



# Mobile activism, material imaginings, and the ethics of the edible: Framing political engagement through the Buycott app



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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore the discursive constructions of Buycott, a free mobile app that provides a platform for user-generated ethical consumption campaigns. Unlike other ethical consumption apps, Buycott's mode of knowledge production positions the app itself as neutral, with app users generating activist campaigns and providing both data and judgment. Although Buycott is not a dedicated food activism app, food features centrally in its campaigns, and the app seems to provide a mobile means of extending, and perhaps expanding, alternative food network (AFN) action across geographies and constituencies. Thus, as a case study, Buycott unveils contemporary possibilities for citizen participation and the formation of activist consumer communities, both local and transnational, through mobile technologies. Our analysis shows, however, that despite the app's user-generated format, the forms of activism it enables are constrained by the app's binary construction of action as consumption or non-consumption and its ethos of 'voting with your wallet'. Grounded in texts concerning Buycott's two largest campaigns (Demand GMO Labeling and Long live Palestine boycott Israel), our analysis delineates how Buycott, its campaigns, and its modes of action take shape in user, media, and app developer discourses. We find that, as discursively framed, Buycott campaigns are commodity-centric, invoking an 'ethics of care' to be enacted by atomized consumers, in corporate spaces and through mainstream, barcode-bearing, retail products. In user discourses, this corporate spatiality translates into the imagined materializing of issues in products, investing commodities with the substance of an otherwise ethereal cause. This individualized, commodity-centric activism reinforces tenets of the neoliberal market, ultimately turning individual users into consumers not only of products, but also of the app itself. Thus, we suggest, the activist habitus constructed through Buycott is a neoliberal, consumer habitus.

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## 1. Introduction

With the growing ubiquity of mobile app technologies, ethical food consumption seems to be increasingly accessible. Mobile apps – such as 'GoodGuide', the 'Good Fish Guide', 'Choco-locate', and 'Certified Humane', among others – provide users with grades, certifications, or labels that classify products as sustainable, Fair Trade, or overall 'ethical'. Critiques of mobile app food activism, however, highlight the opacity and unidirectional, developer- and scientist-generated information provision, which are built into the apps' designs, as barriers to fostering activism. In a recent article analyzing the mobile app 'GoodGuide', which grades consumer products according to ethical criteria, Lyon (2014) calls into ques-

tion the extent to which ethical consumption apps promote 'food citizenship' (p. 60). According to Lyon (2014), as the 'GoodGuide' app relies on (opaque) metrics to assess the ethical 'goodness' of food, it excludes consumers from designing and informing food activism, and instead shapes consumer activism through authoritative voices. Moreover, by atomizing activism – centering it in the individual consumer – 'GoodGuide' obviates all potential for the formation of activist communities, thus failing to meet the basic criteria for citizen participation (Lyon, 2014; cf. Baker, 2004).

Keeping Lyon's (2014) critique in mind, we turn to our research on Buycott, a free barcode-scanner app that provides a platform for user-generated activist campaigns based on crowd-sourced data. Although Buycott is not a dedicated food app (any item that has a barcode can, in principle, be incorporated into the app's database), food is central to its user-generated campaigns. Crucially, while other barcode-scanner apps (such as 'GoodGuide') offer authoritative information on the 'goodness' of food content – both

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nutritiously and ethically – Buycott engages in a different type of knowledge production, one that positions the app itself as a neutral platform, with app users generating activist campaigns, and providing both data and judgment.

The app's central feature is the corporate kinship chart, a visual rendering of ownership relationships between companies, to unveil 'parent companies' whose political values may be suspect. Users join campaigns, and, to reveal a product's kinship chart, scan product barcodes; Buycott then informs users whether the products they scan conflict with (or, alternatively, are endorsed by) any of the campaigns they joined. While company data are mainly provided by users who generate campaigns, Buycott users have the option of flagging 'incorrect data' via the "Report Inaccuracies" button' on the mobile app (Buycott, 2015b).

The development of crowd-sourced corporate kinship charts not only enables Buycott's designated mode of consumer action, but also captures the ethos of Buycott's project. As described on the app's official website,

A buycott is the opposite of a boycott. Buycott helps you to organize your everyday consumer spending so that it reflects your principles. (...) When you use Buycott to scan a product, it will look up the product, determine what brand it belongs to, and figure out what company owns that brand (and who owns that company, ad infinitum). It will then cross-check the product owners against the companies and brands included in the campaigns you've joined, in order to tell you if the scanned product conflicts with one of your campaign commitments.

[Buycott, 2014a]

In other words, Buycott focuses on: *transparency* – linking products with companies and parent companies; *activism* – interpreting products through the lens of *boycott* and *buycott* (advocacy for buying particular products); *openness* – facilitating campaigns that represent a wide spectrum of (sometimes conflicting) political and activist interests; and *user-generated expertise* – relying on users to build an accurate data-base and create boycott and buy-cott campaigns. While Buycott is designed to enable ethical consumption (or non-consumption) at the level of the individual consumer, the app is also marketed as fostering 'impact' and a 'thriving community' of users (Buycott, 2015b), such that the app's focus on campaigns reveals a framing of ethical consumption at the individual level as mediated through the collective definition and endorsement of a cause.

In this article, we examine how Buycott's premise is expressed in – and in turn, shaped by – its two largest campaigns (Demand GMO Labeling and Long live Palestine boycott Israel), by exploring the evolving consumer and media framings of the app. We then discuss what the Buycott case might reveal about the potential of ICT-enabled food activism more broadly, asking: what discursive shapes does an ethical consumption app take when designed to enable – and indeed, promote – user-generated knowledge and causes?

### 1.1. Contextualizing mobile activism within wider alternative food network (AFN) contexts

As analyzed in the ethnographic literature, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) act within particular temporal horizons and spatial settings. Analyses describe grassroots origins, years of community organizing, and evolving multilevel political visions, enacted in church group meetings, convivial meals, farmers' markets, and food swaps, among other small-scale social-political events. Thus, while encounters with food activism may now involve a single shopper and take place in a mainstream supermarket, as in the case of organic and Fair Trade labeling, such encounters stem from decades of AFN work. However, new information and communica-

tion technologies (ICTs), such as participatory apps, increasingly facilitate collective action with immediacy, and across geographic boundaries (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Kleine et al., 2012; Parigi and Gong, 2014). This may change the time horizons, spaces, and concepts underlying AFNs – both extant and emerging – as well as the consumer habitus they implicate.

In the realm of food, Gabriel and Lang (2015) argue, ICTs hold the potential for blurring the definitional boundaries between consumers and producers, creating new types of 'consuming work' (p. 214), whereby acts of consumption expand to include not only the procuring of products, but also the generating and sharing of product-related data. In implicating data sharing as a central act of consumption, ICTs are thus positioned to alter food-related socialities, across both (seemingly) mundane and activist spaces (Choi and Graham, 2014). For AFNs, then, ICTs can be potentially transformative, mediating the networks' messages to broader audiences, and changing the ways in which these messages are communicated and activism is conceptualized (Lekakis, 2014). However, as Lekakis (2014) suggests in her article on ICT use in the Fair Trade movement, empirical analysis of the roles of ICTs in contemporary AFN work is necessary in order to ground these potentialities and examine the paths that ICT use takes in practice. In particular, analytic approaches to ICT-enabled food activism should move beyond data shared and messages mediated, to account for individual consumers' engagements with and interpretations of food-related discourses (Barnes, 2014).

The analytic focus we advocate – one which centrally positions individual consumers' discursive engagements with an ICT-enabled activist platform – reflects the status of food as a simultaneously mundane and meaningful substance. Food occupies a special category in the realm of citizen activism. Both a target and a means of action, food links to multiple layers of political meaning. Food activism, as experienced by social actors, has embodied and relational dimensions that shape both the activist target, and the people who enact it (see Counihan and Siniscalchi, 2014). On the most visceral, and perhaps most evident, level, consumer activism targets food itself – as a material, ingestible substance, imbued with unseen nutrients, microbes, and toxins that become incorporated into the consumer's body. As DuPuis (2000) writes in her analysis of the rise of organic milk production in the wake of consumer-driven anti-bovine growth hormone activism, consumer campaigns to unveil the hidden properties of food involve the ethos of 'not in my body' – a form of 'reflexive consumption' (p. 289) that directly links the materiality of food (in this case, cow milk) to bodily incorporation and the consumer's future health.

However, the sites of concern for food activists are not limited to consumers' bodies. For example, in its now corporate-friendly supermarket version, organic agriculture is framed as providing consumers with pesticide free, non-genetically modified, wholesome foods. Yet, campaigns for organic food implicate not only consumer health, but also agricultural production – including issues of sustainability and the viability of independent farming. At the grassroots level, organic foods are the visible products of broader campaigns that aim to challenge the corporatized, industrial agricultural market, bring small-scale farms to the foreground, make agents and processes of production visible, and foster new market relations between consumers and producers (Johnston et al., 2009).

Other campaigns also position food as a channel toward political ends. A prominent example is the Fair Trade movement. Broadly defined, the movement (which comprises several activist networks) is concerned with the economic wellbeing of farmers in the global South, encompassing issues of labour, environmental conditions, and commodity pricing. At the core of the movement's activities are a number of cash-crops, most prominently coffee, cocoa beans, and bananas (see Lekakis, 2013). Here, food is framed explicitly as a medium for political economic change, and as the gateway to

re-envisioning international development. The consumer's body, then, becomes a main node in an alternative framework of trade (Goodman, 2004; Low and Davenport, 2005), tracing 'moral geographies' from distant locations of production to the intimacies of one's own home and embodied being (Dolan, 2008: 308).

Food, moreover, is a semiotic tool (Appadurai, 1981); as such, it appears in political-economic activism even where it serves only a symbolic, rather than a mediating, function. Writing on the symbolic use of food in large-scale anti-government protests – for example, Egyptian citizens' wearing 'helmets made of baguettes' during the Arab Spring protests (in Sutton et al., 2013: 346) – Sutton argues that '[t]he language of food... is a language that contextualizes, that situates, that moralizes, and thus that challenges the supposedly neutral, non-cultural language of neoliberal economics' (in Sutton et al., 2013: 346). Similarly, in her autoethnographic account of the Occupy Wall Street movement, Dickinson (in Sutton et al., 2013) explores the workings of the movement's sprawling and highly visible kitchen, writing that '[f]ood, the way it was procured, processed, served and consumed, became a medium for communicating an alternate vision, both for the food system and for the city – one based on equality, solidarity and mutual aid' (p. 361); the kitchen, she argues, was 'a political spectacle' of public organization and mobilization (p. 364). In both examples, while food was not the target of intervention, it was used performatively to challenge an existing political-economic order.

Whether a target or a means, the use of food in activism implicates – and indeed, shapes – the habitus of those who consume it. The properties of food – ingestible substance and market commodity, sensory experience and symbolic meaning – intertwine in activist bodies. This habitus shaping has been illustrated in ethnographies of the Slow Food movement, which directly interlinks advocacy for locally, seasonally, and sustainably procured food with the appreciation of the social and sensory pleasures of eating. This gustatory appreciation, moreover, is processual – learned through 'taste education' (Pietrykowski, 2004: 312) and slowly incorporated into the Slow Food member's body with time and repeated practice, making a viscerally felt political consciousness (Pietrykowski, 2004; Hayes-Conroy and Martin, 2010; Sassatelli and Davolio, 2010). Along similarly ethnographic, if less explicitly sensory, lines, Carfagna et al. (2014) argue that practitioners of 'ethical' or 'conscious' consumption develop (and display) – as the authors phrase it – an 'eco-habitus': a mode of embodied practice that aggregates multiple strands of 'conscious' consumption within the body. Like Slow Food's 'eco-gastronomy' (Sassatelli and Davolio, 2010: 214), and the food hacking movement's 'political gastronomes' (Savarin, cited in Kera et al., 2015: 49), the 'eco-habitus' described by Carfagna et al. (2014) is concerned with the materiality and the literal incorporation of politics. And, like the Slow Food habitus, this 'eco-habitus' is imbued with high cultural (if not necessarily economic) capital – or, to use Bourdieu's (1984) phrase, distinction – denoting the practitioners' belonging to a collective ethics of consumption. While Carfagna et al. (2014) note that 'ethical' consumers are critical of consumerism, the 'eco-habitus' these consumers display is constructed through the procurement, production, and exchange of value-laden goods. Through partaking in an 'identity project' (Carfagna et al., 2014: 160) wherein counter-consumerist actions, such as 'food swapping' (p. 170), interweave with market-centric actions, such as 'conscious' shopping (or "'voting with one's dollar'" [p. 173]), 'ethical' consumers develop their 'eco-habitus' in continuous dialogue with the market. The 'eco-habitus', then, is imbued with what Hilgers (2013: 82) describes as 'neoliberal dispositions': orientations that inform embodied being-in-the-world, shaping agency and possibilities for action through the logics of capital – even when actors express resistance to the market.

In this paper, we explore the activist habitus constructed through the Buycott app. Building on notions of 'conscious' consumption as

the embodied cultivation of an 'eco-habitus' (Carfagna et al., 2014), our analysis examines the activist habitus that is defined and constructed when an ICT platform mediates the targets, processes, and actions of 'ethical' consumption, introducing practices like data sharing and product scanning into the embodied repertoire of 'ethical' consuming subjects. At the heart of our inquiry are the user, media, and developer discourses generated through and about the Buycott app. These discourses provide a lens through which we examine framings, reframings, and negotiations of the app and its campaigns. In analyzing these discourses, we delineate imaginings of ethical consumption, modes of ICT-based consumer action, and activist dispositions as they emerge within Buycott's socio-technical network, implicating a particular habitus.

## 2. The study

Our study is part of a growing, cross-disciplinary corpus of qualitative digital research in anthropology (Miller and Horst, 2012), sociology (Lupton, 2014), and geography (Ash et al., 2015). Conceptually, we embed our study in anthropological definitions of digital devices as material culture, with users' digital engagements configured as expressions that reveal shared values and forms of sociality (Miller and Horst, 2012). We also draw on geographical conceptualizations of the digital as mediating subjective and inter-subjective mappings of experiential and relational space in everyday life (Ash et al., 2015). Methodologically, we approach our data from a digital anthropology perspective that frames virtual discourses as culturally significant utterances, implicating modes of understanding and affect, with the anthropologist acting as a participant-observer, rather than directly eliciting user discourses (Boellstorff, 2012). We also draw on recent qualitative studies in media and communications (Reilly and Trevisan, 2015) and public health (Farrell et al., 2015) that suggest that online discursive spaces, such as social media and newspaper comment sections, provide fruitful domains in which to examine popular affective engagement with politically valent issues. In analyzing Buycott's discursive shaping through online texts, we are mindful of critiques that call for a virtual ethnography that transcends the online/offline divide and integrates the analysis of online engagements with 'real world' interviews and observations (Hine, 2008; Sade-Beck, 2004). While we do not frame our study as ethnographic, we accept the cautious interpretative stance urged by Hine (2008), and acknowledge that, in relying on online discourses, we do not have access to the particular spatio-temporal, material, or embodied contexts that framed each user's, journalist's, or the app developer's discursive expressions.

This paper examines consumer and media framings of Buycott's two largest campaigns: Demand GMO Labeling and Long live Palestine boycott Israel. At the time of writing, each of the two campaigns had more than 400,000 subscribers. Buycott enables activism through a fairly systematic process of 'networked action' (cf. Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 743) that seeks to draw together consumers, technology, and information through campaigns. To generate or join activist campaigns, users first register with Buycott – either on the Buycott website or through the mobile app itself – using their email, Twitter, or Facebook account. Once registered, app users can generate campaigns through the Buycott website's 'Start a Campaign' page, where users are taken through a stepwise process. First, users are asked to choose a 'campaign category' from a dropdown menu (including options such as 'food', 'health', and 'human rights') and provide a 'campaign title' of 50 characters or fewer. Then, users are taken to a follow-on page where they are asked to provide a 'campaign image' and a 'campaign description' of '1 or 2 paragraphs', list the companies the campaign 'targets' for boycott or buycott, and provide an explanation for the targeting of each company, including a 'source

URL' as evidence (Buycott, 2015a). A new feature, debuted within a recent update (released 8 December 2015), is the tab 'Actions', where, as part of generating a campaign, users are asked to phrase pithy messages – of support or avoidance – that campaign subscribers can send to the companies the campaign targets, via social media (O'Donovan, 2015, December 8).

In exploring these campaigns, we employ text-based, thematic discourse analysis of news media articles, user- and developer-generated Twitter and Facebook posts, texts on the official Buycott website, and user reviews on iTunes published about these campaigns *and* about the Buycott app itself in relation to these campaigns. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the following questions:

1. How do the news media frame Buycott?
2. How do consumers frame their use of Buycott?
3. What identities does the official Buycott 'voice' construct and assert for the app?

We examine media, user, and official Buycott discourses in tandem, because Buycott was, and continues to be, discursively constituted through a dynamic interaction of all three. Media discourses have been central to the framing of Buycott since the app's debut, and cannot be separated from the ways in which app users have interpreted and framed the app in their reviews and social media posts. Likewise, user campaign trends have shaped media coverage and (re)framings of Buycott. And, in a similar vein, the discursive framings constructed by Buycott's developer have developed in continuous dialogue with media and user discourses, with multi-directional influence. Our inclusion of media, user, and developer discourses parallels the approach taken by Barnes (2014) in her analysis of discourses surrounding Jamie Oliver and the series *Save with Jamie*. Barnes (2014) argues that multiple discursive platforms – including the news media and social media – open 'moments of possibility' for audience acceptance of or resistance to politicized framings of food and eating, as mediated by celebrity chefs. Thus, when examining how audiences (or users) imagine and employ mediated framings of food, it is important to consider user discourses as they appear on social media platforms, alongside the news media discourses that highlight (and indeed, sensationalize) particular framings and thereby direct user engagement toward specific 'moments of possibility'. As our analysis is concerned with the possibilities for consumer action enabled by Buycott, the 'moments of possibility' that emerge and intersect in user, developer, and news media discourses reveal the activist habitus constructed through the app.

Our research focus on Buycott's two largest campaigns grew out of extended engagement with the app. We began to study Buycott as part of a larger project, which was designed to include three case studies, each exploring a different ICT-enabled platform for consumer-based food activism. We selected Buycott as our mobile app case study in late 2013, following media coverage about the app earlier that year, as well as our own participatory exploration of the app (see Schneider, 2013, August 20). At the time, Buycott's public profile was dominated by its Demand GMO Labeling and Boycott Koch Industries campaigns. Initially, we set out to examine how consumers understand the role of Buycott in their everyday decision making about food. As the project proceeded, and we found that consumers employed divergent framings of and expectations from the app, our focus shifted slightly, and we began to delineate how consumers discursively positioned knowledge, responsibility, ethics, and politics vis-à-vis the app. At the Oxford Food Governance Group research workshop, which took place in Oxford, UK, on 22 May 2014, we presented on these diverging discourses, concluding with the finding that the app's project of knowledge production and civic participation was called into question by many of the users who reviewed it – because of incom-

pleteness or inaccuracy of data, and the political leaning of the app's most prominent campaigns. In Buycott's project, we provisionally concluded then, many users still saw themselves as information recipients, rather than active participants.

Two months had passed since the workshop, and new user discourses began to dominate Buycott. With the war between Israel and Gaza in the summer of 2014, a hitherto obscure Buycott campaign, Long live Palestine boycott Israel,<sup>1</sup> began trending. As we followed the campaign's growth, it became apparent that the processes Buycott was undergoing could not be captured by user ambivalence alone; Buycott's emergent story was one of dynamic co-constitution, involving the triad of the news media, citizen-consumers, and the ICT platform. We then turned our focus to collecting data on Buycott's two largest campaigns – Demand GMO Labeling and Long live Palestine. We selected these campaigns because they shaped and defined Buycott, having generated most of the discourse surrounding the app in 2013 and 2014 in the news media, social media, and user reviews, while revealing the forms of consumer mobilization it enabled.

Our data collection process was three-pronged. To analyze the changing media framings of the app, we collected all online news media texts published about Buycott from April 2013 to August 2014 (using the Lexis UK database and Google News). To analyze consumers' framings of their use of Buycott, we extracted user-generated posts from the official Buycott Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/buycottapp/>), as well as iTunes App Store user reviews in which users described the app, why they downloaded it, or how they used it. Mindful of the diverging salience of the two campaigns across geopolitical lines, we extracted data from US and UK iTunes; the Demand GMO Labeling campaign was more salient in the former, and the Long live Palestine boycott Israel campaign was more salient in the latter. Finally, to analyze the app developer's own engagement with these framings, we extracted descriptive texts about the app from Buycott's official website, as well as posts from the app's official Facebook and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/buycottapp>) accounts in which the developer constructed, or responded to, the app's framing.<sup>2</sup> In the analysis that

<sup>1</sup> The campaign's title has been modified recently to 'Long live Palestine, boycott Israel' (2016).

<sup>2</sup> A total of 27 news media articles published between May 2013 and October 2014 were collected. In this paper, we quote from those media articles that represented milestones in the discursive framing of Buycott (e.g. the Forbes articles of May 2013 and August 2014). The articles cited in this paper represent the full range of framings of Buycott in online news media. On the official Buycott Facebook page, we reviewed public visitor posts published from 26 April 2013 to 26 March 2014 (n = 80) and from 17 July to 28 August 2014 (n = 73), and official Buycott posts published from 9 May 2013 to 8 August 2014 (n = 15), along with their associated comments. We collected Buycott user reviews from the US iTunes App Store, published from 3 April 2013 to 29 March 2014 (n = 1,323), and Buycott user reviews from the UK iTunes App Store, published from 13 July to 31 August 2014 (n = 260); we also read through later user reviews in the App Store to identify additional relevant reviews. An app analytics platform (App Annie [<https://www.appannie.com/>]) showed that, in total, 1,330 reviews were published in the US iTunes App Store and 271 reviews were published in the UK iTunes App Store in the dates indicated; as these totals include reviews which have likely been deleted by users, our analysis is based on the reviews we collected directly from the App Store. The user posts and reviews selected for analysis in this paper were those that directly addressed either the Demand GMO Labeling campaign or the Long live Palestine boycott Israel campaign; the posts and reviews quoted were available online when the first draft of this manuscript was completed (23 February 2015). For the purposes of the analysis, we excluded posts and reviews that concerned app functionality or other campaigns, as well as posts and reviews that included very brief expressions of support or lack of support for the app and/or its campaigns (e.g. 'Great app', 'Thanks, Buycott!'); a few posts and reviews focused on counter-uses of the app (e.g. signing onto the Long live Palestine boycott Israel campaign to boycott, rather than boycott, Israeli products), and were also excluded from the analysis. We reviewed tweets, retweets, and replies (n = 420) on the official Buycott page from its inception on 21 January 2013 to 26 August 2014. We also examined all official Buycott website pages, including the home page, the about page, the FAQ page, the campaigns page (with a list of trending campaigns), and the dedicated pages of the Demand GMO Labeling campaign and the Long live Palestine boycott Israel campaign.



follows, we present selected quotes from these news media, developer, and user-generated texts; the quotes are presented verbatim, including the orthographic and grammatical errors that appear in the original texts.

Our study focuses on the discourses generated about and through the Buycott app, and not on consumers' use of the app in everyday decision-making.<sup>3</sup> With regard to app use, we acknowledge the gaps between what we can and cannot know. The data accessible to us are the numbers of campaign subscribers, and user posts on social media and review sites; we do not know, however, the demographic profiles of campaign subscribers, why they join certain campaigns, and how they engage with the app – if at all. We recognize, therefore, that subscription to and posts about particular campaigns do not necessarily translate into (predictable modes of) action. Thus, our interpretative lens focuses on the discursive shaping of the app as an activist instrument, rather than on its role in actualizing consumer mobilization, and we acknowledge that it is still unclear how discursive constructions of political participation play out in consumers' affective, imaginative, and socially-informed everyday uses of Buycott.

### 3. The birth of Buycott

Buycott was first released on 11 January 2013. Its news media birth happened four months later, with a *Forbes* article that produced the Buycott 'origin myth' and introduced app developer Ivan Pardo. Titled, 'New app lets you boycott Koch Brothers, Monsanto and more by scanning your shopping cart' (O'Connor, 2013, May 14), the *Forbes* article inaugurated Buycott as a socially aware, politically progressive, anti-GMO app, that allows users to 'trace [a product's] ownership all the way to its top corporate parent company, including conglomerates like Koch Industries'. Buycott, the article emphasized, was a 'principles' oriented app:

you can join user-created campaigns to boycott business practices that violate your principles rather than single companies. One of these campaigns, Demand GMO Labeling, will scan your box of cereal and tell you if it was made by one of the 36 corporations that donated more than \$150,000 to oppose the mandatory labeling of genetically modified food.

[O'Connor, 2013, May 14]

Highlighting Buycott's anti-GMO, anti-conservative corporation campaigns, the *Forbes* article was quickly reproduced the next day on *Huffington Post*, with the title, 'New app Buycott lets users protest Koch Brothers, Monsanto and more' (O'Connor, 2013, May 15) – notably replacing the word 'boycott' with the more politically direct 'protest'. The same day, an article titled 'Ethical app gives users the choice to "Boycott"' (O'Mahony, 2013, May 15) appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*. Unlike its US counterparts, the *Telegraph* article made no mention of GMO – which is of less relevance to UK consumers due to EU GMO labeling regulations – but highlighted the app's politically progressive origins:

The inspiration for the app was as a tool to monitor products directly or indirectly associated with billionaire conservatives Charles and David Koch, brothers who control the second largest privately owned company in the US, Koch Industries.

[O'Mahony, 2013, May 15]

Three days later, on 18 May 2013, Buycott was selected by the US television network ABC as its *ABC News* 'App of the week' (Godfrey, 2013, May 18). The app, as the *ABC News* article explained, allows consumers to 'manage where their money goes by allowing them to scan products, learn about what brands and companies own those products, and determine if those companies align with the causes a user wishes to support or boycott'. This neutral description was given a more political angle through the example of shopping for tomatoes:

Chances are you like to know what's in the food you eat and where the money you pay to buy that food goes. For instance, those tomatoes from the grocery store may come from a manufacturer that supports genetically modified foods, and you may not want any part of that.

[Godfrey, 2013, May 18]

The *ABC News* article avoided all mention of Koch Industries or conservative causes, and Buycott, again, emerged as centrally concerned with GMO foods. As with the *Forbes* and *Huffington Post* articles, a link to the *ABC News* article was prominently featured on the official Buycott app website (Buycott, 2014a).

It is perhaps not surprising that Buycott's Demand GMO Labeling campaign rose to prominence immediately after these articles were published. Indeed, for over a year, it was Buycott's leading campaign. Subscriptions to the campaign steeply increased from 13 May 2013 (7,352) to 5 June 2013 (80,951), settling into a steady growth curve thereafter (until July 2014) (Demand GMO Labeling, 2014).

#### 3.1. The Demand GMO Labeling campaign: User discourses

The stated aim of the Demand GMO Labeling campaign was to boycott 'companies that donated more than \$150,000 to oppose GMO labeling in California' (Demand GMO Labeling, 2015). The campaign likely referred to California Proposition 37, which called for compulsory labeling of genetically modified foods and was rejected in 2012 (Vaughan, 2012, November 7). According to the campaign's brief mission statement, labeling was key because Americans 'have a right to know if their food contains GMOs' (Demand GMO Labeling, 2015).

As refracted through texts generated by users, on both the Buycott Facebook page and user review sites, the Demand GMO Labeling campaign had taken additional discursive contours. For example, in a post to the Buycott Facebook page, one user advocated for the campaign through the example of popular, branded products:

Time to fight with our wallets! Understand that some of your fav GMO-free organic products are owned/distributed by Coca-Cola which is spending millions to fight GMO labeling. Sorry Odwalla I'm not buyin' ya.

[Buycott Facebook page, 21 November 2013]

While this post clearly illustrated the logic of the campaign and of Buycott's emphasis on corporate kinship charts, in other posts, app users moved away from the campaign's focus on labeling products for GMOs, instead invoking the dangerous materiality of GMO foods themselves:

Since big brother cannot be trusted to sell us healthy food which will not make us sick, we must take matters into our own hands! This app is amazing and will help you to avoid genetically modified foods. It will also tell you if the company or parent company is donating money against Proposition 37 which demands that products with Genetically Modified Organisms be labeled as such (...).

[Buycott Facebook page, 9 January 2014]

<sup>3</sup> For a study of Buycott user experiences, see Horst's (2015) analysis of focus group data, based on discussions with participants who used Buycott for about two weeks. Horst (2015) highlights the 'negotiations' in which users engage when attempting to integrate the app into 'everyday consumption choices' (p. 87), as well as the wariness with which they approach information featured on the app.

Discursively linking the substance of GMOs and labeling for GMOs, this user post conflated identifying companies that oppose GMO labeling with identifying foods that contain GMOs. Here, the app emerged (at least in text) as serving two functions: providing a means of consumer activism, but also a tool to help consumers care for their own health in their everyday shopping decisions. Elsewhere, users entirely disregarded the labeling aspect of the Demand GMO Labeling campaign. For example, in the following Facebook post, a Buycott user framed the app as allowing users to identify ‘GMO companies’:

I've shared this before and I'm sharing it again because it's fabulous! Buycott[is] a free app that allows you to use your Android or iPhone to analyze products and determine if you're supporting GMOs companies/Big Food companies who are damaging your health, or simply low quality products. We all vote with our dollars - be an informed shopper!

[Buycott Facebook page, 6 November 2013]

Here, GMOs, ill health, low quality foods, and food conglomerates were interlinked, framing another logic for the app: that of allowing consumers to advocate for their own interests while shopping. This logic transported the Demand GMO Labeling campaign from its overtly political, collective stance to individualized consumer interests. However, as seen in the following US iTunes user review, this logic could also link to micro-scale enactments of care:

When I read about this app on huffingtonpost, I knew I needed it! It allows me to support everything I stand for, and promote not only the app but good food choices (no gmos!) to other shoppers who have stopped me to ask what I'm doing when scanning my foods! (...)

[US iTunes, 17 July 2013]

The app, again, emerged as a tool to enable shoppers to identify GMO free foods; yet, in this post, the user constructed an image of gentle proselytizing: through her/his own careful action – scanning products to ensure they are free of GMOs – this user served as a role model for fellow shoppers, using the supermarket as an advocacy space. The advantage of the app was in calling on a visible, physical action – that of scanning barcodes; as this user review framed it, this public display of values allowed for the transmission of otherwise unspoken knowledge.

#### 4. The rebirth of Buycott

In August 2014, Buycott was ‘reborn’ in the international media. A sudden spike in registration for one campaign – ‘Long live Palestine boycott Israel’ (which we abbreviate as LLP, from here on) – led to renewed media coverage, and a rebranding of the app’s political and regional foci. While the May 2013 *Forbes* article that announced Buycott led to a trending campaign, the August 2014 articles followed a trending campaign, reframing the app itself in the process. Perhaps not surprisingly, the first article reporting on the LLP campaign was published in *Forbes*, with the title: ‘Shoppers use app to boycott Israel in grocery store aisles’ (O’Connor, 2014, August 6). The article, which focused on Sabra hummus, partly owned by the Israeli company Strauss Group, as a main target of the boycott, quoted Ivan Pardo as saying that he had not seen any articles about the campaign, and that word spread through social media.

Other articles soon followed. On 7 August 2014, *Russia Today* announced: ‘Buycott app gets public to boycott Israeli produce’. Again, food products were central to the framing of the campaign. The text of the article, however, veered sharply from the largely neutral tone assumed by *Forbes*, with statements that effectively represented Buycott as a boycott, divestment and sanctions, or

BDS, app: ‘As critics of Israel’s policy in Gaza lose faith in governments to take action, a new app is helping them to it themselves. Buycott is one of the hottest items on the market as shoppers are using it in their droves to avoid purchasing Israeli products’ (*Russia Today*, 2014, August 7). Along similar lines, the left-wing Canadian magazine *Rabble* framed Buycott as ‘[a] new app [that] helps consumers avoid products that are produced in controversial areas. The app allows shoppers to scan product barcodes to avoid the purchase of Israeli settlement products’ (Katawazi, 2014, August 12); here, the app was again framed as essentially directed at BDS, and its larger mission was reduced: from enabling diverse types of consumer campaigns to an authoritative listing of products linked to geopolitical controversies. This framing notably ignored the corporate kinship charts at the heart of Buycott’s design, with BDS displacing transparency as the app’s focus.

In the English language version of the left-leaning Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz*, Buycott was dryly described as ‘an app that catalogues brands and their affiliations and lets users set up campaigns’, yet the title of the article, ‘Gaza war gives massive boost to boycott Israel apps’ left little ambiguity about how Buycott might be framed (Ha’aretz, 2014, August 8). By contrast, the conservative English language newspaper *Times of Israel* titled its Buycott article: ‘BDS hijacks barcode app to boycott Israel, says author’. Buycott, as depicted in this article, was an unwitting victim of its own neutral user platform: ‘Like a monster escaping from its creator, an app designed to enhance social activism has been adopted to boycott Israel. (...) Although he can’t put the genie back into the bottle, Pardo said he is working hard to encourage campaigns that will support Israel’ (Shamah, 2014, August 11). Unlike the *Forbes* article, and the others that followed in its wake, in both the *Ha’aretz* and *Times of Israel* articles, the focus was on the boycott itself, with no specific reference to Israeli food products – an absence that implies their intended readerships were not expected to make practical use of the app.

These overtly politicized framings challenged Buycott’s self-presentation. While Buycott’s May 2013 news media debut matched its developer’s vision – indeed, the first *Forbes* article was initiated by a telephone call from Pardo to the *Forbes* desk (O’Connor, 2013, June 11) – the August 2014 articles challenged the app’s self-styled framing as a neutral, if liberal-leaning, anti-GMO, consumer-empowering platform. Insistence on neutrality was central to Ivan Pardo’s interviews in 2013:

“I don’t want to push any single point of view with the app,” said Pardo. “For me, it was critical to allow users to create campaigns because I don’t think it’s Buycott’s role to tell people what to buy. We simply want to provide a platform that empowers consumers to make well informed purchasing decisions.”

[O’Connor, 2013, May 14]

In August 2014, Pardo assumed a more urgent voice as he attempted to maintain the app’s neutral framing. On 3 August 2014, before Buycott’s LLP campaign became the subject of media coverage, Pardo tweeted in response to a user who conflated Buycott with a dedicated BDS app,

different app – we let users create campaigns. A Free Palestine campaign has been gaining a lot of traction mainly in W. Europe.

[Buycott Twitter account, 3 August 2014]

On 8 August 2014, however, he seemed to welcome the *Russia Today* coverage, posting about it on the app’s Facebook page. Tellingly, two days later, the post, which originally read ‘Popular article about Buycott in RT yesterday’ was edited to ‘Popular article about a

Buycott campaign in RT yesterday'. On 12 August 2014, following the publication of all the articles described earlier, Pardo tweeted,

To be clear, I offer advice to everyone who emails wanting to create a campaign. U can ask @Buycott\_LLQ how much time ive given to his cause.

[Buycott Twitter account, 12 August 2014]

And then,

Buycott has been referred to as pro-Israel and anti-Israel. That's the media. Buycott is a neutral platform.

[Buycott Twitter account, 12 August 2014]

Yet, Buycott's stated neutral stance did not disentangle it from close association with its trending campaigns. Populated with user posts, the app's official Facebook page effectively became an advertisement space for BDS and anti-Israel memes, cartoons, and event notices in the summer of 2014; these posts shaped the app's Facebook wall for more than a month.

#### 4.1. *The Long live Palestine boycott Israel campaign: User discourses*

User reviews and Facebook posts shed light on the discursive constructions of Buycott, the LLP campaign, and everyday engagements with the app that allowed consumers to shape Buycott-related spaces into virtual BDS spaces. The campaign's stated purpose was to place 'international pressure on the state of Israel', with the goals of 'ending... [the] occupation... dismantling the Wall', '[r]ecognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality', and 'promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes' which are now within Israel (Long live Palestine boycott Israel, 2015). At the time of research, the LLP campaign listed 80 companies to be boycotted, of which 31 were food companies, supermarkets or food distributors; some companies were Israeli based, while others had sometime tenuous links to Israel. While the campaign was quite clear about its political goals, its subscribers expressed other discursive logics. Campaign subscriptions increased exponentially with the start of the war between Israel and Gaza in mid July 2014, settling into a moderate upward curve when the cease fire agreement was finalized at the end of August 2014 (Long live Palestine boycott Israel, 2015). (During that time, the GMO labeling campaign also showed sharp increases in subscribers, probably as a secondary effect of the popularity of LLP.) Not incidentally, many subscribers described a nexus of consumer products and war financing in explaining their rationale for joining the campaign. A user posting on the Buycott Facebook page wrote:

To all my Facebook friends using smart phones, download Buycott App on your phone and Boycott Israel Supporting Companies (Mc Donald's, Caterpillar Inc. etc) because indirectly we are also responsible for this Massacre !

[Buycott Facebook page, user post, 7 August 2014]

Later user reviews, however, also expressed similar logic; for example, this 19 November UK iTunes review stated that Buycott is a

Great app which lets you know which products/companies donate money to Israel so you can avoid them and save innocent lives!

[UK iTunes, 19 November 2014]

Another iTunes reviewer offered this interpretation:

This App will help you not to pay for bullets that go towards killing Palestinian children.

[UK iTunes, 16 December 2014]

These reviews expressed a dual elision: first, the app itself was elided with the LLP campaign, positioning users as consumers of

authoritative BDS information provided by the app; then, the LLP campaign target – boycotting Israel-related products in order to isolate Israel – was elided with the materiality of money, with users imagining a direct link from their wallets to weapons.

Even those user posts that apparently aligned with BDS discourse reproduced the imagined material link between consumer products and war, albeit through corporations as intermediaries. For example, one UK iTunes reviewer wrote,

I finally feel like I am doing something for the poor innocent Palestinian civilians and hopefully this will put enough pressure on the companies to withdraw funding from Israeli violence.

[UK iTunes, 29 August 2014]

The link this user imagined between companies and Israel was the direct channeling of money in support of war. The user, then, in withholding her own money from consumer products, framed herself as stopping a vital node in the chain. Along similar lines, another UK iTunes reviewer implicated the companies listed in supporting war and injustice:

Being able to shop wisely and contribute is an outstanding achievement ! Every little helps and I feel am adding my voice to many that what Israel is doing is inhumane and companies which support this injustice is not a company I will buy my product from! Now am in control to what enters my home!! Many thanks for the genius behind it!

[UK iTunes, 29 August 2014]

Notably, this user alluded to maintaining the integrity of the boundaries of the home through using the app. This implied concern with the literal incorporation of politics, and the concomitant abjection of 'consuming' war, appeared most prominently in user discourses that focused on the links between products and land. For example,

Great app. Now I can avoid those zionist products that Israel sells produced from stolen land of the Palestinians!

[UK iTunes, 18 July 2014]

Another UK iTunes reviewer offered an even more condemning take:

This app gives the consumer the power and knowledge to boycott companies they don't approve of. In my case, I don't want to buy from a terrorist murdering state who steal land and then produce on that land, whilst persecuting the native people.

[UK iTunes, 23 July 2014]

Although the majority of user engagement with Buycott occurs at the supermarket and involves fast moving consumer goods and food, explicit mentions of food products did not feature centrally in most user posts and reviews related to the LLP campaign. However, when they were featured, it was often in evocative connection with land. In this UK iTunes review, the user wrote,

I use it to support Palestine by avoiding illegal Israeli goods especially vegetables that are grown on Jewish only settlement.

[UK iTunes, 16 August 2014]

Food, moreover, did not have to be produced on Israeli land to warrant avoidance. In this review, a user traced a map of parent companies that took the user from her or his local UK supermarket to a Burger King branch in the West Bank:

Fantastic for getting information whilst on your weekly shop. I would have never thought to boycott Heinz. They share the same parent company with Burger King who have opened a branch in a West Bank settlement. Who would have thought!

[UK iTunes, 21 July 2014]

To use Barnett et al.'s (2005) terms, what emerges in these discourses is a construction of 'caring at a distance' (p. 24) – a sense



of responsibility bound up with the contracted spatiality of a globalized, ICT connected world, a ‘moral selving’ in relation to consuming products that implicate others (Barnett et al., 2005: 30).

## 5. Discussion: material and neoliberal imaginings

At a surface reading, Buycott’s Demand GMO Labeling and Long live Palestine boycott Israel campaigns diverge in a number of ways. The GMO labeling campaign rose to prominence following news media coverage of Buycott, while LLP drove renewed media coverage and reframing of the app. GMO Labeling was dominant among US subscribers, while LLP was dominant among subscribers from the UK and other Western European countries. And, perhaps most importantly for this paper, GMO Labeling is directly related to food products, while LLP uses food, among other products, as a means of advocating for a broader political cause. The analysis of news media and user discourses surrounding both campaigns, however, reveals commonalities in the activist ethics they employ, and in the ways in which these ethics shape-shift and reemerge in users’ constructions of their everyday engagements with the app. As the rest of this section will discuss, texts produced through and about these two campaigns evince similar imaginings of consumer-citizens as exercising political power within the market. These imaginings are linked with the centrality of commodities in Buycott user discourses, as well as in the app’s conceptual and practical design, where consumer action is framed through the binary prism of product boycotts and buycotts. With a commodity-centric design, the modes of consumer action Buycott offers implicate consumer-citizens as individual, albeit corporatized, agents (see Gershon, 2011), whose political influence is located at the retail end of the product chain. As such, the activist habitus constructed through Buycott and the discourses surrounding it is a consumer habitus, imbued with neoliberal embodied ‘dispositions’ whereby the acting subject is always-already oriented toward, and embedded within, the market economy (Hilgers, 2013).

The ethos of ‘voting with your wallet’ reverberates through both campaigns, and the representations thereof. With money as power and markets as political arenas, consumers are imagined as wielding both the means and the responsibility to bring about change (cf. Micheletti et al., 2004). Guthman (2008) and other researchers (Johnston, 2008; Roff, 2007) argue that such neoliberal imaginings of consumers, while framed as the empowering, grassroots pathway to large-scale political change, only serve to reinforce the neoliberal state and its values of responsibility, privatization, and devolution of governance. Citizen-consumers, Johnston (2008) suggests, are ultimately subject to the goals of consumerism, not citizenship. Of note, Guthman (2007: 472) cites ‘value-based’ food labeling as a prominent (re)production of neoliberal market rationality among ethical consumption circles: a practice that creates new, competitive markets for ‘ethical’ commodities, while placing presumably informed decision-making in the hands of the consumer (cf. Barham, 2002). Such labeling schemes, as Lezaun and Schneider (2012) argue, shape ‘restless consumers’ who are charged with maintaining constantly evolving bodies of knowledge about food products, so as to navigate the ever-changing landscape of labeling in the absence of definitive government regulation. The Demand GMO Labeling campaign, which promotes the consumer’s ‘right to know’ by effectively labeling corporations that oppose GMO labels, appears to be an exemplar of the logic Guthman (2007) and Lezaun and Schneider (2012) critique.

This analysis of Buycott’s GMO labeling and LLP campaigns shows the enduring centrality of commodities in subscriber discourses. While Buycott allows for consumer action on a large scale, and within an immediate time horizon, this action is made

concrete not in collective spaces or through fellow activists, but in the materiality of products and the practice of shopping. A recurring finding in user discourses is the transitioning of campaign targets into users’ material imaginings, informed by familiar framings of action – with users concretizing political aims, such as GMO labeling, in tangible substances, such as toxic food. Thus, many GMO-related user discourses refer to Buycott as already providing information on products containing GMO, rather than as hosting a campaign that advocates for GMO labeling. User discourses also cast the GMO campaign as allowing them to care for their own health, while issues relating to agricultural production – such as the livelihood of farmers, land sustainability, corporate monopolies over seeds and pesticides, and industrial control of local farms – fall by the wayside, remaining obscured in campaign discourses and thus intangible. Similarly, many LLP campaign users imagine boycotted products as directly placed on or emerging from Israeli land; others link consumer purchases to funding war machinery, although the campaign is directed at the isolation of Israel, not at direct impact on weapons purchases. Imaginings – of producer-retailer relationships, of the dynamics and spaces of production – are also part of consumer discourses about AFNs; in the absence of transparency about products’ processual becomings, labels and images associated with AFNs become imbued with imagined narratives (Dolan, 2008). Yet, in the case of Buycott, consumer imaginings are not structured by the meta-narratives that AFNs – such as the Fair Trade movement (Dolan, 2008) – construct. Rather, users recombine multiple narratives to give shape and, quite literally, substance, to Buycott’s campaigns.

The commodity-centered discourses surrounding Buycott, however, do not simply reflect users’ ‘misunderstandings’ of activist campaign; rather, these discourses directly link to the mode of activism offered by the app. By framing consumer action through the binary prism of boycotts and buycotts – that is, non-consumption and consumption – the app’s conceptual and practical design directs user imaginations to the realm of commodities. Calling on its users to identify with causes and (often spatially distant) unseen others through minor acts of (non)consumption, Buycott facilitates consumer imaginings that materialize issues in products (see Goodman, 2010). The app’s design, moreover, constrains not only modes of consumer action, but also user imaginings of the relationality and spatiality of products. To take action through Buycott, a consumer must engage with mass-produced, barcoded products; discursively – in media, user, and official app framings – such action is situated in supermarket aisles. The ‘truths’ unlocked in those aisles, through Buycott, are relational: the corporate kinship chart, a visual rendering of ownership relationships between companies, implicates ‘parent companies’ whose political values may be considered suspect. The relationships and spaces the app privileges, then, are entirely corporate, with barcoded products framed as the consumer’s channel to influencing otherwise inaccessible realms of policy and production. Thus, by design, the app constructs resistance as occurring within mainstream retail spaces, excluding alternative markets and alternative action. With its consumption-centric design, Buycott ‘authenticate[s] the market’, framing it as the arena for political change and thereby reinforcing neoliberal constructions of food as commodity (Dolan, 2010: 33).

Although Buycott relies on user-generated campaigns and data, the modes of consumer action it offers are essentially atomized, located at the retail end of the product chain and expressed in individual consumption decisions. Buycott’s brand of activism, then, does not depart substantially from the action promoted by authoritative ethical consumption apps, as critiqued by Lyon (2014). Like authoritative apps – and AFNs more generally – Buycott partakes in an ‘ethics of care’ that positions individuals, rather than institutions, as responsible for social justice and political change



(Goodman, 2010: 106). Buycott's 'ethics of care' reinforces a neoliberal conceptualization of citizen participation; indeed, 'vote with your wallet' has been featured as a headline on Buycott's homepage since late 2014 (Buycott, 2014b). This conceptualization amplifies the voices of consumers who have the time, money, literacy, and access to technology required to exercise such 'voting'. Yet, as it emerges in user discourses, the 'voting' that occurs through Buycott is not confined to acts of purchasing or boycotting particular consumer products. On social media and review sites, when users announce they had downloaded the app or joined one of its campaigns, they engage in a form of performative activism, being counted – or casting their 'vote' – for a particular cause. Unlike other digital media activist platforms – in particular, social media sites – Buycott offers constrained, market-oriented binary action, rather than multiple modes of public engagement (cf. Valenzuela, 2013); as such, user discourses position the app not as a versatile political platform, but as a synecdoche for specific, individual action. From this perspective, joining a campaign may function as 'voting', regardless of the actualities of (non)consumption that do or do not follow, holding a function similar to sharing a meme, 'liking' a Facebook post, or 'favoriting'/'liking' a tweet. Viewed within the wider context of digital activism (or 'slacktivism' [Christensen, 2011]), joining a campaign also functions as a performance of public opinion, with the numbers of registrants having symbolic, even if not financial, significance (cf. Vie, 2014). Buycott itself thus becomes commodified, discursively constructed as an emblem of the activist self.

Buycott user discourses, we suggest, highlight not only the devolution of responsibility from the nation-state to consumer-citizens, but also the devolution of activist campaigns as they trickle to commodity-centered, everyday enactments by individual consumers. Lockie (2009) argues that alternative food networks present modes of mobilization and collective action that challenge the individualized, commodity-centered politics of the neoliberal market. However, in the case of Buycott, commodities comprise the instrument of mobilization. With its immediacy, accessibility, and effortless subscription to campaigns, Buycott provides a clear framing of action – as opposition, battle and especially, voting – with the promise of change made tangible and specific in the everyday. We therefore suggest that users' concretized framings of the app and its campaigns parallel the decontextualized consumer politics around 'ethical' foods once they reach mainstream supermarket shelves (cf. Johnston, 2008). With Buycott's brand of prepackaged activism, subscribers become consumers – not only of products, but also of the app itself.

The activist habitus constructed through Buycott, then, is a consumer habitus. While AFNs, such as the Slow Food movement, promote the development of an 'eco-habitus' through a conscious ingestion of 'ethical' foodstuffs (Carfagna et al., 2014), Buycott promotes the development of a habitus that integrates the app and its socio-technical practices – generating and joining campaigns, scanning products, and sharing product and company information. The habitus that emerges through Buycott reflects both the logic underlying the app's development and the affordances of the app. We suggest that this habitus is co-constituted through the interaction of Buycott's developer, users, and the mobile app itself (see also Eli et al., 2015). Following actor-network theory, Ruppert et al. (2013) argue that 'digital devices are simultaneously shaped by social worlds, and can in turn become agents that shape those worlds' (p. 22). Thus, while the logic of 'voting with your wallet' provides the syntax for Buycott's *modus operandi* (campaigns and corporate kinship charts), the app's affordances – flagging causes and companies to boycott or buycott via barcode scanning – enable users' commodity-centric adaptations, interpretations, and imaginings as they emerge dynamically through their use of the app (see Van Dijck and Poell, 2013). These adaptations,

interpretations, and imaginings are intimately linked with the material realities of the digital devices (smartphones, tablets) and consumer products the app involves, as well as with the embodied actions the app implicates, such that Buycott's digital spaces, materialities, and practices tacitly interweave with users' embodied being (cf. Hine, 2015).

This consumer habitus points to the 'neoliberal dispositions' (Hilgers, 2013: 82) that shape both the developer's logic and the users' adaptations of the app. Buycott's conceptualization of consumer action and its users' commodity-centric interpretations are deeply embedded in the market logics that seep into people's ways of being-in-the-world (Hilgers, 2013). The app is developed and deployed by actors who embody relational and agential stances that match the logics of individuality, responsibility, and capital (Hilgers, 2013). As such, the possibilities for action they envision are constrained by tacit modes of relating to the self: as an individual, responsible, self-regulating actor in a market economy – an actor who may incorporate with others, but always as a self-owning unit (Gershon, 2011). Buycott's endorsement of market-based politics should be contextualized within the everyday, habitual, embodied entrenchment of neoliberalism. As Guthman (2008) argues:

activists produce neoliberal forms not because they embrace a particular discourse, but because neoliberalism is in many ways characterized by these emergent forms... it is difficult to know what something outside of neoliberalism might look like when all is seen as neoliberalism (pp. 1180–1).

Thus, rooted in an ubiquitous (albeit not monolithic [cf. Goldstein, 2012]) neoliberal being-in-the-world, the consumer habitus cultivated through Buycott reproduces the tacit embodiment of responsibility, atomized consumption as a mode of agency and empowered action.

## 6. Conclusion

An analysis of the discourses generated through and about the Buycott app reveals that, despite the app's reliance on user-generated campaigns and crowd-sourced data, the forms of activism it enables are constrained by the app's binary construction of action as consumption or non-consumption and its ethos of 'voting with your wallet'. Consumers are thus imagined as wielding political power through retail products and in retail spaces, with action framed as an individual consumption decision, albeit in the context of corporatized campaigns. This framing reinforces neoliberal values of personal responsibility, privatization, and the devolution of governance to consumer-citizens and the market (Guthman, 2008; Johnston, 2008; Roff, 2007). Agency, then, is conceptually materialized in retail products, a process reflected in user discourses, where political aims, such as GMO labeling, are made concrete in tangible commodities, such as toxic food. Thus, the activist habitus constructed through Buycott is a consumer habitus.

The case of Buycott reveals contemporary possibilities for citizen participation and the formation of activist consumer communities, both local and trans-national, through mobile technologies. Buycott's crowd-sourced brand of activism does not depart substantially from the action promoted by authoritative ethical consumption apps (cf. Lyon, 2014), or from the action promoted by AFNs. Like its authoritative predecessors, Buycott positions individuals as responsible for social justice and political change. While Buycott's developer frames the app as creating a 'community' of activists (Buycott, 2015b), the action envisioned and enabled through the app is the incorporation of self-regulating, individual consumers, whose decision-making occurs

at the retail end of a product chain. As a case study, Buycott exemplifies how practices associated with mobile app use are easily enfolded into neoliberal logics. While the habitus constructed within this socio-technical network seemingly engages emergent configurations of ICT-enabled 'ethical' consumption, the practices the app implicates are imbued with pre-existing 'neoliberal dispositions' (Hilgers, 2013: 82). Embedded in these 'neoliberal dispositions', which shape agential rootedness in and orientation toward the market (Hilgers, 2013: 82–85), this consumer habitus integrates the app, and its socio-technical practices – generating and joining campaigns, scanning products, and sharing product information – in a tacit embodiment of activism. Thus, imaginings of and possibilities for ICT-enabled political participation continue to be constrained to commodity- and market-centric action.

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