Social Media For Social Change: Sustainability-Based Community in a Sustainable World

Robert Kozinets, York University, Canada
Frank-Martin Belz, Technische Universität München, Germany

The presentation overviews relevant extant research on online communities devoted to self- or social betterment. It then considers the relationship of so-called “intentional,” engaged online (and online/offline) communities to issues of sustainability. We then offer our observations, findings, and analysis from netnographic and blended ethnographic/netnographic fieldwork.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/16212/volumes/v38/NA-38

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Social Media for Social Change: Sustainability-based Community in a Sustainable World”
Robert V. Kozinets, York University, Canada
Frank-Martin Belz, Technische Universität München, Germany

As of 2010, the important role of social media in fostering and facilitating consumer engagement in political and marketing campaigns, and in facilitating other forms of activism are indelibly established. This presentation seeks to consolidate, broaden, and develop the view that social media and online communities can be useful sites of social betterment that consumer researchers should include in their studies.

We place our presentation in the context of sustainability concerns, and contribute to this literature by charting the intersections between social media and sustainable consumption. Overridingly, our concern is a practical one. How might online communities and their constituents help foster a more sustainable consumption style and a more sustainable consumer culture? This is a large question; in this session we aim to start the discussion by recognizing and connecting research streams, offering initial findings, and suggesting particular paths.

The presentation has three main sections. First, there is an overview of extant research on social media with a focus on the alleviation of social problems and the promotion of consumer behaviors that lead to self- or social betterment. Research in the area increasingly suggests that online communities act as locations for the personal and collective enactment of social betterment. Our necessarily broad and brief overview looks at three broad categories of social media-social connection: (1) altering institutional relationships, (2) offering emotional benefits, and (3) encouraging social involvement. We provide numerous references and pragmatic examples about these institutional, emotional, and social effects, across a variety of cases.

Next we consider the relationship of online communities—and online/offline community combinations—to issues of ecological orientation or sustainability. We explore how the role of local, involved, engaged communities has been increasingly invoked as the key to the transition to a more ecologically sustainable society. We are concerned with the specific and more generalizable role of intentional communities, which are widely viewed and held up publicly as a hotbed of political innovation and organized political influence.

We then offer initial observations and findings from net-nographic and blended ethnographic/netnographic fieldwork on several of these communities in Europe and North America. Our initial findings regarding sustainability-oriented social media tell us four things. First, social media help consumers focus their awareness and attention together on particular options. Second, social media carry conservative values, in that they seek to foster more traditional forms of community. Third, online and offline media and community work together in new, important, and evolving ways. Finally, a “customizing” and “segmenting” of communal types of participation was evident in the diverse space of the Internet. As we continue to collect data and analyze it (the next stage of data collection is from June-September 2010), we expect these initial findings to deepen and broaden.

“Transformative Outcomes of Identification Formation and Narrative Transparency”
Melea Press, University of Wyoming, USA
Eric J. Arnould, University of Wyoming, USA

Moving toward greater sustainability at any level of society (individual, community, institutional) involves transformations on an individual and collective level. Transformations have been discussed in literature on consumption communities, in policy literature, and in managerial literature. Furthermore, some have shown that the relationships built between constituents and organizations can be evocative and transformational (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002), yet the process of how these connections form has not been explored.

This presentation will look at both sides of identification formation, and how identification can lead individuals down the road towards meaningful connections with organizations, and ultimately to personal transformation, in this case towards more sustainable consumption patterns. From the constituent side, we will examine what drives these relationships to form and the value and behavior change that ensue. Then, from the organizational side, we look at what drives constituents toward the organization. We show that narrative (as opposed to measured) transparency and connection to long-standing cultural values provide a route for constituents to form meaningful relationships with organizations.

First, with data from constituents in two different contexts, we present a model of identification formation. The first data set contains 18 longitudinal interviews with members of a Community Supported Agriculture program, and the second data set contains 41 cross-sectional interviews with employees of an advertising agency. Using this new theoretical framework that brings together the concepts of identification formation and participation, we show three different modes of identification formation: Epiphany, Assimilation, and Exploration. We also show two conduits for participation, that is, through formal and informal means, and we reveal the role of productive consumption in personal transformation. We then demonstrate that when individuals identify with an organization, they take on the values of the organization as illustrated by individual behavior change.

Next, we use a third data set compiled from 50 Community Supported Agriculture websites to illustrate the importance of narrative transparency in expressing the values of the organizations to constituents. Transparency information is typically communicated through reporting of facts and figures. On CSA websites, we find that transparency is communicated through personal narrative, that is, through detailed and personal stories of activities on the farm. This data set also reveals the inadvertent way organizations connect to deeply held cultural values to build meaningful relationships with constituents, as well as legitimacy for the market form.

This research shows processes on both the constituent and the organization side of identification formation. It also shows how individuals transform their values and behaviors through closer relationships with model organizations.
References