Ethical Consumption Communities Across Physical and Digital Spaces: An Exploration of Their Complementary and Synergistic Affordances

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Abstract

While there is an extensive body of literature about the impact of sharing physical space on ethical consumption, and a growing body of literature that addresses the impact of digital technologies on ethical consumption, there is little research on the increasing intersections between the physical and digital realms. This study explores the distinct affordances of physical and digital spaces and how they may work in both complementary and synergistic fashions. Drawing on an ethnographic study of two ethical consumption communities in North London, UK, we explore how ethical consumers navigate and negotiate both physical and digital spaces, taking advantage of such affordances. We develop the notion of *chorophilia*, or love for physical space, explore digital commitments and synergistic affordances of scaling up, and advance *polytopes*, which focus on the relationality of digital-physical spaces. Implications and avenues for future research are also discussed.

Keywords Ethical consumption · Space · Physical and digital

Introduction

Following the ‘spatial turn’ in marketing (Hoelscher and Chatzidakis 2017) and social sciences more broadly (eg. Warf and Arias 2008; Withers 2009), it is increasingly acknowledged that all consumption activity is *in* space and therefore affected by its special characteristics. Accordingly, various studies in consumer ethics have vividly illustrated how notions and practices of ethics and politics are both constituted by, and constitutive of, the spaces in which they are embedded (Chatzidakis et al. 2012; Gibson-Graham 1996, 2003; Moraes et al. 2010). For instance, Chatzidakis et al. (2012) focus on the Athenian neighbourhood of Exarcheia, a space within which mainstream practices of Fair Trade and sustainable consumption (eg. Andorfer and Liebe 2012; Bray et al. 2010) are largely disavowed. Instead, the ultra-left ethos of the area encourages more radical forms of ethical consumption such as directly trading with Zapatistas, collective cooking and guerrilla gardening. Centring on ethical consumption in the global South, and in particular Bangladesh, Gregson and Ferdous (2015) show how within-South

understandings of consumption and ethics fundamentally challenge North–South assumptions. Ultimately, they argue that ethical consumption exists not “as ethical consumption but as ordinary consumption with ethical effects” (Gregson and Ferdous 2015, p. 244). Altogether such studies illustrate that the ‘where’ of ethical consumption activity is not simply a background context or ‘empty canvas’. Rather, it is a fundamental determinant of its overall scope and nature.

Notwithstanding the observation that there is an inherently physical-spatial dimension to any social activity (Haraway 1991), we are increasingly dependent on digital space to navigate our shared physical environments, communicate with others, and disseminate our memories within them. Consequently, many social activities have numerous digital layers attached to them (Zook and Graham 2007). These digital layers are generated by our digital communications from and to physical locales, digital sharing of information and the digital cartography that represents physical space. Prior consumer ethics research has considered how such digital layers enable and/or constrain ethical consumption practices (Egels-Zanden and Sörum 2015; Eli et al. 2016; Fuentes and Sörum 2018; Graham 2011; Gummerus et al. 2017; Horst 2015; Humphery and Jordan 2018; Lekakis 2014). Gummerus et al. (2017), for instance, argue that participation in ethical Facebook communities has both informational and social/entertainment benefits for ethical consumers.

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In a more critical evaluation, Eli et al. (2016) illustrate the constraining effects of the Buycott application on activist behaviour, reducing it to targeting corporations and focusing on individual(ist) acts of consumption. Echoing Eli et al. (2016) and contra Gummerus et al. (2017), Humphery and Jordan (2018) argue that the informational and connectivity benefits of the digital realm fail to translate into more radical forms of consumer ethics and politics.

As noted above, however, most contemporary social activity is embedded in both digital and physical realms. Whereas the current literature tends to focus on either physical or digital spaces, and the ways in which they enable, constrain and ultimately shape practices of ethical consumption (e.g. Fuentes and Sörum 2018; Humphery and Jordan 2018; Schneider et al. 2017), their continuous intersection has been largely unexplored and under-theorised. Ethical consumption communities are, on the other hand, increasingly aware of the hybridity of the spaces that they inhabit (Matich et al. 2018). Moreover, they often attempt to exercise agency over the distinct affordances of digital and physical realms. They may, for instance, strategically engage with the digital when trying to scale up and revert to the physical when the fear of “virtualising themselves to death” becomes real (Castells 2007, p. 250). Put differently, (almost) all ethical consumption comprises a multiplicity of physical and digital layers and consumers are increasingly aware of how they shape their activist efforts.

By distinct affordances between physical and digital spaces, we thus refer to how our senses, interactions, and consumption practices are impacted by their special characteristics. To systematically understand these, we build on the concept of affordances (Gibson 1979). Affordances describe how the design of a space allows for its use by the individuals within it (Gibson 1979; Norman 1999). They point to the tangible aspects inherent within a space and how these create or negate different uses of it. Further, affordances include subjective perceptions of what a space can be used for and allow users to reflect on their interpretations of a space. Accordingly, the aim of our study is to explore the distinct affordances of digital and physical spaces, and the ways in which consumers navigate and take advantage of these in their everyday logics and practices.

Literature Review: Place Making and the Meeting Up of Digital and Physical Geographies

We define physical space as the offline dimensions within which we are situated, and within which we have a relative position to other humans, animals, topography and objects around us (cf. Gibson-Graham 1996; Massey 2005, 2007). We are able to interact with others by the means of physical

touch, smell, sound, and sight. Further, we define digital space as the realm in which we interact through interfaces that are designed by the means of programming languages. It refers to spaces that are screened through digital devices including but not limited to computers, laptops, smart-phones, and smartwatches (cf. Cresswell 2006; Hine 2000). We can communicate via digital spaces through inputting into these devices, which will then transmit our data through its network. Inversely, we transmit, receive, and perceive the outputs of the above devices relative to the space we are physically present in.

The shared physical spaces of cities are shaped by the multitude of different purposes given to them. One and the same space can thus give home to multiple different realities (Howarth 2001). Massey (2005, 2007) develops this further with her notion of space as a meeting up of histories. Rather than seeing physical space as a Cartesian plane, she urges the idea that space is relational, and its discourse informed by the histories of all actors within it. As each of us comes with their own disposition, space ceases to be an entity that can be conquered and starts to become a product of the people and objects within it.

When discussing the vast spaces of cities, it becomes apparent that we require a consideration of scale in order to avoid the casual intermingling between the notions of space and place. Humans develop intimate bonds to their personal geographies. To highlight the importance of this, we outline the symbolic value of the markers humans utilise to denote their social spaces from their surroundings. “Space thus acquires symbolic value”, Lefebvre writes (1974, p.141), with symbols in this context always implying “an emotional investment, an affective charge (...), which is so to speak deposited at a particular place”. This interpretation is rich in binding symbolic meaning to human interactions. Lefebvre describes place as a filled vessel, a demarcated zone within which belonging is established. In line with Visconti et al. (2010), it is set apart from the spaces around it by means of instilling a sense of home into its occupants. Tuan’s (1974, p. 3) more phenomenologically oriented work sheds further light on this distinction: “place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other”. Though holding places within them, cities are characterised by Tuan as offering “openness, infinity, unrestricted space” for thinking (Tuan 1974, p. 3). Recognising that place is affectively charged, his concept of *topophilia*, standing for love of place, reminds us that there is an intimate bond between people and the locales they inhabit.

In an urban context, the meeting up of histories lived by individuals from all around the globe intensifies as a more diverse set of people are sharing less space (Massey 2010). Smart devices afford for users to add an additional digital layer within these intensified networks, connecting their owners via a digital realm. Thus, shared physical and digital

spaces must be understood in terms of one another. Exploring their missing links, as well as how ethical consumers navigate and inhabit their intersecting affordances, is crucial for our knowledge of how most contemporary ethical communities are both physically and digitally emplaced. Whilst previous literature focusses on the effect of digital technologies on ethical consumption (Eli et al. 2016; Fuentes and Sörum 2018; Gummerus et al. 2017), our study examines self-governed ethical consumption communities, and how these navigate the distinct affordances between their physical and digital spaces. We define ethical consumption communities as groups of individuals who come together with the intention to forge new modes of consumption that are ecological sustainable and socially just (cf. Bekin et al. 2005, 2007).

As noted above, ethical consumption communities partake in various forms of collective organising and action, that are increasingly embedded in both digital and physical spaces. Affordances, therefore, provide us with an analytic framework that enables us to delineate the key differences of physical and digital realms. Gibson-Graham (1996, p. 121) describes that “the affordances of an environment are in a sense objective, real, and physical, and yet still affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; it is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior”. Boyd (2010) includes the affordances of social media within her discussion of networked publics and therewith highlights how affordances shape public discourse. Affordances describe the design of a space, whether physical, digital, or at the intersection of both realms, and how this affects our use of it and the interactions we engage in.

As Norman (1999) explains, affordances are relationships that ‘do not have to be visible, known, or desirable’, and are yet pertinent to the design of an object or space. Within the different physical and digital spaces of ethical consumption communities, such affordances will allow for distinct modes of communication, interaction and creation that consumers have to navigate. Some of these affordances exist by design, as our paper will elaborate on. Others are inherent to the nature of space that exhibits them. Our theoretical lens of affordances thus supports our central research question: what are the distinct affordances of physical and digital spaces, and how do ethical consumers navigate these in their everyday consumption practices? The next section introduces our two fieldwork sites and the methodological design.

Methodology

In order to explore the distinct affordances between physical and digital spaces, the lead researcher undertook a 1.5-year ethnography of two ethical consumption communities in London, UK. London provided the backdrop to this study

as a world city within which ethical consumption communities have to push back against neoliberal real estate developments and toxic pollution levels (Massey 2007). Our two fieldwork sites were selected on the basis that they differed both in terms of their overall digital versus physical presence (with Transition Town being more digitally active) and their underpinning ideology of ethical consumption (with Rochester Square Gardens being more radically left wing). Concurrently, they were situated in the same London Borough and employed similar digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter, website, and email), hence enhancing the comparability of their affordances. The two initiatives explicitly identified themselves as ethical consumption communities and stressed their advocacy towards environmental issues such as climate change, green spaces, animal rights and social issues. Access to the sites was sought through first contacting the communities at events that were open to the public.

Transition Kentish Town is part of the Transition Town Network, an association of action groups that declare the transition into a carbon neutral future as their aim (Hopkins 2008). Digitally connected around the globe, Transition Towns act on a local scale by starting environmental activities in their neighbourhoods. Transition Kentish Town initiated a multitude of projects such as a local “veg box” scheme, a gardening club, and a bicycle fixing programme. Their means of digital communication with the community were Facebook, email newsletters and threads, and Twitter.

Rochester Square Gardens was a squatter commune of between 15 and 45 occupants at a time before its eviction in July 2016. The squat was located in a former plant nursery on the eponymous garden square in Camden. The collectively communicated aim of the squatters was to provide an integrative centre for sustainable living and an art space for the wider community. Their digital presence comprised of a website and a Facebook group. There were bric-a-brac outdoor spaces such as planters, tents, and a “healing yurt”. The squatters regularly organised Open Days with art exhibitions and workshops for activities such as yoga, vegan cooking, or alternative healing practices.

Owing to squatting of private property being illegal in the United Kingdom and potentially resulting in a fine of £5,000 or a 6-month prison sentence (GOV.UK 2015), we were not able to stay overnight. Further, we sought verbal consent for all research activity as to not spark fear of being documented for prosecution purposes. All participants active at Rochester Square Gardens (and Transition Kentish Town) were anonymised and assigned pseudonyms.

Following Boellstorff (2012), the lead researcher acted “as a participant-observer, rather than directly eliciting user discourses” (Eli et al. 2016, p. 6). The aim was to gather “rich data from which ideas are induced” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2015, p. 53) that reflect the lived experiences and subjectivities of research participants. With this research

philosophy in mind, the analysis of the findings from both physical and digital spaces was of an inductive nature by which “patterns and associations derived from the observations of the world” were identified (Blaikie 2007, p. 124). Following Colson and Geertz (1973, p. 6), the lead researcher collected recordings about the daily lives of ethical consumption community members by “establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary”. This took the form of partaking in group activities such as gardening, meetings and cooking meals for community members as practised by Bekin et al. (2005) and Moraes et al. (2010).

The overall fieldwork totalled in around 220 h of observation. Additionally, 28 semi-structured interviews were carried out during which prompts were delivered to guide the conversation according to Wengraf (2001). A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure that both individuals who intensively shared the physical and/or digital spaces of the respective communities and those who only did so sporadically were represented. The terminology of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ reflects the language used by community members, who distinguished between core members and those who observed their groups from the outside. Figure 1 details these sampling categories and the male/female split. The interview guide was structured into five sections: an introduction that enquired about their first contact with the respective community, a second section on the significance of sharing spaces with other members, a third that explored perceptions of how encounters qualitatively differ between the physical and digital realm, a fourth section on networking between members and other communities, and an introduction that centred on demographic questions.

Data were collected in the form of voice recordings, a fieldwork diary (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983), photographs and materials created by participants (Cameron and Gibson 2005), digital texts, and screenshots. When new themes emerged, these were followed up with additional prompts. Based on Hine’s research in *Virtual Ethnography* (2000), the offline aspects were supplemented by observing the research participants’ digital communications via

websites and social media. Digital platforms were checked for updates daily (Moraes et al. 2008).

NVivo 10 was used as an organisational program to support the qualitative analysis and initial coding. Subsequently, emerging themes and sub-themes were identified (Braun and Clarke 2006), first independently and then jointly (Karmowska et al. 2017). Successive iterations were based both on interactive analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994) and on cross-comparison with field notes and visual data.

Findings

Our findings centre on three themes, reflecting the complementary and synergistic affordances of digital and physical spaces, which emerged from the iterations between our emic and etic understanding of the data. The first focusses on the multi-sensoriality that is unique to physical space and underpins embodied and affective experiences of ethical consumption communities. We define multi-sensoriality as the stimulation that pertains to our five senses and that is perceived through our embodied, material selves (cf. Haraway 1991; Rose 1997). We address longings but also avoidances of multi-sensoriality, including a discussion of (temporal) cravings for physical spaces. Second, we consider the distinct affordances of commitments made in physical versus digital spaces. This includes an exploration of the opportunities afforded by observing nascent behaviours from the safety of digital space. Third, we discuss synergistic affordances, relating to scaling up and hybrid relationalities (*polytopes*).

The Affordances of Physical Spaces

While the specific affordances of physical spaces may vary, our senses rely on physicality in experiencing them (Gibson 1979; Haraway 1991). This also pertains to digital spaces as we can only enter them via interacting with digital devices, which have a physical presence. In exploring the distinct affordances of physical and digital spaces, we thus first probe physical affordances, how these give rise to longings

Fig. 1 Participant table

Transition Kentish Town			
insider		outsider	
Debbie	Stephen	Mel	Laurence
Julia	Nathaniel	Dylan	Nick
Julietta	Valerie	Alex	
women		men	
6		5	

Rochester Square Gardens			
insider		outsider	
Jamie	Adam	Dora	Annabelle
Craig	Mark	James	Maya
Valerie	Phil	Marius	Antonia
Alina	Daniel	Sonia	Sabine
		Flora	
women		men	
9		8	

for multi-sensoriality and their material limitations. To address both, we address longings for physical space, the affordances and limitations of it, along with the realities of sharing it with others.

Multi-sensoriality

Within our data, we witnessed numerous occasions that illustrate how multi-sensoriality is inherent to experiencing physical space, and how this was craved by participants. Several insiders of Rochester Square Gardens spoke about their preference to interact with others in physical space. Mark, for instance, emphasised:

I prefer talking face-to-face with somebody. You get a better understanding and it is more human. You can't really gain an expression from a plain text message. It has no emotion behind it normally. (...) Because there is a lot of lack of concentration when it comes to communication and we are moving away from the fundamental understanding of normal gestures, facial, and voice patterns. We are missing the human touch.
Mark, Rochester Square Gardens

According to Mark, offline meetings were preferable to digital communication as they allowed for encounters to reach their full complexity and thus benefit from a multi-sensoriality that is (to date) unparalleled in digital space. He stressed his opinion that society is moving away from interactions that are rich in non-verbal context, and towards inferior modes of communication that lack "the human touch".

The aspect of human touch was corroborated by Adam, a fellow squatter. He chose the following words to bring the distinct affordances of physical and digital spaces to life:

I tell you how: like making love to my girlfriend in practice or making love to her online.
Adam, Rochester Square Gardens

Importantly, for most of our participants multi-sensoriality was far from just being restricted to social interactions. Dylan, a gardening volunteer at Transition Kentish Town, suffered from depression and took his doctor's advice to try gardening as an additional therapy. For Dylan, gardening was about being exposed to the sunlight, touching the soil, hearing children scream, seeing how the potatoes grew, and smelling the herbs. This multi-sensoriality was not replaceable by the mindfulness applications he had previously tried on his smart phone. When he was away from the gardens, he craved this physicality. As a young Londoner, he did not own a garden of his own, and the limited access he had to the gardens tended to by Transition Kentish Town, did not fully satisfy this craving.

What Mark, Dylan and Adam highlight is that the affordances of shared physical spaces enable interactions of a

different multi-sensorial quality to those that are mediated via digital screens. While the inputting and receiving of data is inherently experienced through our human bodies (Hara-way 1991; Rose 1997), the digital media through which we transmit our communications do not afford the same complexity of non-physical interactions, such as smell, touch, and taste.

This multi-sensoriality was not avowed by all research participants. In fact, experiencing physical space and others within it through all senses was at times viewed as negative and intimidating. Such encounters were exemplified by Maya, an outsider to and regular visitor of Rochester Square Gardens. Upon entering the squat, she would often feel uncomfortable as she confided to the lead researcher during informal ethnographic interviews. The prolonged hugs that she was coerced to reciprocate would feel like an invasion of her personal space. This would be compounded in those cases where individuals did not uphold the standard of personal hygiene that she maintained herself and expected from others. Although Maya loved visiting the squat to participate in communal activities, she would have preferred to forego the olfactory affordances and spatial infringements. Similarly, Alina, one of the key organisers of the Open Days, talked about encroachments of her "personal space". She would often get frustrated with the noise level participants would generate, and the smells from the overflowing food waste bin. Whenever this occurred, she calmed her senses by going to her hut. From there, she was able to manage the digital community spaces by adding new photographs and making connections with members of other eco squats without having to physically interact with them.

Being physically present and experiencing embodiment through all senses is thus not unreservedly perceived as a positive aspect (cf. Rose 1997). While multi-sensoriality does not cease to exist when logging into the digital realm, interactions are more controlled, subdued and distanced in relation to their physical counterpart.

Chorophilia

As established, multi-sensoriality is intrinsically bound to physicality. As Cohen argues, "cyberspace operates as both extension and evolution of everyday spatial practice" (2007, p. 210). Yet, physical space not only affords a different multi-sensoriality, but also malleability. Digital space is not in fact "more free than 'real space'" (Cohen 2007, p. 211), but adheres to its own affordances. The media via which contents are transmitted affect their message (McLuhan 2001). As Sörum and Fuentes (2017, p. 148) propound, social media platforms "shape the meaning and behaviour of ethical consumption". Digital geographies of power entail trained programmers creating interfaces that are mostly used by those who cannot alter them. In fact, social media

platforms are designed to facilitate certain interactions over others (Dean 2008). This often contrasts with a key aim of ethical consumption communities, which is agency over the spaces within which new modes of consumption take place (Chatzidakis et al. 2012).

A desire for the affordances of physical space was a recurrent theme amongst the digitally active members of Transition Kentish Town. This frequently caused a sense of frustration. Julietta, who moderated the Facebook group, voiced concern about Transition Kentish Town using mostly virtual means for their communication.

We need to take over a geographical location or place, a shop or something like that and have it as a hub or a base. That's what other community groups do. We don't do, so we are always amorphous (...) we haven't got any physicality, we have no visibility, we haven't got any anything. I have sort of tried to do and that has fallen flat for various reasons. (...) That would just be a beginning of having a visual representation about the geography, a timeline, the projects.

Julietta, Transition Kentish Town

Within these remarks lies a craving for space, preceding Tuan's (1977) concept of *topophilia*, or love for *place*. What Julietta longed for was a physical space for expressing the community's goals, to be filled with Transition Kentish Town's thoughts and concepts. It was in the absence of this space that she experienced a strong longing for the affordances of physical space with its malleability and ability to represent community projects.

This is corroborated by Valerie's story, a gardening volunteer at the "Well-being Garden" [sic] and later resident at Rochester Square Gardens. She was first attracted to the bohemian spirit of the squat and the promise that she could realise new projects within its spaces. In an interview, she confided that her arrival in London after growing up on the countryside had made her feel a sense of loss of space to call her own. Although she was excited about starting a new life in the capital, she was simultaneously looking for a space to shape within it.

One of the reasons why I would like to move in[to Rochester Square Gardens] is because I feel too detached just going occasionally. I want to work in a green space and coming here is lovely, but I don't feel like it's my space, that I can just come and work on the garden when I want to. It's assigned that it is Thursdays and... And then I come on a Thursday and there is not that much to do, and I feel disconnected from it. And it would be the same with Rochester Square I feel, but because I got the option of actually staying there, I'd like to become a part of the community and be able to feel like I can work on things myself.

Valerie, a volunteer at Transition Kentish Town and later squatter at Rochester Square Gardens

To Valerie, being physically present within the spaces of Rochester Square Gardens carried the promise of creating projects and realising dreams in her own right. Valerie experienced this strong longing for the physical realm by means of craving a free space unencumbered by the pre-existing rules set by others. The squat with its communal space promised exactly that to her.

Emergent from these emic observations, our concept of *chorophilia*, or love for *space*, builds on Tuan's (1977) *topophilia* to address the desire for an unfettered space in which to create new projects and realise community goals. *Chorophilia* therewith precedes *topophilia* in that it craves new spaces prior to having emplaced oneself into them. It is about exploring novel opportunities within the vast vessel of space rather than navigating the social intricacies of sharing a place with others. Crucially, *chorophilia* is a temporary concept that subsides into either *topophilia* or *topophobia* (Gonzalez 2005) after embeddedness into the physical has taken place.

Once Valerie had embedded herself into the spaces of Rochester Square Garden, her *chorophilia* ceased and gave way to *topophilia* as she fell in love with the garden, the possibilities it afforded and its community spirit. This was not to preclude later frustrations of sharing everyday life with an amalgam of individuals who not all agreed with her ideas of creating a utopia. The intense *chorophilia* she had experienced prior to embedding herself into daily life at the squat subsided and gave way to *topophilia*, and eventually to *topophobia*. Valerie ended not feeling safe at Rochester Square Gardens. Her case highlighted how the nexus of home, the place where we reside and live, can bring about conflicting emotions of love and fear (Gonzalez 2005). Although Valerie loved certain aspects of Rochester Square Gardens, she feared others and ultimately left. Thus, *chorophilia* is an inherently temporal concept that thrives on the desires for the affordances of physical space but subsides once these desires collide with the practicalities of inhabiting the space once dreamt of.

Chorophilia allows for a theorisation of the love for physicality in a manner that the digital realm alone cannot provide. It tells of the opportunities inherent in physical spaces that enable individuals to establish new thoughts and modes of interaction that are contingent on its affordances. Unlike *topophilia* or *topophobia*, which is tied to a specific *place*, and requires a high degree of embeddedness within that locale, *chorophilia* is a longing for the new possibilities of spaces that are not yet explored. Whereas *topophilia* and *topophobia* are directed towards a place for which a deep emotional connection has been

established, *chorophilia* describes a more wide-ranging emotional attachment to the physicality of the offline.

The Complementary Affordances of Digital Spaces

The geography of the Internet has changed human interactions in communities. Wellman et al. (2003, p. 135) speak about how technological changes create social affordances: “it is the move from densely-knit and tightly-bounded groups to sparsely-knit and loosely-bounded networks”. Our shared physical spaces are enriched via their digital representations (Graham 2012) which thus create a digital dimension to Massey’s (2007) meeting up of histories. Since we communicate within and across physical and digital spaces, navigating their distinct affordances will affect the commitments that we develop as a result. We argue that these distinct affordances often enhance each other’s qualities and thereby achieve complementarity.

Weaker Digital Commitments

Within our data, we commonly observed a belief that sharing physical space enhances commitment and persistence. For instance, Nathaniel from Transition Kentish Town explains that:

The offline [space is] definitely about community initiative. Not just talking about things, but doing things: [to] be there and do physical things like gardening, or events, or fairs. (...) In the online network, I suppose, there is arguably less initiative. I do think that most of the good things that Transition Kentish Town does require offline action. Those that are only part of the online network, I suppose, can be a catalyst for the people to change, but real change won’t happen online. Nathaniel, Transition Kentish Town

Nathaniel herewith asserted the need for physical space to have real impact on the goals that Transition Kentish Town aims to achieve. He referred to being physically present and doing “physical things” such as gardening and organising events. While the shared digital space may act as a catalyst, it is only through tangibly altering the physical spaces that a deeper commitment to the community is demonstrated.

This understanding of digital activity as weaker in social commitment has an established intellectual tradition (e.g. Lekakis 2014). Beyond Nathaniel’s words, it was echoed in various other participant accounts, and emphasised a distinction between core members and other more casual members. Whether someone was a core member was determined by how regularly they participated in group meetings. This was a way to safeguard who was part of the inner circle, as Transition Kentish Town was a large digital community with only few people partaking offline. Various discussions

about members who would only send in email suggestions without putting these into practice themselves gave rise to further suspicion, and perceived inferiority of commitments made in digital space. As another core member stated: “let’s first see whether they show up before we assign them any responsibilities”. Furthermore, we observed how research participants who were intensely present within the physical spaces of the communities were creating their own micro-societies of belonging and political action such as veganism, dumpster diving, or squatting in order to negotiate new forms of citizenship. As one participant claimed on an Open Day at Rochester Square Gardens “we want everyone to live how we live”. Thus, the material action sought by community members was specific to a shared locale. While mobile technologies enabled participants to mobilise others, it was the sharing of physical space that cultivated commitment to collective action (cf. Chatzidakis et al. 2012).

Observing Nascent Behaviours

In other instances, however, being digitally distanced from the physical ongoing within a community was viewed as beneficial and indeed necessary. Sonia was one of the new participants at Rochester Square Gardens. Although she had first come across the squat by cycling past it, she chose to first contact the occupants online. Sonia stated that while she was very interested in spending more time at the squat, she was highly aware of respecting squatters’ privacy:

I [went on Facebook] yesterday when I wanted to find out about the place. (...) Because I am still a bit confused about how to get involved with the community, like, how to find what’s going on and when I can join and when they have their own community that doesn’t really want to have visitors around all the time. Because obviously if there is an event on Facebook, it means that I am welcome to join this.

Sonia, outsider at Rochester Square Gardens

With this statement, Sonia illustrated how she felt at greater ease with first contacting the squatters via the digital sphere rather than showing up unannounced. She was therewith able to gauge what kind of activities would be on offer, and *when* she could physically visit, without experiencing feelings of unwelcomeness or being overwhelmed with activities she did not feel comfortable with. She thus felt more in control and able to observe nascent behaviours (Dolbec and Fischer 2015). Similarly to Sonia, Marius told us how he would reach out to community members at Rochester Square Gardens digitally before showing up. He was particularly interested in the bicycle workshop but would only show up when an event was advertised on Facebook. In an informal conversation, he explained that he wanted to respect the space of the

squatters and not come across as an intruder. The squat's Facebook group afforded Sonia and Marius a digital space on the threshold of the community via which they negotiated their involvement with it. Physical and digital affordances therefore complemented each other and inspired different types and levels of participation in ethical consumption communities.

Relatedly, the affordances of digital space allowed our ethical consumption communities to create and disseminate content about their spaces to which participants can subscribe without having to make commitments of time and effort. In this sense, digital space can pave the way to member recruitment and cultivation of subjectivities that are more sympathetic towards radical acts of ethical consumption (Castells 2012). The effective navigation of intersecting physical and digital realms affords maximum control, information and even vicarious experimentation. Observing nascent behaviours is thus an affordance of digital space that complements the physical by offering additional opportunities to members that are inaccessible via the physical alone.

The squat's digital spaces exemplified these complementary affordances by offering a digital representation of its physical purposes that allowed outsiders to inform themselves before joining: the website made claims about the squat being a self-sufficient eco-commune, a utopian enclave within the urban housing developments of Camden. Videos on YouTube drew portraits of the squat as a reclusive urban space with the aim to transform society around it. The Facebook group invited people to Open Days during which workshops such as crystal healing and vegan barbecues were hosted. Therefore, to engage in these spaces was to be both aware of and motivated to participate in radically different ways of thinking and doing (cf. Chatzidakis et al. 2012).

Echoing Dolbec and Fischer (2015), we thus found that digital space affords individuals to make decisions about whether to join new practices from a safe and comfortable distance, thereby allowing them to observe nascent behaviours ahead of making further commitments. Crucially, rather than speaking of engaging with digital spaces as a necessarily weaker form of commitment, we argue that this represents a complementary affordance to physical space in that it offers pivotal opportunities for the growth of ethical consumption communities. It provides necessary safe spaces and opens a larger and more flexible repertoire of commitment levels and actions. It further allows for multiple commitments to be experienced simultaneously as the asynchronicity of digital communication affords presence in several different sites. The potential of observing nascent behaviours before entering more solid commitments is thus critically enhanced and complemented by the affordances of digital spaces.

The Synergistic Affordances of Physical and Digital Spaces

The previous two findings sections elaborated on *complementary* affordances by firstly discussing multi-sensoriality and *chorophilia*, and second, digital commitments and the observing of nascent behaviours. Expanding on these findings, we delve deeper into what we term the *synergistic* affordances of digital spaces. By *synergistic* affordances we refer to those qualities of physical and digital spaces that enhance the usability and realisation of projects within both realms. They relate to how ethical consumers can combine the affordances of physical and digital spaces with one another to yield a compounded effect that is greater than the sum of its parts. They thereby have the potential to offer alteration or even transformation to ethical consumption communities by creating a synergy that surpasses those affordances that are simply complementary.

Scaling Up

Within our two communities, the media platforms most often used had affordances that are pre-determined by their owners and creators. Facebook was created to facilitate shares and likes of highly affective content to increase advertising inventory. Dean (in Matich et al. 2018, p. 20) speaks about how it is impossible to re-appropriate a platform for an activist purpose that has been built for a neo-liberal one: "And anyway, on the Internet, this subversion is hardly revolutionary work. In fact, the algorithm thanks you for your contribution". Notwithstanding, we observed how on various occasions these platforms were appropriated with a view to subvert initiatives in the physical realm. For instance, being fiercely defensive of their neighbourhood against forces of gentrification, Transition Kentish Towners started an online campaign when they were notified of the potential development of a Starbucks café on the High Street. Through the combined use of Facebook, Twitter and email threads, they propagated action against this development gaining planning permission. Several posts over the course of a couple of months were made to entice the wider community to voice their opposition via a council website tool. When Starbucks reapplied for planning permission after they were first rejected due to this campaign, Transition Kentish Town members reinitiated it and successfully blocked it for a second time (Fig. 2):

For this campaign, it was essential to scale beyond the members of Transition Kentish Town to include the wider community. To increase their reach, they contacted Transition Towns across London and issued tweets to their followership. Although the members of Transition Kentish Town and their social media followers were communicating digitally, their actions had a profound impact on

Fig. 2 Post in the Transition Kentish Town Facebook group about Starbucks seeking planning permission

physical space. Where previously gentrification was going to see another Starbucks appear, Transition Kentish Town took a stance against what in their view posed an unfair threat to small independent businesses such as Flapjacks, a local café employing staff with learning difficulties. Within the reach afforded by digital spaces, Transition Kentish Towners scaled up beyond their physical boundaries. This included members of the wider community who were not able to partake in action in physical space due to other commitments or physical abilities.

This is corroborated in an interview with Nick, who managed the Twitter account of Transition Kentish Town.

Transition Kentish Town has the definitive list of Kentish Town Twitter accounts in terms of businesses, shops, and organisations. I have scoured Twitter for any organisation which is based in Kentish Town. (...) Because I think Twitter is good at connecting other people up, and people tend to be stronger when they connect up. So as I say it's also

part of placing us at the centre of the community rather than a bunch of activists on the edge.

Nick, manager of the Transition Kentish Town Twitter account

The aim of Nick's Twitter activities on behalf of Transition Kentish Town was to place the local action group at the centre of Kentish Town's digital community. Over the years during which he had managed the account, he accrued 3,778 followers on Twitter, making it the most followed Transition Town Twitter account within London.

Nick's digital activities allowed Transition Kentish Towners to occupy mind space far beyond their local gardening sessions in borrowed spaces or monthly group meetings at the pub. The scaling up of digital space allows citizens to connect to and partake in activist movements (Castells 2012). Crucially, though, scaling up no longer has to culminate in meeting up physically. As Hansson (2015) asserts, "people often extend their body range, carrying capacities and ability to move across distance" through their use of

devices. Cities have become what Batty and Hudson-Smith (2007, p. 1) term “computable”: through the digital connection of people across time and place, cities are “capable of manipulation through their digital content” as “large areas of social life are migrating to the web”. Hence, many conversations can remain in the digital and have tangible physical impact, overall enhancing a synergistic affordance.

In other words, users are simultaneously feeding algorithms and claiming their rights as citizens to influence public policy—even through the socially engineered digital affordances of social media platforms. Norms and practices can be created in privately owned digital spaces, a function that market spaces have fulfilled for millennials (Maclaran and Brown 2005). While social media platforms technologically afford ethical consumption communities to scale up, this can be both highly effective and bounded by pre-set parameters. Crucially, these synergistic affordances allow citizens who might not have the capabilities to be present physically, to partake in and influence ethical consumption communities. As our findings assert, this goes beyond the spreading of awareness for ethical issues and extends to politically influencing decisions that take effect in the physical. There is thus a palpable intersection created by collective action within the digital that directly affects the physical.

Reproducibility and Polytopes

Both Transition Kentish Town and Rochester Square Gardens can be described as *heterotopian*, in the sense of cultivating norms and practices that stood in stark contrast to those characterising more mainstream sites of consumption (e.g. Chatzidakis et al. 2012). Our fieldwork sites reflected on the communities around them by demonstrating how unsustainable practices of consumption may be altered or subverted. Examples of this included reducing waste through dumpster diving or growing and distributing organic produce. At the same time, we began to observe that our *heterotopian* sites were never entirely disembedded or demarcated from other places around them (and some further afar). Drawing on a relational ontology of place (Massey 2005, 2007) we started acknowledging how the different biographies of objects, the built environment and of the participants inhabiting them, profoundly mediated everyday practices.

The digital realm further exacerbated what could be described as the *polytopic* (*poly* - Greek for many and *tope* - Greek for places) quality of our fieldwork sites. The idea of a *polytope* acknowledges that there is no such thing as a truly singular place. Established by Hoppe as a geometrical concept in the nineteenth century (1882), it describes shapes that have multiple sides, thus lending itself as a metaphor for the multiple and three-dimensional realities that

form within spaces and places over time. These spaces touch on the realities of one another not only in a metaphorical, but also a physical sense, demonstrating the intersections between the physical and digital realm. We draw on this metaphor to illustrate that all spaces reference other spaces, independently of their physical or digital nature. In other words, all spaces—whether physical or digital—are always relational by means of being connected to their histories and purposes, thus presenting us with synergistic affordances.

A vivid example is found within our ethnographic data of Rochester Square Gardens. After eviction from the radically alternative and bohemian squat on 4 July 2016, its inhabitants did not lose touch with one another. Many of them had dispersed to new and old homes, setting up more conventional lifestyles, while others started living at new squats in and around London. Yet their sense of community and a shared past they described as “magical” remained alive in their Facebook group. Although this did not subdue their *chorophilia*, as messages suggesting new buildings to be squatted evidenced, the digital became an access point to the memories and emotions that could no longer be lived in the physical. Thus, the squat’s Facebook group became a digital *polytope* that was relational to the other places and times it referenced, and simultaneously afforded the squatter commune to scale up on the physical space:

One of our research participants had discovered that the couple who bought the garden square had turned it into a creative space for contemporary ceramics. The reactions to this discovery portrayed the array of emotions they experienced about this time of their lives. Throughout the active time of the squat, communicating digitally was described as qualitatively inferior to being present face-to-face. Yet post-eviction, digital communications served as a means for romanticising this phase of their lives (Fig. 3).

One participant underlined this in their reply: “so weird to see tho [sic], that place will always be a fairy garden to me”. Another participant wrote “for me personally, early 2014 was the Golden Age of Rochester Square Garden, but the spirit and the memories will out live [sic] what it has become. Miss my NW1/GC family”. These digitalised memories will remain a digital layer more long-lived than this phase of its history. Further, shared digital spaces now became integral to staying in touch with this once physically united “NW1/GC family”, as suggestions of annual reunions demonstrate.

The comments referring to the yellow table “but LOOK! hahahah they kept the yellow table [sic]!!!” and “hahaha if only they knew” allude to a history that amplifies the notion that material items bring their own history into a shared space. The meeting up of histories is not only informed by the biographies of the individuals within a shared space, but also by the objects that are found in it (Massey 2007). As an extension to this concept, both people

Our study builds on the observation that ethical consumption communities increasingly inhabit both physical and digital spaces and learn how to effectively navigate their distinct affordances. Using the theoretical lens of affordances, our key research questions are: what are the distinct affordances of physical and digital spaces? And, how do members of ethical consumption communities navigate these in their everyday logics and practices? In answering these questions, we offer three key novel contributions. First, we develop *chorophilia*, or love for space, which elaborates on Tuan's (1974) concept of *topophilia* to accommodate longings of multi-sensoriality that are (as yet) absent in the digital realm. Second, we discuss the complementary affordances offered by the onset of digital space, drawing on Dolbec and Fischer's (2015) concept of observing nascent behaviours that discusses commitments and the trialling of new constellations. Third, we introduce scaling up and *polytopes* as synergistic affordances that address contemporary implications of relational space, and how these offer the reproducibility and revival of ethical consumption spaces.

All experiences are necessarily embodied experiences as we cannot leave our physicality behind (Haraway 1991). Within the digital realm, experiences occur through our human bodies via which we interact with our devices. Accordingly, “both the agency of consumers and their ‘character’ are shaped, at least partly, by the devices they use and the socio-material landscapes in which they operate” (Fuentes and Sörum 2018, p. 3). Hansson (2017, pp. 107–108) expands on this with her assertion that “when developed and designed, objects and devices are inscribed

Fig. 3 Post in the Rochester Square Gardens Facebook group

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with ideas about their meaning and use”. Digital space designers are highly aware that depending on where our mind focusses, we zone in on particular aspects of the multi-sensoriality of our being, and experience other aspects less intensely. Notwithstanding, we propose that the multi-sensoriality that is felt when engaging with and through digital devices is qualitatively different to that afforded by physical spaces. The digital focusses on sight and sound, and does not (yet) offer touch, smell, and taste.

This observation is crucial for our notion of *chorophilia*, which highlights individuals’ craving for the materiality of the physical realm. Authors such as Rheingold (1994) and Petróczi et al. (2007) propound that digital space can become a destination in its own right within which users can find company and solace. Conversely, we argue that many ethical consumers still strongly desire physical space as it uniquely affords the realisation of multi-sensorial experiences and ideas. Particularly within contemporary urban spaces which are often contested and host a multitude of different projects within them (Howarth 2001; Massey 2007), *chorophilia* can become a vital affective force for ethical consumption communities that strengthens their need to dream about, experience and eventually claim, new spaces.

Affordances (Gibson 1979) allow for a deeper theoretical understanding of *chorophilia* by explaining how individuals reach the bounds of what the physical or digital realm offer. *Chorophilia* as a temporal concept rests on the notion that it is a longing and love for the opportunities held by an unencumbered space that drives members of ethical consumption communities to seek the physical realm. The realities of inhabiting physical space will, however, soon collide with the dreams that were held for it beforehand. For instance, there might be other occupants within a space who are already shaping the affordances of how it is socialised in, how it shapes consumption practices, and how new projects of other-doing may be created within it. Similarly, affordances enrich our understanding of *chorophilia* by pointing towards the limitations of digital spaces. Digital spaces do not allow for some of the physical aspects of creation and consumption that are valued by ethical consumption communities such as growing organic produce, holding workshops or hosting communal meals.

This highlights that *chorophilia* is an inherently spatio-temporal concept. Soon after it is experienced, it subsides into either *topophilia* (Tuan 1977) or *topophobia* (Gonzalez 2005). *Topophilia* signifies emplacement and an intimate bond. *Topophobia* stands for the fear of a place that no longer feels safe, or the disenchantment after it no longer offers new opportunities. This temporal aspect of *chorophilia* perpetually fuels the search for new physical spaces by ethical consumption communities. Thereby it

becomes a catalyst for the transformation of spaces into greener, more socially just alternatives.

Engaging with Physical Space from the Safety of the Digital

Notwithstanding the cravings for the physicality expressed in *chorophilia*, digital space does offer compelling affordances to ethical consumption communities. There are benefits, for instance, to being able to observe projects from a distance. Echoing Dolbec and Fischer’s (2015) notion of observing nascent behaviours, we found that digital spaces enabled more careful and deliberate initial interactions that affect how commitments are entered into. There lies freedom in interacting with others without some of the immediate annoyances and dangers of the physical realm. More profoundly, however, we found that some participants began experiencing themselves as members of these ethical communities by accessing them digitally.

These affordances offer contemporary ethical consumption communities great potential for scaling up, and somewhat contradict widespread (both emic and etic) ideas of online spaces being weaker in terms of social interactions. Far from necessarily resulting in fewer interactions in physical space, digital spaces enable grassroots communities to attract followers and give them the space needed to undergo ideological and identity transitions. The digital space of an ethical consumption community can thus act as a first representation of its aims, membership and activities that ultimately allow a community to gain traction beyond its original physical boundaries. They can create safe zones within which individuals may not only observe nascent behaviours (Dolbec and Fischer 2015), but also fashion new modes of ethical consumption and garner momentum for them in the absence of sharing physical space.

Further, digital spaces can be created at a moment’s notice, and be public or private depending on the needs of an ethical consumption community. New ideas and group constellations can be trialled in digital space and ultimately come to fruition once a suitable physical space has been found. Thanks to these affordances, digital spaces can serve as incubators of social change for activists and ethical consumers who do not yet share physical space (cf. Chatzidakis et al. 2012). We thus expand on previous literature in digital ethical consumption (Eli et al. 2016; Fuentes and Sörum 2018; Gummerus et al. 2017) by moving beyond the infrastructural designs of specific ethical consumption applications and social media platforms. Instead, we demonstrate that digital spaces enable ethical consumption communities to pursue their political aims more effectively and spread them more widely. This is corroborated by Matich et al. (2018, p. 2) whose study on contemporary feminists found them to be “harnessing pre-existing discourses, markets

and arenas of consumption such as social media, and (...) attempting to transform these into feminist spaces of social activism and protest”. Similarly, Odou et al. (2018) speak about consumer resistance within digital spaces that has the potential to disrupt neoliberal governmental campaigns. While the algorithms that power these platforms should be utilised with caution (Dean 2008), grassroots communities without the resources to build their own digital platform can benefit from being able to spontaneously create public or private digital communities according to their needs.

Scaling Up and Polytopes

Finally, we argue that the relational space (Massey 2005, 2007) of ethical consumption communities has now scaled up by significantly expanding into the digital realm. Facilitated by various technological affordances relating to communication speeds and data storage solutions, contemporary ethical consumption communities disseminate messages asynchronously and remotely (Graham 2011), and create new spaces that are organised around interests, needs and movements rather than region alone. According to Humphery and Jordan (2018, p. 3), this suggests “a techno-political shift in conceptualising the ethical consumer”. Matich et al. (2018, p. 5) add to the potential of scaling up that “digital space allows the protest to continue to make an impact long after protestors go home”.

Beyond the obvious benefits of networking and scaling up activist efforts, which we also observed in our fieldwork, we argue that engagement with the digital realm has the potential to affectively charge their spaces and encourage members to keep reconnecting with one another in ways that are less obviously pre-mediated or instrumental. Adding a digital dimension to Massey’s (2005, 2007) space as a meeting up of histories, the digital layer to physical space (Graham 2011) also informs the encounters and constellations of ethical consumption spaces. What is crucial about our argument is that digital memories are not merely a representation of physical encounters. Instead, digital recollections create a relational effect between different spaces, both within the physical and digital realm. Further, such affectively charged digital spaces entice participants to keep reconnecting, and they do so from within the physical spaces they inhabit.

Our spatial metaphor of *polytopes* recognises this and speaks to the reproducibility and revival of physical spaces that ethical consumption communities make use of. *Polytopes*, then, become about the multi-dimensional relationalities of inhabited spaces and their affordances which are ever-evolving, having multiple (and often unpredictable) effects. As the ancient Greek term suggests, *poly topes* speak of *many places*. Geometrically, they connect different panes with one another in a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional fashion (Hoppe 1882). These different panes and facets represent

the spaces and places that can be reproduced, revived, and reconnected largely due to the affordances of digital spaces. Recollections such as social media posts that reside within the digital can, through their *polytopic* engagement with the physical *and* digital spaces they connect with, even revive and reproduce the intense multi-sensoriality that was integral to the original experience. A *polytope* then, is the archetypal contemporary place, one that arises out of the continuous intersection of physical and digital realms.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

Overall, our study builds on the observation that contemporary ethical consumption communities increasingly inhabit both digital and physical realms, and are thus dynamically affected by their distinct affordances. As such, it represents an initial exploration of the distinct affordances of digital and physical spaces, and examines how these may work both in complementary and synergistic fashions. In doing so, our study advances a series of concepts that capture how ethical consumers make sense of these affordances and how often-times, they consciously utilise them in achieving a variety of aims and outcomes that pertain to multi-sensoriality, commitment, scale and relationality.

More specifically, our study establishes *chorophilia* as a spatio-temporal concept that fuels the search for new physical spaces on which ethical consumption communities can leave their (placial) mark. This desire for leaving the digital realm and finding meaning through participating in actions occurring within the physical world is a crucial component of ethical consumer movements, and social movements more broadly. While alternative modes of consumption and production may be initiated in digital space, it is, more often than not, through the tangible impact of the physical that aspirations of a more environmentally and socially just future are multi-sensorially materialised and sustained. We, therefore, offer an antidote to overly optimistic discussions of the potential of the digital realm while acknowledging that digital space comes with its very own affordances; providing, for instance, safety and security, particularly for movements existing on the margins of society. Commitments entered into digitally may appear as weaker and less effective than their physical counterparts. Yet, the distanciation afforded by the digital also enables new behaviours to form as prospective members may ease themselves into the physical context of ethical consumption communities.

Crucially, what our study also offers to the field of ethical consumption is a more integrative view of how the distinct affordances of the physical and digital realm are experienced by community members, and the value this brings to not only creating but also reviving a multiplicity of spaces

within the digital. Our original contribution of *polytopes* further conceptualises the constant intersection of physical and digital spaces on which contemporary society rests by establishing how their distinct affordances are navigated to create new spaces that form an affective and reproducible relationality to those that they reference.

Finally, our study focusses on two specific ethical consumption communities in London, UK. The participants that were present within the field at the point of research invariably shaped the meaning of the communities within which they were co-creating, just like the positionality of the lead researcher affected these interactions and their interpretation (Boellstorff 2012). Thus, future research into ethical consumption communities could explore the applicability of these distinct affordances across communities with different profiles of digital-physical-spatial embeddedness and ideological motivations. Furthermore, the identified affordances are contingent upon the specific timeframe of the study and the dynamic evolution of what we describe as digital spaces. For instance, while multi-sensoriality cannot yet be achieved in the digital realm, the safety that digital spaces can offer, and their potential to revive and reproduce ethical consumption spaces, is constantly evolving. Indeed, first attempts to design digital spaces that afford more multi-sensorial experiences are slowly becoming a reality (e.g. Covaci et al. 2018). Altogether then, our study points to the increasingly intricate spatial nature of contemporary ethical consumption communities, and its capacity to further (but also hinder) their efforts to address a variety of social and environmental injustices.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The corresponding author received funding from Royal Holloway, University of London, in the form of the Crossland Scholarship.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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