

Buy-One-Give-One Consumerism and Synthesized Consumer Self-Identity

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The early 19th century English novelist Thomas Carlyle’s fictional philosopher Herr Teufelsdröckh remarks that “Man’s earthly interests ‘all are hooked and buttoned together, and held up by Clothes.’”¹ While at first glance this observation may seem nothing more than an attempt at humor fused with wisdom from an irrelevant age, it might have some relevance, especially in the current atmosphere of rampant consumerism of clothing spurred by evolutions in technology. Certainly clothes and other fashion accessories do not encompass all of humanity’s interests, but they can reveal numerous characteristics of cultures, societies, religions, and other facets of human life. In short, what we wear tells us about who we are. With this all too easily forgotten importance of clothing in mind, it is also essential to evince that clothing trends often develop throughout history depending on culture, technology, and other pressures. The evolution of the industrial economy in the United States has allowed U.S. citizens to purchase apparel in unprecedented bulk, but recently a shift has occurred in the types of products many consumers choose to collect. In 2013 U.S. consumers bought over \$180 billion of apparel from clothing stores, and while traditionally these purchases only served to bolster the U.S. and global economies, consumerist tendencies have now apparently begun to aid more than just economies.²

In 2006, a young entrepreneur, Blake Mycoskie, founded TOMS Shoes to provide an alternative to U.S. consumerism; rather than simply buying shoes, people’s purchases enable the company to also give a pair of shoes to a person in need around the world. Since the explosion of TOMS’ popularity, dozens of companies have followed in the footsteps of the shoe company to form the buy-one give-one (BOGO) model into a social entrepreneurship movement. Millions of consumers, many of them millennials, participate in this model of purchasing products as a method of seeking to alleviate suffering and diminish economic inequality throughout the world. Still, it would be remiss of society not to question the feasibility, sustainability, and effectiveness of this movement. Some scholars and journalists, like Christopher Marquis and Andrew Park, have produced research on BOGO philanthropy and the structure and history of this movement. Others, like Diana Januzzi, have examined the effectiveness of the BOGO movement in achieving results in international development. Yet few have focused on why the movement has exploded in the United States. People have examined the producer, but not the consumer.

Through an interdisciplinary approach based primarily on a review of existing research on BOGO companies and cultural trends, an understanding of the consumer of such goods will hopefully become clearer. Because objectively determining the motivations and self-identities of individuals remains unfeasible, this project does not claim to make any universal conclusions about all BOGO consumers. Rather, this research attempts to examine one of many possible motivations of BOGO consumers and consider how this might reflect cultural shifts. Furthermore, due to the general lack of credible available research on the impact of BOGO development, these general cultural shifts lack

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Restartus* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1899), 56.

² “Clothing store sales in the United States from 1992 to 2013 (in billion U.S. dollars),” accessed December 8, 2014, <http://www.statista.com/statistics/197644/annual-clothing-store-sales-in-the-us-since-1992/>.

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understanding through the perspectives of the recipients of BOGO aid. More research, independent of BOGO companies, is needed to understand the impact of BOGO development as perceived by the aid recipients. Primarily though, this is an examination of a shift in the culture of U.S. philanthropy and international development practices and ultimately an encouragement of BOGO consumers to carefully reflect on their consumption and consider their consumer responsibilities.

The contemporary U.S. consumer lives in a technological world that not only eases the process of purchasing clothing, but also a world where consumerism has reached the heights of the sacred, and one must participate in the ritual of purchasing in order to aid in the development of their self-identity.³ The development of BOGO philanthropy in the last decade has provided an opportunity for U.S. consumers to develop a new version of this consumer identity. Understanding and unpacking this identity will help to shape a fuller understanding of some BOGO consumers and their possible motivations for participating in BOGO consumerism. Through purchasing BOGO apparel products, U.S. consumers appear to have the opportunity to easily craft an identity that reflects the individual self and is based on a care for others. This identity and its development presents one understanding of a possible motivation for BOGO consumerism and necessitates further consumer responsibility and critical self-reflection by consumers on what this might mean for personal and cultural understandings of philanthropy and international development practiced through consumption.

Origins of Consumer Culture and the BOGO Model

Before we understand this BOGO consumer identity, the sector itself must be surveyed. After a trip to Argentina in 2006, entrepreneur Blake Mycoskie founded TOMS with the simple concept of selling shoes one day and using the profits to give a pair of shoes to people in need around the world the next day.⁴ The creation of this business model of giving and its subsequent success initiated the BOGO business model and its growth throughout the United States. Because of its relatively recent formation, a substantial amount of research on the sector does not yet exist; however, Christopher Marquis and Andrew Park, in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, have produced the most comprehensive and penetrating review of the sector to date and have identified common characteristics of BOGO companies like TOMS, as well as Warby Parker, a high-fashion eyeglass company, and The Naked Hippie, a t-shirt company. Their findings suggest the model succeeds most with consumer products, specifically apparel.⁵ Consumers can more easily grasp the idea of BOGO philanthropy knowing someone in need around the world will hold a product similar to the product purchased. While variances exist among the types of products and services given as a result of the purchase, the BOGO movement broadly exists as a philanthropic and capitalist venture that uses the profits from the sale of primarily apparel items to provide essential international development services. Still, this type of business model likely could not exist without the development of modern

³ Dell deChant, *The Sacred Santa*, (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 41.

⁴ Blake Mycoskie. *Start Something That Matters* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2011), 6.

⁵ Christopher Marquis and Andrew Park. "Inside the Buy-One Give-One Model," in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2014, 30.

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consumerism linked with the self-identity of the consumer and possible only through advances in technology

The development of the power of apparel for individuals in all classes of U.S. society stems directly from the introduction of new forms of technology that ease the production and consumption of apparel and the modern cultural priority of the individual. Throughout the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, the inventions of the cotton gin,⁶ the sewing machine,⁷ and the factory system⁸ dramatically increased the production of textiles, particularly those composed of cotton, and boosted the total amount of garments available to the general public, especially the burgeoning middle class.⁹ With more money to purchase clothing and other material items in a cultural, political, and economic atmosphere that promoted individualism, the U.S. middle class in the 19th century began to form a cultural relationship between consumption and the identity of the self. U.S. consumers “came to view themselves as consumers, not only of political ideas and manufactured goods but also of identity itself.”¹⁰ Because individual choice reflected the character and personality of the individual, the individual choice inherent in consumption fashioned a bond between the identity of the self and the products consumed by the self. U.S. society began to identify the highly-valued individual with the products the individual owned, with clothes being some of the most public of those products. This marriage of consumerism and self-identity dispersed into all segments of society as people of all races, genders, and classes consumed goods in order to present their individual identity.¹¹ With the persistent development of technology in the 20th and 21st centuries, U.S. consumers have more access to immense amounts of clothing, and the continued celebration and proliferation of consumer culture has only deepened the connection of clothing and the self.

Consumer Culture and Individual Identity

With more clothing and money available today, the acquisition and display of clothing in the 21st century U.S. has garnered ontological and even spiritual meaning. In some instances, an individual’s clothing is a “measure of [one’s] very existence.”¹² Material goods, clothing in particular, have become so prevalent and desired in U.S. culture that they do more than act as signifiers of individual identity; they have in some instances become regarded as intrinsically linked with the self. Importantly though, it is not just the wearing of clothes, but also the poise and attitude of the presentation of these clothes that

⁶ Beverly Lemire, *Cotton* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 65.

⁷ J. Anderson Black and Marge Garland, *The History of Fashion* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1975), 244.

⁸ Stephen Yafa. *Big Cotton* (New York: Viking, 2005).

⁹ Cindy S. Aron, “The Evolution of the Middle Class,” in *A Companion to 19th-Century America*, ed. William L. Barney (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 179.

¹⁰ Robert M. S. McDonald, “Early National Politics and Power, 1800-1824,” in *A Companion to 19th-Century America*, ed. William Barney (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 12.

¹¹ Peter Stearns, *Consumerism in World History* (New York: Routledge Books, 2006), 56.

¹² Cunningham and Lab, Introduction to *Dress and Popular Culture*, 1.

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matters.¹³ In his argument that consumerism in the U.S. has reached the level of religion, Dell deChant identifies the act of purchasing material items as the main ritual in a culture founded on consumption.¹⁴ In order to be identified fully as a valuable individual in the community, a person must take part in the ritual of consumption. Thus, the development of technology in the textile and other industries of the U.S. and the linkage of self-identity with consumption have jointly led to the understanding of the purchase and the presentation of clothing as central to individual identity. In this context of consumerist culture, BOGO consumerism was born.

Because participation in apparel consumerism helps form self-identity, BOGO consumerism allows consumers to incorporate a care for others into the personal identity they develop through their clothing. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek describes purchasing BOGO products as a process for consumers to “struggle against the evils ultimately caused by capitalist consumerism” and to simultaneously participate in capitalist structures.¹⁵ While Žižek’s distaste for capitalism may sway his perception of BOGO consumerism, he adroitly suggests some consumers may purchase BOGO items as a means of redressing their capitalist actions, which may have negative global economic consequences. However, he fails to address how BOGO consumerism exists as more than just a process, but actually allows for a fusion of ideals to take place in the identity of the consumer. Sociologist Helmuth Berking asserts that, in general in modern Western society, “[t]he ego’s self-realization claims... are not worth anything at all without care and concern for ‘others’ and nature.”¹⁶ Rather than people wanting to develop their identity based solely on their inward traits, it seems that some people want to cultivate their identity with a foundation of caring for others. BOGO companies have taken advantage of this increasingly others-oriented identity to market products that allow people to express this new portion of their identity. They provide consumers with an opportunity to purchase a piece of clothing and to “also purchas[e] an identity, namely, that of caring about poor people, that of having cosmopolitan global awareness, and even that of having critical consciousness.”¹⁷ BOGO consumerism enables and reflects a new consumer identity found in clothing that appears to bond that personal identity with a communal care for others. Should consumers continue to embrace this synthesis of their identity as mediated through consumption? Or should they question its implications?

The synthesized self-identity of consumers appears to simplify care for others, as it seemingly combines the needs of the consumer with the needs of others, and this simplification appears to be beneficial to all parties. When developing the BOGO model, Mycoskie and TOMS celebrated the power of self-identity predicated on consumption to benefit others. In his explanation of the early planning of TOMS, Mycoskie shares his basis for the creation of the BOGO model: “Why not come up with a solution that guaranteed a constant flow of shoes, rather than being dependent on kind people making

¹³ Douglas Kellner “Madonna, Fashion, and Identity,” in *On Fashion*, ed. by Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferris, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 176.

¹⁴ Dell deChant, *The Sacred Santa*, (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 41.

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, (London: Verso, 2010), 356.

¹⁶ Helmuth Berking, *Sociology of Giving*, trans. by Patrick Camiller, (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1999), 151.

¹⁷ Hickel and Kahn, “The culture of capitalism and the crisis of critique,” 217.

decisions?”¹⁸ According to Mycoskie, not all people will act with compassion in response to issues of global inequality, but most people in the U.S. will participate in the cult of consumption. Mycoskie’s entrepreneurial experience made him aware of the immense power of consumer culture in the U.S., and he wanted to exploit consumer desires to craft a certain type of self-identity through apparel. The BOGO movement has capitalized on these desires, as it has allowed for a development of a new self-identity based on an entwining of consumption and care for others. In this sense Mycoskie is a revolutionary for good and should be applauded for introducing the BOGO business model into the market. At the same time, however, consumers should take a more critical look at the facets of this market-based care for others.

Consequences of BOGO Consumerism

While BOGO consumerism empowers people to develop a self-identity linked to their care for others that seemingly allows for easy mutual benefit, this identity and care for others is possible only through a material product. The BOGO movement is predicated on the purchase of material items: “you help the cause each time you buy a product.”¹⁹ This reliance on the product problematizes the consumer self-identity apparently rooted in a care for others, because the care for others is not fully rooted in the individual. TOMS recently released a handbag printed with the text “YOU’LL BE AMAZED AT WHAT THIS BAG CAN DO,” and followed this release of the bag with a homepage banner stating “TOMS BAGS SUPPORT MATERNAL HEALTH.”²⁰ This product and parallel messaging suggests the global development done results not simply from the consumer or the BOGO company, but from the product itself. While consumers have developed a new self-identity integrated with a care for others, this care for others does not come directly from the consumers. Just as the development of consumer self-identity relies on products, so too does the care for others of BOGO consumerism. Proponents of BOGO consumerism would argue that this blending of care for others with a consumer product highlights the benefit of BOGO consumerism, but this amalgamation might also lead to unintentional shifts in the culture of giving and humanitarian action.

As stated earlier by Blake Mycoskie, the founder of the BOGO movement, BOGO philanthropy is not dependent on kindness or compassion; it is dependent on cold, material consumption. Although BOGO consumers provide funding for global development projects through their purchases, their philanthropy needs no kindness. The word “philanthropy” literally means “love of humankind;” however, BOGO consumerism does not need any love, kindness, or compassion in order to be successful.²¹ This lack of compassion in exchanges of material goods might seem not to matter if people living in poverty benefit from the material consumption. However, only viewing the results of BOGO consumerism from the perspective of the aid recipient discounts

¹⁸ Mycoskie, *Start Something That Matters*, 6.

¹⁹ Joe Marconi, *Cause Marketing*, (Chicago: Dearborn Trade Pub., 2002), 77.

²⁰ TOMS, TOMS Shoes LLC, Accessed Mar. 22, 2015, <http://www.toms.com/women/khaki-youll-be-amazed-transport-tote-bag>. See Appendix D.

²¹ “Philanthropy,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Accessed Mar. 28, 2015, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=philanthropy>.

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how giving or consuming without compassion might affect the soul of the giver. BOGO consumers must ask themselves whether or not they want to act in philanthropy only through a material product or whether they prefer to also give with the warmth of compassion and kindness. They should reflect on their possible new synthesized consumer identity in order to ensure a complete and balanced way of caring for others that is not just about wearing clothes, but might also retain some form of compassionate giving.

Perhaps, then, it seems that Thomas Carlyle's Herr Teufelsdröckh might be correct: the material product of clothing might just hold together all of "Man's earthly interests."²² Not only has clothing and other apparel become a major marker and former of identity, but it is now firmly a medium for social change. This binding of clothes, identity, and care for others through BOGO products has created a unique opportunity for people to leverage the power of consumption to do good. It has also necessitated a consumer responsibility to reflect on this unprecedented power and identity. Some advice from the founder of the BOGO movement might help BOGO consumers understand how best to practice this method of doing good and understand their roles in this new model of international development. Reflecting on his transformation into the leader of the BOGO sector, Mycoskie realized that he wanted to simplify his life and reduce his number of possessions. He asks his readers, "How much do *you*²³ really need in life? How many clothes?"²⁴ Mycoskie seems to want consumers to follow him in reflecting on the value of material goods like clothing; and it seems that this call for reflection should apply to BOGO products as well. The power of clothing can certainly be used in support of global development. However, in using that power, consumers should also reflect on changes in philanthropy, international development, and their identities, in order to ensure that they do not unintentionally lose compassion in the midst of their consumption.

²² Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Restartus* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1899), 56.

²³ author's emphasis

²⁴ Mycoskie, *Start Something That Matters*, 115.

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