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Environmental consumer ethics of natural
personal care products

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**The Aesthetic Turn in Green Marketing:
Environmental Consumer Ethics of Natural Personal Care Products**

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Abstract

Green consumerism is on the rise in America, but its environmental effects are contested. Does green marketing contribute to the greening of American consciousness, or does it encourage corporate greenwashing? This tenuous ethical position means that eco-marketing strategies must carefully define the ethical motivation for environmental products in a way that appeals to consumers with environmental ethics and buyers who consider natural products as well as conventional items. Thus, eco-marketing constructs a complicated ethical identity for the green consumer. Environmentally aware individuals are already guided by their personal ethics. In trying to attract new consumers, environmentally minded businesses attach an aesthetic quality to environmental goods. In an era where environmentalism is increasingly hip, what are the implications for an environmental ethics infused with a sense of aesthetics? Does this create a shallow ecology where we determine environmental qualities based on appearance? Or does this heighten our sense of interconnectedness with the rest of the environment?

This article analyzes the promotional materials of three companies that advertise their environmental consciousness: Burt's Bee's Inc., Tom's of Maine, Inc. and The BodyShop Inc. Responding to an increasing on-line shopping market, these companies make their promotional and marketing materials available online, and these web-based materials replicate their printed catalogs and indoor advertisements. This article illustrates the Internet as a significant medium of communication for environmental business as an alternative to paper-based communication. As part of selling products to consumers based on a set of ideological values, the three companies employ two specific discursive strategies to sell their products. These environmental companies create enhanced notions of beauty by emphasizing the performance of their natural products, and thus infuse green consumerism with a unique environmental aesthetic. Ideas of health are conveyed through community values purveyed to green consumers on the websites of Burt, Tom and the Body Shop, which in turn expands notions of personal health to ecological well-being. This article explicates the ethical implications of a personal natural care discourse for eco-marketing strategies, and the significance of a green consumer aesthetic for environmental consciousness in general.

The intensification of the environmental crisis has reached alarming proportions, fostering a greening of public perception. In particular, a niche market of ecologically minded consumers has emerged, provoking corporate response to popular reevaluation of human consumption habits. Green consumerism is on the rise in America; it has been noted that more people recycle than vote for president. The environmental effects of green consumerism are hotly contested; some argue that it contributes to the greening of American consciousness. Others argue that the green consumerism does not address the root cause of environmental problems because it does not encourage a decline in consumption, and in fact encourages corporate greenwashing that misleads consumers about “sustainable” business practices.

This debate leaves green marketers in a unique ethical position. As a niche market, environmental marketing¹ must direct messages toward a dual audience: consumers whose buying habits already reflect an awareness of ecological implications of consumption, as well as a vast number of potential consumers—i.e. those who must be convinced that the eco-costs of products are important. Therefore, eco-marketing strategies must carefully define the ethical motivation for environmental products in a way that appeals to consumers with environmental ethics and buyers who consider natural products as well as conventional items.

Personal care products provide a unique lens with which to evaluate the ethics of green consumers for two reasons. First these products are considered a necessity by most

¹ Environmental marketing refers to “sustainable marketing” as conceived by Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995), who aim to reconcile the economic and ecological factors of production systems. In this article, this term is interchangeable with “green marketing,” “eco-marketing.” I acknowledge the connotative differences among such terms, and incumbent confusion in technical discussions of sustainable marketing. However, the space of this paper does not permit full explication of the nuances of green marketing practices. For a more specific overview of distinct practices of “sustainable marketing” see Fuller (1999, pp. 1-46).

consumers even at the most basic level of personal hygiene, and because of this reveal intimate details about consumers' buying habits and indeed sense of self. This self-conscious(ness) is the hallmark of personal product advertisements. Many such products are hawked as self-improvement aids: guaranteed to improve our self-image and thus self-esteem. Indeed, this is seen in a wide range of products—we see it in ads for clothing, cars, and alcoholic beverages which tell us to buy a product to be more beautiful, and thus more successful or more popular. With personal products—items directly targeted to improve one's appearance—this marketing strategy is particularly evident: miracle creams are guaranteed to reverse the aging process by reducing lines or wrinkles, while shampoos give you an “organic” experience.

Furthermore, green consumer goods are ideological by their very nature, and thus represent an ethics-based market with a consumer culture shaped by environmentally aware shoppers. Thus, eco-marketing constructs a complicated ethical identity for the green consumer. Environmentally aware individuals are already guided by their personal ethics. In trying to attract new consumers, environmentally minded businesses attach an aesthetic quality to environmental goods. In an era where environmentalism is increasingly hip, what are the implications for an environmental ethics infused with a sense of aesthetics? Does this create a shallow ecology where we determine environmental qualities based on appearance? Or does this heighten our sense of interconnectedness with the rest of the environment?

To address these questions I analyze the promotional materials of three companies that advertise their environmental consciousness: Burt's Bee's Inc., Tom's of Maine, Inc. and The BodyShop Inc. I chose these three companies because they represent different

types of environmental business. Both Burt's Bees and Tom's of Maine are small companies who do not operate their own retail outlets, but sells many of their products in smaller stores that sell other natural products around the country. The Body Shop is a more mainstream cosmetic store that has become mainstreamed in many senses, with its environmentally friendly products. The Body Shop has stores in shopping malls across America, and solicits much publicity regarding its environmentally friendly image. For each company, I analyzed public advertisements, printed materials (magazine ads, catalogs), products themselves (packaging vividness and messaging), and websites (company mission statements, ads, and product descriptions). Responding to an increasing on-line shopping market, these companies make their promotional and marketing materials available online, and these web-based materials replicate their printed catalogs and indoor advertisements. The Internet is a significant medium of communication for environmental business as an alternative to paper-based communication. This paper explores the Internet as a rich text for environmental marketing by analyzing the ways companies showcase details about their production methods, business philosophy and other facets of their ecological values.

Several common themes emerge from an analysis of the web discourse of Burt's Bees, Tom's of Maine and the Body Shop. All three companies in this study emphasize a set of values and beliefs that guide their business practices—this is the hallmark of environmental businesses and eco-marketing. First, I offer a brief introduction to the environmental ethics and the ethical dynamics of environmental marketing. As part of selling products to consumers based on a set of ideological values, the three companies employ two specific discursive strategies to sell their products. The second section of

this paper articulates how these environmental companies create enhanced notions of beauty by emphasizing the performance of their natural products, and thus infuse green consumerism with a unique environmental aesthetic. Third, I examine how ideas of health are conveyed through community values purveyed to green consumers on the websites of Burt, Tom and the Body Shop, which in turn expands notions of personal health to ecological well-being. I conclude with a discussion of the ethical implications of a personal natural care discourse for eco-marketing strategies, and the significance of a green consumer aesthetic for environmental consciousness in general.

Environmental Ethics and the Dynamics of Green Marketing

Aristotle noted that in ethics “the decision rests with perception” (Rolston, p. 31). An environmental ethics must consider how humans perceive themselves in relation to the rest of nature, and how they see their obligation to protect nature. Marcuse embraced new social movements as possessing an expressive relationship to nature that reflected an improved sense of aesthetics that could “expose the ideological functions of instrumental rationality and mount a far-reaching challenge to the ‘false’ needs generated by modern consumer society that had dulled the individual’s capacity for critical reflection” (Eckersley, 1992, p. 71). Marcuse saw aesthetic needs as a subversive force that could enable things to be seen and appreciated in their own right (1972, p. 74). “The emancipated senses, in conjunction with a natural science proceeding on their basis, would guide the ‘human appropriation’ of nature” (Marcuse, 1972, p. 60). Marcuse’s view that the aesthetic qualities of nature counter a life devoted to competition enhancing performance, provide the basis for a critical environmental philosophy (See Eckersley,

1992, p. 71). Indeed, non-humans provide reasons for moral considerability based on aesthetic properties that endow them with intrinsic value (Elliot, 1991, p. 290). These aesthetic properties depend on knowledge of an ecological system: “knowing how the parts work in concert to maintain the whole might assist us in seeing it as a thing of beauty.” (Elliot, 1991, p. 292). An overarching understanding of the interconnectedness of ecosystems imbues nature with an intrinsic value that informs environmental ethical principles.

Hargrove (1989) argues that natural ecosystems have a special kind of beauty that is intrinsically valuable and thus obligates humanity to preserve wild and unmanaged nature. Rolston (1989) posits that an ecological ethic must have beauty and integrity qualities. “The intrinsically valuable intellectual stimulation that the scientist defends is, in fact, a parallel to the aesthetic encounter that the aesthetician defends, for both demand a distance from everyday personal needs and yet a participatory experience that is nontransferable to the uninitiated” (Rolston, 1989, p. 81). These intrinsic values influence how we think about resources, and how we consume. In any socially progressive business, ‘the intrinsic worth of the environment... must be allowed its weight in any consideration of final ends’” (Whitehead, 1925 in Holmes, 1989, p. 159). Sustainable marketing ethics rely on an enhanced understanding of the costs of products that take into consideration the environmental and social impacts of production and consumption.

Questions of how we should manage our consumption are of crucial significance to environmental policies in general, because they address the root causes of the environmental crisis: universal anthropocentric norms of resource exploitation and

excessive consumption. Paul Hawken (1993) locates primary responsibility for addressing the social and ecological implications of human consumption patterns in the planet's dominant institutions: corporations (xiii). Hawken articulates three pressing issues that define this corporate responsibility: "what it takes," the material and energy resources extracted from ecosystems; "what it makes," the commodity and service effects of industrial production processes; and "what it wastes," the collective social and environmental costs to consumers, society and ecological habitats (1). These three principles provide a good starting point for analysis of consumer behavior in the context of ecological responsibility. Developing trends of green consumerism offer a unique lens into the transformative potential of human consumption as a critical response to widely sanctioned ecological exploitation, and as an emergent market that exhibits remarkable potential for social transformation of ecological values. Wagner (1997) notes that economic markets are influenced and defined by green consumer behavior that "reflects concern about the effects of manufacturing and consumption on the natural environment" (1). The power of consumer buying directly informs the nature of ecological market exchanges.

Communications of product promotion and company image are persuasive endeavors to publicize company consciousness and business values. Through marketing campaigns, green entrepreneurs must sell the company, not just their products. Communication is particularly important in sustainable marketing strategies "to educate stakeholders about environmental issues; to foster an image of environmental responsibility (in terms of products and corporate practice) that will directly or indirectly have a positive impact on sales now or in the future" (Fuller, 1999, p. 113).

Communication of corporate causes is important as well because a company's philosophy is an integral part of their communications. Persuasive techniques involve efforts to promote and publicize company's ethical and responsible practices. Such strategies increase visibility of company, reflecting good business sense because of an increase profit potential. Green companies support a variety of causes, which reflect their social consciousness. This includes the donation of proceeds to humanitarian or environmental relief efforts, and indicates a company's willingness to sacrifice economics for social and environmental concerns.

The social and environmental consciousness of a company reflects the ethical motivations of environmentally aware consumers. "Dynamics rooted in aesthetic values, will make alterations more outspoken in visible types of consumption" (Pederson 2000). The consciousness of a company, communicated through advertisements and the products themselves connects to the values of consumers, who express these ethics through the products they buy. "Self-identity as a green consumer often involves a particular ethical orientation, as also is likely to be the case with blood donation... facets of people's self-identities which invoke some moral imperative or consideration will influence intentions and behavior independently if those influences are not revealed in expressed attitudes" (Sparks and Sheperd, 1992, 297). The ethical identity of green consumers is significant in the development of a green market, because value-laden eco-costs drive sales of sustainable products, which dictates a different company image. An examination of how Burt's Bee's and Tom's of Maine's environmental marketing strategies compare to those of The BodyShop sheds light on how ethics and aesthetics converge to create a nuanced environmental ethics for green consumerism.

Natural Performance: A Cosmetic Aesthetic

As discussed earlier, personal products generally promise self-improvement, and in this way, these products perform. All three companies studied offer health and beauty products; Tom's of Maine emphasizes hygiene and health solutions while Burt's presents such remedies in addition to a broader variety of beauty products for face and skin, and the Body Shop offers a wide selection of beauty products ranging from skin moisturizers and a colorful palette of make-up. These product lines provide insight into the expanded aesthetics offered by natural personal care products, one that is concerned with ecological integrity as well as personal appearance.

Tom's of Maine's slogan "Naturally it works" (Tom's of Maine 2003) promises the performance of nature, the enriched beneficial qualities of ecological systems, exemplified in natural ingredients without synthetic additives. While promising a naturally guaranteed result, this is also an implicit argument for less intervention into the ecosystems that provide these resources. "We believe in working with the pure, simple ingredients nature provides to create Natural Care products that work; for you, the environment and our communities" (Tom's of Maine 2003). Tom's argues that their products are effective for personal care, but also invest and help enhance the company's performance in the community. This is an important ethical connection because, (to borrow a still relevant phrase) the personal *is* political, and as consumers, our choices matter, not only for product for performance, but for a more holistic ecological performance.

Burt's offers a similar kind of performance, claiming "we deliver what others only promise!" (Burt's Bees Catalog, 1999, p. 22). Burt's explains how they reduce, with very little plastic and simple, safe and effective materials such as cotton, paper, metal and glass. They reuse, as many of their containers can be used again; and recycle, by encouraging their customers to bring back their empties, which they will reuse or recycle at their plant in North Carolina (Burt's Bees Catalog, 1999, p. 22). Burt's "sensual skin solutions" promise to "help your hands and treat your feet" (Burt's Bees 2003). This product promotion declares it is okay to pamper yourself. Instead of trying to reduce consumption, these companies celebrate responsible consumption. This tactic promotes an environmental ethic that does not rely on consumer guilt, but empowers consumers to feel good about themselves. Burt's promotes its "clean and classic minimal makeup." Burt's does not sell a broad range of make-up, indeed its nonessential role in the company's product line implies it is not an essential part of the human daily routine. The make up is clean and minimal—an easy transferrance to the need for humans to strive for a minimal environmental impact for a cleaner Earth.

The Body Shop urges visitors to its website to "feel good, naturally" (Body Shop 2003). This mantra establishes a connection between natural ingredients and performance that makes a connection between ethics and aesthetics, that links human beauty with natural integrity. The Body Shop offers an extensive line of makeup. While using advertising strategies typical of generic cosmetics, it emphasizes the beauty enhancing qualities of its make-up, but also redefines what beauty is.

How do you define great make-up? We think it not only makes you look good, but feel good and does good too. It gives the wearer confidence and is enjoyable to use.

Our quest for the best has been exhaustive and means that The Body Shop make-up now combines the best advances in cosmetic science with our years of expertise of natural ingredients - some of which are now mainstays of cosmetics and some of which are exclusive to The Body Shop make-up.... 'High performance' or 'simply great'? Don't just take our word for it - come to The Body Shop and try it for yourself. (Body Shop, 2003)

The Body Shop's performance claims expand the beauty aesthetic that drives the cosmetic industry. "Make-up is no longer simply about looking good, but feeling good and doing good too" (Body Shop 2003). If products containing natural ingredients have outstanding beauty results, more people can be persuaded to buy these environmentally friendly products instead of cosmetics produce with animal by-products. Furthermore, while extolling the moisturizing virtues of its marula nut oil, the Body Shop adds "What is more, this ingredient is Community Traded from Namibia, so it does good too" (Body Shop 2003). Here the connection between looking good and feeling good conveys that beauty is not just superficial, but part of a natural human aesthetic is enhancing the well-being of the larger global community.

The Body Shop is inspired by the community, its customers— "customize your make-up and create a look that's as individual as you are" (BodyShop, 2003)—and nature—"The Body Shop eye range not only offers an extensive palette of fantastic nature-inspired colors and finishes" (Bodyshop 2003). Green consumers are urged to be inspired by nature's beauty to make themselves beautiful. That is, we can be concerned with our personal appearances because our personal aesthetic reflects the appearance of the earth. This connection is an important selling point for natural products and combines

a natural aesthetic with an environmental ethic that is a powerful message for green consumers. Burt's Bees' conservation efforts use a similar connection between natural products and a broader environmental aesthetic as a warrant for maintaining beautiful spaces. "With open space being devoured at a breathless pace, these wild lands are in jeopardy and will vanish if we do not muster the will and the funds to save them now" (Burt's Bees 2003). The "wild" aesthetic emphasizes the importance of open, undeveloped space, for the health of the environment. This reflects the importance of natural attractiveness—Burt's and the Body Shop both make connections between their natural beauty products and the cause of protecting the natural harmony of nature.

These eco-marketing approaches perform nature's beauty illustrating the changing aesthetic of green consumerism. The Body Shop incorporates self-esteem into its promotions for its beauty products, reconciling traditional cosmetic femininities with more natural beauty ideals.

Throughout the ages, women's bodies have been manipulated to fit the latest fad. We've been trussed up, pumped up, corseted and bandaged. Waists have been pinched, skin bleached, ribs removed. The fat sucked out, the silicone injected in. Wouldn't you rather be measured by your individuality, thinking and lust for life? Stand up for who you really are. Stand up for self esteem. (Body Shop 2003)

This call for natural beauty empowers women to shun conventional alterations of the female form and embrace self-respecting, individual notions of what is beautiful. This is a step away from traditional selling points for cosmetics that promise perfection that is often artificial because it conceals natural "flaws" and manipulates diverse female forms to reflect a socially constructed "perfect body." There is a certain transparency regarding natural products—knowing what goes into beauty products reveals connections between production processes and environmental effects—revealing connections between our

consumption habits and natural habitats. Transparent production processes parallel transparent beauty ideals that emphasize natural beauty rather than hiding “imperfections” that deviate from an artificial ideal.

Consumer Activism and Community Health

The transparency of the production of personal products establishes connections between consumer choices and community well-being. All three companies publicize their community involvement and their promotions go farther than product purchases, they provide opportunities for community involvement, promote actions to protect the environment, and seek contributions to conservation efforts on their websites. Tom’s of Maine’s main cause is river stewardship, Burt’s Bees raises funds for conservation of wilderness land in Maine, and the Body Shop invests its resources in impoverished communities around the globe. Through their emphasis on community involvement to build healthy communities, all three companies in this analysis make connections between consumer health and the larger environment.

Tom’s of Maine’s “Natural Care” philosophy, “take care of your body and community” (Tom’s of Maine 2003) attaches value to personal care. Their slogan “conservation, restoration, stewardship” (Tom’s of Maine 2003) makes clear connections between actions and philosophy that are holistic, not isolated in the consumption of their products. Their website includes things that customers can do besides consuming—“Did you know... washing your car on pavement can cause soap and oil to flow into rivers? Learn more and take action for rivers...Tom’s of Maine—working with nature to make a difference” (Tom’s 2003). Burt’s Bees’ main cause is protection of land by preserving

open space. In July 1999, Burt's Bees pledged \$2 million to save 185,000 acres of Maine forest. Their effort was part of "the single largest conservation acquisition in Maine's history. It is also the largest tract of land ever purchased for conservation in the northeastern United States" (News and Information, 1999). Their protection efforts continue currently as the company tries to raise funds to expand this forest preserve, exemplifying Burt's philosophy "to protect, utilize and enjoy the finest ingredients found within nature" (News and Information, 1999). Green consumerism is about more than getting people to purchase products, but also donate to environmental protection efforts. Eco-marketing tactics are designed to inspire people to do more for their community; whereas purchasing the product has a tangible benefit, the green marketing tactics of Burt's, Tom's and the Body shop incorporate donations to the cause, the benefit of which cannot be delivered like most online purchases, but is more intangible in the protection of wild lands and rivers.

The Body Shop promotes self-esteem, urging customers to "feel good about yourself from head to toe," a metaphor that illustrates connections between beauty and health, and personal and global well-being. Their mission evokes the tenets of sustainable business practices.

As a socially responsible business we campaign for the protection of the environment, human and civil rights and against animal testing within the cosmetics and toiletries industry. Volunteering supports this work enabling us to positively contribute to the local, national and global communities in which we operate.... at the same time as considering the changing expectations of society and the growing environmental and ethical concerns. In understanding this we realize that our support is fundamental and continually explore imaginative new ways of working. (Body Shop 2003)

The self-esteem promoted by use of their personal products mirrors the Body Shop's sense of their own impact on the global community. The connection between self and community is an important way green businesses can support their cause while at the same time selling their products. Some argue that seeking environmental change through consumer habits absolves people of guilt because their purchase of these products takes care of their environmental obligations. According to this thinking, any environmental ethic imparted from the promotion of these products does not transfer to different parts of their lives, but rather means that people do not consider the environmental impact of the rest of their consumption practices much less their other daily activities. The community connection emphasized by these three companies responds to such claims. "Our values: never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed it's the only thing it ever does" (Body Shop 2003). Social responsibility does not end with the purchase of the product; rather green consumerism incorporates a self-identity that is associated with well-being of community. This sense of the greater community instills a connection between individual actions and their larger environmental implications.

Conclusion: A Deep Aesthetics: An Ethical Connection between Health and Beauty

"Both science and art have the capacity to help us see much further than our everyday economy requires" (Rolston, 1989, p. 82). This is where natural, personal care products blend aesthetics and environmental science because they use natural ingredients to produce high quality cosmetics and other personal beauty and health products that combine scientific guarantees with an enhanced aesthetic of nature. Human centered

ethics can combine with biocentered ethics where human beauty is seen in the context of a larger sense of natural beauty and the functioning of the ecosystem. Thus, the marketing of environmentally friendly products involves a complicated sense of aesthetics, one that invokes connections between health and beauty. This is a deeper aesthetic—not marked by superficial image politics, rather defined by a set of value that reflects the eco-costs of a product. These connections between self and community, ethics and aesthetics, and humans and nature synthesize traditional social, cultural and ecological hierarchies that perpetuate emphasize certain values to the exclusion of others. These links allow ecomarketers to appeal to a dual audience: those motivated by ecological awareness, and those who are not. Eco marketing strategies merge ethics and aesthetics so that people attracted by the aesthetics of natural personal care products grow to understand and believe the ethics of environment behind the products. The connection between natural ingredients and performance encourage consumers to make the connection between the ethics of production and the aesthetics of the beauty products, which fosters an understanding of the relationship between consumer choices and environmental beauty.

The connections with community offers a discursive turn, because instead of hiding the production processes and only selling the final products—those production processes which are often unseemly—the advertisements for these natural products celebrate the production process. This transparency opens up the possibility of increases connection, it makes connections visible, and emphasize harmony between humans and nature. These connections offer visions for a different kind of world with a different kind of aesthetic, not an anthropocentric aesthetic, but a biocentric aesthetic. Through calls for the greater good of community, Burt's Bees, Tom's of Maine and the

Body Shop make explicit connections between individual actions and larger environmental implications. The belief that individual consumer choices make a difference underscores the marketing of each of these companies. While many companies invest in their communities, environmental marketing emphasizes the interconnectedness of the ecological community and an ethical aesthetic that relies on the well-being of the global community supported by a healthy environment.

This environmental aesthetic promotes an ethic that is guided by holistic beauty. The ethical principles of green marketing are based on perspective of humans as part of a complicated and intrinsically valuable ecosystem. Social change must happen gradually; community activism imbues consumers with agency because through personal purchases, individuals can cause change. These environmental messages create a complicated ethical consumer identity where being green is not just cool, but people are hip to the need for action to protect the environment—and thus the need to consider the eco-costs of their actions. The aesthetic turn in green marketing creates an ethical aesthetic where beauty is more than skin deep.

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