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The Civic Sell: Young People, the Internet and Ethical Consumption

Shakuntala Banaji and David Buckingham

Introduction

Imagine a world where buying a certain type of t-shirt would have a similar impact on the public domain to voting in local elections; imagine that by boycotting one music label and purchasing from another, you and your fellow consumers could destabilise the management of a global corporation; or that by buying one brand of tea rather than another you were helping to stamp out child labour in India. Invitations to such types of 'ethical' or 'political' consumption, phrased in more or less explicit ways, abound on alternative civic sites on the internet. Such invitations can be seen to reflect the contemporary notion of the 'citizen-consumer' (Scammell, 2000), and are believed by some to have a particular application to young people. They do, perhaps, sound much more fun and 'cooler' than the repeated injunction to read the newspapers, to go along and vote, or even to participate in official institutions such as 'youth parliaments'. Indeed, for those who espouse it, 'ethical consumption' may be thought to have the added benefit of getting results more quickly than the four-yearly elections which are perceived by some young people to make very little real difference to their lives (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). On the face of it, anyone can accept such invitations and make an active contribution to democracy. But are such assumptions justified?

This paper is based on research being carried out in the UK for the pan-European project 'Civicweb: Young People, the Internet and Civic Participation'¹. The broader project, which is being conducted in seven European countries, is concerned with the role of the internet as a means of promoting civic engagement and participation among young people aged 15-25. We are examining the types of civic and political content available for young people on the internet as well as the stated reasons why such websites are being produced. We are particularly interested in the values and

¹ This research is funded by the European Commission under Framework 6 on Targeted Socio-Economic Research: see www.civicweb.eu.

beliefs of those who create and manage the websites, and the interpretations, beliefs and on- and off-line actions of the youth who visit them. The question of why certain political and civic sites are more successful at engaging youth than others is a prime consideration, and is explored via an analysis of their rhetorics, appeals and pedagogic strategies.

Our focus in this paper is on one specific aspect of this phenomenon, namely the use of websites to promote 'ethical consumption' among young people. It is worth distinguishing at this point between ethical consumption and politically-motivated consumption more broadly. There is a very long history of 'consumer power' – for example in the form of boycotts or 'buycotts' - being used in the service of particular political causes or social movements (Cohen, 2004). However, it is clear that consumption for overtly political reasons is not an intrinsically benign or even necessarily pro-democratic phenomenon, and can be used for very different purposes. For example, Matthew Paterson (2005) describes how in response to the economic panic engendered by the September 11th attacks in America, everyone 'from George W Bush down, politicians and corporate elites', urged Americans to 'buy more stuff', first and foremost airline tickets, as a means of fulfilling their patriotic duty. By contrast, *ethical* consumption, as we understand it, is a term that is generally employed by those on the political left: it typically refers to consumption decisions that are made on the basis of concerns to do with human rights, environmental sustainability, animal welfare, fair trade or humane working practices.

This paper begins by briefly examining several intersecting literatures discussing not-for-profit marketing, commercial marketing, youth cultures and subcultures, politics and ethical consumerism. We then move on to examine the rhetorical constructions of youth identity and ethical consumerism on a range of civic websites, exploring the identifications and disavowals implicit in the language, layout and imagery, and the conceptualisations civic-orientated web producers have of their audiences and of consumption *per se*. This will be done by taking a case-study approach, involving a qualitative textual analysis of web-pages taken from sites such as *Adbusters*, Oxfam's *Generation Why*, *Ethics Girls*, *Adili* and *Amnesty International* which advertise or promote the buying of ethical goods by young people. It will also involve an analysis of the aims of the site producers, as exemplified on the sites' mission

statements or in in-depth interviews. By means of this analysis, we seek to identify and assess the actually or potentially 'civic' aspects of these sites and to question the notion of ethical consumption in particular.

Ethical consumption: dilemmas and debates

In many respects, the issue of ethical consumption brings into focus broader arguments both about the changing nature of civic and political participation, and about the role of consumerism, in contemporary democracies. The literature on social capital typically suggests that mass consumption is inimical to civic participation, and that the rise of mass media and consumerism has been a key factor in the demise of a healthy civic culture (Putnam, 2000). By contrast, social theorists such as Giddens (1991: 209-231) establish a contrast between 'old' and 'new' politics, where 'emancipatory politics' corresponds roughly to conventional politics and 'life politics' encompasses the politics of (new) social movements. Ethical consumerism (and associated notions such as 'sustainable consumerism' and 'fair trade') represents a clear instance of Giddens' second conceptualization. It is the active conjunction of this 'new' politics with 'new' technology by civic organizations seeking to engage apparently new groups of young citizens which particularly interests us here.

The research we have carried out so far has discovered that many civic websites targeted at young people tend to highlight 'life politics' or ethical consumerism rather than an appeal to conventional forms of political activity (CivicWeb, 2007). But as Tallontire, Rentsendodj and Blowfield ask in their literature review on this subject, 'Who is the ethical consumer, and what do they mean by ethical consumption?' (2001: 1). What is considered 'ethical' is by no means absolute: many criteria may come into play in determining degrees of 'ethicality', and such criteria may quite frequently conflict with each other. For example, is any buying ethical if the product is 'organic'? Does such buying constitute political action only if those who made it receive the entire profit, or is it acceptable for some of the profits of third-world labour to go to 'ethical' civic organisations? How strongly should environmental and 'green' considerations weigh in the balance if a product is branded 'fair trade'?

Research on the practices of self-professed ethical consumers has revealed interesting hierarchies in terms of how products are graded according to an unwritten ethical scale of virtue. By means of a survey distributed via the UK's *Ethical Consumer* magazine, Wheale and Hinton (2007) attempt to identify what they call 'ethical drivers' attached to specific groups of products, from clothing to electronic goods. Their findings indicate that environmental issues are ranked above human rights and animal rights/welfare issues, and that the ethical consumer considers the product groups themselves to have differential importance, ranging from food products, which are most strongly associated with ethical issues, to the brown goods group (electrical goods such as stereos and TVs), which proved to be least associated with these issues. Their examination of the motivating factors within each group suggests that ethical consumers consider each product group on the basis of its bundle of ethical attributes, with varying levels of importance attributed to each issue within the decision to consume or buy. Similar findings are apparent in the study by Young, McDonald and Oates (2006), which suggests that consumers face a complex task in balancing out such diverse criteria in making purchasing decisions: being a 'green consumer' is not a simple, either/or matter, but something that involves compromises and trade-offs – and often contradictions.

International studies of young people's conceptions of ethical consumption (e.g. Autio and Heinonen 2004; Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005) suggest that there are often gaps between rhetoric and reality in this area – that is, between the attitudes young people profess (not least in response to researchers' enquiries) and their actual behaviour. Those for whom ethical considerations are paramount are in a small minority; and in practice, consumers tend to make contingent, and often quite inconsistent, purchasing decisions. This is partly to do with questions of availability and price (since 'ethical' goods are invariably more expensive than their 'unethical' equivalents); and partly to do with the availability and reliability of the information that would help consumers reach such decisions. However, it also reflects the extent to which consumers have the time or inclination to prioritise the issue; and the

continuing influence of essentially 'non-rational' (for example, emotional, symbolic or aesthetic) dimensions of consumer behaviour.²

While we should beware of equating consumption with purchasing power, these and other studies also suggest that ethical consumption tends to be concentrated among social groups that are already economically privileged. Micheletti et al. (2004) note that historically people's religious, ethnic or gender identities have often been associated with purchasing or with the boycotting of products to political effect, but that it is the 'empowered and embedded' people who nowadays use their purchasing power as a political tool. For example, Tallontire, Rentsendodj and Blowfield are not alone in finding that, '[r]egular fair-trade buyers are untypical of the population as a whole: they are better educated, wealthier, mostly female, over 30 years of age and tend to work in the public sector or "caring professions"' (2001:17). In this typology, class and spending power play a clear role either as a motivator or as an enabler of civic participation. Given that young people as a whole tend to have less spending power than adults, there may be good grounds for questioning the idea that promoting ethical consumption is in fact a means of extending the democratic participation of youth.

Such findings also feed into more general debates about the political implications of ethical consumption. Advocates such as Norris (2002) see ethical shopping as a form of politics that is all about 'purposive collective action' aiming to redress social inequalities. In their collection on political consumerism, Michele Micheletti, Andreas Follesdal and Dietlind Stolle likewise argue that '[p]olitical consumerism acknowledges the new power of corporations and uses the market as a powerful site for politics' (2004: ix). However, others suggest that, far from representing a challenge to the power of global capitalism, ethical consumption is a merely individualistic strategy that is complicit with neoliberalism. George Hoare, for example, argues on this basis that it can reinforce political quietism and apathy:

Ethical shopping is often argued to represent a 'new' form of political engagement (see Norris 2002), one which particularly appeals to those who

² The findings of such research are also borne out in some online youth forums, such as a recent 'Generation Europe' discussion: <http://www.generation-europe.eu.com/content/view/78/15/>

regard themselves as having disengaged entirely from formal, parliamentary politics. However, we cannot forget that there is a sense in which ethical shopping is non-collective and focuses on the individual, and is confined to the role of a choice which, while important, we might plausibly argue is a matter of private morals. There is a danger that ethical shopping represents (or, less likely, but more worryingly, feeds into) a state of disengagement from politics as purposive, collective action concerned with altering the distributional values of social institutions. (Hoare, 2007: n.p.)

Micheletti et al. (2004: xv) identify a range of opinions on these issues, including those who argue that political or ethical consumption is a creative response by citizens to bad governance (Beck 2000); those who see consumer action as a 'partial answer to the negative side-effects of globalisation (Moberg, 2001)'; and those who remain sceptical about a form of action that they feel can attract only the 'wealthiest and most established people and therefore reproduces patterns of marginalisation, powerlessness and disembeddedness nationally and globally (Basu, 2001)'. As Paterson (2005) notes, it is undoubtedly true that failures in older forms of social democratic political action have fuelled 'new consumer movements' such as the anti-sweatshops campaigns; yet we have also seen a consumerisation of politics, for example in the increasing use of focus groups to establish typologies linking voting intentions to particular patterns of consumer behaviour.

So are even anti-corporate and 'ethical' businesses – and the people who choose to buy from them – in fact operating to sustain the system some of them would wish to undermine? Paul Kennedy's analysis of 'ethical' and 'green' businesses in the UK highlights some of the contradictions between business practices and the marketing of lifestyle or ethical products. Drawing on postmodernist accounts of consumption as a set of symbolic practices, he introduces the idea of virtuous buying (2004: 26): 'Given that the moralisation of consumer practices involves the deliberate attempt to combine lifestyle preferences with 'goodness', and/or political correctness – both essentially symbolic qualities – some forms of commercialised signifying culture can be made to work for the environment and social justice rather than against them'. Nevertheless, Kennedy's survey of stakeholders who run both 'mainstream' and 'radical' ethical/green businesses reveals interesting fault lines between ethical

political ideals and business realities. While all the enterprises he examined were 'commodifying ethicality or selling the proofs of moral virtue' (2004: 33), they were conscious of having to create and maintain the markets for their goods. This consciousness affected mainstream and radical or alternative businesses in different ways, but Kennedy concludes that in seeking to compete and maintain their share of the market, the more principled, political and radical green/ethical businesses may have to follow some of the 'unashamedly commercial' strategies of mainstream businesses. As he concludes (2004: 41), '[t]he marriage of profit with principle is an uneasy one'.

Even so, there is a danger of oversimplifying the debate if we see ethical consumption as an *alternative* to other forms of civic or political action. As Clarke et al. (2007) suggest, ethical consumption campaigns are typically seen by their advocates as one among a broader array of political strategies, and not as a substitute for them. Such campaigns do typically target those who are already committed to the issues, but they serve as a complement to other forms of action. They also help to build networks among activists, and to promote the visibility of such debates within the wider public sphere. As such, these authors suggest, it may be false to see ethical consumption as merely an individualistic or privatised strategy – or indeed to regard consumerism as somehow essentially distinct from, much less opposed to, the domain of politics and civic life.

The rhetorical appeals of marketing: 'cool', 'alternative' and 'countercultural' products

While the question of social class and democratic access is threaded throughout our analysis, we also need to consider the strategies that are used in marketing fashionable, 'cool' or 'hot' products – from clothing and jewellery to trees, holidays and sponsored gifts – by appealing to their 'ethical' credentials. As we shall see, the language used in such campaigns aimed at young people appeals simultaneously to the wish to consume or buy products (and hence reflects broader rhetorics within mainstream marketing and consumer culture), and to the desire to do so in ways that are 'ethical' (which relates to the realms of social responsibility, citizenship and/or

politics). Their sales pitch is one which takes activities or values that are often seen as undesirable, unfashionable or uninteresting – not least because of their apparent identification with adults – and seeks to redefine them as, on the contrary, desirable – not least through their association with characteristics that are implicitly perceived as inherently and exclusively youthful. As we shall see, there is an apparent tension here, which the sites seek to resolve by appealing to the notion that such goods are ‘alternative’ or ‘radical’ – and hence, it would seem, necessarily ‘cool’.

Yet this tension is difficult to overcome, not least because what counts as ‘ethical’ or as ‘cool’ is not necessarily stable or easy to define. Thus, as we have noted, the term ‘ethical’ itself is neither used nor understood in a straightforward manner. Potentially, it could refer to environmentally sustainable practices, fair payment to producers for goods, production in sanitary and safe conditions, organic farming, the buying of produce from specific countries and companies, or politically anti-authoritarian production techniques or regimes. Each of these dimensions has a provenance and a history in the realms of business and marketing, neoliberal, liberal-democratic or leftwing activist politics and environmentalism, as well as in the domains of charity shops, non-governmental marketing and charity purchasing that long pre-date the advent of the Internet.

Likewise, the notion of ‘cool’ has a long history in marketing to children and young people (see Cross, 2004; MacAdams, 2002). Yet while the term is apparently understood by millions of consumers young and old, cultural products cannot be seen as intrinsically ‘cool’ or indeed ‘uncool’. Some argue that the whole notion of cool is nothing more than a tactic generated by corporations (such as Nickelodeon, Nike, Reebok and Levis Jeans) to sell more products to bemused, easily influenced young consumers (Quart, 2004). However, marketers typically suggest that achieving and maintaining the status of ‘cool’ is particularly difficult given the volatility of the youth market (del Vecchio, 1997). What qualifies as cool is ever-changing and frequently contested, and varies significantly in different contexts and settings: even within the mass consumer market, appealing to some universal notion of cool is an inherently risky strategy.

Notions of 'alternative' and 'countercultural' cool are of course a staple element of youth culture. Yet here again, the forms of 'subcultural capital' that are at stake in defining what is authentic, or in maintaining distinctions between the 'alternative' and the commercial 'mainstream', are subject to constant change and negotiation (Thornton, 1995). The association between particular forms of youth cultural 'style' (as embodied in music, fashion and visual design) and particular political positions or orientations are equally complex and contested: it is certainly hazardous in the contemporary world to assume a necessary 'homology' between such forms of cultural expression and a given social location, even if youth cultural theorists may have argued as such several decades ago (e.g. Hebdige, 1979). This is not to suggest that such aspects are merely 'empty signifiers' which can be assigned any meaning whatsoever; but it is to imply that cultural forms and fashions play a complex and ambivalent role in processes of identity building and formation.

Naomi Klein, adbusters founder Kalle Lasn (Klein, 1999; Lasn, 2000) and other high-profile opponents of 'brand culture' and corporate power would have us believe that consumption in an 'ethical register' is not only possible and occurring but has categorically different outcomes and motivations from those of the mass marketing and consumption that defines mainstream 'cool'. One such believer in 'culture jamming' as a political tool is Jonah Peretti, who engaged the Nike corporation in an email exchange about making a customised trainer with 'Sweatshop' written on it, only to find the entire exchange circulating around the world wide web and attracting an unprecedented amount of both positive and negative political comment. According to Peretti, 'culture jamming promotes change by making citizens aware of the contradictions in corporate policy and practice' (2004: 136); it also 'provides a new type of free speech tailored to a media-saturated environment' (2004: 137). This is certainly an idea that websites such as Oxfam's *Generation Why*, *Amnesty International*, *Adili* and *Ethics Girls* attempt to use in more or less political – and simultaneously more or less commercial – ways.

However, other cultural critics differ on the possible outcomes of such practices. According to Heath and Potter (2005), rather than being part of a cultural rebellion against mainstream capitalist culture, alternative goods and culture jam ideas are enmeshed just as firmly with the capitalist system as any Nike trainer or FCUK

sweatshirt. In describing the idea of cultural critique popularised by Kalle Lasn in his book *Culture Jam*, Heath and Potter satirise the belief that any form of consumption can be 'outside the system':

Traditional political activism is useless. It's like trying to reform political institutions inside the Matrix. What's the point? What we really need to do is to wake people up, unplug them, free them from the grip of the spectacle. And the way to do that is by producing cognitive dissonance, through symbolic acts of resistance to suggest that something is not right in the world... Since the entire culture is nothing but a system of ideology, the only way to liberate oneself and others is to resist the culture in its entirety. This is where the idea of counterculture comes from. (2005: 9)

Heath and Potter argue that this inflated belief in the rebellious power of the counterculture – whether in the form of so-called 'ethical clothing', 'organic food' or a refusal of social conventions such as drug laws – undermines traditional activism. Instead of helping disenfranchised groups, countercultural critique and the actions associated with it remove attention from huge social differences in wealth and poverty, thus preventing engagement with trade unions or voting, and generally undermining moves towards much-needed social reform. According to Heath and Potter, those who buy into the 'myth' of counterculture come to regard issues of social justice or government irresponsibility as mere illusions, part of the grand ideology which controls people's behaviour. Yet they propose that, on the contrary, the counterculture itself is a grand illusion, one which is a logical extension of – and which inherently sustains and invigorates – the individualistic ideology of consumer capitalism.

Some support for Heath and Potter's argument may be found in a brief examination of the Adbusters website. Adbusters, known for its satirical take on commercial advertising, specialises in what it calls 'fearless anti-corporate criticism' but at the same time wishes to become a major online hub for the marketing of a particular set of 'alternative' cultural products ranging from books and shoes to posters and electronic gadgets. Thus, the featured item on the page shown in Figure 1 is a pair of 'Blackspot shoes' which are 'Organic Hemp, Cruelty Free, Anti-Sweatshop and Pro-

grassroots'. Each of these labels carries a notional lifestyle politics in its wake and at the same time acts to market the product in a way that mirrors commercial marketing techniques by appealing to key markers of identity – authenticity, individuality and social responsibility.



FIGURE 1: Adbusters, The Culture Shop

Ultimately, however, Heath and Potter seem to accuse representatives of the counterculture – among them the ethical consumers we are concerned with here – of suffering from a form of false consciousness, or at least of being victims of a kind of ideological confidence trick just as damaging as the consumer culture they seek to oppose. Yet are such criticisms fair to most of those who wish to challenge brand society by buying unbranded or ethically labelled goods – and do they do justice to

the ethical consumption and political buying options that exist on the websites we now go on to consider?

Methodology

For this section, we draw on our qualitative analysis of a range of youth civic websites, covering issues of content, design and interactivity. This analysis provides an in-depth understanding of the different ways in which issues are represented, and in which young people who visit the site are addressed, constructed and invited to participate. Within the broader sample of sites we have analysed in the project, we compare sites that appear to be adopting relatively traditional approaches, both to youth civic participation and to the Web as a medium, with those that are more innovative (Civicweb, forthcoming). Here we focus specifically on those that have as an aspect or central part of their campaign ethos an invitation to young people to consume in particular ways as ethical and political citizens. Our analysis employs broadly social-semiotic approaches (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001), and builds on emerging work focusing specifically on websites (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2004; Burn and Parker, 2003).

Among the questions and themes we have addressed in our broader analysis are the following:

- **Multimodality.** How does the site use different modes of communication, and for what purposes? For example, is it predominantly text-based? Do the images function merely as illustrations, or play a more prominent role? How are users invited to 'read' these different modes?
- **Navigation.** How does the site direct users through the material? How do links within the site and between sites help to support and legitimate the information provided on any given site?
- **Address.** How is the user addressed, both verbally and visually? For example, is the tone formal and impersonal, or informal and personalised? What assumptions

are made about the characteristics (needs, interests, cultural orientations) of young people in particular? To what extent, and how, is the site teaching, selling, or engaging the user in a dialogue?

- **Representation.** In what ways does the site frame and convey the ethical issues with which it is concerned? How are these issues invoked in the specific act of marketing goods? To what extent are young people themselves represented as agents or merely as ‘consumers’? How is the ethical status of the goods established and legitimated?

Generation Why: Constructing the Young Ethical Consumer

We begin by analysing one UK youth civic site, Oxfam’s *Generation Why*, looking at the site as a whole rather than simply the pages that focus on marketing. Other sites such as *Ethics Girls*, *Adili*, *Amnesty International* and *Adbusters* (above) are referenced with a more specific focus on their marketing pages, the kinds of products sold and the language and ideological appeals used to sell them to young people.

The explicit aims of Oxfam’s *Generation Why* website are embodied in its strap-line: ‘Do what you love doing - just change the world while you are doing it’. The site seeks to get young people involved in campaigning on Oxfam projects through the activities that they already ‘love doing’ such as popular music, shopping, sport, cinema, writing and a variety of other arenas. There are obvious assumptions being made here about what it is that young people really like doing in their spare time, for pleasure. These assumptions may in themselves suggest an in-built appeal to middle-class youth, which is an issue that will be pursued further in this analysis.

The site’s politics are left-leaning liberal on most issues and, in line with Oxfam’s campaigning status, more pronouncedly left-wing on issues to do with international development. According to the site producer whom we interviewed³, their broad mission in terms of young people’s civic participation is getting ‘a broad agreement to

³ Interview between Ben Beaumont, Web Editor, Oxfam-*Generation Why* and Shakuntala Banaji, February 2007.

work with others to eradicate poverty around the world'. Their conception of civic participation and action thus ranges from shopping for 'ethical' goods to campaigning around trade laws, fund raising, donating (although this is not considered a priority, in that young people are acknowledged as having less money), lobbying government and international corporations, volunteering, demonstrating and writing letters and signing petitions. They also encourage online polls on issues that broadly relate to the politics of the website. Early in 2008, for instance, the question was: 'We know you've made an ethical new year's resolution (haven't you?) But what is it?' and the options given were 'Buy more fair trade produce'; 'Recycle more rubbish'; 'Save energy at home' and so on.

Invitations to young people to contribute feature on various pages of the *Generation Why* site, and cover both volunteering for *Generation Why/Oxfam* projects and writing up stories on relevant topics or issues (Figure 2):

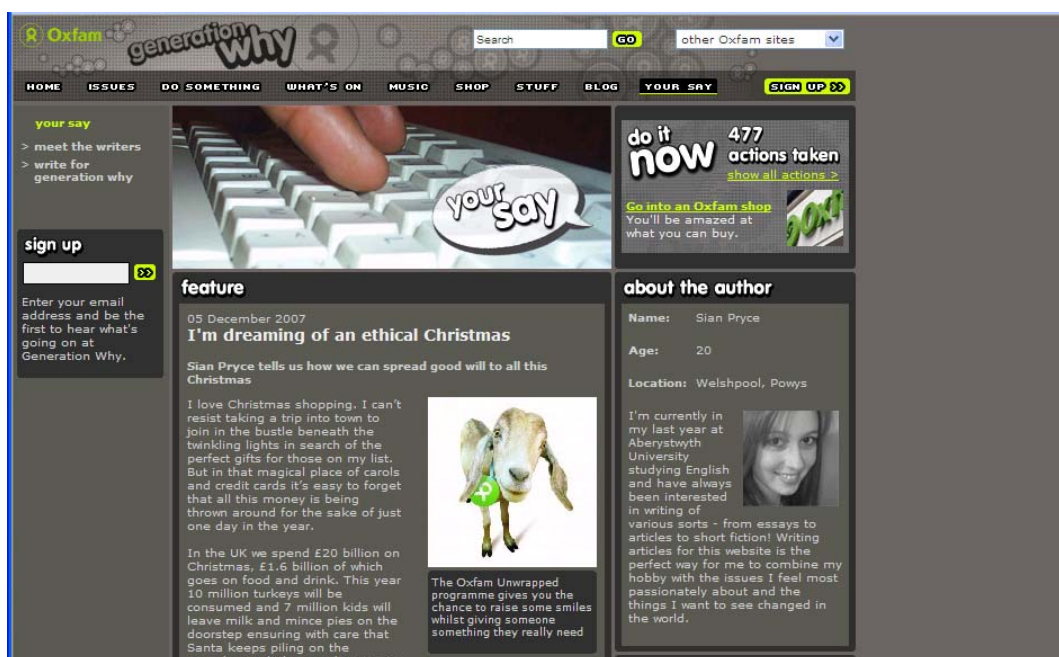


FIGURE 2: *Generation Why*, December 19th 2007

The content here tends to focus heavily but not exclusively on 'life politics'. Figure 2 above gives an example of an article featuring a young woman discussing ways of shopping more ethically for Christmas presents. Below the article, there is a comment from another young woman asserting that she will use only old newspaper to wrap presents and thus save on the wrapping paper this year, and suggesting that

she has been inspired to do this by reading this article. The ethical appeal here is twofold: by refusing to buy lots of extra toys, paper, tinsel and other unnecessary ornaments, one can save a large amount of money which can then be donated to charity and used for the improvement of people's lives in poorer countries; but at the same time one is being environmentally friendly by recycling and making better use of existing resources. Both these options are explicitly labelled 'ethical'. The appeal here involves an element of push (or social challenge) and pull (or emotional encouragement). It implicitly proposes that young people will feel able to do something about the environment and that they will be acknowledged for doing so: they will achieve political agency as well as admiration and social status.

Generation Why was set up to target a younger audience than that of the traditional Oxfam website, which is seen to appeal to a more traditional, older audience. The web producer whom we interviewed about *Generation Why* explained:

...obviously people have a lot of different opinions about what Oxfam is, like [they might think it is] a bit old, maybe a bit unfashionable, and we were kind of meant to challenge those perceptions via a website that would engage young people on their level in an uncomplicated way – so *Generation Why* was started to put across everything that Oxfam does. (Producer Interview with SB, February 2007)

The producer's evidence and the site itself appears to take seriously the suggestions of Charities Aid Foundation researchers Catherine Walker and Andrew Fisher (2002) that young people are often disengaged from political or charitable causes for lack of opportunity or lack of attempt to engage them. These authors suggest that young people are actually keen to be involved but that existing approaches to fundraising from them need to be adapted to take account of their concerns, activities and enjoyments. Rather than 'preaching to the converted', then, a key aim is to reach out to young people who may not already have a commitment to Oxfam's ethical or political perspective; and this is reflected both in the visual design of the site and in the written content. Thus, the *Generation Why* team particularly strive to avoid a censorious or patronising tone: they seek to take account of what young people like

doing rather than implying that all fun is bad or negative. Hence, music and shopping are used

to reach out to new audiences because ...there'll always be a body of young people who are motivated by social justice and social justice issues in its own right and you won't need to engage them through music as they're passionate about justice anyway. But ... if you're into music or you're into fashion you can still have a positive impact on the world. (Producer interview, *ibid.*)

However, there are questions that could be raised about the kinds of young people who might be attracted to this website and by this approach. According to the website producers' information, the large majority of users are probably middle-class, and many are at college or university. More than two thirds of them are young women. This gender and class profile is particularly apparent in the user contributions, which are largely from university students, and cover issues such as 'how to get on the charity career ladder'. It is also apparent in the tone, mood and style of the writing. As we have noted, the aim here is to engage visitors' attention to issues of injustice or inequality, locally or globally, via an enthusiastic focus on their supposed primary interests – music, tourism, television, shopping, and so on. The mood tends to be upbeat but also at times annoyed and encouraging of activism. Rather than suggesting that no-one is to blame for the injustices, there is a clear sense that business as usual between governments and corporations is not acceptable.

The style of the writing is more difficult to define. In the UK, it might be said to draw on a very particular class register – Standard English. It has a deliberately informal, 'cool' or slangy twist at times, but is also highly erudite and relatively formal at other points. There is an avoidance of jargon, and where it is used it is explained, in line with a pedagogic approach that seeks not to alienate young people or to make them feel that civic actions are *hard work*. Users are encouraged to think that all their actions are 'making a difference' and regaled with imperatives: 'DO It Now!' 'Challenge your mates'. There are also lots of questions, both pointed and rhetorical, built into the appeals to young people, a pedagogic strategy intended to reduce the distance between the writers and readers, bringing them onto the same level and lending a personalised, intimate edge. The appeal to ethical consumption thus entails

an assumption that readers will possess a shared understanding of what is ethical, while at the same time seeking to engage them with a specific form of received slang which confers social 'cool' on some items.

This combination of didactic and consumer-oriented perspectives is achieved on many different levels. For example, users are encouraged to read one of the 'Small Guides to Big Issues' that detail the historical background and explain terminology around issues from 'Climate Change' to 'Women's Rights'. However, these guides are not available online and free of charge, as one might have expected given the proliferation of free information and discussion on the internet: clicking on the link to the guides leads to a page advertising them. They are in hard copy only and cost around ten pounds each. Although written by serious political writers such as Jeremy Seabrook, the way in which these guides are presented on the advertising page and the graphics on the front covers are reminiscent of young shoe-string or budget holiday and travel guides such as *The Lonely Planet* series or *The Rough Guide*. Here again, the iconography of the marketing links things that users apparently 'love doing' (such as travelling and backpacking) to serious political issues.

Shopping for Social Justice

As our Christmas shopping example implies, 'ethical consumption' sometimes appears to imply an overall reduction in consumption *per se*, not merely of 'unethical' commodities, but also of any that are considered in some way unnecessary. Yet shopping is also implicitly seen here as one of the things that young people 'love doing' for its own sake. One key aspect of the site's attempt to 'engage young people on their level' is therefore to encourage them to buy, either from the site itself or from other charitable online 'ethical shopping' catalogues:

Why not buy from a charity-shop website, so that while you're still giving something meaningful to those you love, you're also helping to fight poverty and climate change? The Oxfam Unwrapped programme gives you the chance to buy a goat or a loo in the name of a mate and the chance to raise some smiles, have a laugh and make some conversation whilst giving

someone something they really need.

(<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/generationwhy/yoursay/articles/yoursay263.htm>)

December 19th 2007.

Here the language of commercial marketing is apparent in the appeal of the 'two for one' idea. Ethical purchasing is its own reward, yet it also creates a pedagogical opportunity, to 'make some conversation' with one's friends, and thereby perhaps to raise their awareness of social and political issues.

Shopping itself features quite prominently on the site, especially around the time of events such as Christmas, Easter or Valentine's Day, with young people being encouraged to shop but to do so in an 'ethical' manner by considering issues such as the impact of cash crop farming in certain regions, paying farmers fairly for their trade, encouraging non-genetically modified crops or organic farming, and so on. The site features extensive opportunities to buy goods both for the consumer him- or herself – ranging from chocolate and clothing to CDs, DVDs, books and greetings cards – and for use in developing countries – for example, seeds, fertilizer, a goat, a chemical toilet or condoms to help in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Figure 3 shows the home page of Generation Why in the week leading up to Christmas in 2007. The strategic placement of the ethical t-shirt sale image and the 'everything half-price' slogan in the top right hand corner of the screen suggests that charities such as Oxfam have taken lessons from commercial retailers seriously. Their visual iconography in this instance references commercial marketing techniques. This is also apparent in the notion of a sale, getting a bargain, the encouragement to buy based on scarcity of the product – 'your last chance to buy' - and the faintly ironic claim about the t-shirts' 'legendary' status.

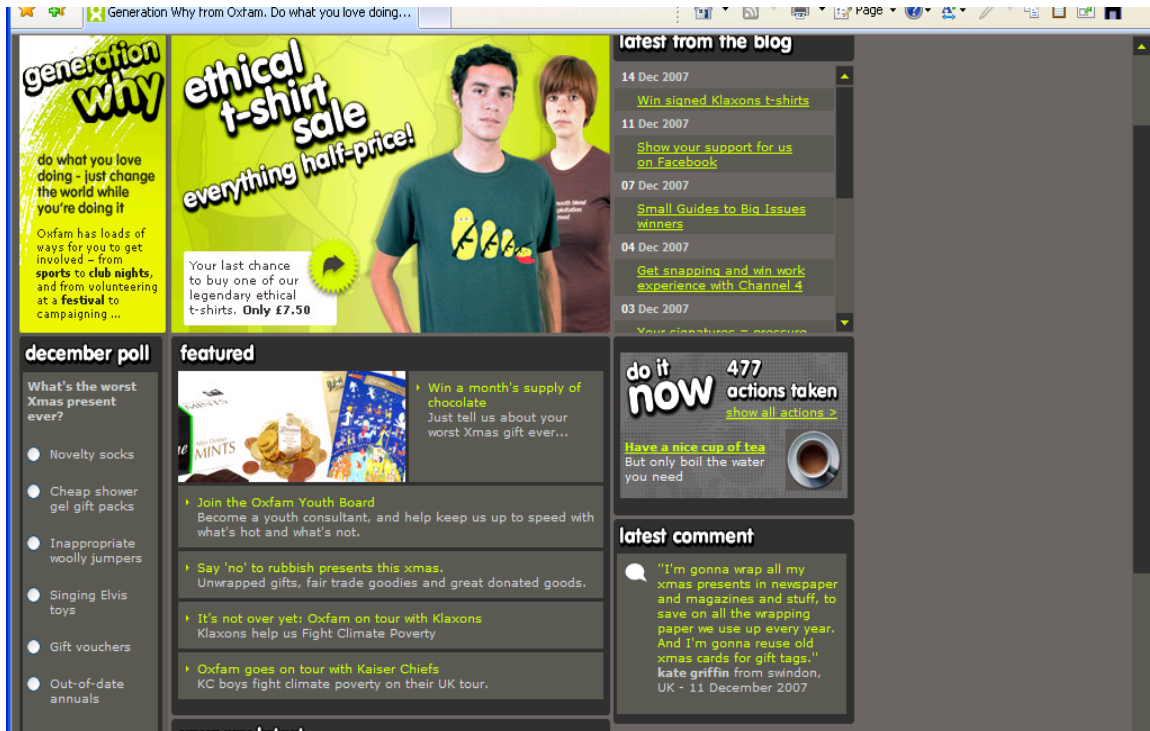


FIGURE 3: Generation Why Homepage, December 19th 2007

‘Hot ethical t-shirts’, typically bearing slogans that promote humane working conditions or fair trade, or express opposition to the global arms trade, appear to be particularly popular. Figure 4 features one design, ‘Shop Till You Drop’, drawing attention to the forced overtime and poor wages of garment workers in developing countries. Here again, the product would appear to combine an element of ‘cool’ or fashionable style with an opportunity for educating one’s friends about the message that it conveys: it is simultaneously ‘ethical’ and ‘hot’.



FIGURE 4: Generation Why: March 2008

Amnesty International, by contrast, do not emphasise the ethical features of their shopping list on the main pages of their site. Rather, shopping is seen primarily as an alternative way of donating to Amnesty and keeping the organisation running. While products are 'ethically sourced', shopping is seen here as essentially a form of fundraising (with prices incorporating a substantial donation to the organisation). On the Webpage shown in Figure 5, shopping is one of the 'actions' that people can take to support Amnesty:

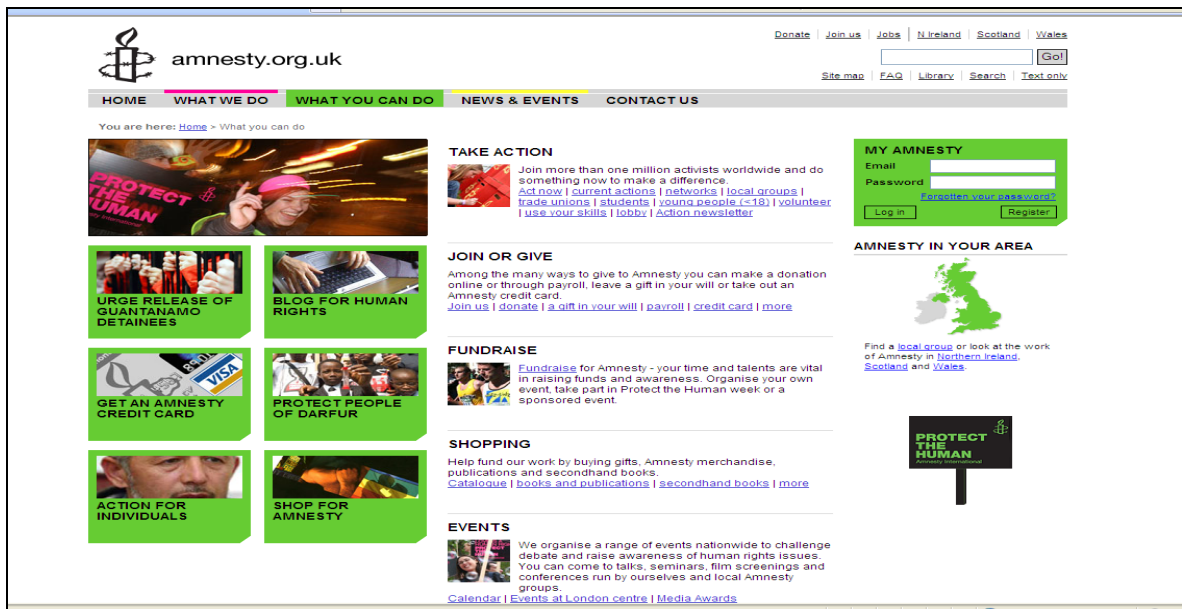


FIGURE 5: Amnesty International, December 2007

Nevertheless, by the time one reaches the Amnesty International UK online catalogue pages, the language of ethical consumerism is everywhere (Figure 6). As a potential young 'ethical consumer' surfing the Amnesty website, you are apparently aided by the fact that their products have an 'ethical' product key, reminiscent of Wheale and Hinton's 'ethical drivers' (2007) mentioned above. If you do not want to buy Amnesty branded goods, you can purchase ones which fall into the category ethical because they are flagged as 'Educational' or 'Eco-friendly' or 'Fair Trade'.

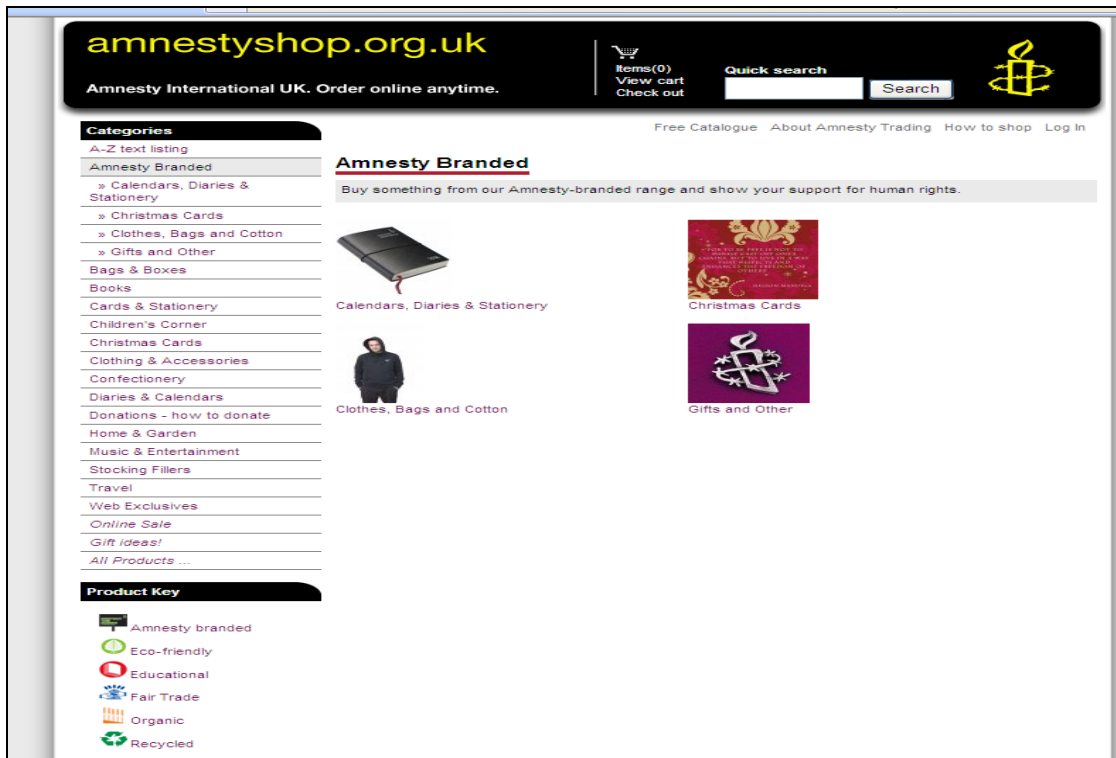


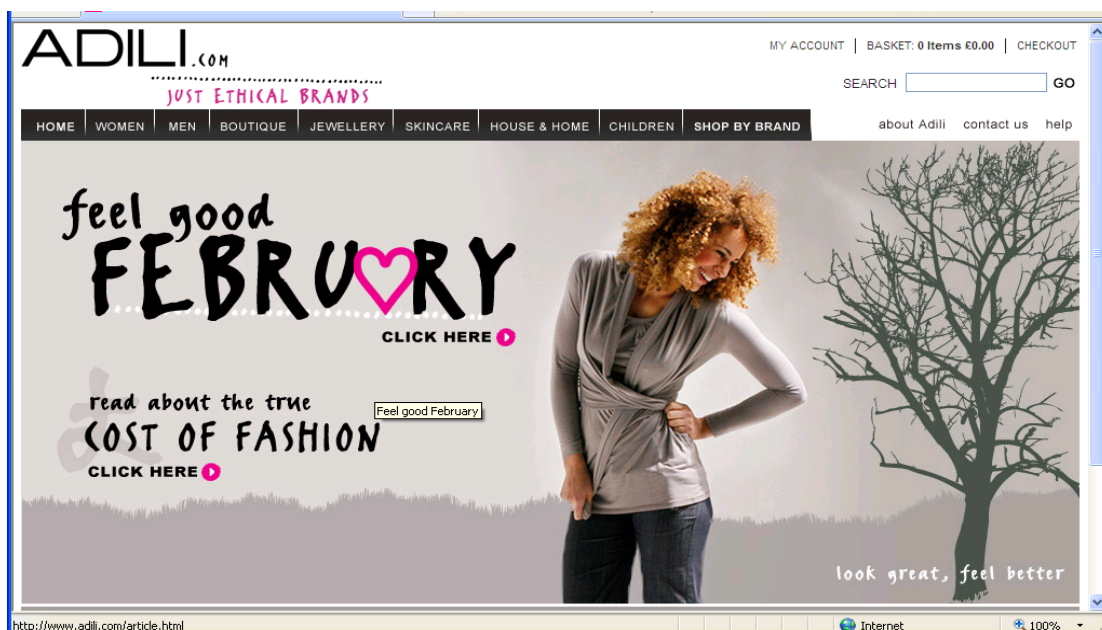
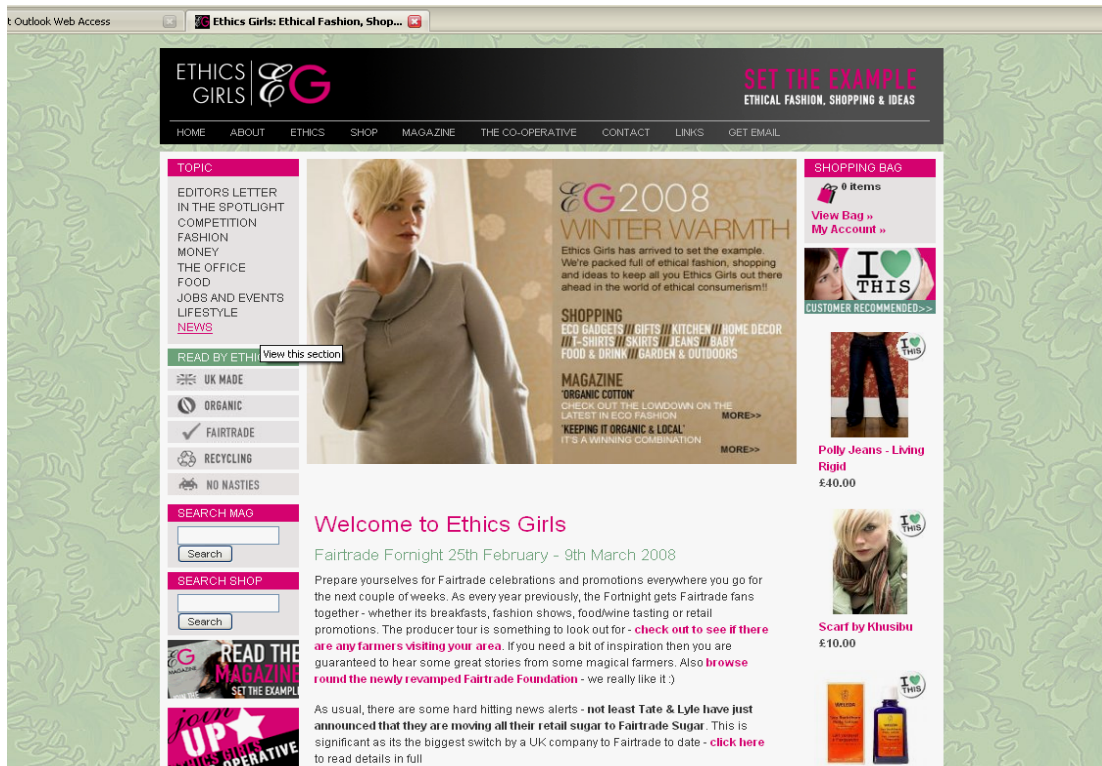
FIGURE 6: Amnesty International, February 2008

The goods on offer with *Amnesty International UK* are not cheap, and do not appear to be targeted primarily at young people or at people who view themselves as ethical consumers. Rather, they assume that since many of their audience already consume certain goods at some point or other, ethical shopping will be an acceptable way for them to raise money. While using the language of ethical marketing on the shopping pages of the site, *Amnesty International* clearly suggest on their homepage that donating to *Amnesty's* Human Rights cause would be the primary function of the shopping on their site. In this sense, the pleasure and politics of ethical shopping is not part of the primary ethos and political appeal of the site in the way it is for *Generation Why*.

Ethical Shopping: *Ethics Girls* and *Adili*

Meanwhile, the consumerist ethos is even more apparent in the case of sites such as *Ethics Girls* and *Adili* (see Figures 7 and 8). These sites are both essentially 'ethical shopping' sites, rather than sites whose primary rationale is to raise awareness or spread information about specific causes. At the time of this research, for example,

Ethics Girls was strongly promoting winter fashions, along with a vast range of products from fairtrade chocolate and beauty products to ‘eco sex toys’ and vegan condoms. As on Amazon, and other online shopping sites, it is possible here for users to recommend products to each other (albeit primarily on ethical grounds), alongside those heavily promoted by the site itself.



FIGURES 7 AND 8: Ethics Girls, Adili, February 2008

In the case of *Generation Why* and *Amnesty International*, shopping is somewhat marginal to the structure of the site, although it is certainly strongly (and visually) flagged up on the home pages. By contrast, in the case of *Ethics Girls*, the activity of shopping is the central focus, and the information about ethical issues is less prominently displayed. The material relating to shopping is strongly visual, while that relating to ethical and political issues is heavily verbal. The design of the site is also more obviously gendered: the pink contrasts with the more neutral yellow of *Generation Why*, and products are recommended with a pink heart icon. The language is equally gendered – products are repeatedly praised as ‘lovely’, ‘gorgeous’ and ‘delicious’. Nevertheless, the design is significantly more grid-like than a typical teen girls magazine, and the visual style is much less outrageously girl-oriented than that of mainstream commercial girls’ sites such as gurl.com (although the target audience also appears to be somewhat older). The green leaf pattern on the background of one site and the tree and outline of hills on the other (Figures 7 and 8) suggest connections to nature and natural processes. The understated colouring of the writing, pale backgrounds and lack of interactive or flashy multimedia options concentrate attention both on the individual products (in the manner of an exclusive boutique) and on the intended ‘messages’ on the explanatory pages.

Both sites overtly stress the ethical angle of their marketing campaign both in the main page text and in their slogans – one is ‘Set the example: ethical fashion, shopping & ideas’ and the other is ‘Just Ethical Brands’, which plays on the word ‘just’. In these respects, the sites appear to be seeking a kind of compromise between an overtly commercial approach and the more ‘worthy’, didactic style of sites such as *Ethical Consumer*, which are more centrally focused on the social and political issues at stake, and significantly more text-based.

Nevertheless, Adili in particular takes pains to substantiate the claims it makes to be engaging only in ‘ethical’ fashion. It has a number of pages of explanation and discussion which attempt to marry the languages of fashion and consumer choice with those of politics. The following (Figure 9) is taken from a page selling gold and white gold jewellery with expensive price tags and the description that follows (Figure 10) opens when the Ethical Fashion tab is clicked on the Homepage:

Ethically Mined Gold & White Gold

FiFi Bijoux is committed to making a positive contribution to the people & communities it works with, promoting positive ethics, offering an alternative to exploitation, human rights abuses or irresponsible damage to the environment

Ethical Fashion

There's no point being coy about it, fashion can be a dirty business. Cotton accounts for just 3% of the world's agriculture, yet uses 25% of all insecticides and 10% of all pesticides. At the same time the 40 million (mainly female) workers in the global textile trade are the ones that pay the price for cheap clothing: long hours, poor wages, unsafe working conditions, abuse, harassment, discrimination. Not good.

Thankfully it doesn't have to be this way. In recent years a number of pioneering brands have started making clothes the ethical way. Best of all these clothes are superb, stylish pieces that make you look good and feel great. Isn't that what fashion should be about?

Consequently everything we stock tackles at least one of the environmental and /or social issues involved in making, transporting and selling clothes. We assess both the brand and their products against a set of ethical criteria covering environmental impact, working conditions and fair trade. We don't expect perfection - garment supply chains are often complex and fragmented and many ethical brands are still small companies, but we do look for real commitment.

Here's where we stand on the main environmental and social issues associated with fashion:

- Fair Trade**
- Alternative Fibres**
- Recycled**
- Organic**
- Traditional Skills**
- Locally Sourced**
- Environmental Impact**
- Charitable Projects**
- Working Conditions and Labour Standards**
- Progress Brands**

FIGURES 9 and 10: Adili, March 2008

According to this description, in order to qualify as ethical for trade on the Adili site, clothes must 'make you look good and feel great' but also tackle 'at least one of

environmental and/or social issues involved in making, transporting and selling clothes'. In principle, it would be possible for goods to qualify solely on the grounds that they were recycled or involved traditional skills, irrespective of the fact that other criteria were not met – an approach that, to say the least, significantly simplifies the dilemmas faced by ethical shoppers.

The civic consumer – a contradiction in terms?

Several commentators have argued that in late modernity consumption is one of the main arenas in which young people's identities are shaped. For some, this is essentially a process of ideological recuperation. Steven Miles, for instance, writes that:

Consumption operates at both an immediate and a very subtle level. By consuming a pair of training shoes, for example, a young person not only buys comfort and a communal sense of wellbeing, but also legitimizes a way of life. By consuming a pair of training shoes, the individual asserts his or her rights as a citizen of consumer culture, and effectively accepts the status quo. (2000: 150)

On the other hand, authors such as Paul Willis (1990) and Mica Nava (1992) suggest that consumer culture allows a much greater opportunity for creativity, and even for expressions of political dissent. From this perspective, consumer culture becomes a domain of 'symbolic creativity', in which young people actively appropriate cultural goods and symbolic resources in seeking to fashion their own identities.

In the context of this (rather tiresomely polarized) debate, the issue of ethical consumption raises some interesting paradoxes. As Heath and Potter point out, the argument that every cultural object is ideologically coded in an effort to sell more goods cannot just arbitrarily stop at Nike trainers – it also applies to t-shirts made of organic cotton. While one may argue about (supposedly ethical) ends justifying (supposedly pragmatic) means (as in Kennedy's (2004) account of the dilemmas of ethical marketers, discussed above), it is clear that lifestyles and identities are also

being symbolically hitched to ethical products, just as they are to mainstream ones. There is certainly a broader debate to be had here about the ultimate significance of consumer culture as against other determinants of people's identities and life chances (see Lodziak, 2002); but if we accept that (as Miles puts it) 'identities are increasingly constructed through symbolic resources' (2000: 154), then the symbolic value of fair-trade, political-slogan-bearing or organic cotton t-shirts is as significant for those who buy them as the connotations of sportiness or casual cool are for those who purchase Nike.

So, if goods to be purchased can offer young people symbolic resources for building their identities as citizens, what are the identities being bought into by putative purchasers of 'hot ethical T-shirts' and recycled Christmas gifts? Just what kind of political or ethical claim is being made by a T-shirt that bears the fair-trade label? And are all such claims set out in the same way and equally justified? As such ideas play an increasingly important role in mainstream marketing, some of their inherent ambiguities become apparent. As Smeltzer (2007), notes, labels such as Fair Trade are now being busily taken up by corporate interests:

How should one assess that at the G8 summit 2005 in Gleneagles leaders of those economically dominant countries that are continually held responsible for global trade injustices (often by actors and organizations in the Fair Trade movement) formally acknowledged the growing success of global Fair Trade and said in their final statement that they "welcome the growing market for Fair Trade goods and their positive effect in supporting livelihoods and increasing public awareness of the positive role of trade in development"? (Fair Trade Advocacy Newsletter, 2005: 4) (Smeltzer 2007: 3)

Yet rather than suggesting that the idea of Fair Trade is 'pure' and has been co-opted for 'unethical' reasons by elites, Smeltzer suggests that there are some inherent ambiguities and contradictions in its meaning: the notion itself is 'a site of contestation, conflict and negotiation between different actors', and defining what constitutes 'fairness' in this context is by no means straightforward. Yet ultimately, as Julia Bonstein (2005) notes, mainstream corporations may well be the ones to benefit most from an increased popular demand for 'ethical' products: 'Save the rainforests

by having a beer, help African school-children by eating chocolate: companies have discovered that the way to a customer's pocket is through his heart.'

Clarke et al. (2007) usefully question the assumption that 'the politics of consumption naturally implies a problematisation of consumer identities'. Their case study of ethical consumers in the UK suggests that discursive interventions used in ethical consumption campaigns (which include websites marketing ethical goods) aim to provide information to people already disposed to support or sympathise with certain causes. Crucially, they suggest that ethical marketing campaigns also tend to provide supporters with 'narrative story-lines' (2007: 231). Such storylines are clearly visible in the content of *Ethics Girls* and *Adili*, as well as in a more nuanced form on *Generation Why*. Obviously, political commitments are by no means simply a matter of rational choice – any more than consumer behaviour can be detached from its emotional and symbolic dimensions. Enabling people to feel virtuous about their consumer choices, and using them to publicly express and extend their commitment to particular ethical positions, is obviously a powerful political strategy. But can a combination of sympathy for a narrative storyline, which might encourage the buying of ethical products and support for the cause of fair trade, add up to a new form of political action? And can this be detached from the connotations of class and capital that characterise the types of consumption being advocated?

George Hoare's suggestion that we might 'distinguish between two outcomes of ethical shopping', one a political outcome and one an apolitical one, goes some way towards providing an answer to this question:

An apolitical outcome of ethical shopping is anything which is achieved collectively in the weak sense: its realisation did not require a co-ordinated campaign... A political outcome, on the other hand, is one which could not have happened without a politically mobilised group behind it... Armed with this distinction, I want to argue that the greatest danger of ethical shopping is the possible achievement of apolitical outcomes. (Hoare, 2007: n.p.)

This conclusion is different from one that sees all 'ethical' consumer campaigns as cynical ploys or all 'ethical' consumers (whether young or old) as merely dupes or too

lazy to engage in real politics. It merely problematises - as several other writers quoted in this paper do - the idea that consumption, and the language that goes with it, can be stripped entirely of its negative, corporate or inegalitarian connotations and harnessed wholesale to revitalising democratic and political interest amongst young people.

However, the distinction between apolitical and political outcomes brings with it a new set of problematic assumptions. If one assumes political outcomes to be those that impinge on governance or that affect relationships between groups of people (rich and poor, for instance, or developing world farmers and Western European retail chains), then one must also acknowledge that not all political outcomes are necessarily democratic or beneficial to those in socially excluded positions. For example, the protectionist stances taken by even avowedly left-leaning anti-globalisation consumer groups in rich countries towards goods or labour from Asia and Latin America might be said to undermine rather than to enhance global social justice.

Conclusion

The sites we have considered in this paper can be seen to provide new and informal ways of addressing young people simultaneously as citizens and as consumers. They overtly legitimate shopping as a valid leisure pursuit, but also seek to construct it as an ethical practice. They build on the role of fashion and 'cool' as highly significant dimensions of commercial youth culture, and yet seek to mobilize these forms of cultural expression as a political tool. This is an inherently ambivalent and politically risky strategy. Furthermore, the implicit linkage of consumer behaviour with pro-democratic political intentions in the rhetoric of these sites side-steps both the small-scale social and the wider political implications of encouraging identity-construction and political expression through consumption. As Janelle Ward has noted, 'even if theoretically speaking the Socially Conscious Consumer is given credit for using her spending power wisely and demanding better working conditions in the third world, for example, the equality of each and every citizen is deeply shaken when one-person-one-vote becomes one-dollar-one-vote' (2007: 18). We suggest

that while traditionally old-fashioned constructions of politics and citizen behaviour might have failed to engage many young people, the adoption by some civic websites of 'life politics' encouraging particular kinds of consumption may prove equally problematic, most notably in relation to continuing questions of social inequality. Consumption may indeed be seen as a form of political action; but even when it is applied in pursuit of social justice or democratic goals, it is not one that is equally available to all.

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