelty free" positioning. Regulation (EC) No 1223/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November (2009) on cosmetic products has a section dedicated to animal testing. In this section, the regulation explicitly prohibits: "the placing on the market of cosmetic products where the final formulation has been the subject of animal testing"; the placing on the market of cosmetic products containing ingredients or combinations of ingredients which have been the subject of animal testing"; "the performance of animal testing of finished cosmetic products"; and "the performance of animal testing of ingredients or combinations of ingredients". This regulation was introduced in 2009 and entered into force in 2013. Basically, any communication that refers to a product as "cruelty free" from this date onwards is redundant. Nevertheless, the company declares on its Spanish website:

"Lush do not test on animals, do not use materials that contain animal derivatives that are unsuitable for vegetarians and only buy raw materials from companies that are not involved in the use of, or commission the use of, animals for testing and have no plans to do so in the future. We believe that animal testing is not acceptable".

[...]But voluntary company codes of conduct, "cruelty free" labelling and logos are necessary when there are no laws to protect animals. If there were strong laws, then all companies would be forced to be cruelty free, instead of only the fairer companies that do so by choice".

Neither Europe, nor the US nor Latin America permit the marketing of products that have been tested on animals. In any of these locations, the *#crueltyfree* tag is a spurious moralistic marketing strategy. By the commercial use of these terms, companies such

as *LUSH* can lead consumers to believe that their products are less cruel than their competitors who nonetheless, are subject to and follow the exact same laws. All they are saying is that they do exactly what other brands in the European market do, they just display their concern more. To top it all, and although they are remedying it, many *LUSH* ingredients still contain, for example, traces of palm oil, whose exploitation is to blame for destroying the habitat of orangutan communities³. Testing creams on animals is cruel, but burning down their jungles apparently isn't.

The force of these claims that appeal to "the moral virtues" of a product lies not in their manufacturing process but in the connotations that they give to the product. Thus, when choosing, the brand's slogan and the presence of these prefixes reinforce the consumer's personal values and in some way, help them to perform an active role. An example of this: buying a coat from *Ecoalf* - a company that recycles ocean plastic and includes it in its textiles, in spite of the fact that multiple washes of these clothes release micro-plastics back into the ocean - implies saving the ocean. This not only gives meaning to the product but also gives a symbolic weight to the act of buying it. Interestingly, not only are many of these labels and prefixes present on the products on our shopping list but they also appear on the social media profiles of the consumers themselves. It's not strange to read how someone defines themselves as "Vegan, antifascist, LGBT friendly" on a Tinder profile or display "Save the Planet" on an Instagram bio. As we've seen, this is similar to *LUSH* when they assure us that they are *#crueltyfree*; to *Ecoalf* and saving the oceans; or to *Biofrutas* and their contribution to health.

There are many more examples of "virtue signalling" (Thomas Bartholomew) on social networks, not only by individuals but also by companies and the advertisers themselves. For example, the case of Gillette's relatively recent campaign "The Best Men Can Be", sought to promote positive behaviour in men in order to move away from bullying, sexism, toxic masculinity, etc. The campaign was received so negatively that one might suspect them of seeking out scandal in order to attract a larger audience. What's more striking here is the significant discrepancy between what Gillette said was good and what Gillette did: after the controversial ad, the internet was flooded with images of "grid girls" who exhibit the brand logo on the seat of their trousers at motor races. In this case, Gillette considered it sufficient to point out what was good and tell others how to behave, while the actions of the brand itself were to the contrary. As individuals, people have an inherent need to belong and be part of something bigger, to feel committed to the society we live in and to aspire to improve. These choices act as signifiers for our ego. A 2016 Morgan Stanley report calculated that more than 70% of consumers below 35 years of age declared choosing their products and brands based on ethical reasons. This indicates that younger generations consider themselves as being more aware of the consequences of human action on society, the economy and the planet. Nevertheless, if these generations are so conscious about responsible buying, why do they continue to fall for the industry's advertising gimmicks? We'll try to explain this through the ideas surrounding the concept of attention economics.

The argument made by Simon in 1971 to describe reality as it was then, appears to foresee the consumption of information today through the internet and social networks.

"...in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it". (Simon 1971, pp. 40-41).

This copious flow of information can overwhelm the individual and leave them unable to process it in all its abundance. It is this sensation that we feel in the supermarket, of amazement as

we stand before the shelves for minutes, walking around, unable to decide which can of tuna to choose.

The individual may feel lost amongst this freedom and their subjectivity is overwhelmed before the choices available to them. It creates the perfect scenario for uncritical adherence to opinion, that is to say, the subject no longer actively generates an opinion - as this would require the ability to process all the information - but consults a source that they consider reliable and accepts it without critical examination. Thus, opinions, similar to the products we consume, are not created but sourced from the variety displayed on shelves. We may imagine a consumer's internal monologue to be something like this: "if this product is telling me that it is more moral than the other, then surely it is so and I should opt for it". The same phenomenon is evident when we speak of *Fake News*, as in the same way that we select a product in a market, a fake news that fits one's ideology or bolsters one's political stand may be shared, and echoed, without checking its veracity.

In his article for *The Spectator* in 2015, the British journalist James Bartholomew coined the term "virtue signalling", to which we have referred before⁴. In it he describes virtue signalling as a public act, with very little associated cost, whose goal is to inform the rest of one's socially acceptable stance on a topic. According to this, we essentially become passive subjects and, instead of acting on our values and opinions, we sign up to what we believe is a good cause. Knowledge becomes virtue and in the Socratic method, when one understands what it is to be good or virtuous, they will automatically "be" so, even without acting upon it. According to this thought, which is not lacking in ideals, there is no difference between knowledge and virtue. Just as the clothes make the man, appearing to be and seeming are conflated with being, in a time when image is everything.

ECO-SIGNIFIERS, EGO AND SCHIZOPHRENIA

To understand why virtue signalling or why consuming certain labels is so attractive, it is useful to take a detour into Lacanian thought on ego-formation. In contrast to earlier scholars who understand the concept of "ego" from a Cartesian perspective "I think, therefore I am",

Lacan proposed the idea that ego is formed by experience. For the French psychoanalyst, an individual remains unconscious of their own identity until they attain *the mirror stage* of their development, that is to say, the moment when they begin to identify themselves in their reflection in a mirror⁵. Until this moment, all their experiences, sentiments and sensations lack continuity, floating in nothing without being associated with a narrative. After this stage of their lives, individuals arrive at the socialisation stage and then begin to recognise themselves in their experiences. These (re)cognitions, now understood as "signifiers" may be of an object, a genre, a style of music, a nation, a religion, etc. Their relation to a subculture, the colour of their skin or any other signifier, may help to create the narrative of a person about their person. Or to put it in other words, when we speak of ourselves, we cannot do so without referring to other elements that contextualise us: "My name is Alf. I am a 12-year old boy. I watch *Dragon Ball Z* in the mornings. I want to save the ocean. I hate plastic. I went to high school in Arteixo, my favourite food is spaghetti and my dream is to be a YouTuber".

According to Lacan, schizophrenia is a mental condition that does not allow an individual to link signifiers with the signified, the inability to correctly group signifiers in order to form their own narrative and create their identity. If Alf, the hypothetical child from the previous paragraph, is unable to identify himself with the experiences he describes, we may diagnose Alf with schizophrenia. Continuing this line of thought, the literary critic and theorist Frederic Jameson retook the definition of schizophrenia to describe post-modern culture as one that, owing to its overabundance of signifiers, makes it impossible for the individual to compile and construct a coherent narrative⁶. He speaks of a society constantly in its mirror

stage, where individual and collective identities blend into each other, again and again, to progressively form a weaker one each time.

Jonah Peretti, the creator of BuzzFeed, adds that today, signifiers are a given in *Mass Media*, highlighting in his essay "Capitalism and schizophrenia":

"In Lacanian terms, consumer capitalism needs subjects who continually reenact the infantile drama of mirror stage identifications. These subjects must oscillate quickly between schizophrenic consciousness and idealized ego formations. I assert that the increasingly rapid rate at which images are distributed and consumed in late capitalism necessitates a corresponding increase in the rate that individuals assume and shed identities. Because advertisements link identity with the need to purchase products, the acceleration of visual culture promotes the hyper-consumption associated with late capitalism. Put differently, capitalism needs schizophrenia, but it also needs egos. The contradiction is resolved through the acceleration of the temporal rhythm of late capitalist visual culture. This type of acceleration encourages weak egos that are easily formed, and fade away just as easily. An essentially schizo person can have a quick ego formation, and buy a new wardrobe to compliment his or her new identity".

Peretti not only points out that people exist in a constant state of mirror stage, but he also mentions how these constantly new ego formations involve a continuous demand for signifiers. We speak of behaviours, of morals, of trees, movies or any other commodification of identity. From a similar point of view, Ian Woodward explains in his book *Understanding Material Culture* that "... according to the semiotic approach, material culture is said to be a 'signifier' that communicates things to others, accomplishing some kind of social 'work'". The philosopher Paul Verbeek explores this further: "Not only has philosophy not recognised the meaning of things and their material nature, it is also the failure of contemporary post-modern industrial design, whose products are primarily meant to serve as signs instead of material things, as symbols or icons of their owners' lifestyles. Post-modern consumers buy objects less for their material nature than for their capacity to express the type of person intended to own them"⁷. When we acquire a certain class of objects, we do so because in some way we see ourselves reflected in them. This is evident if we think of clothing; but we also identify with bands or styles of music, behaviour, collectives, characters from our favourite TV series or any other thing – or product – that appeal to us.

We may affirm that the more narrative-heavy these products, the greater the ease and relevance with which they are adopted as signifiers. In Western culture, semiotics plays an important role in this type of behaviour as language is the expression of our thought system. We objectify what is abstract and the objectual is liable to be possessed, possessions in turn communicating the identity of their owner. Or to put it other words, the narratives that accompany the object of consumption do not solely speak of the purchased good but also of the buyer's personality, if I buy vegan products, I'm a vegan; I buy eco-friendly products, therefore I am eco-friendly; I buy cruelty free, therefore I am cruelty free. Thus it is that the signifiers are enshrined in the objects and these objects also include the mission we seek to fulfil; helping us to distinguish ourselves from the herd, but at the same time, making us part of a collective that shares the same mission or ideals. We live as consumers in the complete commodification of morality, a secular version of the sale of Indulgences where buying is responsible and if I buy good, I am good. *I buy, therefore, I am.*

ART AND DESIGN IN LATE CAPITALISM

We tend to think that art can function as a sort of rebellion against established systems, but the reality is that they usually work in close symbiosis. From the moment in which the photo camera liberated art from its representative function, the latter has progressively changed into an introspective search for what constitutes art itself. Currently, art and design are not an exception

and are not immune to the market circuits that we have discovered throughout this text. One of the characteristics of art today is that it generally depends on a narrative that accompanies the work, often prioritising its symbolic value: what the work stands for instead of its aesthetic value. The art of political connotations, for example, is extremely dependent on this dynamic. Many institutions take recourse to this type of art to echo their ethical orientation, encouraging and commissioning works by creators that can contribute to the formation of their identity, and are urged to follow this path by governmental frameworks that provide them with financial support. You'll hear many cultural centres, collectives and institutions proclaiming themselves as feminists, anti-colonialists, ecologists (among other -ists), you'll see them and their boasts will be accompanied by the renewed themes of the artists they sponsor. This has its pros and cons: on one hand it boosts the constant creation of new works and on the other hand, the criteria for judging a work are not so much about the work itself but about its media potential. The lines between artist, designer and content creator are more blurred than ever, thanks to digital media. Sharing is a way to tell the world what is your stand, to represent the type of person you are and your tastes and orientations. This decentralisation of the criteria for evaluation restores, in some way, power to popular opinion, but also limits the horizons of creativity to what is socially acceptable, what is good and desired, castrating art of any type of critical potential and frequently leaving it as a tool to spread awareness or disseminate viewpoints. "I like this work of art" is conflated with "I agree with its message" or "It's very me".

COMMERCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

A fix for all of this may be a sufficiently strong regulation that leads all products to be ethical in a holistic manner, that do not pollute, do not consume resources, do not exploit workers, that do not do direct or indirect damage to the planet, and

ultimately, are sustainable here and at their source. Right now, the onus of responsible buying is on the consumer. Perhaps this might change if labels cease to be part of the products and become a legal criteria for their marketing. This would eliminate the companies' need to proclaim aloud their goodwill as a marketing tool and make them focus once again on the qualities of the product itself - however, I seriously doubt that this is the best solution.

Derrida said that we live in a time out of joint, we do not have access to a self-presence of life rather we experience the world in relation to consumer goods, manufactured by humans but not controlled by them beyond this moment. We may multiply this by the fact that additionally, we now inhabit multiple temporary spaces at the same time. We are losing ourselves and in multiple dimensions, by associating ourselves with these goods and with their sellers' messages. We no longer build the world on the basis of our history but in relation to goods and indirectly to their corresponding resources. Our obsession for sustainability is a symptom of our inability to understand the world within any system that is not capitalist. Thus, our concept of progress is inherently linked to our capacity for, and propensity to, create new consumer goods. To speak of sustainability within a commercial framework means that we refuse to let go of our consumer goods, or make radical changes to our lifestyle. The apparent climate situation tells us that our system does not permit a "sustainable" sustainability. Perhaps the system will change, or perhaps we will change, or perhaps one will lead to the other, who knows, but I agree with Grafton Tanner in this regard when he says: "For now, we live in the mall, but it's closing soon"⁸.

Joel Blanco

Joel is an inactive member of the Pokemon generation, an expert in junk food, a lover of philosophy and a designer. He obtained a Master's Degree in Contextual Design from Eindhoven Design Academy. He currently imparts classes on Global Challenges, Trends and Design for Innovation. He develops strategies and assists organisations to imagine a new world, one where the norms of a bygone society and of the present no longer exist, and where many of today's problems have simultaneously disappeared. His goal in life is to have a yacht.

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Notes

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07. VERBEEK, P. (2005). What things do. University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press.

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Images

01. January 2009, 5#monthly edition of Italian magazine supplement IL - Intelligence in Lifestyle Screenshot of Gillette's ad.

02. Screenshot of Gillette's ad.

03. Posted byu/aroh100876 in /r/JordanPeterson/ subreddit in 2019. Displaying antagonist reaction towards Gillette's campaign.

04. Meme posted by GoneForeverAaronHernandez in January 16 2019•via Android.

05. Laila Laurel and her awarded "anti-manspreading chairs" (actually a really bad design with a "strong" message) - Extracted from *Daily Mail*.

06. Ore Streams is an investigation by Studio Formafantasma into the recycling of electronic waste commissioned by NGV Australia and Triennale Milano.