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## Reflections on a Decade Long Exercise in Public Sociology: Can We Quantify Ethical Consumption?

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# Reflections on a Decade Long Exercise in Public Sociology: Can We Quantify Ethical Consumption?

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**Abstract.** In order to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the evolving nature of public sociology, this article reflects on a public sociology research project a decade after presenting it as part of the keynote for the 2009 annual conference for the Association for Humanist Sociology. The *Better World Shopper* project focuses on quantifying 32 years of social and environmental responsibility data on 2204 companies into numerical values that are then translated into A to F grades for the public through a regularly updated book, smartphone app, and website. Rooted in social movements theory and the growing literature on ethical consumerism, the methodology for the project is discussed in detail, including how data is weighted, updated, and an evaluation of how various biases are addressed throughout the analysis. The project is offered up as one example of how humanist sociology and public sociology can overlap in ways that can generate much needed conversations outside of academe.

**Keywords:** public sociology, humanist sociology, ethical consumerism, social justice, environmental sustainability

**Word Count:** 9,758

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## ***Reflexive Statement***

*In some ways, I was a public sociologist before I was sociologist. The book, *The Better World Handbook*, that I co-authored with two other sociology graduate students to help my undergraduates grapple with the overwhelming nature of the problems covered in our *Social Problems* classrooms, was published six months before my doctoral dissertation. I believe that the sociological perspective offers us a critical framework through which to view the world, and that we are obligated to apply it in some way to help better local or global communities. I have been researching our fraught relationship with corporations via ethical consumerism since the early 2000s, tracking their social and environmental impacts funded largely by our consumer dollars. I have spent much of my time translating this research into data made accessible to the public through *The Better World Shopping Guide*, in order to help people more effectively hold companies*

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3 *accountable for their actions. For the past ten years, I have been a teacher-scholar at*  
4 *College of the Holy Cross, a small liberal arts college in New England.*  
5

## 6 7 **Introduction**

8  
9 A cursory search using Google Scholar reveals rapidly increasing interest in term “public  
10 sociology” over the past 40 years: 18 articles in the 1980s, 101 in the 1990s, 1980 in the  
11 2000s, and 6970 articles published so far in the 2010s. It has been 15 years since Michael  
12 Burawoy, 2004 president of the *American Sociological Association*, put public sociology  
13 on the map, so to speak, and over 30 years since Herbert Gans coined the term (Fastis  
14 2014). Burawoy made explicit a tradition as old as some of the earliest sociologists  
15 (Weber, DuBois, and Addams) that calls sociology to use its scientific tools to engage  
16 public audiences around the important social issues and challenges of the day. It calls for  
17 social science with a purpose, if you will, to address the race, class, gender inequalities  
18 and environmental degradation it has been so precisely observing and documenting  
19 (Burawoy 2005).  
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22 Since then, public sociology has sparked sociologists writ large to applaud, debate,  
23 engage, and dissect this orientation like little else since, the results of which have  
24 spawned books and edited volumes attempting to capture the emerging dialogue (see  
25 Adam et al. 2009; Agger 2007; Blau and Smith 2006; Clawson et al. 2007; Dolgon and  
26 Chayko 2011; Hanemaayer and Schneider 2014; Nichols 2007; Nyden, Hossfeld, and  
27 Nyden 2012). It has even more recently sparked sociologists within certain theoretical  
28 traditions, like symbolic interactionists, to begin to map their own relationship to public  
29 sociology (see Puddephatt and Taylor 2017). I see this as a fitting time to reflect upon  
30 some of the seeds that were planted and to assess how this specific sub-field is evolving.  
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32

33 While I would like to call on other self-identified public sociologists to contribute their  
34 reflections at this particular moment in our collective history, I will note that I may be  
35 coming late to the table on this count. I am in wholehearted agreement with Jim Pennell  
36 and Tim Maher’s (2015) argument for a more integrated, transformative, public-centered  
37 approach to public sociology, as well as Emily Kane’s (2016) emphasis on creating a  
38 civically-engaged, community-oriented undergraduate infrastructure to encourage critical  
39 thinking about sociology’s larger role. Having said that, I’d like to contribute my own  
40 lessons to the discussion of how to nurture this important branch of our discipline’s work.  
41

42 I will start with a reflection on how my own sociological research turned toward this  
43 new growing body of public scholarship. I do this in part because the timing aligns well  
44 with the emergence of this area (my own public sociology research project on ethical  
45 consumerism began in earnest in 2004), and also because essentially ten years ago, I  
46 presented an earlier iteration of this project at the keynote presentation for the 2009  
47 Annual Meeting of the Association for Humanist Sociology. As Corey Dolgon (2010) so  
48 eloquently pointed out in his AHS presidential address “humanist sociology is public  
49 sociology...[and] public sociology is humanist sociology”. The thoughtful feedback I  
50 received then from my humanist colleagues contributed significantly to the development  
51 of this public sociology project, and a decade later, I would appreciate an even deeper  
52 level of feedback to aid in its further evolution.  
53

54 The research project, which I call *Better World Shopper*, seeks to synthesize publicly  
55 available data on the social and environmental impacts of companies, rating their overall  
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responsibility on a scale from A to F, to bring increased transparency and accountability into the corporate sphere where frustratingly little exists. An essentially humanist enterprise, it recognizes the potential of individual agency combined with critical thinking to provide one more tool that may allow people to contribute to a more socially just and environmentally sustainable world. As a sociological project, it recognizes the limitations of individual agency, understands the social and economic privilege of most ethical consumers, acknowledges the cooptation of the consumer empowerment narrative by disingenuous corporate public relations campaigns, and realizes the need for more structurally-oriented solutions in order to bring about significant social change.

## Social Movements

The *Better World Shopper* project initially stemmed from my research interest as a sociologist in the field of social movements. In the mid-1990s, the dominant paradigm in social movements theory was *resource mobilization* (Gamson, 1990; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tarrow 1994), which focused its analysis on how movements effectively mobilize their available financial, temporal, and human resources in order to achieve the desired social change. However, in Europe an alternative theoretical paradigm was gaining traction; *new social movements* (NSM) theory was contesting this dominant theoretical framework by focusing on the shifting nature of social movements in the 1960s. NSM theory posited that the most recent group of social movements shared certain distinctive qualities, generally: 1) more focused on postmaterialist concerns, 2) less centralized, 3) less organized, 4) more culturally focused, 5) making use of individual, in addition to collective forms of action (Buechler, 1995; Habermas, 1981; Melucci 1980; Mertig and Dunlap 1995; Touraine 1985). This group of NSMs includes the: environmental movement, LGBTQ+ movement, peace movement, human rights movement, anti-nuclear movement, and the feminist movement among others.

One of the most successful of these NSMs is the environmental movement, something referred to as a vanguard movement for other NSMs due to both its popularity and to its role as a kind of “gateway” movement for exposure to, and involvement in, other NSMs (Dalton 1994, Mertig and Dunlap 1995, Scott 1990, Turner 1994). The environmental movement was particularly effective at focusing its adherents on economic and lifestyle actions that moved people beyond the realm of political organizing (Haenfler et al. 2012, Lorenzen 2012, McCloskey 1991).

An increasing number of scholars have begun to argue that even more private, culturally-oriented, individually-focused forms of lifestyle actions need to be reconceptualized as movements (Atkinson 2012; Cherry 2015; Kennedy 2011; Lorenzen 2012; Willis and Schor 2012). These *lifestyle movements* actively promote a lifestyle (forms of speech, consumption patterns, food choices, dress codes, everyday practices) as their primary means to foster social change by confronting predominant cultural norms in order to challenge the status quo (see Haenfler, Johnson and Jones, 2012). While these movements (veganism, straight edge, voluntary simplicity, ethical consumerism) may not be as highly organized as traditional social movements, relying on loosely coordinated

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3 behaviors of individuals, the results still generate collectively significant impacts,  
4 sometimes referred to as "collectivized individual action" (Bossy 2014).  
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## 8 **Ethical Consumerism**

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10 Ethical consumerism, consumers seeing their dollars as economic "votes" that can  
11 encourage companies to behave more responsibly, exists in a space contested by  
12 competing conceptual frameworks. First identified and studied almost exclusively by  
13 business scholars examining its relationship to corporate social responsibility (now more  
14 commonly referred to as corporate sustainability), this research is largely atheoretical,  
15 focusing on describing the attitudes, behaviors, and demographics of this niche in the  
16 marketplace (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Carrigan, Szmigin, and Wright 2004; Doane  
17 2001; Freestone and McGoldrick 2007; Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005; Starr 2009).  
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19

20 A more critical approach is taken by most social scientists as they re-conceptualize  
21 ethical consumerism as largely a market-based, corporate self-defense mechanism  
22 promoted by companies interested more in ethical branding than actual changes in  
23 corporate practice (Budinsky and Bryant 2013; Cock 2011; Foster 2000; Lubbers 2002;  
24 Tokar 1997). From this more skeptical perspective, ethical consumers merely reinforce  
25 the neo-liberal status quo through apolitical, atomized, and ineffective marketplace  
26 choices that distract them from the more necessary, collective structural and political  
27 changes needed to bring about actual reform (Carrier 2008; Guthman 2008; Maniates  
28 2002; Smith 1998; Szasz 2007; Thompson 2011).  
29

30 However, a third group of researchers has more recently emerged calling for a more  
31 nuanced understanding of the role of ethical consumers as participants in a lifestyle  
32 movement that complements political engagement for some (Adams and Raisborough  
33 2008, 2010; Barnett et al. 2010; Brown 2011; Kennedy and Krogman 2008; Melucci  
34 1989, 1996; Micheletti 2003; Neilson and Paxton 2010; Shorette 2014; Stolle, Hooghe,  
35 and Micheletti 2005; Willis and Schor 2012) and serves as a first step for others to more  
36 overt, collective action (Barnett et al. 2005; Carfagna et al. 2014; Holzer 2006; Micheletti  
37 and Stolle 2007; Moore 2006). There is growing empirical evidence to support this  
38 "middle path" framework of the movement, demonstrating a positive correlation between  
39 ethical consumerism and political activism (Willis and Schor 2012).  
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## 44 **From Theory to Action**

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46 I focused my doctoral research on understanding why people were choosing to focus on  
47 lifestyle actions rather than more overtly political forms of engagement (Jones, 2002). A  
48 mixed methods research project, it involved a content analysis of relevant online and  
49 print literature, in-depth interviews with leaders advocating for lifestyle actions, and an  
50 extensive mail survey of members of the organization, *Green America*. This group is  
51 considered the leading US-based nonprofit organization promoting social and  
52 environmental responsibility through the economic actions of individuals ( now called  
53 *ethical consumerism*). In the interview with the founder of *Green America*, Alisa Gravitz  
54 discussed how many activists in the 1980s saw more traditional political avenues for  
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3 change as being blocked under the Reagan Administration. In response, activists began  
4 reorienting some of their efforts to focus on economic pathways to achieve the desired  
5 change, something that, in part, contributed to the rise of “green businesses” and ethical  
6 consumers.  
7

8 While pursuing this research, I co-authored a book with two colleagues in an attempt to  
9 address the expressed needs of students in social problems classes who would  
10 consistently ask what they could do, personally, to help contribute to the solutions to  
11 many of the social problems they’d studied over the semester. The resulting book, *The*  
12 *Better World Handbook*, is essentially a cataloguing of the major social and  
13 environmental problems humanity faces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century followed by detailed accounts  
14 of 300 or so actions an individual could engage in to become a part of their potential  
15 solutions. Of all the material presented, four pages in the chapter on “Shopping”  
16 generated more reader feedback than the rest of the book combined. Readers wanted to  
17 know more about how companies producing some of the most common consumer  
18 products were rated from “poor” to “excellent” on their overall social and environmental  
19 records.  
20

21 Thus, in 2004 I decided to pursue a more in-depth research project focused more  
22 specifically on mapping the social and environmental impacts of companies and  
23 translating that data for the public. This focus could be subdivided into two major project  
24 goals:  
25

- 26 1) How can social scientists most accurately map companies’ social and  
27 environmental impacts?  
28
- 29 2) How can social scientists translate this data for the public in a form that it is  
30 understandable, practical, and easily accessed?  
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34 To demarcate the scope of this investigation, I chose to let the availability of data to  
35 drive the breadth of the issues to include under the operationalized definition of “social  
36 and environmental” impacts. This approach essentially adopts grounded theory  
37 techniques (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) whereby emergent  
38 themes are constantly compared to the available data until saturation clarifies which  
39 patterns best characterize the overall data set. Potential data sources were uncovered  
40 using simple Google searches from terms like “transparency”, “responsibility”  
41 , “equality”, and “ethical”, combined with terms like “scorecard”, “report card”, “ratings”  
42 and “rankings”, generated hundreds of useful hits. After sifting through the results, hat I  
43 discovered was that much of the existing data being provided for consumers [albeit in a  
44 piecemeal way by ecolabels, nonprofits, investigative journalists, and government  
45 agencies] tracked quite clearly with the issues of concern for the NSMs emerging from  
46 the activism of the 1960s: environmental sustainability, social justice, human rights,  
47 animal welfare, and empowered local communities. This also mirrors the scope of issues  
48 included by the other major (US and non-US) ethical consumer rating systems.  
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## 54 **Ecolabels: An Imperfect Solution**

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By far the most common way that ethical consumers determine corporate responsibility related to the products or services they are interested in purchasing is by relying on third party seals or certifications often referred to as *ecolabels* (see Jones 2017). The major advantage of these ecolabels lies in their location on the products themselves at the point of purchase. This allows ethical consumers to identify their best choices at the moment they are shopping for the desired item(s). Some of the most recognizable certifications utilized by ethical consumers include: USDA Organic, Fair Trade, Marine Stewardship Council, Bird Friendly, Dolphin-Safe, Rainforest Alliance and Forest Stewardship Council.

Unfortunately, these ecolabels represent only a partial solution for ethical consumers as they suffer from at least five significant weaknesses. First, and perhaps most apparent, is that most products do not contain any certifications and as such consumers are left guessing about the social and environmental responsibility of the majority of products they encounter. While many of the uncertified companies may not meet the certification standards, others may merely lack the savvy, time, or financial resources to garner the seals which codify their good practices (Ponte 2006).

Second, there is growing evidence that many of the most popular ecolabels have watered down the requirements of certification to meet the increasing demand by companies to have their products certified under these systems (Ingenbleek and Meulenbergh, 2006; Cohn and O'Rourke 2011). This may have already led to companies with sullied ethical reputations to utilize particular certifications as a way of greenwashing their brand image (Bartley and Smith, 2010).

Third, a growing number of companies and industries have created their own internally-generated certifications that lack the objectivity of independent third party certifications and are likely to be even less rigorous than their more common counterparts (Fransen, 2012; Ingenbleek & Meulenbergh, 2006; McDermott, 2013; Hughes et al 2008; Giovannucci and Ponte 2005; Ponte 2004). Many consumers cannot tell the difference between the two types of ecolabels (e.g. Whole Foods produces its own Whole Trade certification ecolabel), and therefore have an even more challenging task in understanding the actual ethical landscape (O'Rourke 2005; Giovannucci and Ponte 2005, Bartley and Smith, 2010).

Fourth, nearly all ecolabels certify products rather than companies allowing consumers to determine the ethical impacts of individual products but not of the company behind the product. This allows companies with more questionable track records to create certified product lines (e.g. Green Works cleaning products by Clorox) that compete directly with the products created by more ethical companies (e.g. cleaning products by Seventh Generation). Additionally, consumers may garner a sense of the ethical impact of a particular product but not gain a broader understanding of which companies/brands deserve (or do not deserve) their support more broadly.

Fifth, the majority of ecolabels cover fairly specific issues and/or product categories, obscuring the picture of the broader ethical impacts these companies are having across the wider spectrum of issues ethical consumers are concerned with. Examples of this include the aforementioned: USDA Organic (environmental), Fair Trade (primarily social), Marine Stewardship Council (sustainable seafood), Bird Friendly (bird welfare), Dolphin-Safe (dolphin welfare), Rainforest Alliance (primarily environmental) and Forest Stewardship Council (sustainable forestry).<sup>1</sup>

## Other Ethical Consumer Rating Systems

The following four ethical consumer rating systems are, along with *Better World Shopper*, the longest-running and most widely recognized in the world. These systems largely overlap in both how they define the major components of ethical consumerism as a combination of social and environmental responsibility (with some consideration for political responsibility and animal welfare) and how they reach consumers with their ratings (Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

*Ethical Consumer (UK)*. Founded in 1989, *Ethical Consumer* (EC) is the oldest of the consumer-focused CSR rating systems. Based in Manchester, UK, the organization began producing a subscription-based magazine of the same name released six times a year. In addition to its main website ([ethicalconsumer.org](http://ethicalconsumer.org)), the organization maintains an additional presence online under the title *Corporate Critic* ([corporatecritic.org](http://corporatecritic.org)) that allows consumer to access the data behind their company ratings for a small fee. While they are the only system to presently lack a smartphone app, they are also the only to offer a print and online magazine subscription to ethical consumers.

*Ethical Company Organisation (UK)*. *Ethical Company Organisation* (ECO), founded in 2000, is the only other major consumer-oriented CSR rating system established in the UK. Over the past 16 years, ECO has published 11 editions of *The Good Shopping Guide* to allow consumers to better understand the ethical records of the companies they're supporting in the marketplace. While the group has offered online details of the project since its inception ([ethical-company-organisation.org](http://ethical-company-organisation.org)), more recently ECO has begun to translate some of their shopping guide's data into a separate but related website ([thegoodshoppingguide.com](http://thegoodshoppingguide.com)) that allows consumers to more quickly reference their ratings and the corresponding strong and weak issues areas for each company.

*Shop Ethical (AUS)*. In 2004, *Shop Ethical* (a.k.a. *Ethical Consumer Group*) established its rating system primarily for concerned consumers in Australia. While originally known as *Ethical Consumer Group*, soon after self-publishing its pocket-sized shopping guide in 2008, *Shop Ethical*, it has become more widely recognized by the name of its print publication. In order to minimize confusion between this system and the UK-based *Ethical Consumer*, this research will refer to the group as *Shop Ethical*. In addition to the print guide, the group's efforts include a searchable website ([ethical.org.au](http://ethical.org.au)) and one of the more sophisticated smartphone apps available to consumers.

*GoodGuide (US)*. In 2007, *GoodGuide*, became the most recent of all consumer-oriented CSR rating systems to enter into the field. Originating from efforts by Dara O'Rourke at UC Berkeley, *GoodGuide* offers both a popular searchable website ([goodguide.com](http://goodguide.com)) and a smartphone app of the same name that is able to scan an item's UPC codes to connect them to its product ratings. *GoodGuide* also holds the distinction of being one of the most



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3 well-funded research efforts in this area, originally raising over \$13 million before being  
4 acquired by Underwriters Laboratories (UL), the nonprofit product safety certification  
5 organization. Unfortunately, as of 2017, *GoodGuide* removed all company-level  
6 environmental and social data from its system in order to focus exclusively on health  
7 ratings based on individual product ingredients lists.  
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## 10 11 **The Data Availability Problem** 12 13

14 As I argued in my article comparing rating systems across the US, UK and Australia (see  
15 Jones 2017), the central problem that plagues this type of research is the lack of available  
16 data that offers any significant combination of *validity* and *reliability*<sup>2</sup> There are little to  
17 no legal requirements for companies to offer up data on their own record of corporate  
18 social responsibility (Sutantoputra, 2009). Without a requirement for transparency,  
19 provided by either the marketplace or the government, companies are concerned about  
20 data they voluntarily release in the name of transparency (particularly if it reveals any  
21 shortcomings in this area) inadvertently: spooking investors (Beatty and Shimshack,  
22 2010), giving an advantage to less transparent competitors (Searcy, 2012), or focusing the  
23 ire of an already suspicious public (Lyon and Maxwell, 2011). The data that companies  
24 do make available is typically unverifiable, uncomparable to other companies, almost  
25 exclusively positive, and for these reasons, usually somewhat suspect (Lyon and  
26 Montgomery, 2012; Marquis and Toffel, 2011).  
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29 Ratings agencies, working in the socially responsible investing (SRI) sector, collect the  
30 most consistent third party data. Containing more than \$2 trillion worth of investment  
31 portfolios (Guay *et al.*, 2004), these SRI ratings agency determine the potential  
32 profitability of a significant amount of investments depending on which companies fall  
33 under their definition of “socially responsible”. To remain competitive with the profit  
34 returns touted by more mainstream (and less restricted) investment funds, many of these  
35 SRI agencies tend to utilize a definition (and data) that support a more laissez-faire  
36 approach than most ethical consumers and nonprofit organizations working in this area  
37 would be comfortable with (Jones 2017).  
38

39 Additionally, many of these agencies rely on self-reported data from companies (van  
40 den Brink and van der Woerd, 2004; Waddock and Graves, 1997) and often utilize  
41 methodologies that are closely guarded as trade secrets<sup>3</sup>. As a result, the CSR data arising  
42 from these agencies is considered by a number of scholars to have little or no validity  
43 (Chelli and Gendron, 2013) often just mimicking the companies’ own effort to  
44 manipulate and positively spin their own reputation in the area (Ramus and Montiel,  
45 2005). This lack of independence and validity from one of the only consistent sources of  
46 third party data has motivated many scholars to call for a more accurate, valid,  
47 transparent system of CSR measurement that is resistant to the influence of the  
48 companies themselves (Carroll, 2000; Chen and Delmas, 2011; Liston-Heyes and Ceton,  
49 2009; Turker, 2009; Zadek *et al.*, 2005).  
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## 54 **Building A Robust System of Measurement** 55 56 57 58 59 60

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3 It is in the context of this data poor landscape that I constructed a system to more  
4 accurately measure the social and environmental responsibility of companies. The  
5 database would need to consolidate and organize, and synthesize publicly available  
6 sources of data that each measure one or more aspects of companies' social and/or  
7 environmental impacts in order to provide a more comprehensive, and accurate, picture  
8 of what companies are doing in this arena. In order to ensure both the validity and  
9 integrity of the rating system, I chose to adhere to the following procedures:  
10  
11

### 12 *Inclusions*

- 14 1. The system focuses on following data streams tracking one or more of these  
15 issues:
  - 16 a. environmental sustainability
  - 17 b. human rights
  - 18 c. animal protection
  - 19 d. community involvement
  - 20 e. social justice
- 21 2. The system includes data from independent, third party sources, including  
22 primarily:
  - 23 a. nonprofit organizations
  - 24 b. government agencies
  - 25 c. private organizations
  - 26 d. investigative journalism
- 27 3. The system focuses primarily on company-level data rather than on individual  
28 product data or industry-level data<sup>4</sup>  
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### 35 *Exclusions*

- 36 4. The system does *not* include data self-reported by companies
- 37 5. The system does *not* include data generated by SRI ratings agencies

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41 It may be worth noting that while many are familiar with ethical consumerism as an  
42 environmentally-focused enterprise, fewer understand how social justice issues are taken  
43 into account. As such, I've included a table specifically documenting the social justice  
44 issues, corresponding data sources, and examples of each (see Table 2).  
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46

47 [INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]  
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## 51 **Constructing The Database**

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53 As of 2019, the ratings database contains 2204 companies, each with its uniquely  
54 calculated score and resulting grade, and spans 32 years (1988-2019) of research data.  
55 While it remains in its initial form (2004-present) as an extensive Excel spreadsheet,  
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3 there are plans to transition the database into a Google Sheet in order to allow for instant  
4 ratings updates via the website and smartphone app.

5 The rating system utilizes a point scale for companies' overall social and environmental  
6 responsibility that falls between -100 and +100 with a starting point of 0 for all  
7 companies when they are initially added to the database. Before including any particular  
8 data source in the project database, I evaluate each for basic relevance (does it cover one  
9 or more of the five issues), conflicts of interest (is it influenced indirectly or directly by  
10 the companies themselves), and quantifiability (can it be usefully translated into a point  
11 score). Each data source is evaluated to determine whether it tracks exclusively positive  
12 or negative social and/or environmental impacts. In some cases, the data source tracks  
13 both positive and negative impacts and so a neutral (zero point) is determined (typically  
14 employing an appropriate measure of central tendency).

15 Data are weighted quantitatively giving consideration to a number of factors [see Table  
16 3]:

- 17 1. *age* (more recent data are weighed more heavily)
    - 18 a. e.g. data from 2019 (higher) vs. 1989 (lower)
  - 19 2. *reputation* (data from well-regarded [nonpartisan/nonprofit] data sources is  
20 weighed more heavily)
    - 21 a. e.g. data from US Environmental Protection Agency (higher) vs. Business  
22 Ethics Magazine (lower)
  - 23 3. *rigor* (data collected and analyzed according to scientific norms is weighted more  
24 heavily)
    - 25 a. e.g. data resulting from Union of Concerned Scientists' environmental  
26 rankings of automakers (higher) vs. Fast Company's WorldBlu List of  
27 most democratic workplaces (lower)
  - 28 4. *longevity* (data from ongoing research that has a multiyear history is weighted  
29 more heavily)
    - 30 a. Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index project has been  
31 calculating company scores on LGBTQ issues for 17 years (higher) vs.  
32 World Wildlife Fund scoring the forest-friendly manufacturing of tissue  
33 paper for 2 years (lower)
  - 34 5. *level of significance* (data that represents relatively exceptional achievements,  
35 whether positive or negative, are weighted more heavily)
    - 36 a. e.g. achieving comprehensive certification as a *benefit corporation*, or a B  
37 Corp (higher) vs. being a member of Business for Social Responsibility  
38 (lower)
  - 39 6. *breadth* (data focused on measuring a broad range of social and/or environmental  
40 impacts is weighted more heavily)
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3 a. e.g. Political Economy Research Institute’s combined air pollution, water  
4 pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions rankings (higher) vs. As You  
5 Sow’s recycling score (lower)  
6  
7

8 [INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]  
9

10 Once data sources are weighted, individual data points on companies are converted into  
11 standardized scores (see example of Responsible Sourcing Network’s data on the use of  
12 conflict minerals in company supply chains in Table 3). Data points are tracked and  
13 accumulated into data profiles for individual companies (see ExxonMobil example in  
14 Table 4). Each of those data points are standardized converted using the calculated  
15 weight resulting in a point score within the system. All of the point scores are totaled for  
16 each company to construct an overall score. In the case of ExxonMobil, for example, the  
17 overall raw score is -63.8 on a scale from -100 to +100.  
18  
19

20 [INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]  
21  
22  
23

## 24 **Translating Data for Consumers**

25  
26 Scores from -100 to +100 are then translated into A to F grades for ease of reference in  
27 order to give consumers a more practical sense for how to think about the relative social  
28 and environmental responsibility of the companies they are considering in the  
29 marketplace [see Table 5 with the example of the consumer category of “gasoline”].  
30  
31

32 [INSERT TABLE 5 HERE]  
33  
34

35 The data are adjusted three times before their translation into the grades offered to the  
36 public. First, when the data source is originally added, the data are weighted according to  
37 its own merits (see *Constructing the Database*). Second, the data may be re-weighted in  
38 the overall formula to reflect adjustments that consider the merits of the data relative to  
39 the rest of the data sources included. This is particularly important to account for recently  
40 updated data and/or new data sources added every other year. Third, the point range for  
41 each grade category are adjusted to maintain some consistency in the variation reflected  
42 by the A to F scale of grading (e.g. in 2017 edition of the ratings, an “A-“ was assigned to  
43 companies falling between +14.00 and +19.99 points - see Table 5). This system of  
44 adjustments allows for checks and balances at three levels in the ratings database to  
45 account for errors and biases that may be inadvertently occurring at any one level due to  
46 unforeseen effects of adjusting the weighting of one or more variables without  
47 concurrently readjusting the relative weights of others.  
48  
49

50 As a part of this process, brands are traced to their company of origin and the  
51 corresponding company grade is attached to those brands (e.g. Dasani is a brand of  
52 bottled water created by Coca Cola). This allows consumers to hold companies  
53 themselves accountable rather than trying to keep track of which companies own what  
54 brands. Along similar lines, companies are often traded, sold, and/or spun off to/from  
55 larger parent companies. And in those cases, grades must be adjusted accordingly (e.g.  
56  
57  
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1  
2  
3 Burt's Bees [A-] was purchased by Clorox [F] in 2007). In these cases, again, I allow the  
4 data streams to reveal over time if the company has changed under new ownership rather  
5 than making a subjective assessment of what is happening outside of public view. This  
6 data driven approach provides a clear contrast to the more common, visceral reactions of  
7 many ethical consumers to "blacklist" companies when they "sell out" to larger  
8 corporations (data analyzed through 2017 had the two companies different but closer:  
9 Burt's Bees at a C+ rating compared to Clorox at a D-).

10  
11 This part of the research (connecting brands to companies to parent companies) process  
12 can take up to a quarter of the overall time involved in the research, as there are few  
13 requirements that compel companies to be transparent about which brands they own and  
14 who they themselves are owned by.  
15

## 16 17 18 **Updating The Research** 19

20  
21 While the website and smartphone app are updated whenever it is practical, the printed  
22 version of the research (*The Better World Shopping Guide*) is generally updated on a  
23 biennial basis. This updating process involves a combination of three major efforts to  
24 maintain the relevance and utility of the ratings.  
25

26 First, along with a regular group of volunteers scattered across the US, I visit a handful  
27 of popular supermarkets to compare the brand/company listings under each category in  
28 previous edition with what currently exists on the shelves. I also include a review of a  
29 major big box stores (e.g. Target) and a major online retailer (e.g. Amazon). Volunteers  
30 jot down notes directly in the previous edition and mail me their annotated books. This  
31 allows for the updated ratings tables for each category to better reflect the choices  
32 consumers are facing in the current marketplace.  
33

34 Second, the connections between existing brands and the companies that produce them  
35 are reconfirmed as well as the connections between companies and parent companies.  
36 This is a necessary step due to the relative frequency of mergers (e.g. American Airlines  
37 merging with US Airways), acquisitions (e.g. Unilever acquiring Ben & Jerry's),  
38 separations (e.g. Proctor & Gamble selling off Pringles), etc. New brands and companies  
39 are also traced to their company of origin and/or parent company (e.g. Vitamin Water is  
40 owned by Glaceau which is part of Coca Cola) in order to accurately connect companies  
41 to new products that consumers encounter in the marketplace.  
42

43 Third, the 76 data sources are checked to determine what updated data has been  
44 released by each source, which are in turn added to the ratings database. New sources of  
45 data are collected and evaluated for potential inclusion. Once all of the vetted data  
46 sources have been included and updated, the ratings formula is recalculated to account for  
47 necessary weighting adjustments to reflect any rebalancing needed due to the addition of  
48 newer data.  
49

## 50 51 52 **Understanding, Assessing and Addressing Bias in Ethical** 53 **Rating Systems** 54 55 56 57 58 59 60

1  
2  
3 Building a rating system for ethical consumers with some modicum of accuracy is, as one  
4 might imagine, no small task. While *Better World Shopper* is not the only system of its  
5 kind (there are at least four other similar projects internationally - see Appendix II), there  
6 is still little consensus on how to construct a rating system that will minimize the myriad  
7 biases that plague the efforts to measure corporate impacts on environmental  
8 sustainability and social justice (see Jones 2017). To shed light on how these biases  
9 impact ratings systems like this, I have detailed five of the most challenging biases that  
10 this system currently grapples with and how each is addressed (some more successfully  
11 than others).  
12  
13

### 14 1. *Sparse Data Bias*

15  
16  
17 Many companies are either too small or too recently founded to have much social and/or  
18 environmental impact data being tracked by the data sources investigating these issues.  
19 Because all companies are placed with a score of “0” initially, they may essentially “fly  
20 under the radar” of the rating system for many years before they grow to a size or age that  
21 makes them significant enough in the eyes of the data sources to follow/review/assess.  
22

23 This bias is the is by far the most common in the database. This is in part why the rating  
24 system places companies with little or no data at a tentative “C” grade until more data  
25 becomes available. Since most companies fall into this range, it is the most prudent  
26 assumption to make before having access to more and/or better data. Consumers are also  
27 guided to assume a neutral position when confronted with any brand or company not in  
28 the system.  
29

### 30 2. *Double Counting Bias*

31  
32  
33 As with many research projects that rely on meta-analysis or attempt to synthesize data  
34 from a wide variety of sources, there is no practical way to determine exactly how data  
35 sources overlap in their assessment of companies. As a direct consequence, it is probable  
36 that some data on a company from “Data Source A” overlap with other data from “Data  
37 Source B”. The result of this is an increased likelihood of “double counting”. This means  
38 that some companies with richer data streams may be assessed either more harshly, in the  
39 case of double counted critical data, or, alternatively, more sympathetically, in the case of  
40 double counted laudatory data. It is also possible the companies have a bit of both in their  
41 data stream. This may result in more extreme variation at the top and bottom of the  
42 ratings than is justified relative to those companies with sparse data streams.  
43

44 This type of bias is particularly pernicious and difficult to control for. It may be  
45 partially mitigated through adjusting the point ranges for the grades at either end [see  
46 Checks & Balances #3], but ultimately a secondary research project is needed to identify  
47 data sources that are most vulnerable to double counting and re-weight them accordingly.  
48  
49

### 50 3. *Firewall Bias*

51  
52  
53 The exclusion of any data coming directly from the companies themselves allows for a  
54 kind of firewall to exist between the ratings data and the potential spin/public  
55 relations/advertising/greenwashing efforts of the companies themselves (see Jones 2019).  
56  
57  
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1  
2  
3 While this is the most prudent approach to a data field rife with self-reporting bias, it also  
4 means that companies do not get any credit for legitimate efforts that have no  
5 independent, third party verification. This may limit the ability of the system to  
6 acknowledge in particular the work of smaller companies that likely have more limited  
7 resources to devote to outside certification efforts.  
8

9 The self-reporting data firewall remains so fundamental to the functioning of the  
10 system as a whole, that this potential bias is largely accepted. Until more reliable third  
11 party verification systems exist to account for individual efforts legitimately adopted by  
12 companies, there is no way to include data that places the integrity of the entire rating  
13 system at risk.  
14

#### 15 16 4. *Company Size Bias* 17

18 While smaller, newer companies may remain relatively unscrutinized, larger, older  
19 companies are more likely to be tracked by multiple data sources and this often results in  
20 lower, more critical, ratings.  
21

22 This tendency occurs in most major ethical consumer rating systems almost regardless  
23 of the methodological approach (see Jones 2017). While it may be worth monitoring, it  
24 may also be the case that this kind of “bias” is not inaccurate as much of the research  
25 does point to most of the troubling ethical behavior being linked to larger companies.  
26 Survey reliant rating systems (e.g. *GoodGuide*) suffered from the opposite bias as large  
27 companies that responded to survey inquiries were rewarded for their “transparency” in  
28 self-reporting, while smaller companies with fewer resources that were unable to  
29 complete surveys in a timely manner were downgraded for their non-disclosure or  
30 “secrecy”. There may be a way to compensate for this bias, but it remains difficult to  
31 track at present based on the lack of available data.  
32  
33

#### 34 5. *Meso Level Bias* 35

36 Because this rating system focuses on the (meso level) impacts of companies themselves,  
37 it disregards both the (micro level) impacts of individual products and the (macro level)  
38 impacts of the industries as a whole (see Jones 2019). While both the available data and  
39 the level of consumer engagement both point to company-level ratings as being the most  
40 practical to analyze, it does mean that important analyses at the individual product and  
41 industry levels need to be undertaken by other researchers in the field if the public is  
42 going to have the full picture of the social and environmental implications of their  
43 purchases.  
44

45 It may be possible with enough data to begin to rate whole industries, allowing  
46 consumers to garner a more effective macro level understanding of the relative  
47 responsibility of industries in a prolonged race to the bottom (e.g. petroleum) compared  
48 to those with more positive or mixed dynamics (e.g. outdoor gear, cleaning products). It  
49 may even be possible for another research project to adopt a *Consumer Reports* style  
50 approach to rating the supply chains behind individual products in order to make  
51 recommendations at the product level. However, this research project remains limited to  
52 holding individual companies accountable for their overall social and environmental  
53 practices.  
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## Concluding Thoughts on Better World Shopper

*Better World Shopper* is currently the only rating system of its kind in the US (its only competitor, GoodGuide, created originally at UC Berkeley in 2007, abandoned all company-level environmental and social data from its system in 2017 to instead focus exclusively on health ratings based on individual product ingredients lists). As an app, it has been downloaded over 24,000 times; in its book form, it has sold more than 185,000 copies; and the website no longer tracks how many times it is accessed on a daily basis, but it is safe to say that there is a public demand for this kind of information. While all of the other rating systems are now run by nonprofits (Underwriter Laboratories purchased GoodGuide in 2012), I believe that academics are better positioned to take on this kind of work. A comprehensive system of transparency dealing with complex environmental and social issues in an ever-changing economic landscape requires institutions committed to the pursuit of truth.

Yes, ethical consumerism may be, in part, an exercise that caters to the needs of privileged, upper middle class, highly educated, white men and women shopping at Whole Foods in a handful of primarily wealthy, Anglophone nation-states. And yet, tracking the behavior of otherwise unaccountable economic institutions that are rapidly accruing power in a system of unfettered global capitalism may not be a terrible idea either. Returning to Cory Dologon's (2010) comments on the relationship between public sociology and humanist sociology, I would add that we should strive to have that particular Venn diagram overlap as much as possible. Humanist sociology should be even more publicly-oriented and widely disseminated than it is, and public sociology should consider transformative, civically-engaged, community-oriented projects that help people think more critically about their daily lives and their collective relationship to institutions of power. We cannot afford sociology to become a production-based, utilitarian effort at knowledge accumulation, rather we need to put sociology in people's pockets, integrate it into their regular routines, embrace it because it provides them with the tools they require to contribute to some small part of the solution to these overwhelming social and environmental problems.

On a good day, I see this particular project as laying the groundwork for efforts to democratize our economic system, allowing not just individuals, but local governments, nonprofits, small businesses, colleges, student groups, and, to my surprise, international networks of nuns, to have their collective economic voice heard in a system that otherwise blindly transforms their consumer dollars into tools for increasing social and environmental exploitation. Perhaps framing the marketplace as a space for potential democracy is just a first step to larger, more important conversations that need to be had about how both dollars need to be extricated from our political democracy for it to function properly, and how some of us having ten or one hundred times the economic "votes" of others may be a form of inequality that should be more seriously addressed if we wish democracy to hold any real meaning. And we need public sociology to help us collectively bring these kinds of conversations to the center of our public discourse.

### Notes



1. Two exceptions of note are Green America and B Corp, both of which offer comprehensive certifications for companies. At present, these two ecolabels certify a relatively small (but growing) number of businesses.
2. In this case, I use the traditional research methods definitions of each of these terms: *validity* referring to whether a research approach is measuring what it is intending to measure and *reliability* referring to whether data are consistently measuring the same thing when repeated.
3. Many SRI ratings agencies charge not insignificant subscription fees to have access to some of the data being used to determine the ratings for companies being evaluated. The raw data, however, are typically not provided even at this level of access as it would potentially jeopardize their relationship with their data sources (the companies) by making them vulnerable to their competitors. Additionally, the agencies want to avoid the increased scrutiny that often comes with more detailed transparency.
4. Product data is nearly impossible to keep pace with as products are constantly changed, removed, replaced, and replicated with slightly/greatly varied characteristics. Industry level data allows consumers to gain a macro perspective but cannot typically be mobilized as most consumers cannot afford to boycott whole industries (e.g. apparel, petroleum, automobiles).
5. As of 2017, *GoodGuide* shifted from being an ethical consumer rating system to being focused exclusively on assessing the potential health impacts of product ingredients.

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**TABLES**

**Table 1.** Other Ethical Consumer Rating Systems\*

Rating System	Media Produced	Print Copies Sold	Monthly Website Visitors	Phone App Downloads
<i>Ethical Consumer</i>	magazine, website	30,000/yr	125,000	n/a

<i>Ethical Company Organisation</i>	book, website, phone app	80,000	41,000	2,000
<i>Shop Ethical</i>	book, website, phone app	120,000	35,000	30,000
<i>GoodGuide</i> <sup>5</sup>	website, phone app	n/a	385,000	2,000,000

\*[adapted from Jones 2017]

**Table 2.** Incorporated Social Justice Data Sources

Category	Data Sources	Issues Tracked	Examples
Race, Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· NAACP</li> <li>· Fair Trade Federation</li> <li>· Global Sullivan Principles</li> <li>· Burma Campaign</li> <li>· War on Want</li> <li>· Free2Work Campaign</li> <li>· Political Economy Research Institute</li> <li>· Human Rights Watch</li> <li>· Amnesty International</li> </ul>	diversity, equal opportunity, respect for cultural identities, migrant labor issues, ethnic group discrimination, indigenous rights, genocide, human trafficking, refugees, environmental justice	NAACP’s Opportunity & Diversity Scorecard: Hotel & Lodging Industry  measures racial inclusion and diversity practices
Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Securities &amp; Exchange Commission</li> <li>· Oxfam International</li> <li>· TransFair USA</li> <li>· Fair Labor Association</li> <li>· Clean Clothes Campaign</li> <li>· Labour Behind the Label</li> <li>· AFL-CIO</li> <li>· Jobs with Justice</li> <li>· BCorp</li> </ul>	worker health/safety, sweatshops, child labor, labor organizing rights, bribery, corruption, forced labor, living wage, unions, poverty, working hour limits, excessive executive pay, fair labor practices, efforts reducing global inequality/poverty	Clean Clothes Campaign’s Let’s Clean Up Fashion Report  measures living wages, codes of conduct, and freedom of association

Gender, Sexuality	· Human Rights Campaign	rights of women in the workplace, gender equity, sexual abuse, LGBTQ+ workplace discrimination, right to childcare, forced overtime, women in leadership roles	Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index
	· Intl Labor Rights Forum		
	· Ethical Trading Initiative		
	· Ain't I A Woman Campaign		
	· Maquila Solidarity Network		
	· Corporate Knights · As You Sow		

**Table 3.** Data Source Weighting with Example

Factor	x	Data Source Characteristics	Date Source Example
			Responsible Sourcing Network: Conflict Minerals
Age	1.5	2010s	2016
	1	2000s	
	0.5	pre-2000	
Reputation	1.5	government data	nonprofit
	1	nonprofit data	
	0.5	for-profit data	
Rigor	2	science-based	hybrid model
	1	hybrid model	
	0.5	non-scientific	
Longevity	3	5+ years	2014 - 2016 = 3 yrs
	2	3-4 years	
	1	1-2 years	



Significance	2	challenging criteria	mid-range
	1	mid-range criteria	
	0.5	little or no criteria	1
Breadth	2	1+ category covered	conflict minerals (human rights: multiple sub-categories)
	1	multiple sub-categories	
	0.5	single sub-category	1
Weight Multiplier	-3 to +3 [BWS]		$(1.5*1*1*2*1*1) = 3$
Scale Conversion	0 to 100 points [RSN}		$0 = -3, 50 = 0, 100 = +3$
Company Example: ExxonMobil	6.7/100 [RSN]		$((6.7)-50)*0.06 = -2.598$ BWS = -2.6 points

**Table 4.** Example of Data Points Being Tracked: ExxonMobil

Data Point Tracked	Value	Score	Data Sources
Money spent on lobbying	\$247 million	-8.3	Center for Public Integrity
Global Climate Change Score	35/100	-2.2	CERES
Greenwashing Award	x1	-1.0	CorpWatch
Top companies stopping climate legislation	listed	-2.0	Greenpeace
LGBTQ Equality Index Score	14/100	-4.8	Human Rights Campaign
Top 100 Corporate Criminals	#5	-3.0	Multinational Monitor
Worst Corporations of the Year	x5	-5.9	Multinational Monitor

Money spent on campaign contributions	\$19 million	-3.2	Open Secrets
Top 100 Toxic Air Polluters	#5	-2.0	Political Economy Research Institute
Top 100 Toxic Water Polluters	#19	-1.8	Political Economy Research Institute
Top 100 Toxic Greenhouse Gas Polluters	#4	-2.0	Political Economy Research Institute
Top 12 Corporate Tax Dodgers	listed	-1.0	Rainforest Action Network
Overall Responsibility	F	-2.0	Responsible Shopper
Funders of climate change "junk" science	listed	-3.0	Responsible Shopper
Conflict Minerals Responsibility Score	6.7/100	-2.6	Responsible Sourcing Network
Pick Your Poison Petroleum Industry	bottom	-3.0	Sierra Club
American Legislative Exchange Council	founding member	-6.0	Source Watch
Climate Accountability Scorecard	poor	-4.0	Union of Concerned Scientists
Ongoing Boycotts	x3	-6.0	Corporate Accountability International, Greenpeace, Green America

**Table 5.** Grade Translation Rubric with Example: Gasoline

A+	+25.00 or more
A	+20.00 to +24.99
A-	+14.00 to +19.99

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B+	+9.00 to +13.99	
B	+4.00 to +8.99	Sunoco
B-	+3.00 to +3.99	Petro Canada
C+	+1.00 to +2.99	Citgo, Hess, Ultramar
C	-0.99 to + 0.99	Circle K, Costco
C-	-1.00 to -2.99	Total, Valero, Beacon, Diamond Shamrock, Stop N Go
D+	-3.00 to -3.99	Marathon, Ashland, Speedway, Pilot, SuperAmerica, Flying J
D	-4.00 to -8.99	Conoco, Phillips 66, Jet, Superclean, Tosco, Union 76
D-	-9.00 to -13.99	Shell, BP, Arco
F	-14.00 or less	Exxon, Mobil, Esso, Chevron, Gulf, Texaco, Unocal

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