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Political consumerism, young citizens and the Internet

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Abstract
Evidence suggests that purchasing products for ethical or political reasons—also known as political consumerism—may be gaining in importance. With (young) people’s declining voting rates and a general disinterest in political institutions, scholars and political elites alike are speculating on the evolution of citizenship. Research shows that citizens in countries like the UK see issue and life-style-based politics as increasingly relevant. These developments point to an interest in understanding political consumerism and its relationship to citizenship. Through analysis of a survey conducted among 1215 respondents in the UK, this article presents evidence in particular for youth’s notable presence online and their affinity for a particular strain of political consumerism identified as socially conscious consumption. It explores the relationship between this consumption and online and offline political participation. It discusses the potential for political consumerism to play a larger role in traditional political realms and particularly through the utilization of technology.

Keywords
internet, online communication, political communication, political consumerism, survey, young people

Introduction
Historically, democratic citizenship has been based on participation in traditional politics such as voting or being knowledgeable about relevant issues (Marshall, 1950). But with
such engagement in decline, there is a perception of political apathy, particularly among young citizens. Youth are in the process of developing enduring notions of citizenship, so this lack of engagement with democratic politics may be cause for concern (Livingstone, 2002; Miller and Shanks, 1996).

But new ideas about citizenship are emerging. For example, ‘elite-challenging forms of participation are becoming more widespread’ (Inglehart, 1997: 236) and redefining what is political may help to identify new forms of engagement and participation (Dahlgren, 2003). This ‘uncivic’ culture is ‘a society characterized by the rise of networks, issue associations, and lifestyle coalitions’ (Bennett, 1998: 745). In this environment the idea that consumption can be political is growing in relevance. Some perceive individuals consuming goods as citizens and point to the political nature of certain products (Roddick, 2001; Scammell, 2000; Stolle et al., 2005; Ward, 2008).

At the same time, citizenship is evolving, and new conceptualizations focus on ‘new’ and ‘single issue’ politics. Giddens (1991) looked to ‘lifestyle’ politics: When local and global issues collide, lifestyle choices become increasingly important as individuals find themselves faced with more and more options that can be deemed political. There is evidence of such a transformation in the British context. Alderman saw the UK as having:

... become two nations politically: on the one hand, that of two parties which continue to monopolize power at the parliamentary and governmental level and, on the other, that of the single issue groups and protest movements, whose membership has long since outstripped the active grassroots support the parties can call upon (1999: 128).

Bennett described this evolution as ‘a more typical but less theorized citizen experience in the late modern period’ (2003b: 138). These conceptions see citizens taking matters into their own hands rather than waiting for official government bodies to take action for them. Political consumerism, a relevant example of these society-wide changes, has received citizen attention before (think Ralph Nader’s Modern Consumer Movement). However, the current political climate is driven by a number of new factors. For example, technology has accelerated the reach and speed of communication. Globalization has also greatly impacted the ways we consume and how we think about consumption, particularly in relation to the role of corporations: ‘Globalization makes corporate power explicit ... by drawing attention to their capacity to escape state regulation, they inadvertently highlight their own responsibility for good or ill ... in the process, they politicize consumption’ (Scammell, 2000: 353). These changes have made products a growing part of citizens’ lives. The idea of passive consumption is being replaced with ‘prosumers’, individuals who demand a say in what is sold to them and how it is marketed (Salzman, 2000). Salzman notes that a rise in available online information provides consumers with more knowledge and also more tools to request explanations of why products are meaningful. He urges advertising professionals to be aware of this shift in consumer demand. Producers are aware of this changing relationship with consumers, and are demonstrating an active appeal to consumers’ demands for more ethical products (Marsden et al., 2000).

Such a shift in consumption behavior can also be attributed to citizen-consumers, those that operate within ‘a model of citizenship, with some of the classical republican
dimensions of civic duty, public-spiritedness, and self-education is an increasingly apt description of consumer behavior’ (Scammell, 2000: 352). Scammell argues that consumers—if they are socially conscious and think of themselves as citizens when making purchasing decisions—are no longer only active within a model of consumerism. So a citizen-consumer is also a smart shopper. She is aware of the brands that she wears and what they stand for, and she exercises her spending power in a socially responsible way. Consequently, as corporations continue to leave behind the regulation of the nation state, the citizen-consumer will increasingly become an important counterbalance. This phenomenon can generally be described as political consumerism, ‘Consumer choice of producers and products based on political or ethical considerations, or both’ (Micheletti et al., 2003).

In order to examine changing perceptions of citizenship and particularly the prevalence of political consumerism, this article investigates the relationship between political consumerism—and in particular, a strain of political consumerism termed socially conscious consumption—and political participation by examining data from an online survey of young UK web users. Before detailing the methodology the topic is more precisely located within a conceptual framework.

Changes in political communication

**New media and political participation.** If citizenship is being redefined, then shifts may also be present in the ways in which the political is communicated. A great deal of scholarly work has connected this citizen evolution to new communication technologies. Research sees new media as either potentially addressing perceived disengagement and reviving traditional citizenship practices, or enhancing new forms of citizenship. To expand, the first claim argues that youth are already active and knowledgeable online so encouraging them to engage with political institutions via the internet may transfer to increased rates of traditional participation (Ward et al., 2003) by, for example, allowing voter registration online or providing extensive political party information on a website. Others however claim that young people are turning away from traditional politics, thus altering the potential relations that political elites have with young citizens. At the same time, youth are active online in a number of different realms. Research has examined how young people use the internet, and show that they are confident about seeking information online (Rainie and Horrigan, 2005) and also forming networks around issues of importance (Smith et al., 2005). Coleman and Rowe (2005) demonstrate that youth do engage with public affairs, though this engagement takes place away from traditional institutions. Others argue that online political participation is akin to its offline counterpart, for example by comparing participation in an offline electoral meeting and an online forum (Livingstone et al., 2005). With such potential for online media to engage citizens in non-conventional ways, a possibility opens up for internet use to reflect a behavior that may also be taking place offline: that is, political consumerism.

**Typologising political consumerism.** Political consumerism represents a shift in focus from the government to the market. This results in a change in the balance of power between producer and consumer, but also between the citizen and the government.
Scammell said, ‘Citizenship is not dead, but found in new places … the site of citizens’ political involvement is moving from the production side of the economy to the consumption side’ (2000: 351). She argued that realms traditionally considered to be the property of the consumer are now becoming infused with more citizen characteristics (see also Dahlgren, 2003). Scammell cited environmental groups, consumer watchdogs and action groups as prime examples of this shift.

Given its rich history, the study of political consumerism has resulted in a variety of definitions. Some regard political consumerism as incorporating both individual and collective acts (Micheletti et al., 2003) while others distinguish between political and non-political consumption, arguing that contemporary political consumerism goes beyond boycott action in that it is more of a routine pattern of behavior that also includes ‘buy-cotting’, or deliberately choosing certain products (Andersen & Tobiasen, 2004). Due to the numerous ways of viewing this concept, it is necessary to develop a typology that draws on current theoretical and empirical work (see also Ward, 2010).

A socially conscious consumer (SCC) can be defined as ‘a consumer who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change’ (Webster, 1975: 188). She/he makes an effort to purchase products that are fair trade, made from recycled products, or are not tested on animals. This consumer feels empowered by her purchasing decisions, perhaps because she views her consumption as political and the act of a ‘cool citizen’, one who enjoys ‘the choice and pleasures of consumer society but [does] not want to support the bully over the little guy’ (Scammell, 2000: 353). Perhaps certain brands are a large part of her daily life so she needs to be more involved in the product’s image because it is a part of her own identity. She sees the simple action of purchasing a particular product—and thus purchasing what that good stands for—as a political act.

The SCC mainly restricts the exercise of political consumerism to her wallet. But does such consumption really relate to citizenship? Bennett said that even for those citizens who are not interested or even actively avoid politics, ‘their fashion statements and product choices may matter in social image terms’ (2003a: 6). But is the SCC truly acting as an aware, informed citizen simply by purchasing products that are marketed as socially conscious? Or is she merely satisfying an internal, ‘feel good’ mechanism set off by marketing opportunities that intend to do just that?

Distinguishing the motivation behind purchasing products can be difficult, and has been tackled recently in the literature. For example, one study differentiated between socially conscious consumption and status-oriented consumption (Keum et al., 2004). Socially conscious consumption was operationalized with green consumption and cause-related consumption. Status-oriented consumption was defined as focusing on individual needs (rather than a concern for the collective good) and was operationalized by querying fashion, luxury travel, and gourmet food purchases. But what about a luxury travel package that is advertised as environmentally friendly, such as eco-tourism? Given that our society is so infused with (in particular corporate) messages about socially conscious consumption, it can be difficult to distinguish the internal motivations for purchasing. As the trend of socially conscious consumption grows so does its relevance to the evolving political world. If civic-political organizations choose to use such a strategy, then it is
also likely that they will attempt to tie such purchasing behavior to more political behaviors, such as voting or protesting.

In contrast, the critical citizen consumer (CCC) acts as a SCC when purchasing products marketed, for example, as fair trade or biological. But she goes beyond consumption behavior and embraces a more political identity, taking her spending habits one step further by, for example, participating in organizations that are active in holding governments and corporations accountable to their claims. Where the SCC educates herself primarily to inform purchasing, CCCs use information to additionally act and become involved. Therefore, a CCC monitors corporate action and joins likeminded others intent on keeping global giants in check. As Bennett (2003a) notes, the younger generation that is abandoning traditional politics is forming a global citizen movement, intent on holding various organizations accountable or spreading a relevant message.

CCCs are active in forming networks and associations around political consumerism issues from the bottom up, and participating in non-conventional organizations and also sometimes more conventional organizations that embrace issue campaigns. Often such initiatives encourage individual behavior change but also target corporate practices.

Past research has found that political consumers are resourceful, highly educated and affluent, and show high rates of political interest and participation (Stolle & Micheletti, 2005). Others, focusing on a student sample, show that those turning most often to political consumerism demonstrate more trust in fellow citizens and have high rates of political efficacy (Stolle et al., 2005). Despite these findings, the issue of political consumerism is rarely the focus of attention in studies examining civic or political engagement. As some point out, ‘… the claim that political consumerism has become part of the political participation repertoire of western populations requires systematic evidence that an individual’s choice of purchases can be rightfully seen as a politically motivated and consistent form of behavior’ (Stolle et al., 2005: 249).

Research question and method

This article concentrates on these above-described issues via analysis of an online survey. The focus is exemplified in the following exploratory research question:

Who are political consumers, and how does political consumerism relate to more traditional forms of political participation? This question can be assessed by looking at two elements: First, how prevalent political consumerism is among young people and second, how this consumerism can be seen in relation to more traditional forms of participation. Through analysis of survey data, we examine whether young people are engaged in various forms of political participation, both online and offline, and also examine self-reported rates of socially conscious consumption. Next, we are interested in examining the role that political consumerism (specifically, reported levels of what is termed socially conscious consumption) plays in young people’s political participation. These relationships will be explored through regression analysis, which provides an analysis of how the independent variable (in this case, socially conscious consumption) is related to dependent variables (e.g., various forms of political participation).

The research question is addressed via analysis of an online survey. Web-based surveys ‘offer significant advantages in terms of reach, speed, and economy’ (Mann & Stewart,
As long as browsers are compatible, respondents see an identical survey and ease of completion is facilitated through the use of a computer interface. Data collection and management is also consistent and smooths the process of analysis. Web surveys are often used to reach internet-savvy individuals and also youth in particular (Beebe et al., 1997). Surveys conducted via the internet also have a number of shortcomings, particularly in relation to sampling issues. It has been argued that online surveys are best used when focusing on non-probability samples, given the difficulty of obtaining a random sample of participants online (van Selm & Jankowski, 2006).

The survey was conducted via a European-wide project called CivicWeb, a project that focuses on the production and the nature and characteristics of civic and political websites and the uses and interpretations of these sites by young people. The survey targeted young people in each country participating in the project, including Sweden, the Netherlands, Hungary, Spain, Slovenia and Turkey as well as the United Kingdom. The current research focuses on the survey conducted in the UK, which yielded a total of 1215 respondents. Respondents who started but did not complete the survey were excluded from further analyses.

MTV UK agreed to place the survey banner on its website. The link to the survey URL was active on MTV UK’s competitions page for three weeks (October 7 to October 28, 2007). MTV requested that the banner was not placed on any other website in the UK. The survey link was also announced to young people in the context of both university lectures and a number of groups for underprivileged youth. Potential respondents were offered the chance to win an iPod in exchange for their (one-time) participation.

A number of questions were included on the CivicWeb survey in relation to political consumerism. These questions were formulated through consultation with a number of sources, including 2000 DDB Life Style Study, CSR/MORI, and CIRCLE research funded by Pew Charity Trusts. Questions were either taken directly from these surveys or were adapted to the specific needs and format of the CivicWeb survey.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the survey did not utilize a random sample of participants. Due to the self-selective nature of respondents, it is statistically impossible to generalize about the political nature of young people in the UK. This methodological weakness has not gone unnoticed, however, and we have refrained from formulating hypotheses, instead presenting analysis, findings and conclusions in an exploratory manner.

Demographics and internet use. The reported mean age of survey respondents was 21.84. Females made up 64.4 percent of all respondents; 20.6 percent belong to a minority ethnic group; 79.3 percent were born in the UK. In comparison to the latest UK census data (collected in April 2001), the sample here is skewed: CivicWeb survey respondents are over representative of females in comparison to the general population. Further, respondents here are much more ethnically diverse than census data reports (although generally, women outnumber men across a variety of ethnic backgrounds).

Respondents demonstrated regular internet use. With the average age of first use at 14.49, 84.8 percent reported accessing it most ‘at home’. Internet use was quite prevalent: 55.5 percent used the internet seven days a week on average and 84 percent were online between five and seven days per week. When going online, 49.2 percent of the respondents reported using the internet for either ‘1-2 hours’ or ‘2-3 hours’ on average.
These findings are comparable with recent research on internet use by children and young people. The UK Children Go Online project (Livingstone & Bober, 2005) reported slightly lower percentages (i.e., 75% of participants had internet at home as opposed to 84.8% in the current survey; 41% were daily internet users, in comparison to 55.5% in the current survey) though this is in line with increasing rates of internet penetration in the UK (Dutton & Helsper, 2007). However, it should also be noted that the CivicWeb survey was accessible from the MTV UK website and not available offline; this feasibly could result in a more tech-savvy, higher access group completing the survey.

**Results**

**Determining constructs of political participation.** An exploratory factor analysis was used in order to conceptualize political consumerism and also define the dependent variables used in later analysis. This is primarily necessary in order to determine if socially conscious consumers (SCCs) can indeed be distinguished from critical citizen-consumers (CCCs) as argued earlier. Factor analysis allows us to determine the internal reliability of a measure, or in other words, say with more confidence which types of participation emerge as distinct variables. On a five-point scale ranging from never to always, survey respondents were asked to rate how often they participated in a variety of political activities, including questions that explicitly tapped political consumerism.

A factor analysis (Principle Component Analysis with Varimax rotation) revealed four distinguishable factors. These included a measure of offline political participation, online participation, offline civic participation, and socially conscious consumption, termed as such because it contained only items related to purchasing behavior (the survey question querying boycotting behavior as political participation did not adequately load on any factor).

The four factors (eigenvalues 3.02, 2.90, 2.67 and 2.40, explained variance 17.76, 17.06, 15.71, and 14.14 %) were used to form scales. **Offline political participation** (M=1.25, SD=.56, alpha=.81) was measured using four items. These included questions on a five-point scale ranging from never to always: In the last 12 months, have you … (1) called or sent a letter to a politician or a government official; (2) organized/participated in a demonstration, strike or protest; (3) worked for a political party; and (4) given out leaflets about a social or political issue.

**Online participation** (M=1.63, SD=.73, alpha=.82) was measured using five items. These included questions on a five-point scale ranging from never to always: In the last 12 months, have you … (1) forwarded an email about social or political problems; (2) signed a petition on the internet; (3) participated in online discussion platforms about social or political problems; (4) sent an email to a political or a government official; and (5) worked on a website/page, on which you state your opinion on social and political problems.

**Offline civic participation** (M=1.71, SD=.88, alpha=.78) was measured using four items: In the last 12 months, have you … (1) worked for a voluntary or charitable organization; (2) visited a public meeting or attending an event in your local area; (3) worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker; and (4) spoken at a student council.
According to the exploratory factor analysis, online and offline participation emerged as different constructs of political action. Additionally, offline political participation and offline civic participation represented different facets of political participation. In other words, this analysis confirms a distinction between those individuals that participate in either civic or political action, as well as those that participate either online or offline. Further, and of keen interest here, *socially conscious consumption* was a separate construct from other forms of political participation. It is difficult to speculate whether it is a predictor of more traditional political participation or simply a distinctive form of participation in its own right, though later analysis will attempt to shed light on this issue.

As the key independent variable ($M=3.36$, $SD=.97$, alpha=.85) for the forthcoming regression analysis, socially conscious consumption consisted of three items measured on a five-point scale: (1) I try to buy products that use recycled packaging; (2) I try to buy products that don’t harm animals or the environment; and (3) I try to buy from companies that support charitable causes. Boycotting behavior (i.e., abstaining from purchasing certain products based on social or political reasons) did not load with this construct, suggesting that purchasing products is indeed distinctive from boycotting products, providing preliminary support for a distinction between SCCs and CCCs.

The relationship between socially conscious consumption and political participation. Regression analysis helps to better understand how socially conscious consumption (here, as the primary independent variable) fits with online participation as well as offline political participation and offline civic participation. Also included as independent variables are social trust, measured using three items (alpha=.72, $M=3.10$, $SD=.89$), and attitudes towards civic participation, measured using seven items (alpha=.86, $M=3.70$, $SD=.81$). These variables are included in the analysis based on their relevance to past research. For example, some authors find that individuals rated high in political consumerism demonstrated less trust in political institutions, more trust in fellow citizens and had high rates of political self-efficacy (Stolle et al., 2005).

Before reporting results from the regression analysis, it is first interesting to examine descriptive aspects of SCCs. In order to do this, the socially conscious consumption scale was divided at the mean (3.36) and respondents were classified as ‘low’ (44.1%) or ‘high’ (55.9%) SCCs. Thus, over half of the survey respondents report being quite involved in purchasing socially conscious products. A t-test was used to test for significant differences between each level (see Table 1). There was a significant difference between gender, age, and reported levels of confidence using the internet. Females were more likely to score high in socially conscious consumption than males. This gender difference has been established elsewhere, both in international research and findings particular to Sweden (e.g., Ferrer-Fons, 2004; Petersson et al., 1998; Stolle & Hooghe, 2003). High SCCs were on average slightly older ($M=22.47$) than low SCCs ($M=21.22$), though this difference is minimal. Those high in SCC also report higher levels of confidence in using the internet for a number of tasks.

Turning to elements more specific to political consumerism, there was a significant difference between those low and high in socially conscious consumption when it came to frequency of boycotting. Boycotting as a form of political participation is on the increase (Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 2002) as is ‘buycotting’ (purchasing specific products for social or political reasons), which conceptually matches the definition of socially conscious consumption.
conscious consumption found here. Although boycotting was a less commonly utilized form of participation as reported in this survey, high scoring SCCs reported boycotting for social or political reasons more often than low scoring SCCs. The same is true for searching out (online) information about corporations and social responsibility: High SCCs were more likely to visit corporate websites to read about their ethical policies as well as visit websites more critical towards corporate policy. Such a finding also demonstrates support for a step-wise process between SCCs and CCCs.

Returning to the regression analysis (see Table 2), confidence using the internet was measured using five items (alpha=.83, M=3.84, SD=.81). Control variables comprise age (mean=21.84, SD=8.6), gender (64.4% female), a measure of economic independence (two items, alpha=.85, M=3.24, SD=1.3), and education in years (M=11, SD=4.7). Table 2 shows the relationship between socially conscious consumption and three forms of participation (online, offline political, and offline civic participation), and demonstrates a positive and significant relationship between socially conscious consumption and online participation as well as visit websites more critical towards corporate policy. However, this relationship disappears with offline civic participation.

Turning to other independent variables in the model, reported confidence in using the internet was positively and significantly related to online participation and offline political

### Table 1. Who are Socially Conscious Consumers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low in SCC</th>
<th>High in SCC</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>51.2%**</td>
<td>48.8%**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40.2%**</td>
<td>59.8%**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total percentage of respondents</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>21.22**</td>
<td>22.47**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>10.89</td>
<td>11.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic independence</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social trust</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes civic participation</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence using internet</td>
<td>3.74*</td>
<td>3.96*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How interested are you in politics?</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...boycotted a product because you disagreed with the social or political values of the company that produces it?</td>
<td>1.34**</td>
<td>1.85**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...visited websites of corporations to learn more about their social responsibility?</td>
<td>1.47**</td>
<td>1.74**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...visited websites that pressure corporations to be more socially responsible?</td>
<td>1.35**</td>
<td>1.65**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Gender differences were calculated with the chi-square phi and Cramer’s V as test statistics. For each additional variable, a t-test compared the means of those labeled as low/high in SCC. For simplicity, we report only the mean scores of indexed variables.

*p<.01, **p<.001.
participation, but not offline civic participation. Social trust only had a significant relationship with online participation. Attitudes towards civic participation were significantly related to all forms of political participation, though this relationship was positive for online participation and offline civic participation and negative for offline political participation.

As for the control variables, age and economic independence were negatively and significantly related to offline civic participation (i.e., younger respondents were more likely to engage offline in civic participation, and those reporting more economic independence were more likely to participate in offline civic participation, due to reverse coding). Other variables including gender, education and economic independence were non-significant for all models.

**Conclusion**

The general area of inquiry addressed in this article explores the prevalence of political consumerism and the relationship between this consumption and other forms of political participation. Survey results, though exploratory, demonstrate that unlike past research has speculated (Stolle et al., 2005), respondents do differentiate between boycotting and buycotting and, with an enthusiasm for ethical spending, are quite active as SCCs (55.9%...
of all respondents scored high in socially conscious consumption). Socially conscious consumption is a fairly widespread behavior, common among those slightly older and slightly more educated. Further, in order to better understand its origin, it was identified as behavior separate from other forms of political participation, thus suggesting that it can be seen as a move away from more enduring citizenship behaviors. Online and offline participation are also noted as distinguishable, and within offline participation, civic and political factors are uncovered.

A step-wise approach from mainly individual behavior as SCCs to the more often collective nature of CCCs reflects what youth also see as relevant: In the survey, for example, boycotting did not load with more consumption-related queries. An exploratory factor analysis additionally reveals that SCC is distinct from other types of more traditional, offline political participation. In order to better understand SCC’s relationship with political participation, and thus how youth view citizenship, regression analysis shows that SCC does have a significant positive influence on both online and offline civic participation, though it does not significantly influence offline political participation. We believe that this finding demonstrates that socially conscious consumption does indeed cause certain types of political participation, thus presenting fascinating possibilities for a future understanding of how individuals become more politically active citizens. In other words, certain types of purchasing behavior can now be tied to political behavior, thus providing a demonstrable connection between consumer and citizen arenas.

A number of findings can help to better understand the nature of political consumerism. First, survey respondents do differentiate between individualistic, consumer-related behavior and more traditional strains of participation (including boycotting); and second, those scoring high in SCC are more likely to be active in both online and offline participation in comparison to those scoring low. Although there may be an element of social desirability in answering questions about trying to buy certain types of products, those scoring high in SCC are also more likely to visit websites about corporate social responsibility, pointing to a more political behavioral element. Thus higher-scoring SCCs tend to more often participate in critical consumption and activism, providing an example of Inglehart’s (1997) elite-challenging forms of participation. This suggests that those keen to reach youth in such a manner may best do so through appeals to lifestyle changes and organizations can be encouraged to promote participation in such a manner. And though it is not yet clear why certain individuals take the next step, CCCs may be encouraged to protest against, for example, corporate and government targets.

Turning to the relationship between political consumerism and more traditional strains of political participation, a positive, significant relationship is found between socially conscious consumption and online participation as well as offline civic participation, but this relationship disappears with offline political participation. These results demonstrate that this ‘new’ form of political behavior does in fact influence political participation, and supports the argument that it is a distinctive path to citizenship worthy of further study. However, the fact that socially conscious consumption is not tied to offline political participation leads to a number of explanations. Perhaps as such consumption is tied to online and more civic forms of participation and it is playing its part in solidifying a move away from traditional means to citizenship. Conversely, as noted by Dahlgren,
civic can be ‘understood as a prerequisite for the (democratically) political’ (2003: 155) so perhaps it should instead claim its role as a stepping-stone toward more conventional political participation. At the same time, democracy may be less about political parties, voting and traditional political knowledge, and may be embracing new forms of citizenship such as political consumerism. This shift however does not replace old forms of participation or make political institutions irrelevant (Dahlgren, 2003). Future research must continue to identify connections between socially conscious consumption and democratic citizenship while remaining aware of the potential problems of equating citizenship with practices that are inherently capitalist (Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007).

A number of issues relevant to the survey should be noted, along with potential improvements to survey implementation in future research. The CivicWeb survey used a non-random sample of participants. The survey was conducted online (via the MTV UK website) and though this strategy yielded a high number of respondents, little can be concluded about the target population, as respondents were self-selective in nature. On a demographic level this resulted in an over-representation of females and ethnic minorities in comparison to UK census reports. It is possible that respondents were overwhelmingly non-political because they were regulars on MTV’s website, thus already demonstrating their preference for online entertainment rather than civic or political action. This is speculation, but reflects on the larger need to acknowledge that survey results should be regarded in the same manner as they were reported: as exploratory. The data delivered a good first look at young people’s political consumerism behavior in the UK, but in order to provide more inferentially sound results, future studies should utilize a random sample of participants to more accurately report on the civic-political nature of young people in the UK.

Beyond sampling concerns, the survey did not make available an in-depth portrait of what young people actually do online. Although the survey did supply a wide variety of (general) information about online practices of youth as well as their attitudes and behaviors towards civic participation, it neglected to probe how young people use websites. This issue is particularly relevant for those researchers interested in the connection between online activity and political consumerism. For example, Livingstone et al. (2005) were able to comment on different levels of engagement with online content, but this was not possible given the structure of the CivicWeb survey. Future research, perhaps also qualitatively-based, could more deeply explore actual practices online, in order to assemble more accurate insights for academics as well as youth organizations interested in pursuing such a strategy. Finally, given the broad scope of the survey, queries related to political consumerism were minimal. For example, the three survey questions that probed socially conscious consumption were focused on purchasing behavior and responses may have contained an element of social desirability. Future research can justify devoting more variables to studying such behavior, in particular to examine more closely the nature of the distinction between SCCs and CCCs. Additionally, survey questions can be worded more strongly in order to better probe the actual purchasing behavior of respondents.

Future research could address other shortcomings present in the current study. Focus groups with young people could help to better understand how young people perceive the concept of political consumerism, and how they tie this into their own civic and
political participation, both online and offline. The CivicWeb survey data utilized here is also available from other countries, so a comparative study is possible to determine the relationship between socially conscious consumption and participation across Europe. Finally, further research into the aims behind these websites is necessary to determine the explicit motives of web producers. Such empirical steps will help to illuminate as well as expand on the theoretical understanding necessary to fully grasp the changing nature of (young) citizen’s political participation.

Notes
2. For more information, see Keum et al., The Citizen-Consumer, which utilized the 2000 DDB Life Style Study; see http://www.csreurope.org/whatwedo/consumerattitudes_page408.aspx for CSR/MORI, and A. Andolina, S. Keeter, C. Zukin, and K. Jenkins, A Guide to the Index of Civic and Political Engagement for information on the CIRCLE research project (2003, retrieved from http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/IndexGuide.pdf)
3. These questions included three that queried ethical purchasing behavior (i.e., ‘buycotting’) and one that asked about boycotting for social or political reasons. The logic here was to see whether boycotting and boycotting are indeed elements of political consumerism (as argued in past research, see Stolle et al., 2005) as well as whether they are distinct from other forms of political participation.
4. A fifth item (‘In the last 12 months, have you sent an email to a political or government official?’) produced a double loading on offline political participation and online political participation. We chose to include this item only in the online factor for two reasons:
   (1) offline political participation already includes a similar question about calling or sending letters to politicians; and
   (2) the loading was higher for online participation (.653 versus .545).
5. Queries included:
   (1) Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?
   (2) Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they go the chance, or would they try to be fair?
   (3) Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves? All items were measured on a 5-point scale.
6. Respondents were asked: ‘To be a good citizen, how important would you say it is for a person to … ?’ Queries included the following:
   (1) support people who are worse of than themselves;
   (2) vote in elections;
   (3) always obey laws and regulations;
   (4) form their own opinion, independently of others;
   (5) be active in voluntary organizations;
   (6) be active in politics;
   (7) be informed about what is going on in the world. All items were measured on a 5-point scale.
7. Respondents were asked: ‘How confident do you feel when using the internet in regard to…?’ Queries included the following:
   (1) understanding terms related to internet hardware and software;
   (2) troubleshooting internet problems;
(3) using the internet to gather data;
(4) learning skills within a specific internet program;
(5) turning to an online discussion group for help. All items were measured on a 5-point scale.

References


