



# Digital consumer activism: Agency and commodification in the digital economy

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## abstract

Consumer activism has been reshaped as it has moved increasingly into the digital realm, and yet relevant theorisations have been slow to emerge. This paper presents an innovative approach to digital consumer politics by examining and connecting key scholarship in digital activism and the digital economy. Through a discussion of three case studies (*#grabyourwallet*, *#deleteuber* and *#deletetwitter*, and Connecting Good or CoGo), we analyse digitally mediated agency, and the transformation of consumption meanings and practices in the digital economy. We argue that digital consumer activism offers both new forms of campaigning and presents familiar problems. Our case studies demonstrate the complexity of engendering agency when consumer activism enters the digital realm. Equally, the case studies illustrate contradictions in the ways in which consumer politics contests the capitalist economy offline, but leaves it substantially uncontested online due to a reliance on digital platforms dedicated to private profit.

## Introduction

From protecting consumer rights to promoting environmental justice, consumer activism has become an important source of protest. Consumer activism<sup>1</sup> here does not so much speak of a specific, organised movement, but

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<sup>1</sup> We recognise a subtle difference in theorisations of ‘consumer activism’ and ‘consumption activism’. The majority of scholarship focuses on the first term

of consumption practices as a locus of struggles for environmental sustainability and global equity (Boström et al., 2019; Forno and Graziano, 2014; Humphery, 2010; Littler, 2009; Lekakis, 2022). Consumption practices are also often invoked as a vehicle for addressing intersectional political concerns, such as racism and patriarchy, and as a means of targeting specific political figures and policies. Furthermore, like many political and economic processes, consumer and consumption activism has been reshaped as the digital realm has grown. Since the early 1990s, web pages have been deployed for various consumer activism campaigns and, more recently, 'apps' enabling sustainable and fair consumer choices have emerged. At the same time, changing modes of consumption related to the rise of a 'digital economy' – and the possible impact this has on ethical consumption campaigns – remain under-researched. Indeed, analysis of these developments has been relatively slow to emerge, perhaps reflecting the difficulty of grappling with a terrain that speaks both to the history of consumer politics and to theorisations of digital activism and economy.

In responding to this relative absence of analysis, this article focuses on the *intersection* of digitally mediated agency and consumption practices in the digital economy. This focus draws together critical reflection on ethical consumption and social movement studies with analysis of digital economy and politics. While this gives our approach wide purchase, it also risks a lack of singular focus – yet, we argue, it is precisely this diffuse intersection of ethical consumer activity and digital economy which illuminates the tensions we examine here in relation to agency and commodification. In short, it is only on the emerging terrain between consumption practices and digital

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to emphasize or criticise the idea of the consumer or 'citizen-consumer' as a potential agent of social change. The latter term, on the other hand, may be used to focus on consumption as action, practice and economic logic as much, if not more so, as on the figure of the consumer (Humphery, 2010). There is, nevertheless, overlapping political meaning across this terminology and we use the term 'consumer activism' in this article to connect with theories of political consumerism and consumer agency. While we acknowledge there is complexity here, it is important to connect these literatures to understand the phenomena we are investigating. Given we also need to address digital economy literature this places restrictions on the extent to which we can address the full complexity of the background literature, while asserting that we have examined enough to support our arguments.

economic practices that we are able to better conceptualise digital consumer activism. In what follows, we first review key literature in consumer and digital politics. We then present three case studies of digital consumer activism that advocate two boycotts and one buycott. Through these case studies, we draw out dynamics in the complex concept of 'agency' relating to consumer activism in digital contexts, while also drawing attention to the digital economy's production of consumers and its commodification of consumer politics.

### **The politics of consumption and the turn to the digital**

The politics of consumption has typically been explored through the prism of political consumerism (Boström et al., 2019; Micheletti, 2003) and, within that, only a few contributions have explored it as increasingly digitally mediated. While some scholarship focuses on quantitative measures of activist use of digital media, other emergent scholarship speaks to the intersection of consumption and digital practices and, in doing so, has attempted to directly connect notions of media practice to those of consumer activism (Heldman, 2017; Lekakis, 2022; Treré and Yu, 2021; Ward and Vreese, 2011; Yu, 2021). Following this lead, we variously draw here on scholarship relating to digital media activism, political consumerism and digital economy. Moreover, we follow Sassatelli (2007) and others in treating consumption as a series of practices. By emphasising consumer practices, which we integrate below into ideas of activism and agency, we draw attention to the dynamic interplay of actions in consumption contexts; contexts which are themselves a complex intersection of production, distribution, packaging, marketing, retailing, financing, purchase, ethics, and so on. Here, we thus conceptually invoke and build on the way consumerism necessarily involves individual moments of consumption which accumulate into patterned practices that are, in turn, the main focus of activist responses to consumption in capitalist economies (Boström et al., 2019; Humphery and Jordan, 2018; Lekakis, 2022; Micheletti, 2003).

Digital media activism scholarship has explored the social dynamics of online consumer activism at the level of collective action. Parigi and Gong (2014) focus on the ways social media networks create shared identities and

relationships between consumer activists. Digitally enabled sociality ('digital ties'), they argue, strengthens the outcomes of digital consumer activism, as seen, for example, in Minocher's (2019) analysis of online petition site Change.org. Yet, these kinds of social media practices are often criticised by other scholars for fostering short-term, armchair-based activism, termed 'slacktivism' (Christensen, 2012; Penney, 2014). While this debate is an important one, what is notable is that such digital media scholarship rarely explores the nature of the consumer activist agency implied in its analyses. In this paper, we move to do so, and we begin by positing agency – in a digital activist context – as the capacity to take sustained action geared towards collective prosperity, based on socio-technical affordances and able to contest pressures from commercial ideologies and interests.

Such approaches to political agency are exemplified well by Campbell's (2005) conceptualisation of agency as communal and participatory, material and symbolic, and inherently ambiguous. In their conceptualisation of political agency at a digital crossroads, Kaun and colleagues (2016: 2) understand it 'as constituted through the use of knowledge and resources, themselves embedded within structural contexts; at the same time, agency is transformative of the structures within which it is embedded by making use of knowledge and resources in creative and often radical ways'. Similarly, some consumption studies scholars have also recognised such ambiguity and been cautious in overplaying the ability of online connection to build substantive political agency, while nevertheless not abandoning the possibility of such online agency altogether. Analysing the politics enabled and disabled by ethical consumption, for example, Lekakis (2013) argues that digital engagement both leads to involvement in a broader politics of consumption and that these digital platforms increasingly privilege a narrative of lifestyle over one of solidarity. While we recognise that agency is a contested and ambiguous concept when it comes to consumers engaging with political discourses and practices, our research suggests it is worth further attention in the context of digital consumer politics.

Where, then, does ambiguity reside in relation to agency in digital consumer activism? In many respects, this concerns the critique posed by theories of 'slacktivism' which argue that online media is an ineffective avenue for politics and raises the question of whether a complex agential activism is even

possible in such a context. Exploring agency in digital consumer activism is important in questioning, for instance, whether the action of clicking an online boycott petition offers moral reassurance while in effect doing little of political import or whether online communication supports consumers to connect their consumption to a more substantive offline activism. Furthermore, any such analysis needs to also consider, as we do here, the range of actors involved; from individual citizens as consumers engaged in consumption practices, to leaders/influencers, to political collectives and businesses acting as 'market activists' and so on (Lekakis, 2022). To this, non-human actors must be added, most notably in algorithmically enabled digital interaction (Jordan, 2015). Indeed, this sense of critical caution is evident in studies of the rapidly growing number of 'ethical consumption apps' that seek to engage consumers in sustainable and ethical purchasing or in broader forms of consumer activism (Eli et al., 2016; Humphery and Jordan, 2018; Fuentes and Sörum, 2019; Hawkins and Horst, 2020). It is in these complicated contexts that the agency of actors within both broad consumption practices and digital consumption activism can be understood.

As digital consumer activism has emerged, so too has an understanding of how the 'digital economy' shifts the nature of consumption itself – and we complete our analytic focus in what follows by connecting such ideas to the discussion of agency and consumption. There are several ways the digital economy has been conceptualised. Some authors have proclaimed new stages of capitalism revolving around digital technologies. Srnicek (2016) argues for a 'platform capitalism', while Zuboff (2019) sees the kind of information gathering which underpins firms like Google as a new age of 'surveillance capitalism'. Other authors examine the specificities of the digital economy within a wider market context, rather than reaching for definitions of economic epochs. Elder-Vass (2016) explores the intertwining of both freely given goods and of profit extracted from such gift economies. Jordan (2020) examines the digital economy as one sector among other economic sectors, exploring how consumption is shifting in relation to freely given goods and related novel forms of monetisation. Within this context, agency is understood as moulded to a new economic *modus operandi*, developed through technological affordances such as data tracking of consumption

preferences, which has proven powerful in managing the activities and practices of consumers and, consequently, of activist responses.

A focus of such discussion is on the way consumption has become integrated into the digital economy through both consuming information goods and by producing information that is itself a key input for the digital economy (Dean, 2012). Here, the focus is on how agency and consumption practices are themselves being altered in the digital economy. Such reinforcing behaviour has now been demonstrated to include algorithmically driven inequalities that embed racial, gender and economic disparities within software (Noble, 2016). This lends a new twist to a core dilemma of consumer politics, which has always faced the ambiguity of utilising 'responsible' consumer choice to contest consumerism. This ambiguity is intensified in the digital realm; where the digital consumer is drawn, through consumption, simultaneously into the production of information that is then utilised by companies to fuel further consumption. In such an economic context, it appears possible for all activities by consumers, even ostensibly oppositional actions, to become digital information that simply further creates and embeds a digital economy within capitalism.

Digital consumer activism can thus be productively examined by connecting these two axes; first, changes to agency in consumer politics in a digital age, and second, the changed practices of consumption brought about by the rise of the digital economy. Analytically, our focus here is on this intersection of what we call 'digital consumer activism'. This focus develops existing analysis, such as the one on slacktivism discussed above, and addresses how consumption within the digital economy may affect and be affected by frameworks of ethical consumption. We will now pursue these connections through three case studies, aiming to use our empirical material to draw out and re-examine these conceptual dimensions.

Before we turn, however, to our evidence and conclusions, we note that our research utilises a mixed methodology. Given the complexity of our analytic strategy in locating our questions at the intersection of already complex literatures, it was important that our evidence reach a similarly broad scope. We therefore use a number of methods – both quantitative and qualitative – in exploring three case studies; that were themselves chosen both on the basis

of their reliance on digital media to practice consumer activism and on their political reach within affluent capitalist societies. Our case studies are: the boycott campaign *#grabyourwallet*, arising in 2016; the digital deletion campaigns (*#deleteuber* and *#deletefacebook*) primarily active in 2016-2018; and the boycott organisation 'Connecting Good', operating since 2015. While we acknowledge this range of case studies (and the evidence they give rise to) comes at a cost of depth, this serves the conceptual purpose of our study. Our methods all involve broad case study methodology in using existing evidence and develop the following original material. The first case study of *#grabyourwallet* uses a semi-structured interview of a key actor, supported by textual analysis of the study website and of media analytics. For the second case study of online deletion campaigns, digital empirical analysis examining Twitter (now known as X but in this article referred to by its name at the time of research), inspired by Rogers' (2013: 154) 'postdemographic' methods, is used. For the third case study of Connecting Good, textual analysis of available sources, including company reports, is utilised. Any particularities of these methods are noted at the appropriate point in the following case studies (Thomas, 2011; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Finally, we recognise that we are discussing only a segment of the global economy, though these are areas that are strongly involved with consumer activism in market-based democracies.

### **Digitising the boycott: The case of *#grabyourwallet***

The hashtag campaign *#grabyourwallet* appeared on Twitter in October 2016, calling for a boycott of Donald Trump-related brands and businesses. The *#grabyourwallet* campaign is part of a broader movement of economic dissent in relation to Trump (including after his presidential term ended), highlighting issues around sexism, racism and environmental injustice (Fisher, 2019). This boycott hashtag campaign was launched by San Francisco-based marketing professional Shannon Coulter, who found her experience in creating social media content for brands useful when it came to speaking

against gender discrimination<sup>2</sup>. Coulter first started the Twitter campaign *#fashionnotfascism* that promoted a boycott of Ivanka Trump's clothing brand, when Ivanka Trump failed to distance herself from her father's sexist statements. This hashtag was later followed by the more sensational *#grabyourwallet*, which, hinting at Trump's vulgar comments from the leaked Access Hollywood tape, gained strong traction among social media publics.

In 2021, the website of the campaign included thorough documentation of press coverage of the boycott, as well as of the impact of the movement (such as impressions gained on Twitter and businesses dropping Trump-related brands). An aspect of being a marketplace-oriented boycott is that it directly addresses its economic target. The aim of the campaign is to distance consumers from Trump's business organisation, by listing and commenting on these companies and brands. Retailers targeted for stocking Trump brands included Macy's, Bloomingdale's, Lord & Taylor, Overstock.com, Zappos, and Amazon, golf courses and wineries, as well as Celebrity Apprentice advertisers (where Donald Trump was executive producer).

Boycotts are complex and can variously focus on influencing the marketplace activity of consumers, on utilising media to raise awareness, or on directly targeting companies or individuals (or their proxies) (Stolle and Micheletti, 2015). This is encapsulated by Friedman's (1999) differentiation between marketplace-oriented boycotts and media-oriented boycotts, as well as that between non-surrogate and surrogate boycotts. The *#grabyourwallet* boycott is both a media-oriented and marketplace-oriented boycott. Its instigator, Coulter, stated that 'the biggest lever was press' in turning concerns into a popular movement of economic withdrawal; suggesting the importance of publicity to the campaign. There were other parameters at play as well. In relation to media, the boycott benefited from Coulter's background of working in digital marketing, and her experience in interacting with journalists. For example, Coulter stated that professionals who were willing to talk to the press about why they were participating in *#grabyourwallet* was key for credibility and momentum. In addition, the discursive activism that

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<sup>2</sup> All references like this to Coulter's views, quotes from Coulter or information from Coulter are from interviews conducted as part of this research into digital consumption activism.



the hashtag campaign mobilised supported the ‘online telling and connecting of personal stories’ which is characteristic of the rise of hashtag feminism (Clark, 2016: 769). In this sense, *#grabyourwallet* is about enabling connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012) through the sharing of personal stories that offer reasons for refusing to purchase Trump-related goods and services.

The outcomes of the *#grabyourwallet* campaign include gaining considerable media attention, as well as having notable marketplace impact. In the first ten days of the hashtag, it was reported that ‘more than a million people have viewed her [Coulter’s] posts ... and she is receiving 200 direct replies on Twitter per day and hundreds of retweets’ (Walters, 2016). Reportedly, the campaign’s website was receiving about two million unique visitors per month soon after its launch (Kramer, 2017). Indeed, the social media analytics company Captiv8, reported that, by 2017, there had been more than 496,000 ‘engagements’ (likes, retweets, and so on) on Twitter or Instagram posts that include *#grabyourwallet*. Captiv8 found that a significant share of those posts originated in California or New York, suggesting the campaign had gained particularly strong traction in those areas (Halzack, 2017). This attention has translated into market impact, with the target most prominently affected being Ivanka Trump’s line of clothing and footwear. For example, while the department store Nordstorm initially reported that they had no ‘plans to stop offering [Ivanka Trumps] collection’ ten days after the *#grabyourwallet* campaign started, they moved to drop Ivanka Trump’s brand (Abrams, 2017; Walters, 2016).

In terms of political agency, participation in the hashtag activism of *#grabyourwallet* did not necessarily result in strong digital ties, but it was not a case of slacktivism either. Contrary to the idea of slacktivism as ‘political activities that serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants but have no impact on real-life political outcomes’ (Christensen, 2012: 3), the tactics employed by the *#grabyourwallet* digital campaign resulted in considerable negative publicity for some Trump brands, as well as some successful economic divestment. The strong leadership figure of Coulter is a significant factor in this context. Behind this campaign, there is a specific named organiser who provides charismatic leadership that utilises the creative capital possessed by her as a marketing professional to leverage digital technologies for visibility of a cause. In the case of *#grabyourwallet*,

leadership and publicity facilitated its visibility, as the campaign shifted over time from hashtag activism to creating a not-for-profit organisation that, in Coulter's words, 'turns consumer power into a more just, inclusive world'. Agency, in this case, was mobilised through both consumer action (boycotting) and the discursive sharing of personal stories, and as such it was geared towards collective prosperity, enabled by socio-technical affordances and independent of commercial ideologies and interests. Those participating in the #grabyourwallet campaign did not need to engage repeatedly with the campaign, but the transformation of #grabyourwallet into an organisation illustrates the potential sustainability of this type of campaign.

Moving from questions of agency to digital economy, the #grabyourwallet campaign also worked creatively with elements of the digital economy, but in ways that fuel as well as utilise information markets. Drawing on both publicly available tools and technological expertise, the #grabyourwallet campaign initially called for a boycott of businesses listed in a meticulous Google spreadsheet but, as the movement gained traction, Google's cap of 50 visitors per spreadsheet limited its growth. Coulter then employed others to turn her starter spreadsheet into a website. In addition, a Chrome Plugin later became available, enabling pop-up messages about Trump connections when entering the website of a business on the boycott list. What this case also suggests is that while the action called for by #grabyourwallet is one of marketplace activism through rejecting Trump brands, this activism itself relied, in part, on the 'big players' of the digital economy to mobilise consumers. There is thus a tension here between 'resisting' the consumer market through responsible consumer choice while also working with and through digital platforms that are intent on the commodification of information.

### **Deletion and the case of #deleteuber and #deletefacebook**

Deleting social media apps is a type of boycott based on refusing specific ways that digital and internet technologies mediate social relations. Our second case study looks at two relevant examples through the Twitter hashtag campaigns #deleteuber and #deletefacebook. These accounts are not comprehensive, but they identify some common characteristics. In early 2017, then President Trump issued an executive order banning refugees and

immigrants from seven mainly Muslim countries from entering the USA. Protests followed, and in support a taxi union in New York City called on its members to stop offering cab rides for the day from New York's Kennedy airport. It later became clear that cab service Uber had, during this strike time, not only continued offering rides but had also used 'surge pricing' to raise the prices of rides as a way of coping with high demand. What seemed to be profiteering from the cab strike was revealed when Uber announced it had suspended surge pricing. Soon after, a hashtag *#deleteuber* appeared on Twitter (Cresci, 2017; Isaac, 2017). This also seemed a low-cost, perhaps slacktivist, protest as there was an almost direct rival, Lyft, that people could use. A further burst of activity followed the news that then Uber CEO Travis Kalanick was on an official economic advisory committee appointed by Trump, which led to Kalanick resigning from that committee (Won, 2017). Later, further scandals at Uber at times revived the hashtag.

While analysing tweets retrospectively is difficult, if not sometimes impossible, some tweets from a hashtag can be retrospectively collected through the weblink Twitter provides.<sup>3</sup> Despite significant limitations of this data, the dates of tweets using the hashtag *#deleteuber* were extractable, providing a timeline of such tweets. The results suggest a passing Twitter storm; with the first use of the hashtag in 2011, but no more than once or twice on any day for the subsequent 6 years until tweets using the hashtag reached 61 in our sample on the day of the taxi protest. The day after the

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<sup>3</sup> The data set used in this article for *#deleteuber* and *#deletefacebook* analysis was collected from tweets retrieved from the source <https://twitter.com/hashtag/deleteuber> and <https://twitter.com/hashtag/deletefacebook>, both viewed in February 2018. This data has the advantage of being able to retrospectively collect tweets and was employed for that reason. Though sampling from the twitter app is preferable in many contexts, retrospective analysis requires additional methods. There are significant limitations to this data which should be noted. First, the initial collection in February 2018 found tweets back to 2011; however, an attempt to repeat collection two months later only found tweets back to February 2017. Second, the data is in an extremely messy form, making it difficult to extract reliable data, meaning that dates of tweets became the baseline of reliable data from this method. Third, it is not clear what proportion of the total tweets with a particular hashtag are available and for how long. Accordingly, results should be treated with caution and only the most significant results from both data collections have been used in this article.

protest tweets reached 490, then immediately dropped back to 157 the following day until, by the second week of February 2017, tweets were back to only a few a day.

These are indicators of a classic twitter storm (Seegerberg and Bennett, 2011). There is a steep and sudden take off in attention followed by an almost as swift drop-off in tweets. Tweeting here is meant to be an amplification of the substance of the protest, which was consumers deleting their Uber accounts. But the twitter storm also raises the question of whether tweeting becomes a protest in-itself, creating a form of clicktivism which satisfies moral qualms without having to do anything more substantial (Halupka, 2014; White, 2010). Here, individual digital consumption actions (sending and reading tweets and retweets) are called for to promote those actions becoming digital consumption practices; that is, where enough people taking similar actions (deleting an app) makes a pattern that, in turn, makes an activist intervention. There have been claims about the loss of users to Uber in this period being significant, with the figure of 200,000 deleted accounts following the campaign's peak periods reported based on a leak from Uber staff (Stat, 2017). However, Uber's revenue rose in the last quarter of 2017, following the early year protest (though it is hard to tell if this is from increased rides or changes in revenue gathering mechanisms). At the time of the protests, Uber was a loss-making company but large financial losses for Uber were true for it prior to (and after) the protests (Lashinsky, 2018; Le Febvre and Armstrong, 2018).

In 2017, a second deletion campaign occurred as a scandal broke over then Facebook (now Meta) around the use of its data by the firm Cambridge Analytica to influence a USA Presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum. This widely reported scandal made clear the extent of personal information being kept on users and how that information was being both used by Facebook and being sold to a range of companies (Anon, 2018). As with Uber, a hashtag (*#deletefacebook*) became popular as the scandal spread and deepened. Tweets were collected, though it was only possible to do so from just after the campaign started (March 31, 2018) and a peak was already evident. The subsequent picture is similar to the *#deleteuber* campaign with a peak of tweets followed by a rapid drop-off, such that by the end of April tweets were minimal. There were occasional repeated smaller spikes, usually related to later stories of Facebook and privacy.

One market research report suggested that over 50% of UK Facebook users had changed their privacy settings as a result of the scandal (though it is impossible to know if the *#deletefacebook* campaign contributed to such changes) and 5% had deleted their Facebook accounts altogether (Tan, 2018). However, by the end of 2017, Facebook was reporting a worldwide 14% increase in daily active users to 1.4 billion and a 14% increase in monthly active users to 2.13 billion (Facebook, 2018). In addition, leaving Facebook is more complex than leaving Uber, as some obvious replacements – such as Instagram – are owned by Facebook (Hern, 2019). Evidence, then, is at best ambiguous over whether this campaign led to significant numbers of deletions and probably suggests little effect.

*#deletefacebook* seems another classic Twitter storm. Similar to *#deleteuber*, and unlike *#grabyourwallet*, there is no clear evidence of leaders or a group of contributors who focused the protest. Rather, in both *#deletion* campaigns, the impetus came from the events surrounding the beleaguered companies and the communicative abilities of twitter users to easily mobilise by creating a hashtag. Both campaigns appear also to be reactive and decentralised.

Reactive here simply means these are boycott's responding to specific events. The events trigger the possibility of a boycott by drawing on a flurry of publicity across media. Even if we now confer the idea of a campaign on these *#delete* storms, it seems that these were more closely related to events than to ongoing pressure. There are websites with advice on alternatives to Uber and Facebook and instructions on how to delete the apps and accounts, there are sometimes also celebrities or individuals with significant numbers of followers who use the hashtag; however, there appears to be no ongoing organising. Decentralisation accordingly appears to be both real and to be more evanescent and 'storm-like' than events that might lead to ongoing relations between activists that build a campaign. In this sense, both *#delete* campaigns relied on a particular form of digital agency.

These two points of being reactive to events and being decentralised also relate to the way these campaigns, by their nature, rely on and incite further use of social media, similar to the way *#grabyourwallet* provides informational fuel for some digital companies. The partial implication of these two campaigns is, then, that whatever Uber or Facebook lost (and the evidence for

loss is at best thin) was Twitter's gain. This gain was a fuelling of further information consumption that drives the digital economy, particularly the practice of harvesting data from users' activities to feed monetisation through ads. In this sense, the #delete campaigns examined here may appear to be consumer boycotts, but they also unintentionally promote consumption of digital commodities.

### **Digitalising the boycott: The case of Connecting Good**

Having explored boycotts so far, boycotts need a brief explanation (Hilton, 2003). Boycotts consist of endorsing the purchase of particular products, services or enterprises. For the most part, this has translated into advocating the use of alternative economic spaces (the farmers' market as opposed to the supermarket) or alternative product types (fair trade as opposed to mainstream). In doing so, the boycott, like the boycott, draws on tropes of consumer power. The boycott works with a calculative logic of the 'good' or at least the 'better', identifying which products and businesses are deserving of consumer spend according to how those products conform to values such as environmental sustainability, fair trade, worker rights, animal rights and so on.

Digital technologies, especially the app and social media, have proven valuable for boycott tactics. One of the most prominent of consumer activist apps, Buycott, lists hundreds of ethical consumption campaigns, providing information to users on products to be avoided or purchased based on crowd-sourced information about the record of each company. Indeed, Buycott has already been the subject of considerable analysis, because the app speaks of both the digitally mediated possibilities of political organising while re-asserting a capitalist logic of values-driven consumer choice (Eli et al., 2016; Hawkins and Horst, 2020; Humphery and Jordan, 2018).

In our third case study, we draw attention to a somewhat different, digitally enabled boycott strategy in the New Zealand-based group CoGo (Connecting Good). Drawing on models of social and environmental accreditation, developed within areas such as organics and fair trade, CoGo was established as a registered charity in 2010 (under the banner of Conscious Consumers) for

the purpose of identifying and accrediting ethical traders in the New Zealand hospitality industry. CoGo continues to be an accrediting body, by 2022 operating across various market sectors, including hospitality, food retail, fashion and transport ([nz.cogo.co/our-accreditation](http://nz.cogo.co/our-accreditation)). Like other ethical consumption accrediting schemes, CoGo has awarded symbols or 'badges' (aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals) to both businesses and products that meet or are working towards a 'respect for people, planet and animals' (CoGo, 2020). By 2013, this focus on accreditation was supported by the launch of the Conscious Consumer (CoGo) App, which provides consumers with information on hundreds of CoGo registered businesses.

All this is by no means novel. Similar smart interfaces supporting ethical consumption have been developed, but the CoGo team markets itself as having a certain edge. Not only does the CoGo App boast a polished interface, the CoGo group combines business accreditation with app-based consumer membership as a basis for its evolving commercial model of information and data brokerage. The CoGo App registers individual consumers and the values they prioritise, such as waste reduction, sustainable sourcing, responsible investment and so on. In doing so, the CoGo app acts as a hub that connects ethical businesses and buyers in a 'feedback loop' ([nz.cogo.co/impact-framework](http://nz.cogo.co/impact-framework)). Through the CoGo App, businesses can directly promote their trade to a targeted set of ethical consumers. Conversely, these consumers can 'vote' for certain businesses and the values they represent not simply by frequenting a particular enterprise, but by having their patronage recorded by linking their payments to their CoGo membership. Each time the CoGo App user makes a purchase at a registered business, they contribute to CoGo's consumer database. This data is then mined to provide reports to businesses on the spending and values profile of their customers, while also providing broader aggregate information on the market activity of all CoGo members.

In effect, this is a hybrid model of both commercialised activist agency and triple bottom line business innovation. The focus is on the construction of an ethical market, forged through the 'responsibilisation' of business as much as the consumer. Income to CoGo is generated through registering, accrediting and supplying businesses with consumer data. Importantly, all data supplied is anonymous, collective and aggregate in nature, and CoGo App users are

under no obligation to link their payments to membership. Nevertheless, the brokerage of consumer data is central to the CoGo model, as is their emphasis on 'changing business to change the world'. The latter aim is undergirded by CoGo's 'impact framework' through which businesses are advised on meeting social and environmental sustainability measures and awarded further 'badges' as they make 'practice improvements'. This approach initially proved successful, and CoGo went global. A UK branch and UK-based app was launched in 2018, at the same time that the group re-branded in both the UK and New Zealand under the Connecting Good (CoGo) banner. As an accredited 'benefit corporation', informed by a philosophy of caring capitalism, CoGo works unashamedly with a purely consumer and business-oriented model of change. Downloading the app is referred to as 'joining the movement' and is promoted through slogans such 'ethical living made easy'.

CoGo thus sits at the least contestatory end of consumer activism, seemingly reducing a social movement to shopping in the right places and relinquishing one's spending data. Political agency here is little more than an amorphous ethics of market choice. This delimitation connects in some respects to the nature of the boycott itself. As Kelm and Dohle (2018) have argued, the consumer boycott tends to be a more outwardly collective activity than the boycott. Indeed, it might be said that where the boycott constitutes consumer choice as organised protest, the boycott speaks of a less dramatic and far more diffuse affirmation of products and businesses. More broadly, as Eli and colleagues (2016) have noted, digitally-based invocations of a vote-with-your-wallet consumer power work through a binary construction of political action as consumption or non-consumption that both continue to be framed within capitalist consumerism. While this reiterates a well-worn critique of ethical consumption, the CoGo app stands as a particularly clear example of commodity-centric activism. This is reinforced by notable limits in the functionality of the app itself; which provides app users with little input into app design and content and does not enable communication between CoGo 'members', further limiting political agency. Here, of all our case studies, we see perhaps the most vigorous use of the digital to render political consumerism as atomised agency and yet, CoGo, unlike the delete campaigns examined above, overcomes an agential evanescence by drawing consumers into an ongoing relationship to CoGo campaigns.



CoGo can be further problematised by its recalibration of consumption agency as data and this dovetails with our second analytical axis that emphasises the way the digital economy produces the consumer through commodification of information. This strategy certainly offers CoGo a connection to digital economy companies that are thirsty for data. The data trace of ethical activities becomes a kind of informational activism and CoGo's claim of enabling the consumer to shape business ethics is not without foundation. Moreover, CoGo can be seen as moralising conventional practices of corporate data brokerage; an enormously powerful industry based on the massive monitoring and selling of consumer information (Crain, 2018). CoGo, in contrast, brokers with a commitment to consent, privacy and transparency in relation to the collection and distribution of data, while also refraining from personalising consumer information. But what CoGo, and CoGo members, cannot escape is the commodification of this data itself. Ironically, CoGo App users render themselves as another commodity in the chains of both ethical consumption and of the digital economy. This is the inescapable consequence of monetizing CoGo data and is hardly a challenge to the commercialisation of identity brought by the digital realm. As Crain (2018: 98) notes the '...commodification of personal information has become one of the Internet's foremost business models'.

Like other ethical consumption applications, the CoGo app involves contradictions. It effectively leverages a form of consumer politics that speaks to what Ward and Vreese (2011) have called socially conscious consumption that is particularly appealing to digitally active citizens. But more significantly, the CoGo app shifts the gaze of ethical consumption to the realm of commerce as much as to the agency of the ethical consumer. This is important, since it potentially displaces the primacy of the consumer in discourses of ethical consumption and re-frames this discourse as an ethics of social justice and sustainability that is about distributive and retail practices as much as purchases (Humphery, 2017). The CoGo App continually re-centres 'consumer choice' as political agency while feeding a growing digital economy based on information brokerage.

## Discussion

Our three case studies examine the complexity of agency when consumer activism enters the digital realm. Across the Twitter-based hashtag campaigns examined above, we saw an agential evanescence in which the ease of tweeting a hashtag led to intense bursts of activity but also uncertainty in both the aftermath and longevity of a consumer-centred campaign. Indeed, the critical account provided by theories of slacktivism seems confirmed in our account of the *#delete* campaigns. Against this, both the *#grabyourwallet* and CoGo cases produced more sustained campaigns and platforms for consumer agency mobilisation, though they did so precisely by not relying on social media alone and by generating formal organisations. We will explore these points briefly.

First, against the slacktivism critique, we suggest that analysis of digital consumer activism needs to look more widely than events like twitter storms – because, though these events may indeed merely constitute morally reassuring and politically inconsequential action, they must also be connected to a broader activist context to be fully understood. Our work suggests that digital media can only ever be integrated within ethical consumption campaigns as one of a range of techniques and strategies and any attempt to implement activism solely through apps or social media campaigns is likely to produce at best passing moments of publicity. The two campaigns of *#grabyourwallet* and CoGo avoided agential evanescence primarily because both are more than social media events and have some form of leadership and campaign format using a range of activist tactics, thus establishing ongoing forms of agency. Indeed, *#grabyourwallet* was developed by a practitioner skilled in social media but has extended to a range of activist resources. CoGo offers a business-based and institutionalised approach, which nevertheless ensures that it is an ongoing resource for digital consumer activism, however circumscribed this is by an ideology of consumer choice. Our argument, here, should not be read as a claim for the efficacy of hierarchical organisation but as a reassertion of the continuing need for a consumption politics forged through structured, diverse and ongoing campaigning, rather than through a sole reliance on digital media. Our examples reflect known tensions in the creation of agency through activism; tensions over forms of leadership, organisation, inclusivity and collective

decision-making – and our findings argue that digital resources do not overcome such complexities.

The second area of complexity that we have explored concerns the dilemma of using digital industries to protest forms of ethically dubious consumption while being drawn, at the same time, into fuelling digital forms of consumption that are themselves ethically questionable. In all the case studies above, we foreground that different kinds of digital actions, from hashtags to apps, generate information of the kind that is central to the capitalist digital economy. CoGo extends this to its logical conclusion, by institutionalising the sale of information generated from ethical consumers. What might digitally aid a consumer to take effective choices in supporting, for example, living wages for labourers, will at the same time generate information valuable to data brokers and digital platforms dedicated to private profit. Here, the complexity of agency within consumption practices is foregrounded, because ethical agency in using, for example, ethical apps to identify and buy ethical goods, is linked to semi-hidden digital consumption practices that can redirect such ethical agency toward profit-oriented advertising and other aspects of the digital economy that are ungoverned by ethics beyond profit. This contradiction is the playing-out in a digital form of the longstanding ambiguity within ethical consumption and consumer activism campaigns that advocate a politics opposing particular forms and levels of consumption by promoting other ‘ethical’ forms of exchange that may leave a capitalist market logic of consumption largely uncontested. Within our case studies, consumer activism is foregrounded in *#grabyourwallet* and CoGo while the logics of accumulation of the digital economy are either left hidden or are treated as a tactic to be taken advantage of. In neither case are the ethical problems produced by the digital economy addressed. Locating our analysis at the intersection of the digital economy and ethical consumption in the digital realm allows us to identify how a longstanding issue within ethical consumption—how can consumption be contested by consuming differently? – has reappeared in a new form particular to digital contexts.

## **Conclusion**

As we argue, analysing the digitisation of consumer activism exists within, and points to, shifting political dynamics. Through three case studies, this article has examined the connection between digital media activism and the politics of consumption in two key ways; first, by drawing out issues relating to the nature of agency in consumer activism in digital contexts and, second, by drawing attention to the digital economy's production of consumers and the meaning of this for consumer activism in the digital realm. By locating our analysis at the intersection of digital media activism and the digital economy, we identify this conjunction of agency and consumer identity as key to understanding the emerging dynamics of a digital consumer politics.

Digital consumer activism is currently expanding. There are an increasing number of apps supporting and reporting on ethical consumption; and now also there are digitally native forms, such as Sleeping Giants and Stop Funding Hate that mobilise for divestment against digital advertising practices that promote hate speech. Our analysis has focused on digitally-mediated boycott and buycott campaigns – as well as on forms of data brokerage – that change participation in consumption activism and transform the ways in which consumer power operates. As we experience more ways in which the digital transforms consumption and consumer activism, we have outlined key areas of conceptualisation and concern in relation to digital media activism and the digital economy.

We also argue for a media practice approach that asserts the importance of the complex concept of agency when examining the politics of consumption – as the very point of this consumer activism, however successful or unsuccessful, is to engender agencies through which alternative forms of consumption can address issues of environmental sustainability, labour rights, global inequality, and social and cultural justice. The digitisation of consumer activism has resulted in a reconfiguration of, rather than escape from, familiar political fault lines. Digital consumer activism amplifies rather than evades complex questions of political agency. Moreover, such digital activism signals a developing intersection of consumer politics and the digital economy that simultaneously speaks of political possibilities and of private profit. This is not to suggest that digital media should be abandoned for

political activism simply because that may simultaneously produce profit for digital corporations. Rather, our analysis points to the need to grasp and explore such complexities both in research and in activism, and thereby to create an effective digital consumption politics through commonly used forms of media. Overall, we are witnessing a new, digitally inflected, intersection of consumer activism and capitalism that both enables and limits protest and change.

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