

Online consumer activism: Challenging companies with Change.org

Xerxes Minocher

This is a pre-print version of the article published in New Media & Society and may differ slightly from the version that appears in print. Please cite from the published version where possible: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818803373>

Within this article I explore how consumer activists use the petition site Change.org to successfully resist and challenge corporate business practices. Bringing together literature from communication, political science, and consumer behaviour, and using case studies of two successful campaigns, I trace a process of online consumer activism where the comments of individuals pursuing personal publicity aggregate to attract negative media attention to a brand, leading to subsequent corporate behaviour change. This process of online consumer activism illustrates a dynamic interplay between online spaces of participation, personal publicizations, and the formation of identities for both consumers and companies, furthering our understanding of how online spaces are being used for digital anti-corporate activism.

keywords: digital media, slacktivism, online protest, process-building, activist publics

Since corporations wield so much power in society, it's notable that most studies of online participation focus on engagement with political institutions and civic behaviours, with little focus given to the corporate sphere (Lutz, Hoffmann, & Meckel, 2014). Studies that do examine online participation in relation to businesses explore how consumers can "co-create" alongside companies, and how to better customer relations (Lutz et al., 2014), but there is little discussion of how consumers can hold a company accountable by engaging with them online. Recent work has shown us how companies keep their unethical actions well-hidden from the population (Zyglidopoulos & Fleming, 2011), and that they use online media to monitor and manage activists who may challenge them (Uldam, 2017), but there's little understanding of how consumers themselves can use digital media to conduct their own oversight of companies. Since companies wield so much public influence and can so easily hide their behaviour, it is important to understand both how consumers can challenge a company when unethical practices are exposed, and what role the online sphere may play in this.

To extend our understanding into this domain, I explore how consumer activists use the online petition platform Change.org to successfully challenge company behaviour. As illustrated through case studies, Change.org empowers consumers to take action by signing petitions and sharing their comments within the online space of what can be called an activist public. The aggregation of comments within an activist public coalesces into a doppelgänger brand image that challenges a company's carefully crafted public image (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). This questioning of brand authenticity then plays out in local, national, and international news media coverage, and in a bid to respond to the negative publicity, companies modify their behaviour to align with consumer demand. Illustrating this process of online consumer activism where online protest spaces are used to challenge company behaviour, the results of this analysis

contribute to our understanding of both online anti-corporate activism and digitally-mediated political consumerism.

Identifying contentious consumers

In political science and communications, consumers tend to appear in the well-studied area of political consumerism which explores selective purchasing decisions as manifest in boycotts and buycotts. Much of the attention in political consumerism focuses on the civic or political dimensions of these purchasing behaviours rather than the impact boycott or buycott actions create (e.g. Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005; de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014; Copeland, 2014); as such, the impact of these actions on the companies themselves is unaddressed. Also within these studies, when the online component of participation is considered, it is only in its capacity to predict political consumerism (Shah et al., 2007), but there is no further exploration of meaningful ways consumers engage with companies and challenge their behaviour online. Though it is recognized the marketplace can play a key role in creating change, the focus of political consumerism is on the civic and political sphere, leaving the market context in which these behaviours occur outside of the considered scope. Previous special issue journals focusing on the politics of consumption follow a similar pattern: recognizing the primacy of the consumer role, but focusing on political and civic implications while leaving the question of how consumers resist companies online unaddressed (Shah, McLeod, Friedland, & Nelson, 2007; Shah, Friedland, Wells, Kim, & Rojas, 2012).

To understand how consumers resist corporate influence, we must look to the consumer behaviour domain, specifically the consumer activism literature. Moving beyond the boycotts and buycotts of political consumerism, the consumer activism literature is composed of a broader repertoire of actions. Studies examine the diverse ways consumers challenge companies, trying

to curb corporate influence and capitalist ideology with acts of culture jamming, protests, and anti-consumption lifestyles (e.g. Rumbo, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Glickman, 2009; Portwood-Stacer, 2012). However, though robust, the online component of participation is absent within these consumer activism studies. While it's recognized that consumers can challenge companies with more than boycott/buycotts, how these practices translate online remains unexamined.

Meanwhile, a bulk of research has explored and outlined the impact of digital media for the practice and conceptual understanding of activism. However, this scholarly attention focuses on social movements in broad strokes, not challenges to corporate behaviour in the new media environment. Recent investigations have birthed various conceptualizations of “Internet-assisted” (Nielsen, 2011), “digitally enabled” (Earl & Kimport, 2011), or “digitally networked” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) activism, and while companies may at times be the target, attention remains within the social movement perspective. Even recent attempts to broaden the political consumerism concept (Bossy, 2014), or understand the nature of social media power (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016) have remained within the social movement paradigm. Yet, as at least one set of these authors reminds us, it is also important to consider protests that occur outside of social movements (Earl & Kimport, 2011). In light of this reminder, the absence of the market context in political consumerism, and the unexplored role of online spaces in consumer activism, exploring how consumers resist and challenge companies in a digital environment contributes both to the absent literature on how consumers can engage with companies online, and to our understanding of the use of protest as a means of redress in the marketplace.

The next section selectively reviews the literature from political consumerism and consumer behaviour to highlight promising trends in understanding a type of online consumer activism.

Then, drawing on the lens of brand publics which sensitizes our analysis to a social-media based consumer culture (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), we will begin to explore the Change.org petitions. Discussion focuses on the results of this analysis, suggesting a form of online activist publics, and concludes with a process of online consumer activism.

Understanding contentious consumers

Consumer activist behaviour is often kickstarted by consumers' recognition that a company is engaging in oppressive or harmful practices which can harm themselves or their communities (Ozanne & Murray, 1995). Such recognition can come about from personal revelations (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), or exposure to other activist acts which draw attention to an unjust system (Rumbo, 2002). Once this recognition occurs, it's presumed that newly-enlightened consumers will naturally band together and challenge companies (Ozanne & Murray, 1995).

Consider the spread of a viral email exposing Nike's complicity in sweatshop labor to consumers who were otherwise unaware of these unethical corporate practices: as consumers learnt of Nike's behaviour, they came together to challenge the company (Peretti, 2004). These newly-enlightened and now active consumers added fuel to the anti-sweatshop fire, a movement which also included more formal actors like unions and non-profits who greatly benefited from the upsurge of consumer participation (Micheletti & Stolle, 2007). Perhaps it is obvious that exposing unaware consumers to egregious corporate acts can propel participation and incite change. However, the role digital media can play in these practices remains understudied and underdeveloped.

Bennett (2004) and Bennett & Lagos (2007) have gone furthest in exploring how activists can use online media to challenge corporate behaviour. They highlight a "logo logic": a process in

which activists attach negative meanings to lifestyle brands in an attempt to compel corporate participation in regulatory or professional certification standards. Lifestyle brands connect to individual consumers through an emotional branding approach based on relational and affective bonds (Thompson et al., 2006), and complete the difficult work of capturing the attention of individual consumers and connecting them to their brand image, which activists then subvert to bring negative publicity to the brand (Bennett & Lagos, 2007). This creation and attachment of negative meanings to a brand image to alter the company's public façade is known within consumer behaviour literature as a doppelgänger brand image (Thompson et al., 2006). After altering a brand's image into a doppelgänger brand image, activists can spread their creations through digital media and challenge the values a company claims to represent, thereby turning the power of consumers against their favored brands (Bennett & Lagos, 2007).

While this logo logic behaviour is shown to be effective, the discussion centers on whether awareness can be tied to a broader social movement itself, with little analysis given to how the negative brand image is created and spread through new and mass media networks. And while this domain of investigation promised great potential, now more than a decade has passed with little follow-up (Giesler, 2012 provides the exception). In the interim, critiques of slacktivism have come to typify the behaviours which consumer activists produce online.

Contentious consumers online

The highly-visible and public nature of online action often leads to critiques that participation in such behaviour may allow individuals to feel good about themselves, but does not lead to tangible impact (Morozov, 2012; Skoric, 2012). Proponents of the slacktivism perspective stress that individuals are motivated by a desire for visibility, and that this motivation co-opts further

impactful contributions to a cause once impression-management goals are achieved (Kristofferson, White, & Peloza, 2014).

Participation on social-networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter where individuals can engage in low-effort actions that are highly-visible to public audiences seems to best represent the slacktivist argument (e.g. Morozov, 2012; Schumann & Klein, 2015), but the label of slacktivism has been applied to a range of actions from low-effort acts such as signing a petition or adopting a token symbol of support (Kristofferson et al., 2014), to more committed acts like boycotts (Skoric, 2012). It is considered that these are actions that may let individuals feel good about themselves, but lack the concerted effort that actually lead to impact.

There is some validity to this critique. For example, in 2010 when a Greenpeace campaign emerged against Nestle and its use of palm oil, consumers flocked to the brand's Facebook page to publicly express their outrage at the corporation's actions. In their comments, individuals do not consider personal responsibilities or discuss what actions they can take themselves (such as a boycott of Nestle), but instead focus on publicly deriding the company with little consideration of how to challenge the corporation, its subcontractors, or the government that permitted such behaviour (Etter & Vestergaard, 2015). Here consumers recognize a company engaging in harmful action but take no further action than chastising the corporation's behaviour online.

As Figure 1 captures, the slacktivist critique suggests that this highly-public display of outrage allows individuals to feel like they are achieving something without any real impact occurring. Once individuals feel they have participated, further involvement is discontinued (Schumann & Klein, 2015). In this way, actions taken online encourage consumers to engage in highly-visible

acts of token support and walk away from a cause, self-satisfied, co-opting further meaningful contributions from those who may have participated in traditional consumer activist acts.



Figure 1 - The process of slacktivism

Yet, even while less-committed actors may not contribute further, this does not mean that the tools of slacktivism cannot be used to affect impactful change (Shirky, 2011). Low-effort acts online still maintain a level of popularity, and continue to be linked to acts of successful consumer resistance. In 2011 when Bank of America introduced a \$5 debit card fee, an online petition emerged on Change.org to challenge this decision. The slacktivism perspective suggests that like the anti-Nestle campaign on Facebook, this petition could attract the activity of publicity-seeking consumers, but no market change would occur. True to the prediction the petition quickly attracted over 300,000 signatures and comments from individuals, but it also garnered national media attention and spurred both the U.S. President and Vice-President to criticize the actions of Bank of America (Bernard, 2011). Within a month of the petition's creation, Bank of America stepped back from its proposed fee along with other banks across the country that had enacted similar practices.

As this Bank of America example illustrates, the slacktivism conclusion of no impact is incomplete in its explanation. In actuality, acts considered slacktivism achieve a range of meaningful outcomes. Even further, low-effort acts online can encourage further-involved actions such as volunteering, promoting an ideal of conscious consumption, and donating money to a cause (Center for Social Impact Communication, 2011; Lee & Hsieh, 2013), as well as more

traditional activist behaviour such as community organizing and participation in social movements (Parigi & Gong, 2014).

As online spaces and communication tools continue to connect individuals more closely together, the potential for collective impact to emerge from these spaces grows as well (Resnick, 2002; Shirky, 2011). Beyond the publicity-affording nature of social-networking platforms, studies of online petitions sites have shown that certain online spaces provide affordances for the emergence of non-traditional, multi-issue based interest groups (Karpf, 2009), and facilitate new forms of participation which challenge the landscape of incentives and involvement traditionally characterizing collective action (Margetts, John, Escher, & Reissfelder, 2009). But how does an online petition site like Change.org facilitate the challenging of corporate behaviour?

The slacktivism perspective may capture the personal motivation of individuals engaging in these online behaviours, but there is no clear articulation of how impactful market change is possible from such acts. Similarly, the earlier consumer activist and logo logic views suggest it is possible to challenge a company's behaviour through its brand image, but the process to do so remains undefined. While these perspectives are incomplete in explanation, they are valuable in suggesting the starting and ending points of a process of online consumer activism.

A different perspective of consumer action online

It is helpful to recognize that not all online spaces are created equally. Since different online platforms provide different affordances, certain social practices can only emerge as effective when there is a balance between the aggregation of interested individuals, and the presence of

particular communication tools or technologies (Resnick, 2002). While participation within online media is often characterized by ‘narcissistic’ self-expression, in some spaces practices of personal publicization can come to have broader collective impact for civic institutions (Papacharissi, 2009), as well as corporations (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

Consider the sphere of Twitter where the discursive practice of posting tweets is mediated through the use of a hashtag. When an individual appends their tweet with a certain tag, they are not only publicizing their personal opinion, they are also contributing to an organized media space that is centered on the hashtag used. Though individuals do not always interact with one another as they share their tweets, the shared use of a certain hashtag allows the various contributions of personal sentiment and affect to aggregate into a structured set of meanings and dominant themes (Arvidsson, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Over time, a selection bias that only attracts certain compatible personal expressions is created, influencing how individuals use and interpret the hashtag (Papacharissi, 2015; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

For companies, a ‘brand public’ is formed when consumers tag their tweets with the hashtag of the brand. By doing this, consumers connect their personal lives with the company, strengthening the lifestyle brand relationship (Thompson et al., 2006; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). In the example of #louisvuitton, the hashtag attracts and aggregates postings that share information about products, news about the brand, and photos of consumers’ significant private moments such as birthday celebrations and graduations (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Though consumers are only using the hashtag to publicly share their purchases or private moments, the brand remains central to the sharing of these personal publicizations. As a result, these personal contributions aggregate to create publicity for the brand itself, extending its visibility and

presence within the lives of consumers (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). So, even as individuals engage in low-effort public action for themselves, they positively grow the scope and influence of the brand.

This is not an trend exclusive to companies or brands. A similar pattern of individual contribution and aggregation is also seen with the hashtag #blacklivesmatter where a plurality of tweets reflects a range of opinion and sentiment. Individuals use the hashtag to express their own reactions or opinions, but over time the structured aggregation of these tweets has come to signify unity for the movement itself, and its use has even allowed individuals to attract media attention and elite responses to the cause (Freelon et al., 2016).

Whether a hashtag is being used by consumers publicizing their recent purchase or by activists furthering a cause, it is the aggregation of these individual contributions along with the communication affordances of Twitter that allows a larger, collective impact to emerge (Resnick, 2002). What the brand public lens allows us to see is that actions of individual consumers pursuing their own publicity aggregate into a larger, collective visibility for a brand. Is it possible that in a similar fashion the participation of individual consumers on Change.org could extend the visibility of a consumer activist cause and create collective impact? How might we apply this perspective of brand relationships, communication affordances, and aggregated individual contributions to reveal the mechanisms underlying a process of online consumer activism?

Method & Data

Change.org was chosen to explore this behaviour as it is a platform which contains the low-effort actions of individual consumers along with a track-record of success. Unlike similar online

petition and participation-based sites such as Avaaz.org and SumOfUs.org which take on a much more active role with their members and also engage in offline action, Change.org is solely an online petition site where users can create or sign a petition unheeded and undirected, requiring only a signature from its participants, and a comment if they choose to share; any individual can create a petition, and there is a large global audience participating within the site. As such, it provides a rich context to explore the low-effort behaviours of individual consumers which typifies online consumer activism.

Personal participation and secondary media sources

From January to October, 2017 an immersive, interpretive netnographic approach was employed to study the affordances of the Change.org platform as well as the nature of individual participation within this space. Netnography is the dominant approach for studying consumer behaviour online, and is shown to be an effective method for understanding the culture of online communication and examining the point of view of participants in an online space (e.g. Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

I regularly visited and participated within the Change.org platform, signing petitions, engaging in site-wide feedback processes, and examining all resources, FAQs, media releases, and other site pages (totalling 31 single-spaced pages, and 52 minutes of video) for three months before specific petitions were selected for analysis. Analysis of the chosen petitions involved repeated follow-ups with these petitions for an additional seven months until comments were no longer being added to the petition, and no further insights emerged. In total, 36,285 comments were analysed and a random, mixed subset of 250 of the most recent and most popular comments per petition were used to verify identified themes and relationships. Comments quoted in the

following analysis are chosen from the most popular comments on each petition as signified by number of likes received, indicating other participants' agreement with the shared opinion or claim. Access to the site was from a Canadian location which influenced which petitions were presented as the site uses IP locations to tailor content.

I followed news coverage of the petitions which were posted as updates on the campaign page in order to understand who was covering the campaign, what was being said, and what the targeted company's responses were and how these changed over time. Tracking these stories also helped to understand how the voices of consumer demand moved from Change.org into the mass media and how the campaign and corporate response was being represented to broader audiences.

The two petitions chosen for analysis both achieved their goal of changing the behaviour of multi-national corporations in North America, and were prominently displayed on the front page of Change.org, suggesting they represent an ideal type of campaign and success the platform seeks to encourage, serving as illustrative examples of what types of claims and appeals achieve success through online petition sites. Both petitions were created when consumers had no access to legal recourse, or had failed to change corporate behaviour through regulatory channels. At the time, these campaigns had attracted more supporters and comments than most other petitions, and comments continued to accrue even after success was achieved, signalling strong consumer support for the cause. The substantial difference in timelines of both campaigns provides both a snapshot and long-exposure look at how the process of online consumer activism develops.

Petition 1: Stop selling serial killer Robert Pickton's book! 58, 232 signatures (available [here](#))

In January 2016, a book entitled *Pickton: In His Own Words* appeared as a product offering on Amazon Canada's website. In this memoir Pickton, a serial killer charged with murdering 26 women, argues for his innocence, claiming he is the "fall guy" for the deaths that the RCMP placed on him. Since the book was printed in the U.S., it was unclear if Canadian authorities could take any legal action, so in response a petition was created on Change.org, encouraging consumers to demand that Amazon remove the product offering from their catalogue.

Petition 2: M&M's Candies: Stop Using Artificial Dyes Linked to Hyperactivity 216,636 signatures (available [here](#))

Renee Shuttters found that her son was experiencing hyperactivity due to artificial dyes which are used in the coloring of M&M's, causing her involvement in a 2011 public hearing between the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States, along with health advocates, researchers, and other consumers where it was agreed that "[e]xposure to food and food components, including artificial food colors and preservatives, may be associated with adverse behaviours" (Shuttters & CSPI, 2013), but more scientific evidence was required before the FDA could take action. In response to this inaction, Renee created a petition on Change.org challenging Mars Inc. to use natural colorings in its M&M's candies. Supporting her campaign, the non-profit Center for Science in the Public Interest promoted the campaign on its website with a news release that cited studies presented in the FDA hearing to support Renee's assertions.

The Change.org experience

Analysis of Change.org was driven by a desire to understand the context that participatory behaviours occur in, the cues which trigger their action, and how the aggregation of personal publicizations could affect corporate change. Directed by this, the findings section first focuses on how the platform of Change.org encourages participation through site features and positive results before an investigation in to the Pickton and M&M's petitions uncovers how consumers enact an activist narrative that sees consumption as an enterprise for self-expression and negotiation of social inequalities (Thompson, 2004). Finally, how these personal publicizations are aggregated within these online spaces is traced, illuminating how a doppelgänger brand image (Thompson et al., 2006) is created to challenge Amazon Canada and Mars Inc.

Empowering Consumers

While an individual may not be able to influence the market, the combined power of a group of consumers, if guided correctly, can certainly affect change. This belief was foundational to the work of the National Consumers League (NCL) in the early 1900s as it set about to inform, and educate consumers to the unfair practices of merchants, suppliers, and companies throughout the United States (Glickman, 2009). Reflecting a similar understanding today, petition creators on Change.org recognize that consumers have the power to affect change within the market, but as individuals, lack the expertise and coordination that is required for consumer actions to have impact. In an effort to educate and encourage action, site features on Change.org empower individual consumers by highlighting how their actions can lead to impact and market change.

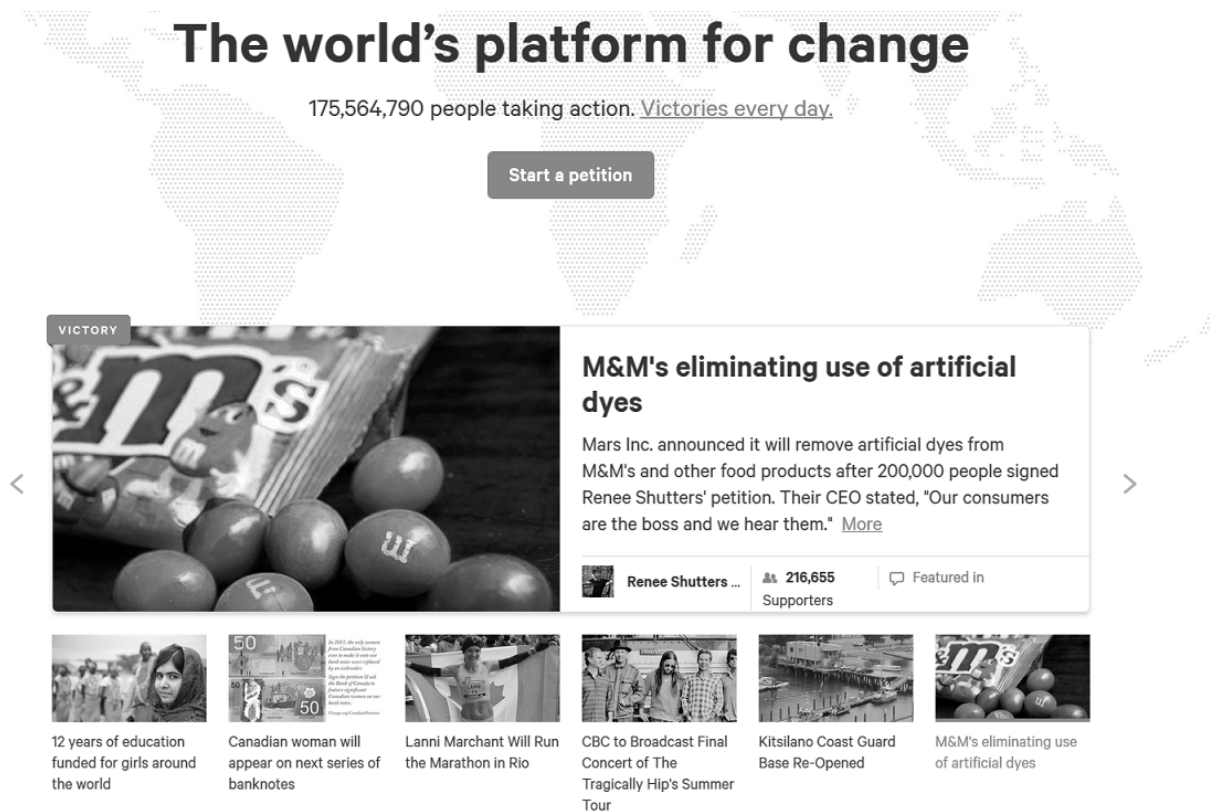


Figure 2 - Change.org Welcome Page (January, 2017)

Branding itself as *The world's platform for change*, Change.org employs a form of visual labour (Tatarchevskiy, 2011), enumerating its membership and recent victories in an attempt to legitimize the platform and its potential for impact. Not visible in this image, below the slideshow of victorious campaigns, a *What's happening on Change.org* feed highlights petitions that are trending throughout the site. Users are presented with the trending petition's title, description, and number of participants that have already supported the cause. Here, Change.org uses the number of supporters (those who have signed the petition) to reflect the importance and value a cause represents, and to encourage further participation from those who have yet to sign (Tatarchevskiy, 2011). Once users make an account and sign for a cause, their action is tracked, and when related campaigns are created, Change.org sends emails suggesting they participate

further by signing onto another important cause. In this way, the Change.org platform can mobilize its latent membership without burdening the group during off-times (Resnick, 2002).

When a user navigates to the *Impact* page they learn that Change.org has achieved 20,261 victories in 196 countries, and that “Nearly every hour, a petition on Change.org achieves victory”. These claims are followed up with a notice that *Your voice matters* above a list of current petitions that require support. Through this exposure, consumers learn what the NCL sought to teach more than a century ago: simple consumption choices like purchasing the right product or signing the right petition can lead to tangible market change. Site features on Change.org empower consumers to view their participation as an effective means to create impact, and prominently display trending and successful campaigns across the site to attract further attention and participation. For petition creators on Change.org, the site also has a page of resources which provides tips to support individuals in their attempts to ‘build momentum’, ‘engage decision makers’, and ‘reach out to the media’.

While petition creators on Change.org seek to create market change by aggregating consumer power through simple consumption choices much like the NCL did in the 1900s, what is new is that the Change.org platform allows petition creators to educate and empower individual consumers to create market change through their low-effort participation online. As the Pickton and M&M’s case studies will show, petitions on Change.org are online spaces of participation that aggregate individual low-effort actions to create larger, collective impact.

Activist publics

The online spaces of participation that Change.org facilitates through its petitions may be regarded as activist publics which share many of the characteristics of, and function like, brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Much like the affordances of Twitter facilitated the emergence of a brand public by aggregating the personal contributions of consumers, petitions on Change.org aggregate contributions from individuals who also make the brand central to their postings. Unlike a brand public, however, here the prominence of the brand does not grow positively. Participants in activist publics are incensed to action by recognizing brands they know engage in harmful practices, and they take action by signing and expressing their personal perspectives. Individual submissions then aggregate within the online space of the activist public, creating a collection of comments that share an activist narrative challenging the brand's actions as well as its public image, all endorsed by a large number of signatures.

Impelled to action by a desire to challenge the market actor while sharing their personal message, consumers sign the petition and add their comments. Often these commentaries build on what was presented in the petition description with a personal slant. For example, within the anti-Pickton petition, britta Fluevog [*sic*] comments:

I am a customer of amazon. I understand freedom of speech and economics, so I see the argument to sell the book. HOWEVER a book written by a man convicted of multiple killings--possibly, up to 64, should not be someone any brand wants to be associated with. Allowing him to share his story and profit off of it condones his behaviour and is excessively offensive to the family & friends of the deceased.

Similarly, in the M&M's petition, Reina Garcia comments that:

Even if the manufacturer doesn't buy into the hyperactivity link, why use a cheap, synthetic product when far healthier options are available? Take care of your customers. You'll still have your profits. You'll just be more responsible and ethical while making them.

Here, these individuals seek to share their personal opinion and point of view on the company's behaviour, and do so by building upon what is provided in the petition description while questioning the ethical values of the brand. In both calls to action, Britta and Reina employ a traditional consumer activist narrative grounded in a moralism (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004): there is a responsibility for those who have an awareness to step in and take action to make sure those who must be punished are punished and those who should be protected are protected.

The nature of participation

When users participate in Change.org they are given an opportunity to add a comment, but there are no site features that allow them to communicate with others beyond a 'like' response. As a result, comments often follow one another with no connection. Instead individuals use the space of the activist public to publicize personal commentaries and to reassert their own morality, insight, and righteousness. The presence of previous submissions then attracts imitation and remediation by subsequent participants, resulting in a theme which underlies and recurs throughout personal submissions. One example of this is the common activist narrative of morality seen above. Across activist publics another common narrative is that of challenging power imbalance, recognized as the inequality that allows one party to exploit their position over others for material gain. Both of these narrative themes of morality and power imbalance occur

repeatedly throughout the comments section of the activist publics. Below are four illustrative comments written in both petitions in the month of February, 2016:

“A law must be passed to stop anyone who murders from selling any book about the crime. No Criminal should be allowed to profit from their crime.”

[Margaret Melnick, Pickton petition]

“Hold all corporate management responsible! When a substance is shown to cause adverse reactions and not alleviated by management they should be held criminally responsible.” [Shirley Korpusik, M&M’s petition]

“What makes you think it is ok to make money on these horrific murders? Shame on Amazon!” [Rene Lawand, Pickton petition]

“Why should Europe have better, safer food than we do? It should be equal, unless we are unable to do that. Or is it that candy makers want to do less here to [make] more profit?” [Lynda Bpwwman, M&M’s petition]

As these comments show, there are widespread perceptions of immorality and power exploitation in the actions of these companies. As the narratives continue to build within the activist public, the common focus is a critical view towards the targeted market actor. Whether it is Amazon or Mars Inc., participants paint themselves as the moral agents who must challenge and resist the exploitation of power that these companies have engaged in. Through this narrative-building, consumers in the activist public are able to create an activist identity and role for themselves (Thompson, 2004); but, beyond this, the aggregation of these comments comes to

affix an identity and role to the targeted company as well: the powerful evil that must be vanquished.

Creation of a doppelgänger

The meanings and interpretations that participants of an activist public attach to a company's behaviour challenge the brand images of these market actors (Giesler, 2012). Neither Amazon nor Mars Inc. seeks to be seen as abusing their positions of power to pursue profits over the well-being of their consumers, yet these are the images and meanings that emerge from the activist publics. These critical interpretations of company behaviour problematize the emotional story and identity value that Amazon and M&M's brands provide to their customers (Bennet, 2004; Bennet & Lagos, 2007), challenging the companies to respond (Thompson et al., 2006).

For participants of the activist public, Amazon is not only an online shopping marketplace, now it is also a market actor driven by its greed, as "Amazon sees only a profit, not the psychopathic tendencies of Pickton, and most certainly not of those with whom he took from this world without remorse" [Diane Bertrand, Pickton petition]. Similarly, Mars Inc. is no longer a company that manufactures treats for children, but rather a creator of "Pretty poison. So what if they are pretty. You don't give a rats ass about children's health. Pretty poison..." [Eric Torgerson, M&M's petition]. The emerging images of these lifestyle brands are not carefully curated brand images, but rather critiques that reach beyond the company's façade to reveal a very different nature of the companies: profit-seeking immoralists with questionable motives and products.

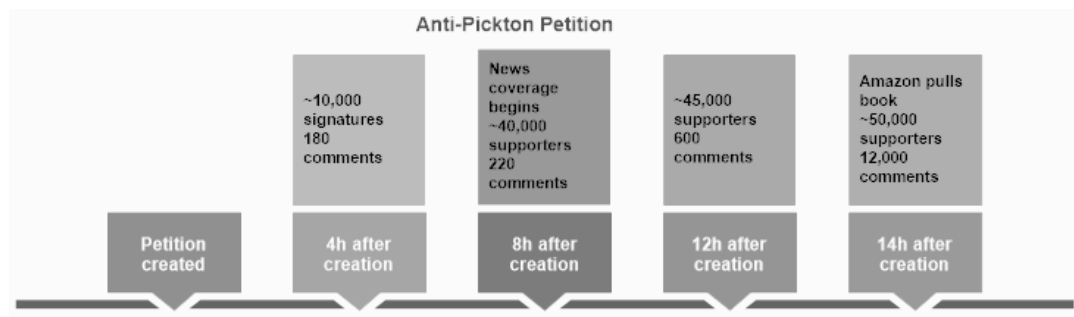
As the activist public grows in size and popularity, the cause attracts more attention, while the critical brand image shines a spotlight on the targeted market actor. Site features geared towards highlighting petitions that are trending and popular help to mobilize the critical brand image itself (Giesler, 2012), and as the campaign grows, the activities previously limited to the activist public may no longer be restricted to Change.org. Consumers participating in the public share their individual activity through social media, attracting further visibility to their personal actions, while also circulating the critical brand image farther.

The interaction between different public sources such as consumers within the activist public and news media coverage helps to frame the company's behaviour as an ethical public issue (Dahan & Gittens, 2010) that requires a corporate response. While consumers expressing disapproval on a brand's Facebook page may attribute responsibility to the company following news media frames (Etter & Vestergaard, 2015), here it appears that Change.org influences the approach that news media coverage subsequently plays out.

In the case of Robert Pickton's memoir, within a day over 50,000 supporters had signed the petition and shared their comments. Coverage of the petition and the outrage surfacing from Amazon's actions were reported in local outlets such as the Vancouver Sun and CTV Vancouver, in other Canadian media sources such as the Globe and Mail and Huffington Post Canada, and through international outlets such as the BBC and The Guardian. In their coverage, these media outlets reinforce the undesirable nature of the company's actions by linking the immoral character of Pickton and the unfair opportunity to publish his memoir with Amazon itself. Though Amazon did not respond to requests for comments, several outlets noted that

Amazon had previously published another book by a killer named Paul Bernardo the year before, and go on to quote Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale who stated the impact of Pickton's book would be "painfully traumatic" and that "[the government] will be examining all those who have assisted in any way in this odious enterprise" (Stueck, 2016).

This type of coverage replicates the uncaring and perceived profit-seeking nature of Amazon that participants of the activist public decried, but occurs outside the activity of the activist public and brings up past transgressions, helping to spread the critical interpretation of the brand image further. In a bid to respond to this negative coverage and the doppelgänger image itself, Amazon removed the product offering from its catalogue. News 1130, a local Vancouver outlet that first reported that a "Lawyer says removing Pickton book from Amazon may be tough" was able to update its website hours later with the information that "Robert Pickton's self published book is being pulled from Amazon's website following a public outcry" (Druker, 2016). However, as we will see with the M&M's campaign, such an immediate response is not always possible.



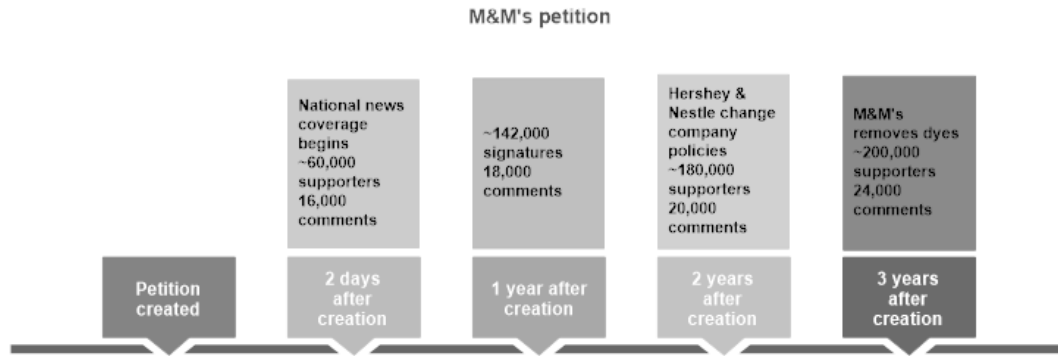


Figure 3 – Timelines of action for both campaigns

The ire of the M&M's activist public drew a variety of media attention from outlets such as CNN, NPR, and the Consumerist (a subsidiary of the consumer advocacy organization Consumer Reports). In its own coverage, CNN lists the ingredients of American-bought M&M's showing that these were “artificial food colorings derived from petroleum”, before contrasting this to M&M's they purchased in England where “their colors come mostly from plants” (Hudson, 2014). The coverage goes on to further distinguish Mars Inc.'s behaviour to Kraft which had removed artificial dyes from its Macaroni & Cheese earlier in the year (Hudson, 2014), highlighting that it is possible for companies to take action based on the health concerns of their consumers. The pressure continued to build as Hershey and Nestle also took steps to introduce natural ingredients in their products due to consumer demand (Isidore, 2015), while Mars Inc. remained firm, maintaining “We have absolute confidence in the safety of all the ingredients we use” (Hudson, 2014).

These public and highly-visible announcements appeared in media articles that were covering the M&M's petition from Change.org, continuously juxtaposing the inaction of Mars Inc. against the proactive actions of its competitors. This media coverage spread beyond the activist public while continuing to shine a spotlight on Mars Inc.'s failure to align its corporate actions with the well-

being of its customers. The doppelgänger image of Mars Inc. as unwilling to protect the health of its consumers moved in to popular culture itself. Given the actions of its competitors, and the outrage directed at them from the activist public, Mars Inc. needed to take steps in order to maintain a positive image. Three years and 200,000+ signatures after the petition was created on Change.org, Mars Inc. declared that it would be removing artificial dyes from all its food products including M&M's.

As the petition organizers recognized, challenging Mars Inc. directly allowed consumer desire and emotion to trump the need of rigorous evidence that the FDA required (Collins, 2015), much like participants in the Pickton activist public were able to change Amazon's behaviour without relying on legal recourse. It is unlikely that only the participation of individuals on Change.org accomplished these results. Rather, much like the NCL campaigns in the early 1900s (Glickman, 2009), or the anti-sweatshop labor campaign against Nike in the early 2000s (Peretti, 2004), the influx of consumer participation here helps to highlight a public challenge against these brands and sustains pressure over time in order to produce a corporate response (Bennett & Lagos, 2007). In this way, the participation of consumers online serves to further support and increase the likelihood of a campaign's success.

Discussion

Through this exploration of Change.org, we have seen that activist publics are characterized by the aggregation of personal publicizations within online spaces of action. While a consumer's individual contribution to an activist public allows them to enact an activist-like identity, unlike activism on Facebook and Twitter where this type of behaviour may be used as an end in itself to

promote a certain self-image, publicizations within activist publics aggregate without providing visibility in one's own personal network, and instead can help aggrandize a cause. As comments aggregate within the activist public, they reflect a critical interpretation of the brand and coalesce into a set of meanings that is subsequently curated and played upon by media coverage, creating a doppelgänger brand image that challenges the targeted brands to change their behaviour.

In their coverage, media outlets use the narratives that have emerged from the activist public to frame their story. Though the articles are couched in more professional language and rely on sources beyond the activist public (quoting the Public Safety Minister for example), the media coverage relays a commentary of the targeted company that mirrors the sentiment of the aggregated perspectives within the activist public, highlighting company missteps and inaction in the face of their consumers' health and well-being. This coverage propagates the doppelgänger image of the target company as acting against the best interest of its consumers. Assuming linearity, Figure 4 presents the key stages within the process of online consumer activism that can lead to a successful campaign against undesirable corporate action.



Figure 4 - The process of online consumer activism

In exploring the success of these types of actions, the aggregation of perspectives component of this process appears to be a lynchpin. For an activist public to be effective, it must attract and engage a large number of participants: this increases the likelihood of further participants,

extensive sharing on personal social media, and the attraction of public media attention. Though critical meanings emerge from the activist public, much of the criticality is limited to the activist public itself until the media picks up the story, which is also reflected in recent findings that show the importance of mainstream media covering online activist behaviour in order to receive a response from ‘elites’ (Freelon et al., 2016). Once an activist public begins to receive media attention, the subsequent coverage helps to create and spread the doppelgänger brand image into popular culture, pressuring the company to change its behaviour in line with the demands made within the activist public, allowing the cause to achieve success and create market change.

Conclusion

Though consumer participation online provides opportunities of public visibility which can deter further engagement with subsequent acts, the impact of such behaviour is not solely limited to personal publicity. Tangible market change still occurs through the aggregation of these actions. Moving beyond the logic of social movements to explore the online behaviour of Change.org participants with a social-media based consumer culture perspective allows this work to articulate the process through which online consumer activists create a negative brand image to challenge companies into more desirable patterns of behaviour. This understanding contributes to the understudied domain of online participation directed against corporations, and provides further insight to the important question of how online spaces of protest can be used as a means of redress.

References

- Arvidsson, A. (2013). The potential of consumer publics. *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, 13(2), 367–391.
- Arvidsson, A., & Caliandro, A. (2016). Brand Public. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 42(5), 727–748. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv053>
- Bennett, W. L. (2004). Branded political communication: Lifestyle politics, logo campaigns, and the rise of global citizenship. *Politics, Products and Markets*, pp.101-126.
- Bennett, W. L., & Lagos, T. (2007). Logo Logic: The Ups and Downs of Branded Political Communication. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611(1), 193–206. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206298484>
- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). THE LOGIC OF CONNECTIVE ACTION Digital Media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 739-768.
- Bernard, T. S. (2011, November 1). *In Retreat, Bank of America Cancels Debit Card Fee*. Retrieved from New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/02/business/bank-of-america-drops-plan-for-debit-card-fee.html>
- Bossy, S. (2014). The utopias of political consumerism: The search of alternatives to mass consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 14(2), 179–198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540514526238>
- Centre for Social Impact Communication. (2011). *Dynamics of Cause Engagement*. Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide.
- Collins, S. (2015, June 18). *Taking the Food Ingredient Fight Online*. Retrieved from WebMD: <http://www.webmd.com/news/breaking-news/food-additives/20150723/consumers-food-makers-additives>
- Copeland, L. (2014). Conceptualizing political consumerism: How citizenship norms differentiate boycotting from buycotting. *Political Studies*, 62(S1), 172-186.
- Dahan, N. M., & Gittens, M. (2010). Business and the public affairs of slavery: A discursive approach of an ethical public issue. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 92(2), 227–249. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-009-0151-8>
- Druker, S. (2016, February 22). *Lawyer says removing Pickton book from Amazon may be tough*. Retrieved from News 1130 Vancouver: <http://www.news1130.com/2016/02/22/lawyer-says-removing-pickton-book-from-amazon-may-be-tough/>
- de Zúñiga, H. G., Copeland, L., & Bimber, B. (2014). Political consumerism: Civic engagement and the social media connection. *New Media & Society*, 16(3), 488–506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813487960>
- Earl, J., & Kimport, K. (2011). *Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the internet age*.

MIT Press.

Etter, M. A., & Vestergaard, A. (2015). Facebook and the public framing of a corporate crisis. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 20(2), 163–177. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-10-2013-0082>

Freelon, D., McIlwain, C., & Clark, M. (2016). Quantifying the power and consequences of social media protest. *New Media & Society*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816676646>

Giesler, M. (2012). How Doppelgänger Brand Images Influence the Market Creation Process: Longitudinal Insights from the Rise of Botox Cosmetic. *Journal of Marketing*, 76(6), 55–68. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.10.0406>

Glickman, L.B. (2009). *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America*. University of Chicago Press.

Hudson, W. (2014, January 7). *American mom wants European M&Ms*. Retrieved from CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/07/health/mms-candy-artificial-dyes/>

Isidore, C. (2015, February 18). *Nestle says it is dropping artificial flavor and color from chocolate bars*. Retrieved from CNN Money: <http://money.cnn.com/2015/02/18/news/companies/nestle-artificial-flavor-color/>

Karpf, D. (2009). The MoveOn effect: Disruptive innovation within the interest group ecology of American politics. *APSA 2009 Toronto Meeting Paper*, 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1451465>

Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(1), 61–72.

Kozinets, R. V., & Handelman, J. M. (2004). Adversaries of Consumption : Consumer Movements , Activism , and Ideology. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31, 691–704.

Kristofferson, K., White, K., & Peloza, J. (2014). The nature of slacktivism: How the social observability of an initial act of token support affects subsequent prosocial action. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(6), 1149–1166. <https://doi.org/10.1086/674137>

Lee, Y.-H., & Hsieh, G. (2013). Does slacktivism hurt activism?: the effects of moral balancing and consistency in online activism. *CHI '13 Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 811–820.

Lutz, C., Hoffmann, C. P., & Meckel, M. (2014). Beyond just politics: A systematic literature review of online participation. *First Monday*, 19(7). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i7.5260>

Margetts, H., John, P., Escher, T., & Reissfelder, S. (2009). Experiments for Web Science: Examining the Effect of the Internet on Collective Action. *Proceedings of the WebSci'09: Society On-Line*, 18–20. Retrieved from

- http://www.governmentontheweb.co.uk/downloads/papers/Margetts_et_al_Experiments_for_Web_Science_2009.pdf
- Micheletti, M., & Stolle, D. (2007). Mobilizing consumers to take responsibility for global social justice. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611(1), 157–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206298712>
- Morozov, E. (2012). Why Kierkegaard Hates Slacktivism. In *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (pp. 179–203). Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ctwEIggfIDEC>
- Nielsen, R. K. (2011). Mundane internet tools, mobilizing practices, and the coproduction of citizenship in political campaigns. *New Media & Society*, 13(5), 755–771.
- Ozanne, J. L., & Murray, J. B. (1995). Uniting Critical-Theory and Public-Policy to Create the Reflexively Defiant Consumer. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 38(4), 516–525. <https://doi.org/0803973233>
- Papacharissi, Z. (2009). The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere and beyond. In *Handbook of Internet Politics* (pp. 1–35). https://doi.org/10.1111/1478-9302.12016_66
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Parigi, P., & Gong, R. (2014). From grassroots to digital ties: A case study of a political consumerism movement. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 14(2), 236–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540514526280>
- Peretti, J. with Micheletti, M. (2004). The Nike sweatshop email: Political consumerism, Internet and culture jamming. *Politics, products and markets: Exploring political consumerism*, past and present, 127–142.
- Portwood-Stacer, L. (2012). Anti-consumption as tactical resistance: Anarchists, subculture, and activist strategy. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 12(1), 87–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540512442029>
- Resnick, P. (2002). Beyond Bowling Together: SocioTechnical Capital. In J. Carroll (Ed.), *Human-Computer Interaction in the New Millenium* (pp. 247–272). New York, NY: Addison-Wesley.
- Rumbo, J. D. (2002). Consumer Resistance in a World of Advertising Clutter: The Case of Adbusters. *Psychology and Marketing*, 19(2), 127–148. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.10006>
- Schumann, S., & Klein, O. (2015). Substitute or stepping stone? Assessing the impact of low-threshold online collective actions on offline participation. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 45, 308–322.
- Shah, D. V., Friedland, L. A., Wells, C., Kim, Y. M., & Rojas, H. (2012). Communication, consumers, and citizens: Revisiting the politics of consumption. *The ANNALS of the*

- American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 6-19.
- Shah, D. V., McLeod, D. M., Friedland, L., & Nelson, M. R. (2007). Introduction: The politics of consumption/The consumption of politics. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 6-15.
- Shah, D. V., McLeod, D. M., Kim, E., Sun Young Lee, Gotlieb, M. R., Ho, S. S., & Breivik, H. (2007). Political Consumerism: How Communication and Consumption Orientations Drive “Lifestyle Politics.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611(1), 217–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206298714>
- Shirky, C. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change. *Foreign Affairs*, 90(1), 28–41.
- Shutters, Renee and CSPI. (2013). *M&M's Candies: Stop Using Artificial Dyes Linked To Hyperactivity*. Retrieved from Change.org: <https://www.change.org/p/m-m-s-candies-stop-using-artificial-dyes-linked-to-hyperactivity>
- Skoric, M. M. (2012). What is Slack about Slactivism? In *Methodological and Conceptual Issues in Cyber Activism Research* (pp. 77–104).
- Stolle, D., Hooghe, M., & Micheletti, M. (2005). Politics in the supermarket: Political consumerism as a form of political participation. *International Political Science Review*, 26(3), 245–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512105053784>
- Stueck, W. (2016, February 22). *Robert Pickton book pulled from production after public outcry*. Retrieved from The Globe and Mail: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/bc-governments-appeals-to-amazon-to-drop-possible-robert-pickton-memoir/article28834209/>
- Tatarchevskiy, T. (2011). The “popular” culture of internet activism. *New Media & Society*, 13(2), 297–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810372785>
- Thompson, C. J. (2004). Marketplace Mythology and Discourses of Power. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(1), 162–180. <https://doi.org/10.1086/383432>
- Thompson, C. J., Rindfleisch, A., & Arsel, Z. (2006). Emotional and the Branding Value of the Doppelganger Strategic Brand. *Journal of Marketing*, 70(1), 50–64.
- Uldam, J. (2017). Social media visibility: challenges to activism. *Media, Culture & Society*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717704997>
- Zyglidopoulos, S., & Fleming, P. (2011). Corporate accountability and the politics of visibility in “late modernity.” *Organization*, 18(5), 691–706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508410397222>