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Roberta Discetti & Matthew Anderson

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# Hybrid consumer activism in Fairtrade Towns: exploring digital consumer activism through spatiality

Roberta Discetti<sup>a</sup> and Matthew Anderson<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of People and Organisations, Bournemouth University Business School, Poole, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of People and Organisations, Portsmouth University Business School, Portsmouth, UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore digital consumer activism through a spatial lens, in order to understand how digital and place-based consumer activism intersect and interact. The empirical context is provided by Fairtrade Towns activism in the UK, investigated through netnographic methods. Three main spatialised tactics of digital consumer activism emerged from the analysis: *emplacing the digital space*; *territorialising ethical consumption*; and *materialising digital activism*. Building on these, we theorise *hybrid consumer activism* as a form of consumer activism whereby activists display belonging and identity both in physical and digital 'places' draw boundaries around spaces of ethical consumption through localised and digital collective action, and form hybrid digital ties. This study contributes to existing scholarship by taking into account placed and spatialised dimensions of digital consumer activism and by questioning the dichotomy between digital and place-based activism through the concept of "hybrid consumer activism".

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Digital activism; consumer activism; consumer communities; netnography; market-based activism; Fairtrade Towns

## Introduction

Digital and physical worlds are today so inextricably intertwined that an epistemic distinction between the two is being blurred to the point of irrelevance. Our bodies are enmeshed with our digital selves, layered in complex interplays of embodiment and technologies, with particularly interesting outcomes for the dimensions of consumption and activism (Matich, Ashman, and Parsons 2019; Stewart and Schultze 2019; Airoidi 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Organised consumer activism is a form of collective action aiming at transforming consumption and markets (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), concerned with consumer rights, ethical values, the public good and a general desire for change (Gabriel and Lang 2015). Internet-based technologies are today central to consumer movements, as online interactions shape how consumers express their political preferences in the markets (Parigi and Gong 2014), prompting several forms of digital activism attempting to change the social order of consumption and markets. The current literature on digital consumer activism primarily focuses on understanding the digital domain, such as the use of online apps to inform ethical consumption choices (Eli et al. 2016; Humphery and Jordan 2018; Fuentes and Sörum 2019) or the emergence of consumer video activism (Minocher 2019; Yu 2021). In this paper, we argue that while understanding the dynamics of the digital dimension is important,

**CONTACT** Roberta Discetti  [rdiscetti@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:rdiscetti@bournemouth.ac.uk)  Bournemouth University Business School, Poole, UK

<sup>1</sup>In this paper, we use a broad definition of 'digital', intended as "a virtual, computer-mediated counterpart of the physical world" (Oxford English Dictionary 2022).

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focusing exclusively on the digital realm conveys an image of digital consumer activism as detached and disconnected from local communities, places, and practices. We thus join research focusing on the interplay between place-based and digital consumer activism (Parigi and Gong 2014; Yannopoulos et al. 2019; Hoelscher and Chatzidakis 2020). Particularly, we build on Hoelscher and Chatzidakis (2020), who recognised that while ethical consumption communities are increasingly inhabiting both physical and digital spaces, research on the interaction of these two realms is scarce. They explored the complementary and synergistic affordances of digital and physical spaces, namely those qualities that enhance the usability of both spaces. However, their emphasis is on physical and digital *spaces* and their affordances – affordances are properties of space. We here aim to place emphasis on the concept of physical and digital *activism* and as such we are interested in the *spatialised tactics* activists mobilise to make use of digital and physical spaces. In so doing, this paper critically re-examines the concept of digital consumer activism through a spatial lens, in order to investigate how digital and place-based consumer activism intersect, and asks: how do digital consumer activism tactics intersect with local and place-based activism?

In order to address this question, we build on scholarship informed by a relational and hybrid understanding of market relations (Chatzidakis, McEachern, and Warnaby 2018; Lucarelli and Giovanardi 2019), which enables an understanding of digital and physical spaces as processual, mobile, always-already-mediated and contingent. Our empirical context is the Fairtrade movement explored through netnographic methods (Kozinets 2020), which constitutes one of the most widely recognised global movements for consumer activism (Raynolds and Bennett 2015).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we review current literature on digital consumer activism; second, we illustrate how a relational and processual understanding of market spatiality informs a hybrid understanding of consumer activism. Third, we introduce the empirical context of Fairtrade Towns and present our methodological approach. Lastly, we present our empirical findings and develop theoretical propositions on hybrid consumer activism. This study contributes to theory on consumer activism by challenging the dichotomy between physical and digital spaces of consumer activism and offering a conceptualisation of its hybrid character. This investigation is timely and significant given the post-pandemic context, which has deepened the intertwining between digital and traditional activism (Massarenti 2020; Pleyers 2020), favouring the coupling of traditional protests and online rallies – see for example the digital protest movements during COP26.

## Digital and place-based consumer activism

Digital consumer activism encompasses a variety of practices, including culture jamming, hacktivism, e-sit-ins, domain squatting, and cyber-graffiti (Albinsson and Perera 2013). Common to these forms of digital consumer activism are a series of transversal e-tactics namely instances of collective action with varying degrees of off – and online components (Earl and Kimport 2011), such as signing petitions, sharing campaign content, or participating in collective platforms, such as Avaaz.org or Change.org. While several e-tactics of digital consumer activism are shared with broader forms of digital activism, others are specific to the consumption domain, such as online boycotts or mobile applications for boycotts.

Digital consumer activism is increasingly recognised a specific set of practices and tactics (Albinsson and Perera 2013), but has sometimes been criticised and pejoratively defined as “clicktivism” or “slacktivism,” terms indicating a costless and token display of support without meaningful commitment (Kristofferson, White, and Peloza 2014). Some scholars have questioned its ability to generate change and highlighted some negative counter-effects, such as narrowing corporate responsibility (Khan and Richards 2021) or reinforcing neoliberal discourses (Page 2017). While mindful of these critiques, we build on a growing body of literature considering digital consumer activism’s transformative potential in societal and market relations (Handelman 2013; Odou, Roberts, and Roux 2018; Minocher 2019; Kozinets 2021; Kozinets and Jenkins 2021).

Scholarship on digital consumer activism has mostly focused on elaborating understandings of the different dynamics associated to the digital domain. Key examples include research on

consumer movements' use of online platforms (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Minocher 2019), mobile applications to support ethical consumption (Lyon 2014b; Eli et al. 2016; Humphery and Jordan 2018; Fuentes and Sörum 2019), or, more recently, "consumer video activism," i.e. the practice of recording and sharing short videos targeting companies (Yu 2021). Other studies have explored the discursive and cultural dimensions characterising digital consumer activism, including digital meso-mobilisation and framing practices (Odou, Roberts, and Roux 2018), activists' online negotiations of brand meanings (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2010), and the digital construction of responsibility narratives (Kampf 2018; Khan and Richards 2021).

Moving beyond the dynamics of interaction on digital platforms, we are interested in how digital consumer activism intersects with physical spaces and communities, and how this connection informs and shapes activist tactics and movement outcomes. In the existing research on digital consumer activism though, examinations around interactions with physical spaces and communities are rare. Even in studies that emphasise the role of materiality, how technology and infrastructure shape ethical consumption, and how consumption is always immersed in socio-material landscapes (Fuentes and Sörum 2019), the role of place remains in the background. This represents a stark contrast with scholarship on place-based consumer movements, which strongly emphasises notions of community, connectedness and cooperation, and a sense of collective identity and solidarity embedded in physical networks (Moraes, Szmigin, and Carrigan 2010; Weijs, Martin, and Arnould 2018; Gollnhofer, Weijs, and Schouten 2019; Birtalan et al. 2021; Forno and Weiner 2020).

While still nascent, we turn here to research offering reflections on the interplay between physical communities and digital spaces of consumer activism. An important study in this sense is Parigi and Gong's (2014) analysis of the role of the Internet in consumer activism within Transition Towns. Their analysis turned to the Internet as the space where consumer movements can consolidate their identities and commitments. While stressing the non-contentious and private nature of acts of political consumerism, they questioned the idea that political consumers act in discrete networks of private choices, in a social "vacuum." They showed instead that political consumers form online networks of connections, what they called "digital ties," which fulfil the important role of providing a public audience for private actions, thus reinforcing participation and accountability. In other words, digital ties transform private acts into collective action. A similar focus on personal relationships and bonds among digital activists is introduced by Gummerus, Liljander, and Sihlman (2017), who emphasised how affectivity in online communities strengthens individual consumers' commitment to ethical consumption. While these studies are important in laying the ground for our investigation, we aim to expand the scope of these reflections and ask how digital ties support not only individual commitments, but collective commitments and consumer activism within physical communities, places, and cities.

A stronger focus on the collective dimension of digital consumer activism is presented by Yanopoulou et al. (2019), who explored new forms of consumption enabled by the Greek movements of the "Indignant Citizens," a politically motivated movement born online to protest the government's austerity measures. While their study shows how social media provided the movement with a site for expression and action, which enabled activists to take the streets and the agora – the place for public deliberation in Ancient Greece – the relationship between digital and place-based activism is not fully unpacked. How did online discourses around symbolic arenas – the streets, the podium, the agora – become embodied and inhabited places? What tactics did consumers put in place to connect the digital and physical spheres?

This overview shows how reflections around place-making and interactions between physical and digital realms are an under-researched theme in scholarship on consumer activism, and yet a fruitful avenue to understand the complex intertwining of this novel form of collective action. A welcome exception is the study of digital and physical ethical consumption communities by Hoelscher and Chatzidakis (2020). While they explored the distinct and complementary affordances of both digital and physical spaces, they also moved in the direction of exploring how these realms entangle and interact. Particularly, they showed how digital spaces enable physical

initiatives to scale up and reproduce new places, what they theorise as “polytopic place-making,” capturing a relational and interconnected view of physical and digital spaces. They interpret these interactions between digital and physical spaces in terms of synergistic affordances, which “yield a compounded effect that is greater than the sum of its parts” (298). We build on this theoretical advancement on the complementary and synergistic affordances of digital spaces with an exploration of the collective tactics activists employ to make use of synergistic affordances of digital and physical spaces. In other words, we are interested in understanding how the interactions between physical and digital spaces produce spatialised collective tactics associated with the practice of consumer activism.

## **A relational and hybrid understanding of market spatiality**

Market spatiality is the field examining the relationships between geographical processes and marketing practices (Castilhos, Dolbec, and Veresiu 2017). Our analysis of market spatiality is informed by the theoretical lenses of relational ontologies (Lucarelli and Giovanardi 2019) and hybridity of physical and digital spaces (Leszczynski 2015; Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski 2018). We depart from the theoretical premise that all consumption is “in space” and “in place,” a premise increasingly recognised by a “spatial turn” in consumer research (Chatzidakis, McEachern, and Warnaby 2018). While it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a full account of how the geographical concepts have shaped research on consumption and markets – see Hoelscher and Chatzidakis (2017) for a comprehensive review – here we provide an outline of why a relational and hybrid understanding of spatiality can be fruitful for the study of digital consumer activism.

Relational ontologies give primacy to relations over entities (Wildman 2010). In consumer research, a relational ontology entails an understanding of market systems as spatially and temporally contingent, namely a processual unfolding of relations, activities, practices, associations, and deviations – constantly mobile, performed and “on the move” (Lucarelli and Giovanardi 2019). Rather than focusing on objects or groups, a relational ontology understands market actors as “scattered configurations of relations” (*ibid.*, p. 95). Relational ontologies conceptualise place as “kaleidoscopic,” namely a multi-faceted, fluid, continuously produced and reproduced set of relations that territorialise consumption, rather than a material and bounded spatial entity where consumption takes place (Cheetham, McEachern, and Warnaby 2018).

A relational perspective allows us to reframe key spatial concepts of space, place and territory from static and defined entities to dynamic and fluid processes. From this standpoint, “space” is not a static container in Euclidian terms, anonymous and open-ended, but a continuously negotiated set of interrelations, power relations and social configurations (Massey 2005). From the same perspective, “place” is not only a fixed set of meanings, identities, and symbolic exchanges, but entails several place-making processes, such as materialising, framing, and bonding (Castilhos, Dolbec, and Veresiu 2017). The focus thus shifts from place as a coalescence of meanings onto sites to place as a number of place-making processes. Coffin and Chatzidakis (2021) described the processes of “emplacement,” namely gathering people, products and practices in a place with symbolic affordances. Similarly, a relational and processual understanding of the concept of territory shifts the focus from notions of boundaries, control, and power, to notions of mobility, discontinuities and proliferation of tangible and intangible boundaries (Brighenti 2014). Applied to the study of consumption practices, a processual understanding of territories includes marking boundaries in the unfolding of temporal and affective dimensions (Cheetham, McEachern, and Warnaby 2018).

Researching digital consumer activism, adopting a relational ontology means addressing the processes of creation and negotiation of the “digital” not as a separate sphere, but as a dynamic and processual making and remaking of social and market relations ontologically inherent to contemporary social life. We thus complement this relational understanding of spatial concepts with a hybrid understanding of online and offline spaces of consumption and market relations (Šimůnková 2019). This is underpinned by an understanding of space as a contingent, multiple, always

already-mediated, hybrid of “real” and “virtual” (Leszczynski 2015). Particularly, we follow McLean, Maalsen, and Prebble’s (2019) perspective, which noted that digital spaces are more than immaterial technological infrastructures separate from physical spaces – they are rather entangled with physical objects, practices, and aesthetics. Given that ethical and political consumption communities increasingly inhabit both physical and digital spaces (Hoelscher and Chatzidakis 2020), we argue that adopting a relational and hybrid sensitivity to spatiality provides a fruitful theoretical lens to understand the interaction between these two increasingly intertwined dimensions.

## Fairtrade towns as place-based campaign communities

Fairtrade Towns (FTTs) represent a grassroots community of campaigners and volunteers that support the vision of fair trade (Fairtrade Foundation 2019). The initiative was launched in the UK in 2001, when a group of local campaigners in Garstang, a small town in England, persuaded the local council to self-declare the town as the first “Fairtrade Town.” Following the success of the local campaign, the Fairtrade Foundation (the organisation licensing the Fairtrade Mark in the UK) developed a set of criteria against which towns and cities could prepare an application to be awarded “Fairtrade Town” status.

Previous academic research has explored Fairtrade Towns through a multiplicity of analytic dimensions, such as moral geographies of consumption (Malpass et al. 2007), community-based marketing (Peattie and Samuel 2018), and theories of practice (Wheeler 2012). Despite the wealth of theoretical perspectives, it is possible to identify a common thread weaving together an interdisciplinary understanding of FTTs, which can be summarised with the theme of re-localising global responsibility.

A first theoretical perspective is that of moral geographies of consumption (Malpass et al. 2007). This perspective gives visibility to the place-based, geographically embedded nature of Fairtrade, and configures FTTs as ethical spaces, namely geographical or virtual spaces imbued with ethical meanings (Low and Davenport 2009). Recently, Samuel, Peattie, and Herman (2020) have argued that FTTs provide a counterpoint to the depersonalisation of mainstream Fairtrade and represent a collective effort to regain local legitimacy and authenticity for the movement, reintegrating geographies of consumption with geographies of responsibility (Samuel, Peattie, and Herman 2020). Studies of FTTs often place particular emphasis on the concept of community. This is articulated in different forms, such as community-based marketing (Nicholls and Opal 2005) or brand communities (Samuel, Peattie, and Doherty 2018). From this theoretical standpoint, FTTs are considered as networks of community-based initiatives. Building on these premises, Peattie and Samuel (2018) highlighted that FTTs bundle together places of consumption, consumer citizenship, and Fairtrade marketing.

Sociological and social movement approaches to FTTs have highlighted the localisation of political activism, participation, and citizenship. Lyon (2014a) and Shawki (2015) defined FTTs as a re-localisation of global activism, while Discetti, Anderson, and Gardner (2020) explored the multi-layered nature of local, national, and global FTT campaigning. From different theoretical standpoints, literature on FTTs has privileged the “placed” dimension of this movement, emphasising notions of localisation, communities, and embeddedness. Given this strong focus on place and localisation, FTTs present an innovative and interesting context to explore the interconnections between digital and place-based activism.

## Methodology

This study employs Netnography, a research method developed in the field of consumer research as the ethnographic approach applied to the study of online cultures and communities (Kozinets 2010, 2020).



## Data collection

Netnography encompasses three types of data: archival (pre-existing online communications), elicited (co-created by the researcher and members of the community) and field notes (Kozinets, 2015). These three types have been collected as follows.

*Archival data* is also called “investigative” data, namely data that the researcher “finds” and “selects” from pre-occurring digital archives, such as blogs, online forums, and social media groups (Kozinets 2020). In this study, archival data spanning from 2001 to 2017 was gathered from the Fairtrade Towns Yahoo Group, in a systematic, observational and unobtrusive fashion (Kozinets, 2015). Launched in the UK in 2001, the online group provided a platform to ignite local mobilisation, coordinate efforts, and negotiate the campaign’s narratives. Participants of the Yahoo Groups represented more than 100 communities in the UK and included members of fair trade companies, local authorities, NGOs, and universities, as well as members of staff of different teams of the Fairtrade Foundation.

*Elicited data* is the result of interaction between the researcher and the participants of the online community (Kozinets 2020). In this study, elicited data was drawn from a total of 13 online semi-structured interviews with key campaigners, active both online and in their local communities. Campaigners were contacted through the National Campaigners Committee, an elected body of Fairtrade campaigners’ representatives, and represented a diversity of geographical regions and communities in the UK. Following this, further interviewees were identified through a snowballing approach. This included Bruce Crowther, the founder of the campaign and first Fairtrade Towns coordinator at the Fairtrade Foundation.

Lastly, *immersive field notes* were produced throughout all stages of data collection and data analysis through two main immersive operations (Kozinets 2020): recording, i.e. chronicling the process of search and investigation; and reflecting, namely first-person ethnographic reflections about encountering a specific social environment. Field notes guided and informed the process of analysis and interpretation.

## Data analysis

Following Kozinets (2020) approach, data analysis started with *collating*, i.e. cleansing the data to remove download errors, redundancies, and personal details, in order to generate a macro dataset including interview transcripts and online cleansed posts. Following this, *descriptive coding* was performed on the whole data set, to allow familiarisation with data and further filing (ibid.). This macro dataset was then grouped into sub-datasets following the progressive identification of themes, a reclassifying work suggested by Kozinets (2010) for the organisation of large bodies of archival data. Netnographic analysis involves a “thick” understanding that combines analytic coding with hermeneutic interpretation (Kozinets 2020). In order to generate this “thick” understanding, analytic coding was performed on the sub-datasets, then *combining* related codes into pattern codes (ibid.). Analytic procedures were subsequently coupled with hermeneutic interpretation, a privileged approach to netnographic analysis (Kozinets 2010). The two main interpretive processes used for this study were *theming*, i.e. identification of higher order themes stemming from codes, and *translating*, i.e. moving from an emic to an etic understanding of the phenomenon (Kozinets 2020). The interpretation followed an iterative, recursive process, circling between data and immersive field notes. Table 1 offers a summary of data collection and analysis steps.

## Ethics

Although often overlooked (see Tuikka, Nguyen, and Kimppa 2017, for a review), ethics is a crucial dimension of online research. In this study, we used Kozinets (2020) ethics flowchart to ensure the soundness of ethical decisions. At the time of data collection, the Yahoo Group was inactive but

**Table 1.** Netnography methodological steps.

Data collection	Analysis and interpretation protocols
<i>Archival data</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Archival data 2001–2017</li><li>• 7508 Posts from the online group</li><li>• 763,175 Total word count</li><li>• Timeframe for data collection: 2018–2020</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ All posts were downloaded with PG Offline software</li><li>○ Collating: filtering, formatting, filing</li><li>○ Coding (descriptive) across the entire dataset</li><li>○ Coding (analytic) on smaller datasets</li><li>○ Combining codes into pattern codes</li></ul>
<i>Elicited data</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 13 semi-structured interviews</li><li>• 15 total hours recorded</li><li>• Timeframe for data collection: 2019–2021</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Interviews were recorded and transcribed</li><li>○ Collating: filtering, formatting, filing</li><li>○ Coding (descriptive) across the entire dataset</li><li>○ Coding (analytic) on smaller datasets</li><li>○ Combining codes into pattern codes</li></ul>
<i>Immersive Field notes</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Researcher's reflexive notes</li><li>• 3 handwritten notebooks</li><li>• Timeframe for data collection: 2018–2021</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Immersive notes: recording, reflecting</li><li>○ Theming: identifying emerging themes from data and notes</li><li>○ Translating from emic to etic viewpoint, circling between pattern codes, themes and reflexive notes</li></ul>

posts were publicly available online, not protected by registration or password; data did not pertain to sensitive topics (defined as personal sensitive information) and the site did not include vulnerable people (defined as people unable to give full consent). These initial conditions qualifies the data as suitable for research. Subsequently, data was securely managed and anonymised, and no personal data or names drawn from the online group were included in the paper. These steps ensured this study's compliance with ethical standards governing online research (ibid.).

For elicited data collected through interviews, we gathered written consent and all our participants consented to be acknowledged in the study. Based on this distinction, some data will be presented in an anonymised way, when drawn from the online group, while some data will be associated with personal names when drawn from interviews, according to the preferences expressed by our participants. Recognising how provisional this approach is, and that more rigorous approaches to digital research ethics are needed, these choices have been guided by directions developed for digital researchers, which stress the key role of “situational ethics” and “contextual integrity” (Markham and Buchanan 2017), namely the acknowledgement that the role of context is crucial in choosing case-by-case what are the right decisions in digital research.

**Spatialised tactics of digital consumer activism**

Three main spatialised tactics of digital consumer activism emerged from our analysis: *emplacing the digital space*; *territorialising ethical consumption*; and *materialising digital activism*. We illustrate each of these tactics through netnographic data in the sections below, while Table 2 provides a summary of the definition of each tactic, its definitional components, and how activists mobilised tactics across digital and physical spaces.

***Emplacing the digital space***

Emplacement refers to the attribution of symbolic affordances and affective meanings to a previously neutral and impersonal space (Coffin and Chatzidakis 2021). Fairtrade activists emplaced the digital space of the Yahoo group through *cultivating belonging* and *negotiating collective identity*.

*Cultivating belonging.* The Yahoo group represented a space where campaigners met virtually, created personal online bonds – digital ties, in the words of Parigi and Gong (2014) – and cultivated a sense of connection and community. Campaigners would develop a sense of familiarity and affectivity to other activists' online personas. Remembering about those first years when the campaign was spreading nationally and activists would meet up first online and then in person at national



**Table 2.** Spatialised tactics of digital consumer activism.

Tactic	Definitional components	Mobilisation of tactics across spaces
<i>Emplacing the digital space</i>	<i>Attributing affective meanings to a previously neutral digital space</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultivating a sense of belonging in the digital space</li> <li>• Negotiating collective identity in the digital space</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital spaces are <i>transformed</i> into ‘places’</li> <li>• Local places and communities’ identities are <i>reworked</i> in digital spaces</li> </ul>
<i>Territorialising ethical consumption online</i>	<i>Marking tangible and intangible boundaries</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawing digital boundaries around ethical spaces</li> <li>• Monitoring dynamic evolution of ethical spaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital spaces are <i>re-drawn</i> for place-based local consumption</li> <li>• Place-based local consumption is <i>re-oriented</i> through digital spaces</li> </ul>
<i>Materialising digital activism</i>	<i>Using materiality for social and political purposes</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transforming digital interactions into place-based connections</li> <li>• Embodying digital support in local mobilisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital spaces are <i>appropriated</i> for place-based mobilisation</li> <li>• Place-based mobilisation is <i>scaled up</i> through digital spaces</li> </ul>

events, Bruce Crowther commented: *I’d go to conferences and meet people who I had never seen before. And I used to always say: look, I don’t know anybody’s face by I know everybody’s email address.* (Bruce Crowther, interview, 2021).<sup>2</sup>

While the development of personal relationships and communal bonds linked to a campaign space is stressed by most literature on place-based consumer activism (Moraes, Szmigin, and Carrigan 2010; Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018; Birtalan et al. 2021), what is noteworthy of this case is the fact that these personal feelings would arise from a digital rather than a physical space. The immersive fieldwork notes showed that campaigners displayed a strong sense of connection arising from their virtual interactions, coupled with a sense of isolation and loneliness in those periods where the online interactions were lagging, even just for few days, as exemplified in the following post: *Fairtrade colleagues, is our Yahoo group still functioning alright because I haven’t received anything from the group since 18th June? Feeling isolated ... in Stoke-on-Trent* (Campaigner, Yahoo group, 2004). Posts like this were common, where campaigners would contrast a sense of isolation and disconnection experienced in their local community with a sense of connection and belonging experienced online. Through the interplay of virtual connections, affectivities to online personas, and constant communication, activists transformed the digital space of the Yahoo forum into a digital “place” characterised by a strong sense of belonging.

*Negotiating collective identity.* Building on these personal and communal bonds, the online group soon became the privileged space where campaigners would negotiate the campaign’s collective identity. The immersive fieldnotes show that the cultivation of connection and belonging was prominent in the first years of the campaign (2001–2005) and instrumental to the negotiation of the movement’s identity, which instead became more prominent as the movement became more consolidated. Collective identity constitutes a key focus of social movements (Melucci 1989) and spatial resources have been identified as central in consumers’ identity practices (Maciel and Wallendorf 2021). The digital space was key in establishing the movement’s collective identity and negotiating campaign narratives to establish legitimacy in local communities, in turn consolidating the movement both at the local and national level. For example, it was instrumental in consolidating the collective identity of the FTT as a continuation of the anti-slavery campaigns organised by British consumers in the late 1800s. Tracing the links between colonialism, the Atlantic Slave Trade,

<sup>2</sup>Bruce Crowther was the founder of the campaign, Fairtrade Towns Coordinator at the Fairtrade Foundation (2003–2012) and then the International Fair Trade Towns Ambassador (2013–2016).

and the current economic context of the “global South,” activists used the digital space to negotiate their collective identity as continuators of the abolitionists’ work. Through several discussion threads, campaigners reframed their participation in the FTT movement as a way of dismantling colonial heritage, a message reinforced by the FTT Coordinator:

As you know I have often made comparisons with the modern Fairtrade campaign and that of the slave trade abolitionists 200 years ago. The latter campaign asked people to boycott West Indian slave trade sugar, stating ‘just because the government licenses this inhumanity does not mean the people have to be a part of it’. Likewise, I would say the same today only we are calling for positive action to buy Fairtrade goods. (Bruce Crowther, Yahoo group, 2005)

FTT activism was thus presented as tackling the damage inflicted to the Global South by imperialistic powers. This was particularly relevant in the case of British cities with ports connected to the slave trade, such as Liverpool, Bristol, and London. The online discussions around the role of these cities in the FTT movement was reframed as a way to rework the city’s identity. For example, Bruce Crowther would often state that *because of Liverpool’s slave trade past there is more of a reason why Liverpool should strive to be the best Fairtrade City in the UK* (Bruce Crowther, Yahoo group, 2008). This shows that the identity and consumption practices of local places were rethought and reworked in the digital space. It is significant that the negotiation of a collective identity, which broader literature on social movements and activism recognises as a core process of movements and organising (Melucci 1989; Castells 2012), took place to a great extent online. The richness and depth of debates held on the online group showed that the digital space, far from being a mere informational and coordination “space” as described by most literature on digital activism, was instead a safe “place” where activists could engage in the vital process of building a collective identity and a shared common narrative, ultimately instrumental to achieve the movement’s goals. In summary, activists transformed the digital space of the Yahoo forum into a “place” bound with affectivities and connection, while re-working local communities’ and places’ identities in the online group, thus mobilising change across both digital and physical spaces.

### ***Territorialising ethical consumption***

Territorialisation consists of marking tangible and intangible boundaries (Cheetham, McEachern, and Warnaby 2018). Fairtrade campaigners territorialised ethical consumption through *drawing digital boundaries around ethical spaces* and *monitoring their dynamic evolution*.

*Drawing digital boundaries.* One of the key tactics of the FTT movement was the development of online directories for ethical consumption. Since the launch of the initiative, one of the main goals of the movement was to increase the local availability of Fairtrade products to support the expansion of Fairtrade markets. To this end, campaigners were tirelessly engaged in creating maps and directories of businesses selling Fairtrade products, which would then be hosted on local Fairtrade groups’ digital spaces as well as signalled in the Fairtrade Foundation’s website. Through a combination of localised action (i.e. visiting local shops) and online action (i.e. constructing digital directories of ethical consumption premises) activists drew ethical boundaries around the consumption landscape of their towns and cities. These maps and directories can be considered as the result of territorialisation and re-territorialisation processes in two senses. First, FTT activists used directories to mark intangible boundaries differentiating ethical places (i.e. shops and premises selling Fairtrade products) from “unethical” places (i.e. shops not engaging with any form of Fairtrade). For example, local directories were a strategic tool in Fairtrade tourist policies. Printed copies of the online directories would be often distributed to local tourist offices, with campaigners stating that

Fairtrade Tourism should be encouraged. It was felt that a visitor should be able to access Fairtrade products by picking up a directory at the most appropriate information point. For example, if you spent a day in York and were a Fairtrade supporter, you might wish to select your cafe or gift shop accordingly. (Campaigner, Yahoo group, 2005)

Second, directories were used as a means to territorialise Fairtrade activism itself, namely to define and re-define what Fairtrade activism meant on the local level. The fieldwork notes indicate that, from the year 2005, the online debate around local directories started to entail negotiations of the tangible and intangible boundaries of the very meanings associated with fair trade activism. The inclusion or exclusion of certain outlets from digital directories would exemplify the engagement of activists with different interpretations of what “fair trade” means. For example, activists would often debate whether they should include only “Fairtrade” certified or all “fair trade” products in local directories. The position endorsed by the Fairtrade Foundation was that “Fairtrade” certified products should be clearly distinguished from other “fair trade” products, i.e. goods carrying different certification schemes, imported through direct trade, or WFTO<sup>3</sup> members:

I have no problem with groups flagging up fair trade products (that do not carry the FAIRTRADE Mark) in their directories as long as it is clear that they do not carry the Mark and neither the products or the directory are labelled as ‘Fairtrade’. The Fairtrade Town campaign has always been about promoting the FAIRTRADE Mark and the sale of Fairtrade products and therefore only these products are considered in achieving the goals. (Bruce Crowther, Yahoo group, 2005)

However, this position was considered too rigid by several campaigners, who would prefer a broader engagement with all the diverse actors of the Fair Trade movement, and would want to give more visibility to smaller fair trade businesses:

Watch out for angry fanatical Fairtrade campaigners! In Ashbourne, we list everyone who offers Fairtrade whether they are entirely wholehearted or not. So, for example, we have a local tea room who sells Fruit Passion and Dubble bars, but who doesn’t use Fairtrade tea, coffee, sugar, etc (we have been working on them, but it’s slow going!). Our view is that if they take one Fairtrade product, we can then persuade them to try another and another etc and ultimately, any Fairtrade is better than none! BUT, we’ve had angry confrontations with visitors from other towns about how we shouldn’t be promoting this tea room because they don’t sell Fairtrade tea and coffee. I think partly they were upset because they felt they should be selling these (fair enough!) but they were also confused about the difference between what FF requires for Fairtrade Town status and what we list in our directories. (Campaigner, Yahoo group, 2008)

This coalescence of the interpretation of “ethical consumption” on the “Fairtrade label” represented a territorialisation process internal to the movement, instrumental to the process of identity building outlined above, drawing boundaries between “insiders” (supporters of the Fairtrade label) and “outsiders” (not supporters or supporters of marginalised forms of Fair Trade, i.e. different labels or direct trade schemes).

*Monitoring dynamic evolution.* Considering territories from a processual and relational perspective (Brighenti 2014) gives visibility to the dynamic nature of territories of consumer activism: territories are not defined as “ethical” permanently but can always fall back on less ethical configurations of market relations. Within FTT networks, boundaries between ethical and non-ethical consumption spaces were continuously drawn and re-drawn through territorialisation, de-territorialisation, and re-territorialisation processes along diverse temporal and spatial coordinates. Campaigners would often argue that *new things are happening so fast now that we feel we may need to update quite often even though complete accuracy is probably never possible* (Campaigner, Yahoo group, 2004), “new things” being shops increasing or decreasing stock of Fairtrade products or delisting products, new outlets opening and older ones closing, and restaurants and café’ changing suppliers. Campaigners would state that

it’s hard work keeping a local directory up-to-date. As soon as you’ve finished a couple of places have closed down and somewhere new has opened up, while others have increased stock and would advocate for eternal vigilance. (Campaigner, Yahoo group, 2007)

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<sup>3</sup>World Fair Trade Organization, previously known as International Fair Trade Association (IFAT).

Additionally, larger chains would often update or change their Fairtrade policy, resulting in campaigners' need to continuously re-draw the boundaries of ethical territories within their cities, as shown in this example from the London campaign:

I know it's bad news for London boroughs and other big cities groups who have several branches of Costa, but I think they should definitely be taken out of the directories if they have stopped serving Fairtrade tea. The coffee – if it is still Fairtrade – is only available on request anyway, for an additional charge. The Ealing branch has never done anything to promote its Fairtrade credentials and has never supported the local group. (Campaigner, Yahoo group, 2007)

This exercise of “constant vigilance” showed campaigners' commitment to keep their Fairtrade maps accurate and up-to-date, but also their dynamic and processual understanding of territories of ethical consumption. Through tracing boundaries around places of ethical consumption and monitoring their evolution, activists were engaged in re-drawing digital maps for place-based local consumption, while re-orienting place-based local consumption through digital spaces.

### **Materialising digital activism**

Castilhos, Dolbec, and Veresiu (2017) described materialising as the property of places to physically instantiate elements of consumption, namely transforming symbolic and discursive markets elements into material ones. While mindful of this definition, here we refer to materialising in a broader sense, related to activists' use of materiality (i.e. the environment's characteristics, a place's properties) for social and political purposes (Chatzidakis, Maclaran, and Bradshaw 2012). FTT activists engaged in materialising through two main tactics: *transforming digital interactions into place-based connections* and *embodying digital support in local mobilisation*.

*Transforming digital interactions.* The immersive fieldnotes showed that, throughout all the years under examination, the Yahoo Group was key in establishing relationships both among campaigners and between local groups and the Fairtrade Foundation. During the emergence of the movement, the Fairtrade Foundation used the online forum to create a database of active Fairtrade Towns groups and to establish place-based connections between local and regional actors. In 2003, when the Foundation hired Bruce Crowther, the founder of the campaign, as FTT Coordinator, it was through the online forum that local groups could request his support to ignite local mobilisation. Interestingly, the support provided was a combination of digital and physical interactions, comprising ongoing online dialogue and personal visits to the groups. This shows that activists made use of the materiality of the Yahoo group, i.e. the properties of the digital space to be conducive of relations among geographically distant subjects, enhance communication, and sharply reduce the costs of mobilisation (Earl and Kimport 2011), to establish connections at the local level in their communities and networks.

The Foundation also used the online group to transform digital interactions into localised connections based on expertise. Monitoring the online discussions, the Foundation activated close relationships for knowledge exchange with key campaigners who acquired a prominent role as “experts” within the digital space, as exemplified by the following post by the Foundation's campaign officer:

Dear David, I was wondering whether you were considering attending either of our Campaign Days? We are planning a workshop on food miles, which will be run by John, who has been doing some work for the Foundation on this issue. He is interested to know whether you will be going after the interesting debate that went on on the Fairtrade Towns Yahoo Group a while ago. He would be interested in getting in touch with you to discuss this. (Campaign officer, 2006)

Connecting digital and physical exchanges, regional campaign days constituted not only learning events but also opportunities to foster localised expertise-based connections born in digital spaces. While the digital space afforded the development of a collective sense of belonging and identity, the

physical meetings in local communities promoted coalescence of the movement and the reinforcement of the social bonds developed online. Activists thus harnessed the materiality of the digital space to translate digital ties into place-based connections.

A further example of a place-based connection established through online networks is the relationship between Bristol municipality and Fairtrade activists, which in 2007 translated into the elaboration of a Fairtrade tourism policy. The online group provided the space where the coordinator of the Bristol Fairtrade group virtually met with the Keswick Fairtrade coordinator. Keswick is a market town in the touristic area of Lake District, and the local Fairtrade campaign successfully worked with the Lake District Tourist Board to promote Fairtrade in the area. The online connection resulted in Bristol adopting several of the strategies developed by the Keswick group and setting up a local Fairtrade policy. This included partnering the Fairtrade campaign with Destination Bristol, the organisation responsible for promoting tourism in Bristol, which started to actively promote Fairtrade throughout the city by including the Fairtrade Mark on publicity, publicising local Fairtrade Fortnight events, and promoting Bristol to visitors as a Fairtrade City.

*Embodying digital support.* This tactic was employed mostly in recent campaigns, which relied on a combination of online petitions hosted on the platform Change.org and traditional mobilisation tactics, exemplified in the recent examples of the campaigns targeting Sainsbury's and Nestlé's decisions to withdraw from the Fairtrade certification. Sainsbury's is the largest Fairtrade retailer in the UK. In May 2017, Sainsbury's announced their decision to abandon the Fairtrade certification to start a pilot project of Fairly Traded tea. To protest Sainsbury's decision, campaigners combined digital and place-based action, using the support gathered through the online petition as a tool to engage in conversations with managers of local retailer branches. Starting local conversations based on the support achieved online was considered to be a way to influence the retailer's decision on the national level:

I've been in touch on behalf of the group with a local Sainsbury's store, I have spoken to the managers [...] I think in this case it was very valuable because I think that at Sainsbury's are concerned when local shoppers express disapproval of what they do. [...] and in fact, the last time I wrote personally to a local Sainsbury's manager, the reply came from head office, so I know that went directly to head office. So I think that's something important that we can do. (North West representative, interview)

This tactic was even more visible in the campaign to challenge Nestlé's decision to de-certify KitKat bars in July 2020. The campaign materialised digital exchanges into physical collective action. Campaigners adopted several e-tactics, such as the promotion of an online petition, the employment of the hashtag #IStandWithFarmers and #KeepKitKatFairtrade, and the circulation of online posters and graphics. The online petition was particularly successful, as illustrated by this quote from the main instigator:

I am very grateful for the 285,000 'clicktivists' who signed my petition because I wouldn't have got anywhere without that. There was no way that I was going to be able to stand anywhere and get 285,000 people sign a piece of paper. And so to be able to get that level of engagement and those numbers, that's the only reason that we managed to do anything at all for the farmers. (Yorkshire representative, interview)

These e-tactics were combined with a day of local mobilisation in October 2020, when Fairtrade Yorkshire campaigners physically handed over the virtually signed petition to the Nestlé Confectionery Headquarters in York. The day of mobilisation poignantly materialised digital activism into local activism, with Yorkshire based campaigners visiting Nestlé's headquarters in York to give visibility to the signatures collected on the online platform Change.org and materialise them into campaigners' voices and collective action on the local level (Figure 1).

Some tension was generated by different understandings of its potential geographical scope between the Fairtrade Foundation's and local campaigners' approaches. On one side, the Foundation aimed at localise the campaign around Fairtrade Yorkshire, where the campaign started, through supportive local MPs with constituencies in the area and media press publicity in the region; on the other, Yorkshire campaigners aimed to globalise the campaign through digital



**Figure 1.** Campaigners hand signed petition to Nestlé Headquarters in York, October 2020. Source: Fairtrade Yorkshire, Danny Lawson/PA Wire. Used with permission.

means, expanding the scope to the campaign not only to the local area but to global consumers worldwide. These interplays were negotiated in an understanding of global and local activism as deeply interconnected:

I wanted it to be global really, and it was, it did end up being global [...] and so there was a bit of tension really, because they sort, the Fairtrade Foundation press office, wanted it to be very Yorkshire based. [...] I knew that the campaign itself needed to be global but taking the local focus. Actually the people's jobs in this factory depend on the farmers and workers in the majority world and these people growing the cocoa and the inter-connectedness of people. So the local economy isn't that different from the global economy because they're dependent on each other. And so the focus on the Nestlé factory in York. (Yorkshire representative, interview)

The Nestlé campaign represented an innovative and successful mode of action blending digital and local action. Campaigners harnessed support and legitimacy generated through digital activism and materialised them into place-based activism, thus transforming online actions into embodied and material experiences of mobilisation. They appropriated digital spaces for campaigning purposes, and used digital connections to scale up local mobilisation: in this way, activists leveraged both synergistic affordances of physical and digital spaces, i.e. scalability and reproducibility (Hoelscher and Chatzidakis 2020).

### Theorising hybrid consumer activism

This paper's aim was to understand how digital consumer activism interacts with place-based consumer activism. In our findings, we showed how digital and place-based consumer activism intersect through spatialised tactics and illustrated how activists mobilised these tactics across digital and physical spaces. We thus build on the empirical findings to argue that digital and place-based consumer activism can interact in ways that generate a hybrid form of consumer activism. We developed here three theoretical propositions inherent to hybrid consumer activism (see also Table 3).

*In hybrid consumer activism, the processes of cultivating belonging and negotiating a collective identity happen through an engagement with physical and digital "places."* This evokes what Hoelscher and Chatzidakis (2020) named "polytopic place-making," namely the transformation of an online space into a "place" to which activists attach emotions, memories, and a sense of community. This significantly contributes to previous literature on FTT and consumer movements. Literature on FTT describes how processes of negotiation of collective identity and coalescence of narratives happen in place-based and local physical meetings (i.e. Shawki 2015; Peattie and Samuel 2018; Samuel, Peattie, and Herman 2020). This is mirrored by broader literature on consumer movements, which emphasise the place-based nature of collective identity (Moraes, Szmigin, and Carrigan 2010; Weijs, Martin, and Arnould 2018; Gollnhöfer, Weijs, and Schouten 2019; Birtalan et al. 2021; Forno and Weiner 2020). Our paper contributes to these approaches showing that the processes of negotiation of collective identity and cultivating belonging of place-based consumer movements can take place also to a great extent online, into digital "places" that acquire meaningful



**Table 3.** Consumer activism: place-based, digital, and hybrid.

Tactic	Place-based	Digital	Hybrid
<i>Cultivating belonging and negotiating collective identity</i>	Collective identity is place-based and grounded in local communities and networks (i.e. Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018; Gollnhofer, Weijo, and Schouten 2019)	Collective identity is weak (Eli et al. 2016; Yu 2021) disperse (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), or absent (Kristofferson, White, and Peloza 2014)	Activists display belonging to their local communities and to the digital space; collective identity negotiated in digital 'places' in turn informs local networks, resulting in 'polytopic engagement' (Hoelscher and Chatzidakis 2020)
<i>Drawing boundaries around ethical spaces and monitoring their evolution</i>	Boundaries are collective and embodied in physical spaces, i.e. the local festival, the neighbourhood, the agora (i.e. Chatzidakis, Maclaran, and Bradshaw 2012; Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018; Yannopoulou et al. 2019)	Boundaries are digital, disembodied and practiced individually, i.e. mobile applications for ethical consumption (i.e. Eli et al. 2016; Fuentes and Sörum 2019).	Boundaries are negotiated collectively both in physical spaces (i.e. local shops) and in digital spaces (i.e. online directories); localised action is instrumental to digital action, which is in turn geared towards orienting consumption in local places
<i>Transforming and embodying digital interactions</i>	Place-based connections generate strong ties, woven into collective identity and social bonding (i.e. Moraes, Szmigin, and Carrigan 2010; Forno and Weiner 2020)	Digital interactions represent weak ties, geared mainly towards information sharing (i.e. Page 2017; Khan and Richards 2021)	Activists form hybrid digital ties, which are able to create and reinforce individual commitment and collective identity, as strong ties, while remaining fluid and disperse, as weak ties (Parigi and Gong 2014)

affective and symbolic features. While the processes of formation and development of collective identity in online communities have already been developed extensively in the literature on online communities (see Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Santos, Coelho, and Rita 2021; Bowden and Mirzaei 2021), what is novel here is the extent to which these digital processes can be observed in a movement strongly rooted in place like Fairtrade Towns, which characterises the hybrid nature of this type consumer activism. We thus argue that it is important to take into account both digital *and* place-based interactions through netnographic or appropriate digital methods in order to construct a full picture of contemporary consumer activism's identities and narratives.

*Hybrid consumer activism draws intangible boundaries around ethical consumption both in physical and digital spaces, through an interplay of localised and digital collective action.* In our data, activists' localised action (i.e. visiting local shops to ask whether they served Fairtrade products) was instrumental to digital action (i.e. digital construction of maps and directories), in turn geared towards orienting consumption in local places and shops. A relational and mobility approach to places (Lucarelli and Giovanardi 2019), shifts the focus from static spatial relationships to the unfolding and processual creation of associations of places and market relations. This approach allowed us to cast new light on the interplay between place-based and digital activism. Traditional sociological approaches draw an opposition between private and public spheres: cities are conceptualised as public domains, territorialised through common identities and social expectations, while the private sphere is the realm of individual actions, a deterritorialised reign of individual freedom (Brighenti 2014). Hybrid consumer activism has the potential to break this dichotomy, on one side, redefining private consumption as a public affair, thus territorialising private consumption into a public domain of social life (see Parigi and Gong 2014); on the other, transforming the spaces of the cities into "ethical territories" characterised by private affectivities, political meanings and identity projects (see also Lekakis 2013) through localised and digital collective action. This questions the underlying assumptions of existing literature around the dichotomies of public/private and digital/place-based activism and highlights the potential of a relational and hybridity lens to cast new light on the kaleidoscopic forms of contemporary consumer activism.

*Hybrid consumer activism transforms digital support into local social capital and embodied mobilisation.* As noted by Chatzidakis, Maclaran, and Bradshaw (2012), space acts as a supportive environment for the creation of social capital. Here we considered the property of the digital space to act as environment conducive to the creation of social capital, which activists translated into local networks and mobilisation. We observed how activists leveraged the support received online through e-tactics (Earl and Kimport 2011) to acquire social legitimacy in local communities and to create embodied experiences of mobilisation at the local level. This strongly resonates with Parigi and Gong (2014)'s concept of digital ties, defined as hybrid ties between strong ties, i.e. the relationship that activists develop in traditional face-to-face interactions, and weak ties, namely online relationships to spread information – digital ties are hybrid because they have the ability to create and reinforce commitment, as strong ties, while remaining fluid and disperse, as weak ties (Parigi and Gong 2014).

It is important to stress that hybrid consumer activism is theoretically different from digitally-enabled consumer activism. The latter is a form of collective action that uses online platforms as means of communication and coordination for traditional forms of activism such as marches and protests aiming at transforming markets (Yannopoulou et al. 2019). Conversely, hybrid consumer activism aims at transforming consumption and markets through *both* digital and place-based activism and, importantly, entails movements between the two dimensions. In digitally-enabled movements, the emphasis is on how online platforms bring together people with similar aims and mindsets who could not have met otherwise, and how the online presence facilitates the creation of collective identity, engagement and trust (Castells 2012; Yannopoulou et al. 2019). In a way, the flow of communication and coordination seems to be unidirectional, with the online space facilitating recruitment, participation and mobilisation aimed at physical networks and events. Conversely, in this study, the practice of emplacing a digital space for the creation of a movement's collective identity and negotiated narratives, as well as the processes of re-territorializing ethical consumption online through digital directories, illustrate tactics of digital consumer activism that harness place-based networks to produce meaningful outcomes online. The exchanges between online and physical spheres are thus permeable and multi-directional. Adopting a relational ontology and hybridity lens allowed us to question the perceived dichotomy between digital and place-based activism to show how tactics can emerge from both realms, migrate into both realms following multiple directions and patterns, produce meaningful effects into both realms, and generate affectivities, embodied materialities, emotions and communities in both realms.

## Conclusions

This paper offers two main theoretical contributions. First, it draws attention to the necessity of taking into account placed and spatialised dimensions when analysing digital consumer activism and outlines spatialised tactics of digital consumer activism and their definitional components. Imagining digital consumer activism as disconnected “by default” from local communities misses the opportunity to understand the increasingly important connections between ethical consumption communities online and in local spaces (Parigi and Gong 2014; Hoelscher and Chatzidakis 2020). We thus argued that the dynamic interplay between place-based and digital action represents an opportunity to rethink digital consumer activism as “placed.” Additionally, reflecting on these spatialised tactics and the interplay with place-based activism, this paper developed theoretical propositions inherent to hybrid consumer activism. Previous scholarship hinted at the “hybrid” nature of digital activism (Parigi and Gong 2014, 237; Hoelscher and Chatzidakis 2020, 294) but did not fully unpack this conceptualisation. We believe this concept has the potential to question the dichotomy that sees the digital and the traditional sphere of activism as separate, thus allowing us to rethink consumer activism along the Mobius strip of market spatiality, a theoretical device that emphasises connections and continuities (Coffin and Chatzidakis 2021) between digital and place-based relations.

This study presents some limitations, which translate into opportunities for future research. First, our study is focused on a particular form of online interaction, such as forums and Yahoo Groups. While these represent important collective memories of online movements, there is a need to empirically test the propositions developed here in the context of social media, which are today “a training ground that allows people to become activists” (Kozinets and Jenkins 2021, 14). Second, future studies will need to consider the central theme of the digital divide and the power dimensions involved in digital consumer activism. While this study highlighted the potential of interlinking digital and place-based activism, this cannot be thought of as a panacea to support movements organising for social justice, as the internet and social media often reproduce the power relationships in which they are embedded (Graham and Haarstad 2014). Future research is then needed to explore how digital consumer activism can overcome issues of access in infrastructure, language, and digital literacy. Lastly, we identified FTT activism as hybrid and stressed the role of belonging, collective identity, boundaries drawing and ties both in placed and digital spaces. However, this paper is based on a specific case with peculiar characteristics, i.e. the placed nature of activism rooted in local communities. This represents one model of hybrid consumer activism that cannot be necessarily generalised to more translocal and ephemeral forms of consumer activism, such as those linked to global fights against social inequalities (i.e Fashion Revolution; Labour Behind the Label). More research is needed to understand whether, how, and to what extent the dimensions identified here apply to transnational forms of consumer movements, with varying degrees of localised and digital presence.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Dr Roberta Discetti* is a Lecturer in Organisation Studies at Bournemouth University.

*Dr Matthew Anderson* is a Senior Lecturer in Business Ethics at Portsmouth University.

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