

# **Ethical shopping apps as market devices: Materialities, competences and moralities**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we examine ethical shopping apps as market devices. Focusing on three “ethical” apps available on the Swedish market, we examine the prescriptions built into these devices. The preliminary analysis carried out shows that the ethical apps examined all work to encourage and allow certain ethical/responsible consumer practices and subjectivities. They are designed to extend the consumption capabilities of the consumers that use them and shape their ways of seeing and thinking about ethical consumption.

*Key words: ethical consumption, digital consumption, market devices, practice*

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the role of ethical shopping apps in promoting and enabling forms of ethical/responsible consumption.

It is often argued that individuals increasingly are being urged to “do their bit” and to address a whole range of recent environmental, social, ethical and economic issues: climate change, unfair trade, peak oil, animal cruelty and other potential future detriments associated with consumption and product choice. However, being a responsible consumer is not an easy task. Research on ethical consumption underscores difficulties of consuming responsibly. Ethical consumption requires not only a strong commitment to environmental and social justice but also resources on part of the consumer (financial means and knowledge for example) and the opportunity to actually engage in ethical forms of consumption (Moisander 2007). Responsible consumers have to deal with a plethora of environmental and fair-trade labels (Hjalmarson et al. 2010, Pedersen and Neergaard 2006), be on the lookout for green washing (Peattie and Crane 2005), keep themselves informed of the latest environmental and social issues and deal with uncertainties (Connolly and Prothero 2008, Halkier 1999). In sum, being a responsible consumer is practically and psychologically challenging.

Against this background, a range of shopping apps intended to assist consumers in making ethical product choices have been launched. Some ethical shopping apps focus exclusively on environmental issues, others make social justice and fair trade their main issue. Regardless of the issues focused they are designed to work in similar ways. These apps are made to assist consumers in their choices and motivate them to be responsible consumers. How is, then, accomplished?

In this paper we examine ethical shopping apps as market devices (Callon et al. 2007). Taking a socio-material approach, drawing on the concepts of inscription/description/prescription (Akrich 2000) and focusing on three “ethical shopping apps” available on the Swedish market, we systematically examine the prescriptions built into these devices.

The preliminary analysis carried out shows that the apps examined all work to encourage and allow certain ethical consumer actions and subjectivities. They are designed to extend the capabilities of consumers but also shape our understanding of what it is to be an ethical consumer

### **Method and materials**

Methodologically, this paper builds on an on-going object ethnography focusing on understand how green shopping apps work. Focus in the study is on three apps: the Grön guide app, shopgun and the Swedish fairtrade app. The apps selected for study have different focus regarding sustainability issues and different organizations behind them. The apps also have different technical set up and thus are intended to work somewhat differently.

More specifically, the ethnographic study design comprises three types of data selection, each intended to produce a specific type of material:

- Interviews with “designers” of green apps
- Close reading/observation of the apps
- Focus group interviews with app-tester and app-users

At the time of writing we have carried out interviews with app designers and carried out detailed observations/reading of the ethical shopping apps themselves. The analysis that follows draws mainly on the observations carried out of the apps.

### **Ethical shopping apps at work**

As mentioned in the method section, the three apps studied are all different. The green guide app launched by Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (Naturskyddsföreningen) focuses predominantly on environmental issues. The Fairtrade app (Fairtrade Sverige) focuses on social justice/fairness issues. And finally, the Shopgun app, (Consumerator a third sector actor) provides environmental, social justice and health information regarding a multitude of products.

The apps are also different in regards to their technical design. The Green Guide app functions as a database containing useful information on consuming sustainably and how to make environmentally conscious decisions. Shopgun is mainly a scan the barcode app. The Fairtrade app is a combination of both database and scan the barcode app while at the same time also adding geo-localization functions.

In spite of these differences the apps are designed according to a similar logic. All three apps studied not only encourage consumers to act differently, they also enable them to do so. Through detailed analysis of the apps we have identified four main types of actions promoted and enabled:

### **Get informed!**

All three apps encourage and enable consumers to get informed. The apps work as interactive databases of information, which has been selected, and organized to be relevant to consumers in different situations and which are also continuously updated.

In the green guide, for example, consumers can *browse* through various green consumption themes – the home, food, children, travel, clothes, work and the garden – and learn the essentials of being a green consumer. These “green tips” – as they are called in the app – are intended to allow consumers to shift to a more sustainable lifestyle. Information is here seen as the basis of consumer change.

The shopgun app on the other hand does enable browsing but instead allows consumers to search for information regarding specific products. Consumer can type a product category and receive information about the plethora of environmental and social injustice issues connected to the production and consumption of this product as well as advice on greener and fairtrade alternatives.

The Fairtrade app is a combination. It contains a database that can be browsed by users but has also allows consumer to search the information in its database.

In various ways and by means of various technical features these three apps all encourage and enable to “get informed”. The ethical consumer they seem to both assume and prescribe is a knowledgeable consumer.

### **Scan the barcode!**

More than merely reading up on products and practices generally, the Shopgun and the Fairtrade apps also encourage and allow consumers to scan the barcode when shopping. According to the author/developer behind the Shopgun-app, a consumer equipped with a smartphone with their app installed can scan a barcode and access product facts and a consumer guide.

We show what’s behind the barcode and by doing so enable informed consumer choice. We hope that with time this will lead to more green products on the shelves, says Ola Thorsen, chair of the board of Consumentor. ([www.shopgun.se](http://www.shopgun.se))

Consumentor brings together the best consumer advisors within the fields of environment ethics and health with the aim of creating a searchable information system for ethical shopping. The app also makes use of a “traffic light logic” with red, yellow and green lights to help consumers chose better products while in-store.

Similarly, users of the Fairtrade app can scan products to gain information about products that have the fair trade certification.

These apps allow consumers to engage with products and commercial spaces in ways they cannot on their own. First, through the scan the barcode function information that is otherwise invisible to consumers is unpacked and made available. This function supposes and encourages an active consumer; eager to check the products they are considering purchasing. Second, these apps do more than open up the “world behind the barcode” they also assist consumers in managing the information overflow that is bound to be the result of barcode scanning. The apps give consumers purchase advice based on the barcode scanning. They work to simplify the information by, for example, using a traffic light system. Vast amounts of information and multiple issues to take into consideration become them translated into a simple green-yellow-red.

### **Pledge green and share your commitment!**

The apps examined could not only encourage and enable consumers to get informed and “go behind the barcode”, they also encouraged and allowed consumers to construct and communicate ethical consumer identities.

For example, users of the Green Guide app are encouraged to select certain actions (for example “detox the kitchen” or to “love vintage”) and then “pledge” (promise) to carry them out later. Pledges are then recorded on individual users' status profiles according to levels of commitment to the “green cause” as suggested by the Green Guide system. You can earn points and become a “hero” of green choices. Users are given the opportunity to share their pledge and scores with others through Facebook and twitter. With a click of a button the user goes from private to public.

Pledging then works in two different ways. First it can be a form of “ethical accountability”, through which consumers can keep score of their progress and thereby motivate themselves to keep to their ethical shopping promises but also to improve themselves as ethical consumers. Second, pledging can also become a way to show others that you are an ethical consumer. It can be a form of ethical bragging but also a way to exercise pressure on others (“I am doing this for the environment, what are you doing?”).

### **Share your position and add to the ethical map!**

Finally, another “social” action prescribed by these apps could be found in the Fairtrade app. This app encouraged and enabled consumers to share advice on where to find Fairtrade coffee. Consumers can post their position, add descriptive information about the coffee place and the fair trade products they offer and even add a picture of the place. By sharing this information consumers are adding to the apps map of fair trade coffee places.

This simple function allow consumer to contribute to an imagined community of fair-coffee-drinkers. It enables then consumers to construct themselves as ethical consumers within a community and contribute to that community by adding locations and information to the ethical fair trade coffee map.

### **Conclusions**

The ethical shopping apps are scripted to connect to consumers and encourage and enable consumers to carry out various ethical shopping actions (which in turn build on and reproduce different moralities). The ethical shopping apps examined are scripted to extend the capacities of consumers and allow them to act as both informed and social ethical consumers. Thus drawing on and reproducing two common ways of seeing ethical consumers - the ethical consumer as rational individual and as socio-cultural being - these apps are designed as an answer to two often discussed problems of ethical consumption – complexity and motivation. By using these green apps consumers can manage complexity and make more informed ethical choices while at the same time constructing themselves as ethical consumers in their eyes of themselves and others. The ethical shopping apps are scripted to function as complexity managers, moral compasses and identity constructing devices. They are designed to be useful tools in the accomplishment of ethical consumption.

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