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Negotiating Sustainable Consumption Practices in Online Communities

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Introduction

In western societies, consumerism has become so heavily woven into ‘the very fabric of modern day life’, to the extent that we are now said to be living in a *consumer culture* (Miles, 1998, p.1). Indeed, consumption is increasingly recognised for its social and cultural significance in society and from a capitalist perspective with an eye for profit, it is often described as something auspicious and rosy. On the other side of the coin, however, companies’ production processes and consumers’ consumption practices place formidable pressure on the earth’s natural resources. With our everyday conventions becoming increasingly demanding of natural resources and our expectations of ‘comfort, cleanliness and convenience’ increasing, the environment is inevitably compromised (Shove, 2003, p.395).

At the same time, environmentally responsible (or sustainable) consumption is understood to provide an alternative approach that, in one form or another, attempts to *reduce* the negative impact of consumption on the environment. Over the past 30-40 years, the rise of environmentally responsible consumption has gained considerable momentum particularly within Western societies and with it considerable interest in academic research. Until recently, research has typically focused on either the agency of the individual consumer or the notion of environmentally responsible collectives. Whilst these studies have enriched our understanding of environmentally responsible consumption, further research has begun to recognise the value of practice theory and how it can be applied to the topic of sustainability (Shove, 2003). Following a practice theoretical approach, research concerned with the issue of sustainability has been able to move beyond ‘mono causal’ explanations of individual behaviour and explorations of *relatively* homogenised and often marginalised consumer collectives to explore, on a much broader scale, the workings of ordinary, routine and often resource intensive practices of everyday life (Shove, 2003). Such research has explored whether and/or how such conventional practices may be transformed into more sustainable forms (Shove and Walker, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011; Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014).

The aim of this research project is to understand how consumers cope with environmental issues on a daily basis. Whilst exploring the ordinary and often habitual practices of consumers, this study places emphasis on the active negotiation of sustainability within their everyday lives. In pursuance of this, the study explores the discussions between members of an on-line forum dedicated to living sustainably, drawing upon practice theory. The next section explores the approaches adopted in previous consumer research studies, in the context of environmentally responsibly consumption, before outlining, in the third section what practice theory has to offer.

Recognising the complexity of environmentally responsible consumption

Early research has considered the concept of environmentally responsible consumption from the individual consumer’s perspective. Many of these studies attempted to define and/or predict environmentally responsible consumer behaviour, based largely on the assumption that environmentally responsible consumption can be understood in terms of the *measurement* of certain individual traits including consumers’ demographics and psychographics (see Kilbourne and Beckmann, 1998 for a critique of this approach). However, these studies were found to be ‘frequently inconclusive and sometimes contradictory’ (Kilbourne and Beckmann, 1998, p.515).

The focus of research broadened to explore the relationship between certain individual traits (i.e. knowledge and their perception of environmentally responsible products) and environmentally responsible consumption. From this perspective, consumers' environmental consumption behaviour is perceived to be a direct result of their knowledge, beliefs, values and attitudes, 'constrained by various contextual 'barriers'' (Hargreaves, 2011, p.82; Kilbourne and Beckmann, 1998). These studies began to reveal the difficulties encountered by consumers in their attempt to consume more sustainably. Still, by placing emphasis on the traits of individual consumers, these studies have effectively isolated consumers from their social, cultural and historical backgrounds (Dolan, 2002), thereby ignoring the complexity of consumption. Indeed, environmentally responsible consumption is an inherently 'complex form of consumer behaviour', that can be enacted in a myriad of ways, reflecting the motivational, practical and moral issues and personal conflict of environmentally responsible behaviour that consumers endure (Moisander, 2007, p.404).

While a considerable body of research has placed emphasis on individual choice, Moraes (formerly Bekin) and colleagues (see Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin, 2007; Moraes, Szmigin and Carrigan, 2010; Moraes, Carrigan and Szmigin, 2012) have explored the collective actions and strategies of *new consumption communities*¹, to understand how consumers' collectively manage their impact on the environment. By adopting an ethnographic approach, engaging with the communities and becoming physically engrossed in their day-to-day living, the authors are able to provide detailed accounts of the *lived experience* of sustainable consumption practices within such community settings. In comparison to earlier environmental research that focused on consumers' attitudes and beliefs, their approach yields a multi-dimensional perspective of sustainable consumption; which illuminates the diverse ways in which consumers integrate sustainability into their lives. Across these studies, the scholars demonstrate how, by living *off-grid* and engaging in sustainable practices collectively, consumers are able to take personal responsibility for their carbon footprint and engender more sustainable forms of consumption (i.e. by producing some of their own foods), than would otherwise be possible at the individual level. Within these studies the collaborative efforts of community members is supported by the physical boundaries of the communities. Thus *place* appears to be fundamental to the development of these communities; strengthening communal 'ties and norms' as well as their ability to become re-engaged in the production process (Moraes et al., 2010, p.290). However, these studies focused on marginalised consumers, in the sense that, the communities explored are considered to be *less* mainstream in their outlook and approach to life and *more* independent from the marketplace than the average consumer. Consequently, as the authors point out, it would be impractical for *individual* consumers living within mainstream society to become sustainable to the same extent (Bekin et al., 2007), which provides the point of departure for this paper. This study aims to build upon Bekin et al.'s (2007) research by looking into the diverse ways in which perhaps *more* mainstream consumers negotiate sustainability within their everyday consumption practices. The next section examines the theoretical underpinning of this research, practice theory, followed by an overview of the methodology.

Practice theory

Practice theory, established primarily within the field of sociology, embodies multiple perspectives from various authors including, Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault and more recently,

¹ Defined as 'ranging from those communities with limited direct involvement in the production process, that is Fairtrade Town steering groups, to those highly committed to various interrelated societal issues, that is intentional sustainable communities, in which it is possible to find many 'ethical simplifiers'' (Bekin et al., 2007, p.275).

work by Schatzki and Reckwitz. In his fairly recent formulation of practice theory, Reckwitz (2002, p.249) defines a practice as ‘a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge’, defined in other terms as, forms of competence, material objects and meaning (Ropke, 2009). These basic assumptions and principles that practice theories share have been adopted and developed in the field of consumer behaviour, thereby providing a *new* perspective to the study of consumption (Warde, 2005). From this perspective, the analytical focus shifts away from the individual and ‘the *acquisition* of specific devices and commodities’ (Shove, 2003, p.395). Rather, it focuses instead on the interplay and the ‘dynamic relationship’ *between* material objects, forms of competence and meaning (Shove and Pantzar, 2005, p.45). Therefore, in using practice theory, it is the relationship between individuals, material objects and various forms of competence that becomes significant to the researcher.

Methodology

The study is based on a netnographic research methodology; netnography is ‘an adaptation of participant-observational ethnographic procedures’ to study the cultures and communities that have emerged through the Internet (Kozinets, 2010, p.74). Developed in the field of marketing and consumer research, netnography has gained popularity in consumer research studies across a diverse range of subjects (Kozinets, 2001, 2002; Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003; Cova and Pace, 2006; Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006). Still, very few studies have used netnography in research on sustainable consumption.

The community explored was established in 2006 and currently consists of approximately 6,221 registered members worldwide. It is relatively active, with a total of 360,648 posts within a total of 23,367 threads, with messages posted daily. The community is designed to help consumers in their efforts to lead a more sustainable lifestyle, through the dissemination of knowledge, ideas, opinions and experiences relating to environmental issues, current environmentally focused events and their sustainable practices, through the forum or in some cases, members’ personal blogs. Members of the community are diverse, in terms of their skills, knowledge and experiences relating to environmental issues and their engagement in sustainable consumption practices.

Similar to ethnographic fieldwork, Kozinets (2010) asserts that the participatory role is *necessary* in order for the netnographer to develop a deeper, more profound cultural understanding of the community he/she wishes to investigate. Before introducing myself and disclosing my identity as a researcher, I began to familiarise myself with the community; their language, knowledge, norms, and followed members’ personal blogs as a means to develop a basic cultural understanding of the community under study. Permission was then sought from the forum administrators to use the community as a basis for academic research and informed consent has been granted from the participants that are referred to directly. Netnographic research is currently on-going and is anticipated to continue for a period of approximately twelve months.

In line with a netnographic research approach, I have and continue to *observe* the community; through reading relevant discussions that have/ are taking place (including those dating back to when the community first became established and more recent discussions) and have gradually started to get involved in their conversations. Furthermore, I have engaged in conversation with several members of the community through the forum’s personal message (PM) system, some of which are still ongoing. Alongside my involvement with the

community online, I have also started to participate in a number of the practices identified within the community, as a means to provide a greater understanding and appreciation of such practices.

Various *on-topic* discussion threads have been read repeatedly. After these discussions had been examined, the researcher began to establish and explore any connections found between the analysed discussion threads. The next section provides a preliminary analysis of *some* of the practices identified so far; namely consuming responsibly and being resourceful and becoming more self-sufficient.

Analysis of findings

The online community represents a place whereby tangible records of members' experiences, opinions, stories, conversations, ideas and practices have accumulated over the course of the community's existence. This material provides us with an understanding of what sustainability 'is' for members of the community and an insight into how it unfolds within their lives. Within the following discussion, it is important to recognize that, what members *do* is, influenced by their current circumstances; where they live, who they live with, past experience, relations, sentiments, their knowledge, skills and ways of doing (for instance). Nevertheless, sustainability is understood to be a collective pursuit within the community.

For the online community members, sustainability is always a 'work-in-progress'. This is palpable within the continual flow of conversation surrounding ways to deal with environmental issues such as environmental degradation, pollution, resource depletion and waste. Through their engagement with others in the community, members have collectively questioned many of their ordinary consumption practices and deliberated over the various different ways in which they can and do reduce their impact on the environment. Within this discussion, we shall firstly introduce and discuss some ways in which members consume responsibly and resourcefully through practicing 'unit watch'. Secondly, we shall discuss some *forms* of self-sufficiency, through which sustainability is practiced amongst community members.

Unit watch is described and perceived by members as a practice that should be performed *periodically*, as a means to develop a fairly accurate understanding of their energy (and sometimes water) consumption. Evelyn, who introduced the practice of watching units to the community encourages members to 'pick a day & a rough time frame, either morning or afternoon', record their gas and/or electricity and (if desired) water meter readings and calculate their consumption on a weekly basis, before reporting their consumption within the community. David, who has been monitoring his consumption for over ten years, has indicated that he records his meter readings, 'around 7:00am on a Monday' which, forms a part of his 'morning coffee making routine'. Another member reported recording her readings on a Friday afternoon, after work and associated the practice with the beginning of the weekend. Whilst some members have dedicated themselves and allocated time within their weekly routines, as a means to engage in the practice *properly*, some members reported that they had *forgotten* to take their readings, which can have implications for their involvement in the practice.

By recording their units on the forum, there is a sense in which members are engaging in the practice together. Whilst the community has no *physical* presence, through their involvement *online*, members collectively share their weekly energy consumption (whether they are

considered to be relatively high or low), discuss any encounters they may have experienced that either increase or decrease their usage and offer support to one other.

The relative significance of recording and monitoring the number of ‘units’ consumed on a weekly basis is tied to the *need to reduce* one’s energy consumption. Inevitably then, *unit watching* extends and intervenes into many aspects of daily life. Focusing on electricity, for instance, it is understood that the *process* of consuming electricity is, *mediated* by household appliances (i.e. kettles, electric shower units, fridges, freezers, washing machines, dishwashers, lights and televisions) or the central heating system. Therefore, whilst engaging in the practice of unit watching, members attempt to ‘take control’ of their consumption by experimenting with and making changes to the ways in which they perform ordinary everyday practices that require or necessitate the use of such appliances and/or the central heating system. For instance, lowering the temperature on the thermostat, adjusting the timings and the heat controller on the boiler, fitting curtains to windows and doors to reduce/prevent draughts (and thus *reduce* the need for central heating), using timers (so more energy-demanding appliances can operate on Economy 7), changing all light bulbs within the home from filament lighting to energy saving CFLs or LED equivalents, manipulating or shortening cycles on washing machines and switching all lights and appliances off (from the main switch) when not in use.

Some members have reduced their consumption through other means that require more expertise and prowess, by connecting the shower’s extractor fan to a solar circuit and operating a slow cooker using solar energy, for instance. Furthermore, a number of members have reported using individual appliance monitors to understand how much electricity certain appliances consume and how they harness this information to see if they can lower the amount of units they consume on a weekly basis. The various approaches listed here through which members *try* to bridle their consumption, demonstrate varying levels of know-how and forms of competence. Moreover, how frequently they are performed differs considerably and thus, each approach is more or less demanding within their daily/weekly routines.

Through exploring the discussions within the online community forum, it becomes clear that some members have found it challenging to control and reduce their household consumption within their everyday life. For instance, David stated ‘the big hitter days at David Towers are Sunday (Sunday roast – heavy use of oven) and Monday (washing day – washing machine and occasional dryer)’, indicating how routine practices have an inevitable impact on consumers’ ability to reduce their energy consumption. Similarly, in response to his revelations regarding the units consumed around Christmas time, the same member stated, ‘of course we had guests, lots of people having showers, lots of computer time, lots of washing, cooking and a few Christmas lights and some cold weather but that is appalling. My only consolation is that it all goes to Ecotricity’. Within these quotations, it is possible to discern how society’s conventions of comfort, cleanliness and convenience (Shove, 2003) persist/creep into members’ homes. Whilst members are mindful of the impact of using various appliances and the central heating system through their engagement in unit watching, they have found it difficult to adhere to their practices of consuming responsibly and resourcefully. For instance, the first quotation reinforces the material/physical value of the washing machine; for *convenience* purposes. Furthermore, amongst ordinary household practices of cooking and washing, the second quotation highlights ideas and perceptions surrounding what it means to take care of guests within one’s home, calling attention to the *need* for a *comfortable* environment. Moreover, it raises ideas surrounding cleanliness and practices of cleanliness (when to shower and understanding levels of cleanliness that are and aren’t acceptable in society).

Nonetheless, members have begun to create their *own* conventions and practices and introduce *new* meanings to some ordinary practices, within the online community. For instance, as a result of members' involvement in unit watch, practices associated with keeping warm within the home have increasingly become associated with materials such as 'body warmers', 'jumpers', 'quilts', 'curtains' and 'hot water bottles'. Similarly, it appears that some members have considered and possibly changed their routines as a result of their engagement in the practice of unit watching. Tanya commented 'looks like hot water is my biggest problem then as this week I've only been putting it on for an hour or so every couple of days rather than having it on the twice a day timer. Looks like time to change my bathing habits (to evenings rather than mornings so I don't need the timer switch)'.

In terms of ordinary practices and the objects consumed within them, one member in particular, Evelyn, has conveyed *new* meanings relating to certain objects and practices, which appear to stem from her involvement in and commitment to the practice of watching units. Negative connotations are attached to certain appliances and objects within the home, through the use of the metaphor 'unit gobblers' (to refer to the process of heating water in a washing cycle, computers and power showers, for instance) and through referring to household *objects*, in terms of the amount of energy they have consumed. Evelyn's turn of phrase, demonstrates how, in this context, sustainability is always a 'work-in-progress', since many appliances ingrained within the workings of daily life, will invariably consume units.

Another practice through which members of the online community live more sustainable lives is through engaging in one or more self-sufficient practices. To varying degrees, some members are involved in the practice of growing their own fruit, vegetables, herbs and flowers through different means; allotments, greenhouses, vertical gardens and home vegetable gardens. Within the discussion threads, great significance is attached to the *process of doing*; i.e. growing one's own food, with less emphasis on the 'end' product. Further, members demonstrate their differing levels of competence; the tacit and explicit knowledge and the skills and experience they have gained and established through the process of growing their own food through the phrases and terms used, such as 'legume beds', 'sowing', 'raised beds', 'mulch', 'strimming' and 'bindweed'. Within one thread in particular, it is presumed that members have the knowledge and are already familiar with the *in's and the out's* of the practice, for instance how to sow seeds, knowing what is planted indoors and outdoors, how to nurture your soil and produce your organic matter etc.

This approach to sustainability is not about consumers divesting themselves or about *doing without*, but about *doing with nature*, which requires a reorganization of daily practices, planning, the necessary tools and the know-how embodied within the practice.

For a number of members, the practice of growing your own foods, in particular, is part of a self-sufficient cycle, which links a number of practices together, some of which extend into the familiar practices associated with permaculture; making use of one's waste through home composting, harvesting rainwater, making use of 'greywater' and cooking, for instance. Within the online community, Robert's post advising 'green beginners' demonstrates how various practices are linked together in some ways.

...Compost your kitchen peelings, fruit skins, shredded paper, etc, etc, rather than throwing it into landfill. If you're aiming for a small holding eventually you need to be looking at minimising your waste stream by consuming as little as possible but also taking charge of, and making use of, what waste products you do generate to help "close the loop"... Following on from composting, grow some (or all) of your own fruit and veg, and then use this in homemade foods. (Robert).

Again, this *cyclical* process demonstrates how sustainability can become a work-in progress. However, it can be more or less demanding depending on the amount of food one grows and the extent to which the other related practices are performed.

Discussion

Drawing upon practice theory, this research seeks to develop an understanding of how perhaps more ‘mainstream’ consumers cope with environmental issues on a daily basis. The preliminary findings discussed here, have begun to demonstrate the many ways in which these consumers negotiate sustainability within their everyday lives. Through using, reducing, adapting, combining and/or transforming various material objects or the ways in which they are used, consumers are able to engage in everyday practices in a more sustainable manner. The two sustainable consumption practices identified here; self-sufficiency and consuming responsibly and resourcefully have begun to demonstrate various interlinked and dispersed forms of competence that together give *new* meanings to their actions as consumers. Furthermore, these practices demonstrate how both individual interests and *ways of doing* transpire within the community and work towards their *collective* goals. This discussion provides a preliminary analysis after conducting only five months of netnographic fieldwork. It is anticipated that these preliminary themes may well change over the course of the next twelve months of netnographic fieldwork.

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