

Summary and Rational:

Boycott Buycot?: Assessing Consumer Discourse and Possibilities for Change through the Buycott App

On April 24, 2013 a factory collapsed in Bangladesh, killing over 1,000 workers. In response, outraged progressive consumers from the Global North demanded a boycott of the transnational clothing companies who hired the local factory to make their goods. On May 14, 2013, “Buycott”—a new Smartphone app—was launched to “organize your consumer spending to help causes that you care for, and to oppose those that you don't.”¹ Included among the list of “campaigns” for consumers to join was “Justice for Bangladesh,” which included a list of companies to either support or boycott for those app users who were interested in “protesting” the recent factory collapse.

The campaign omits the fact that not only have none of the workers themselves called for a boycott, but that some have spoken out *against* a boycott. Nor does the app make any effort to address the systemic causes of unfair labor practices, such as union busting and global capitalism itself. Instead, the app promotes “changing the world” through conscience consumerism.²

This Media and Consumerism unit of a Critical Media Studies course will introduce students to literature that critiques the notion of “ethical consumption.” In addition, students will journal their consumption practices over the course of a week and then write a critical reflection paper about their spending habits. Finally, students will participate in a group research project using the Boycott app. Students will pick a campaign to join and will then investigate more deeply into how, if at all, the campaign addresses the systemic root of the particular cause.

¹ From “About,” <http://www.buycott.com/about>.

² This “changing the world” is not always for a progressive cause. The app also supports campaigns in favor of the 2nd Amendment and Pro-Life organizations. Tellingly, the founder Ivan Pardo remarked, “I don’t want to push any single point of view with the app. For me, it was critical to allow users to create campaigns because I don’t think its 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” (Hawk, 2013). We will also discuss the implications of this approach in our unit.

Related Assignment #1:

Consumption Journal and Reflection Paper

At the beginning of our Media and Consumerism unit, you will begin recording a “consumption journal.” This can be in a notebook, on your computer, or on your phone. To complete this assignment, simply write down everything you purchase over the course of the two-week unit. This includes food, entertainment, rent, laundry, etc. Some particulars to include:

- *Brand name of products
- *Where the product was made
- *Travel requirements to obtain product/service (e.g., did you drive to get the product/service?)
- *Did you see/meet the person who was responsible for making the product or service? (e.g., a fast-food worker who made your food)
- *Do you know if the product/service was made by unionized workers?

After collecting your data, you will reflect on your consumer habits in a 4-5 page reflection paper. This paper will include a summary of your journal and a critical analysis of your consumption practices. Your analysis should draw on the readings and discussions from class. You are required to cite at least three readings from the unit in your paper. Some questions to help guide your analysis might include:

- *What did tracking my travel requirements tell me about the ways my consumer habits impact the environment?
- *What is the difference between meeting the person who created your product/service and not?
- *What are the implications of buying one particular brand of product over another?

The conclusion of your paper should include your insight into whether or not you believe your consumer choices have the power to make a difference on the state of workers rights, the environment, etc. Using our readings and discussion to guide you, reflect on this following question: “How much impact can consumers have?” If you conclude that you make very little impact, please describe what you believe to be a more important avenue for change. If you conclude that you have a great impact, defend that conclusion by discussing ways you can improve your consumer habits. *Regardless of your conclusion, everyone must provide at least a paragraph citing the problems with a “consumer citizen” model of engagement.*

Related Assignment #2:

Boycott Group Project

This assignment requires groups of 4-5 students to pick a particular campaign on the Boycott App and to critically analyze how the app functions. That is, using our readings and class discussions from the unit, assess and contextualize the merit of the app in furthering the cause it proposes to address. When your group has picked a campaign, at least one person in the group must scan products to see how the app recognizes (or doesn't recognize) conflicts with corporations and producers. You will be responsible for collecting data on at least 20 products that you would actually buy.

Once the data is collected it will be your job to investigate the results. If the app says a corporation is not involved in, say, child labor, investigate more in the corporation yourself to see if you uncover any other problems with their practices. This might be a good time to draw on our readings and discussions about *intersectionality*. If the app says the company doesn't use child labor but you learn that it donates money to an anti-union politician, for example, perhaps you may have something to write about.

As a group, you will determine a way to present your analysis to the class in the form of a 15-20 minute group presentation. The presentation can be as creative as you'd like as long as it contains a particular set of components. (See rubric)

Group Project Rubric/Requirements

Evidence of Research

Group provides a clear overview of their chosen campaign....10 pts

Group provides evidence that they scanned 20 products.....10 pts

Group provides a clear critical analysis of their findings....30 pts

Group suggests an alternative to addressing the campaign issue **or** provides a legitimate defense of the app's benefits....25 pts

Presentation

Presentation is clear and easy to follow....10 pts

Presentation is creative and engaging...5 pts

Group members work well together during presentation....5 pts

Group Dynamics

One page paper explaining how the group allocated the responsibilities of each member ...5 pts (*ideally every group member will receive the same score in this category; however, if the paper describes that one group member slacked on duties, that individual, rather than the group, will be penalized*)

Readings:

Fragiskatos, P. (2013). "A Bangladesh Boycott Wouldn't Help Workers." *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/peter-fragiskatos/bangladesh-boycott-garment-workers_b_3202229.html

Gibson, C. & Stanes, E. (2010). Is green the new black? Exploring ethical fashion consumption. In Lewis, T. & Potter, E. (Eds.). (2010). *Ethical Consumption: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge.

Hawk, M. (2013). "Koch Block: New Buycott app wants you to...boycott itself?" Retrieved from http://www.thecommentator.com/article/3561/koch_blocker_new_buycott_app_wants_you_to_boycott_itself

Johnston, J. (2008). "The citizen-consumer hybrid: Ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market." *Theory and Society* (37), 3.

Lewis, T. & Potter, E. (2010). Introducing ethical consumption. In Lewis, T. & Potter, E. (Eds.). (2010). *Ethical Consumption: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge.

Littler, J. (2010). What's wrong with ethical consumption? In Lewis, T. & Potter, E. (Eds.). (2010). *Ethical Consumption: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge.

Prashad, V. (2013). "Bangladeshi workers need more than boycotts." *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/apr/30/bangladesh-workers-need-more-than-boycotts>.

Reactions:

This assignment has not yet been implemented. I plan to include it in my upcoming Mass Media syllabus.

Bio:

Raechel Tiffe is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the department of Communication Arts & Sciences at Merrimack College. Her research and teaching interests include: social movements, labor, (the intersections of) gender/race/class/sexuality, critical pedagogy, food politics, cultural geography, queer theory and politics, and critical media studies.