Cognitive branding defined through an analysis of the Fair trade brand

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abstract
Cognitive branding is a semeiotic inspired theory of how the meaning of lifestyle values become embedded in a given artefact. Cognitive branding has three important perspectives: a perspective regarding interpretation and meaning; a perspective regarding memory and finally, a perspective regarding attention. In order to make the concept of cognitive branding clearer, the article analyse the Fair Trade brand.

KEYWORDS: Cognitive branding, semeiotic, Fair Trade, cognition.
introduction

In this article, we will try to define the concept “Cognitive branding” using the global brand Fair trade as an example. Cognitive branding is, at least in our view, a necessary theoretical development, since it is impossible to understand brands and branding without taking theories of meaning creation into account. Branding is basically ongoing communication processes between brand maker, brand users and among brand users which eventually may result in a brand. In semeiotic terminology a brand is a symbol representing, upholding and communicating a shared memory in its particular cultural setting to its interpreters. Consequently, a brand is always part of a community as it is the community that renders meaning to the brand through the brand users’ uses and experiences with the brand. The meaning of a brand is created in the clash between the brand communicator’s intention with the brand and the way the brand users interpret the brand. We designate this the significance-effect of the brand (THELLEFSEN, SØRENSEN, DANESI, ANDERSEN 2009, THELLEFSEN 2010). The significance-effect designates the interpretative distance between the brand and the correct interpretation of the brand – the shorter the distance is, the more forceful the significance-effect is. The interpreter reflects his knowledge and emotions in the brand – the strength of the significance-effect depends on how much the interpreter “sees” (cf. THELLEFSEN 2010). The branding process, which aims to turn the potential brand into a vivid brand or simply to maintain the brand, takes place inside the brand community. This symbolization of the brand is the process of adding memory to the brand; hence, we speak of a brand’s shared memory (cf. THELLEFSEN 2010, THELLEFSEN, SØRENSEN, DANESI, ANDERSEN 2009). However, before meaning and memory can be added to the brand, it must be able to attract brand users. Attraction takes place through the values communicated by the potential brand. It happens because the interpreter sees parts of himself or wishes he sees parts of himself in e.g. the brand – or simply desires values in the brand. The attraction is based on a confluence on an iconic level. Of course creation of meaning involves memory and attraction and is a complex semeiotic process, which hardly can be separated and only on an analytic level. Therefore, it leads us to conclude that cognitive branding at least involves the following three closely related perspectives: 1. A perspective of interpretation and meaning, 2. A perspective of memory and 3. A perspective of attention. In relation to the Fair trade brand, the questions are: 1. How are we able to interpret the right meaning of Fair trade, and by right meaning, we mean the meaning intended by the utterer of Fair trade? 2. How is Fair trade able to represent a cultural or community memory and, finally, 3. How can Fair trade generate attention? Now, before we address these perspectives and questions we need to look at the conceptual presuppositions for cognitive branding:

1. All brands are the result of communication, and branding is communication par excellence.
2. Man is a sign – he attracts other similar signs, he possesses a sense of community, he only gains meaning within a community.

3. The community possesses a community conscience.

According to the first presupposition then what does it mean to say that all brands are the result of communication and branding is communication par excellence? What is it branding is about? In short, branding is about endowing a given artifact, logo, city etc., in fact - any given sign, with certain desirable lifestyle values. A successful brand is a brand which in a believable way communicates certain lifestyle values which cannot be separated from the artifact without destroying its meaning. The way to endow an artifact with lifestyle values is through negotiations between the utterer of the potential brand and the potential brand users. Here, negotiation is the keyword. It is the utterer of the brand who postulates a relation between his potential brand and some lifestyle values, and it is the brand users who accept the relation. If they do not, the brand will fail.

According to the second presupposition the American Polymath C. S. Peirce (1839-1914) writes in the article “Consequences”:

It is that the…sign which man uses is the man himself. For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an external sign, proves that man is an external sign. That is to say, the man and the external sign are identical, in the same sense in which the words homo and man are identical. Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought. (CP: 5.314)

If man is a sign and, more specifically, a symbol, he must act like other symbols, which implies that he can attract other similar signs. A symbol contains an intrinsic quality as a feeling, which is what makes the symbol unique; it contains energy with which it can affect other symbols and it contains a tendency to bring along other similar signs. The single human contains an intrinsic quality; he possesses energy with which he can affect other humans and he possesses a tendency to bring along other similar humans. Consequently, he can attract the equal minded and be attracted to the equal minded himself, and he can create communities, he can enter into communities, he can destroy communities. Attraction is based on a feeling of similarity of belonging to; it is a strong emotional effect.

According to the third presupposition, the community possesses a community conscience; it distributes a sense of community to its members. In his book “A General Introduction to the semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce” (1996), Peirce scholar J. Liszka mentions the concept “A sense of community”.


Although Peirce never directly used the expression “sense of community” in his writings, it can be deduced implicitly from the following excerpt:

…whether the genus homo has any existence except as individuals, is the question whether there is anything of any more dignity, worth, and importance than individual happiness, individual aspirations, and individual life. Whether men really have anything in common, so that the community is to be considered as an end in itself (CP 8.38).

Peirce goes on to note, moreover, that “Esprit de corpse, national sentiment, sympathy, are no mere metaphors. None of us can fully realize what the minds of corporations are, anymore than one of my brain cells can know what the whole brain is thinking” (CP 6.271). Peirce concludes that human beings are: “mere cells of the social organism” (CP 1.673). Peirce’s notion of “community conscience” (CP 1.56), is, thus, construable as our notion of sense of community. Similarly, Liszka (1996: 91) notes that Peirce’s notion is:

simply the sense of the community of experience shared commonly between utterer and interpreter, sense understood in its broadest terms - the effect of a sign as would enable a person to say whether or not the sign was applicable to anything concerning which that person had sufficient acquaintance.

Liszka equates the sense of community with Peirce’s notion commens, which Peirce (1977: 196-197) defined as follows:

There is the Intentional Interpretant, which is a determination of the mind of the utterer; the Effectual Interpretant, which is a determination of the mind of the interpreter; and the Communicational Interpretant, or say the Cominterpretant, which is a determination of that mind into which the minds of utterer and interpreter have to be fused in order that any communication should take place. This mind may be called the commens. It consists of all that is, and must be, well understood between utterer and interpreter, at the outset, in order that the sign in question should fulfill its function. (EP 2:478)

The idea of a “sense of community” can refer to both a community sense and a sense of community (as a biological sense). The community sense refers to and develops in the single community, which means that the community sense is a local general. It is local since it exists and becomes meaningful in the single community, and as a sign the community possesses an intrinsic quality that makes it unique, makes it able to affect other communities and attract similar communities, and it is general since it is mediated by signs and, thereby, able to be communicated amongst the community members, and from the community to potential members outside the community. The sense of community is the
general sense that enables us to enter into communities and, as a sense, it must be understood in relation to any of our senses, i.e. the ability of the brain to interpret messages from sensory cells so that these refer to the different sense modalities. Consequently, the community conscience is the emotional center of community; it attracts individuals with similar or nearly similar values. Having attracted them, it gives them meaning, identity and a feeling of belonging to. We designate the emotional center of community a *fundamental sign* (cf. THELLEFSEN 2010). Having presented our conceptual presuppositions, let us turn to the three perspectives of cognitive branding.

**the first perspective**

The first perspective regards interpretation and meaning creation: i) It involves hypotheses concerning how brand communities are created, maintained and further developed through communication of certain central lifestyle values and how these central lifestyle values attract brand users, ii) How a common consent of meaning between brand maker and brand users becomes established through negotiations, iii) It also involves a focus on emotions and emotional effects and the concept of doubt and belief - the latter seems particularly relevant here, since the meaning of a brand, the common consent of meaning, is an interpretational habit negotiated and maintained by both the brand maker and the brand users. We use negotiation here to cover the fact that a doubt causes imbalance in a habit. Negotiation is the process which aims to bring the habit into balance by removing doubt. Negotiation is a row of communicative acts between humans which may lead to the building of a brand’s common consent of meaning. The common consent of meaning is the habit, and the habit is something we are ready to act upon if we can trust its balance. Negotiation is the process which establishes and reestablishes a given interpretative habit. As we shall see in the analysis of Fair trade later in the article, a documentary film has put doubt in peoples’ minds regarding the fairness of Fair trade. The brand struggles to remove doubt. Doubt is removed through the strength of its lifestyle values and the advocates of the brand. Fair trade seems to be too good an idea to be seriously threatened by a documentary film.

**the second perspective**

The second perspective investigates how the members in a brand community share memory. The concept covers two aspects. i) Partly an evolutionary biological aspect, which means that man, due to his evolutionary development, interprets sense impressions in a particular human way, i.e. a species-dependent way. This means that we as humans are able to be put in almost similar emotional states when influenced with certain factors. The concept also refers to the concept of implicit knowledge, which designates automatic, tacit, yet symbolic but non-conscious knowledge. ii). Partly the aspect that a brand is capable of representing a certain knowledge content, which the brand user is capable of recognizing when he encounters the brand. It is this biological sense of community that makes it possible to define man as a symbol. No sign exists
in solitary; it always gets its meaning from the relation to other signs. When entering into a community, the single community member gets some of his meaning from the particular community, and he also adds to the meaning of the community. Buying and supporting Fair trade, one communicates the lifestyle values of Fair trade. I support free and fair trade; I support the poor workers in the third world. I am a politically aware consumer, who thinks about what I buy. When fellow consumers see that person they may be attracted to him because they share the same lifestyle values, and they do in fact share a community, or they may be repelled, obviously not sharing lifestyle values. The advocators are the ambassadors of the brand, they do a lot of serious and valuable marketing for the brand just by buying the brand and letting people see it.

**the third perspective involves:**

i). How the brand generates attention through causing emotional effects in brand sympathetic minds.

The third perspective regards how brands cause awareness by communicating emotional elements that are easily perceived by sympathetic minds. It is important to understand that an emotion in semiotic terminology is a sign which refers back in time to experience and refers to the future, to expectation. So, when buying a Fair trade product we have certain expectations to the brand which are based on our previous experiences with the brand. It is a gross mistake of a brand if it interferes with our experience – expectation relation. Fair trade did that, but somehow the brand seems to survive - maybe because the brand users neglected this interference and repressed it. We will discuss this later in the article.

**a short definition of brands and branding**

Before addressing the three perspectives, let us shortly explain the concept of brands and branding. Of course, there are a lot of definitions, since the concepts of brands and branding have a long history. We will not dwell on the history of brands and branding; instead, we refer to John Grant (2003), Gerald Zaltman (2003), and Marcel Danesi (2006) for small, historical brand overviews. Our definition is: a brand is a relevant and visible product which the brand users know and have a loyal preference for, since it provides increased value, is dynamical and consistent. However, the brand is also a catalyst for the creation of brand communities via communication of emotional aspects which creates emotional positive effects in the brand users, and which brings the brand users in an emotional state which the brand users positively search for. Thus, the brand has a brand community creational function in relation to the brand users, who may feel positive and sympathetic towards the brand (THELLEFSEN 2010).

Consequently, branding must be the process leading to the brand. To us, branding is the process where an emotional layer, which aims to create a certain
emotional state in the brand user, is integrated into an artifact or idea, so that this layer and the artifact become a whole statement: a brand. Branding is the process in which a habit of interpretation becomes established, a habit upon which the brand rests. We designate this interpretative habit a common consent of meaning, which is maintained by the brand maker and the brand user. The common consent of meaning resides in the brand community. The common consent of meaning is the establishing of a common consent between the brand maker and the brand users. The common consent of meaning designates an interpretative habit, which is established through ongoing negotiations between the brand maker and the brand users (THELLEFSEN 2010). Having set up our theoretical understanding of cognitive branding, let us take a closer look at the brand Fair trade and see why it has become an even stronger brand despite the breakdown in the experience – expectation relation.

**Fair Trade**

We find this brand particularly intriguing because it addresses and affects our social consciousness in different ways, and it is also interesting because the brand refers to an idea rather than a single organization; Fair trade refers to a number of companies, which have been certified by FLO-CERT (Fair trade Labeling Organizations International – certification). The general concept of Fair trade is “a trading partnership based on dialogue, transparency and respect, which seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South. Fair trade organizations, backed by consumers, are engaged actively in supporting producers, raising awareness and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade”. In 2011, there are around 1000 Fair trade certified companies. These companies primarily produce bananas, honey, oranges, cocoa, coffee, shortbread, cotton, dried and fresh fruits and vegetables, juices, nuts and oil seeds, quinoa, rice, spices, sugar, tea and wine. How these companies are organized, is not relevant to this article. It is sufficient to say that the general concept of Fair trade is to provide:

1. The Fairtrade Minimum Price is a guaranteed price that is said to cover the costs of sustainable production. The set Fairtrade Price is always the minimum price paid but rises if market prices are higher.

2. The Fairtrade Premium is a separate payment designated for social and economic development in the producing communities. The producers themselves decide how these funds are to be spent. As part of the Fairtrade criteria, registered producers are accountable to FLO-CERT for the use of this money. It is generally used for improvements in health, education or other social facilities, although it may also be used for certain development projects to enable farmers to improve productivity or reduce their reliance on single commodities\(^1\).

Taking the strength of the brand into account, the idea of Fair trade seems to be a very good idea. Through buying Fair trade products, we support the third-world workers who generally are very poor. In this way we become political consumers. By buying and supporting the Fair trade brand, we send a message through our consumerism. But as always when money is involved- there is a snake in paradise. The Fair trade brand has been under strong pressure since 2008 when Danish Television (DR1) showed the documentary “Den bitre smag af the” (The bitter taste of tea), made by the Danish journalist Tom Heinemann and the Norwegian journalist Erling Borgen. The documentary proved that Fair trade tea was not produced under healthy, environmental conditions. On the contrary, pesticides were used by workers without any protection what so ever, and the “Fairtrade Minimum Price” consumers had to pay extra for has not benefitted the workers at all. The documentary was sold to ten countries and it won “The Award for Freedom”, which is Al-Jazeera’s international TV documentary prize. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the documentary to some extent revealed some of the truth to us concerning the Fair trade brand. We will not go into detail with the program here, however, but the intriguing fact is that, despite the harsh and what seems to be well-earned criticism delivered by the documentary, the brand is stronger than ever- it just grows bigger and bigger. Why is that?

Obviously, the brand users have found the concept of Fair trade interesting, since the brand in many ways is a success despite the obvious fraud going on. But why is Fair trade a success? In order to answer this question, we have to take a closer look at the emotional aspects communicated by Fair trade products. No doubt, the idea of helping third-world workers has a high emotional appeal. Our consumerism has a direct impact when our money goes directly to the workers. We like to think that we as individuals can make a difference. However, it also seems to have a sort of “consumer indulgence” attached to it. No matter how conspicuous the fraud is, the idea of Fair trade is still very good, and we still buy indulgence. Supporting the Fair trade brand as an idea involves at least the following cognitive aspects:

One has to feel sympathetic towards the idea of the Fair trade brand. One only feels sympathetic towards an idea such as Fair trade if one in some way shares values with Fair trade. However, we need to know what a value is in order to understand how it can attract us. Let us define a value as a symbol containing a cluster of emotions, referring to an ideal which makes one feel, act and think in a certain way. The cluster of emotions defines the value to be what it is; without this cluster it would be impossible to distinguish it from other values. Every value has such a distinctive emotional cluster attached to it, and the cluster is the quality of the value. The important part in the definition is the ideal. The ideal gives interpretational direction to the value; it gives meaning to the value. The ideal of the Fair trade brand could be a wish for a better world where no one has to live in poverty, where all are equal, or at least so equal that
no one has to die from hunger, lack of pure drinking water or trivial diseases. Consequently, the more values one share with the Fair trade brand, the stronger is the force of attraction from the brand. This insight is based on the psycho-therapeutical insight that the more you can reflect yourself in a brand, the stronger is the force of attraction. We also designate this quasi-empathy. Quasi-empathy is the ability to put ourselves in the place of the Fair trade brand and let the brand communicate its emotions through us. Buying a Fair trade product, we communicate to our surroundings, showing e.g. our political stand points, our responsibility to the less fortunate etc. Quasi-empathy should be understood as the case where a brand user recognizes himself in the Fair trade brand. When someone reflects himself in something, he often sees himself, or wishes to see himself or parts of himself, in the reflection. Often, one feels sympathetic towards something familiar which resembles oneself and gets attracted to it, i.e. a brand. Quasi-empathy is a habit of mind we possess that tends, often on a subconscious level, to search for similarities in brands, and which enables us to be attracted to similarities and to enter into brand communities. The more qualities we share with the brand, the more we get attracted to the brand. The more we can reflect ourselves in the Fair trade brand, the stronger we get attracted to it, the more we can identify ourselves in it. Consequently, the values and ideal of the Fair trade brand creates a brand community of advocates. Based on the emotional similarity and the attraction it causes the brand users to become advocates. Consequently, when something puts pressure on the brand, the brand advocates will defend the brand and sometimes even make it stronger. Being a brand advocate, the brand becomes part of us, and an attack on the brand is an attack on us. An attack on Fair trade is an attack on the Fair trade advocates. We think this is one of the reasons why some brands can withstand strong external pressure. Some other compelling reasons are force of habit and convenience.

communication of values

Let us take a look at the values the Fair trade brand communicates:

- Promote respect for the dignity of all human labor;
- Produce models of economic equity and sustainability that can create broad positive social change;
- Provide an opportunity to connect with others and preserve cultural diversity;
- Align environmental sustainability with Fair Trade Practices; and
- Encourage collaboration and cooperation to advance these principles

To this may be added the value of Fair trade. It involves fairness in trade.
Buying a Fair trade product, we acquire these values, and we communicate to our fellow beings that we respect the dignity of all human labor, and that we support fair trade in the third world. Let us take a closer look at this communication. In order for Fair trade to communicate to us in a meaningful way, we have to share some kind of background knowledge with the Fair trade brand. We must know what Fair trade is in order to understand its communication. We must understand the contextual setting the communication takes place within, and this is the existence of a third world where poverty is a significant problem, and in which Denmark is a rich country that supports poor countries. This can be shown in the following brand communication model, see figure 1:

Let us put the Fair trade brand in the communication model. The brand maker is a representative of the Fair trade brand Global Trade. The brand is the Fair trade brand, and the brand user is the consumer that purchases a Fair trade product, e.g. tea or coffee, and thereby buys and accepts the values and ideals of Fair trade.

What are the intentions of Fair trade? From the “Fair trade Resource Network”, we get the following definition of their intentions:
We are committed to creating positive change in the world by empowering consumers with an understanding of the impact of their purchasing choices and by educating businesses about the impact of their trading practices. We believe that the resulting expanded economic opportunities created by Fair Trade will benefit all, particularly the world’s most disadvantaged.

Using the values of Fair trade, these intentions may cause certain emotional effects in the brand users; effects such as sympathy and empathy with the less fortunate, a bad conscience, a genuine wish to make a difference, sadness, optimism, etc., depending on the particular brand user and his political standpoint. No doubt that Fair trade by some right wing politicians may be seen as a socialist endeavor, since Fair trade tries to regulate the market by overcoming the traditional liberal-capitalist forces of the free market.

Now, if these values are able to create the desired emotional effects of the brand, an interpretational symmetry between the intentions of the brand maker and the emotional effects in the brand users caused by the brand intentions may occur. However, it only occurs if the brand maker and the brand user share background knowledge and the communication takes place within an identifiable contextual background. If there is coherence between the intentions of the Fair trade brand and the brand users, a purchase may occur; if not, the brand users will not make a purchase.

the creation of the Fair trade community

A brand community is a structure of meaning in the sense that a brand community is created, maintained and developed through ongoing exchanges of meaning, i.e. emotional effects in relation to a certain purpose. In this way, a brand community is established around a brand interior, which maintains the meaning of the brand community in relation to its brand users. It may be the central values of the Fair trade brand mentioned above that constitute the brand interior. In order to identify the central values of the Fair trade brand, we should also ask the brand users about what values they experience. Values may not be asserted, they have to be earned. The Fair trade brand must earn its values. If they assert the values mentioned above, they must be evaluated by the brand users.

If the brand users disagree on the values asserted by the Fair trade brand, Fair trade must review the values in order to establish a common consent of meaning with the brand users. When dealing with brands such as Fair trade, we also have to deal with the conceptual pair: doubt and belief. If the brand does not live up to its values, brand users may be brought into doubt. Doubt is not the best friend of a brand, since the meaning of a brand, the common consent of a brand, is based on belief, and it is the common consent of the Fair trade brand that was brought into jeopardy with the documentary brought by Danish television. We started out by asking how it could be that people still buy Fair trade products,
when some of these are now aware of the fraud by some Fair trade producers. It is a case of whether or not the doubt is strong enough to affect the belief. Based on the increasing sale numbers of Fair trade products, it seems to be the case that the belief in the idea of Fair trade is so strong that the doubt caused by the documentary cannot break it. On the contrary, it seems to have made the brand stronger. This can be explained by the Fair trade brands advocates. Based on the emotional similarity and the attraction, it causes the brand user to become an advocate. Consequently, when something puts pressure on the brand, the brand advocates will protect the brand and sometimes even make it stronger. Being a brand advocate the brand becomes part of us, and an attack on the brand is an attack on us. We think this is one of the reasons why some brands, here the Fair trade brand, can withstand strong external pressure.

**conclusive remarks**

In the beginning of this article we asked these three questions in relation to Fair trade: 1. How are we able to interpret the right meaning of Fair trade, and by right meaning we mean the meaning intended by the utterer of Fair trade? 2. How is Fair trade able to represent a cultural or community memory and, finally, 3. How can Fair trade create attention? The above analysis should enable us to answer them.

Ad 1). In order to interpret the right meaning of Fair trade we must, as stated above in relation to the brand communication model, share background knowledge with Fair trade - we have to be aware of the fact that many workers in the third world are being exploited in various ways. We must have some insight into their lives before we are able to interpret the justifiability or necessity of Fair trade and its intentions.

Ad 2). When we touched upon values, we defined values as having certain emotions attached, these emotions making it possible to identify the values, and that the values also contain an ideal. In the case of Fair trade the different values share the same ideal, namely an ideal of equality between the third world and the developed world. If one feels attracted to this ideal, you will enter into a community of equal minded people. Consequently, it is the ideal of Fair trade that is the community creator.

Ad 3). The attention is caused by the values communicated. In man, there is an inherent wish to do good. Consequently, Fair trade has no trouble creating attention. Helping the less fortunate through commerce is a great idea - it combines the capitalist ideas of the Western world with a Christian ideal of doing well to others - in this way you could call Fair trade "Christian capitalism". Now the reason to why the Fair trade brand gets stronger, when it in fact is under intense pressure for accusations of fraud: the brand has such a strong emotional appeal to people that they have to be brought into serious doubt in order to change their belief in the Fair trade brand. Of course, this
belief can be broken if the brand users get the *general* sense that Fair trade is fraud, but this is not the case. Instead, it seems to be a fact that the advocators of Fair trade are growing in numbers, and that they do their utmost to support the brand by continuing to buy Fair trade products.

We hope to have shown the analytic strength of cognitive branding. We have used the Fair trade brand to demonstrate our points, but we could have used any brand in our analysis. Cognitive branding offers some analytic tools and understanding of how the brand creates communities, how it communicates, and how it is created in cognitive and socio-cognitive ways.

**references**


