The role of communities in sustainable consumption and well-being: literature review

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Abstract:

This paper introduces the theoretical framework of a multi-year research exploring the role of communities in transition toward sustainable consumption. Previous research did not address how community membership possibly informs, inspires, encourages and instructs individuals in developing sustainable lifestyles. To address this gap we design the conceptual foundations for the inquiry on communities as drivers for sustainability, and as factors contributing to members' well-being. To do so we connect the concepts of sustainable consumption, well-being and community, and illustrate their relationship to each other. We position our paper within the approach of marketing research which deliberately engages for social change.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, well-being, communities

1. Introduction

Current paper is a response to the call for "challenging the status quo in marketing research in the transitional markets of the New Europe." raised by the European Marketing Academy (2020). The starting point which guides our research is the Responsible Research in Business & Management's (RRBM) initiative which defines responsible research as beyond producing reliable and valid knowledge, science should be more socially engaged and socially responsible than is advocated by the value-free ideal (Tsui, 2016). The RRBM approach instructs our topic selection and problem formulation. Accordingly, we introduce our multi-year cooperative inquiry research project on the role of communities in transition toward sustainable consumption. Our approach is certainly not without precedent in marketing. Lefebvre's (2013, p.5) concept of social marketing, which is "a systematic approach to thinking about and solving the wicked problems our world faces", and the quality-of-life marketing endorsed by Sirgy (2002, p.11), who argues that marketing science is "the science of positive social change" are examples of RRBM-like approaches. Accordingly, we position our paper within the framework of marketing research which deliberately engages for social change. In the paper we introduce the basic concepts of our research, such as sustainable consumption, well-being and community, and their relationship to each other. We aim to challenge the status quo through our research process - following the approach of the lifestyle movement framework, suggested by Haenfler, Johnson and Jones (2012) – by (1) studying lifestyles that have a goal of social change; (2) evaluating the impact of pro-environmental behaviour and (3) aiming to further foster small communities to develop sustainable consumption practices through participatory methods. Current paper establishes the theoretical framework for our research project.

As Capra and Luisi (2014, p. xi) phrase it, a "sustainable society must be designed in such a way that its ways of life, businesses, economy, physical structures, and technologies do not interfere with nature's inherent ability to sustain life." Natural sciences research on Earth's ecosystems has shown the radical degradation in Earth's capacity to support life as we have known it (for example the relatively favorable conditions for agriculture) (IPBES, 2019). The loss of nature is driven by multiple socioeconomic processes (Shrivastava et al., 2019). One such process is consumption – therefore we position consumption in the center of the (un)sustanability problem.[1]

Accordingly, ecological economists Spash and Dobering (2017, p. 203) argue that shifting from the "material and energy intensive economies and lifestyles" toward an environmentally sustainable society is one of the main challenges ahead. Indeed, the magnitude of the task is enormous: in their article O'Neill, Fanning, Lamb, and Steinberger (2018) - published in Nature Sustainability - found that of 150 countries looked at, not one society meets basic needs for its citizens at a globally sustainable level of resource use. Even if efforts are taken, gaps between intentions and impacts are occurring (Csutora, 2012). Herman Daly (2007) offers one

[1] As social scientists we acknowledge that inequality is a major issue regarding the responsibility of the destruction of nature's inherent ability to sustain life. Due to the focus of our research and space constraints we don't address inequality in this paper.

explanation for the failure: the focus on efficiency gains decreases the cost of production, which instead of reducing, will likely increase the production, thus the usage of the required resource increases (as explained by the rebound-effect). Therefore, sustainability cannot be addressed solely by (often relying on technological means to) the increase of efficiency; to reduce society's material metabolism the decrease in total material footprint is inescapable.

Current paper builds the theoretical framework to open up space for the inquiry on communities as drivers for sustainability and factors contributing to members' well-being. The framework is developed as follows. Section 2 calls to examine consumption's role in relation to well-being and sustainability. Section 3 builds on the literature speculating whether, and if so how can consumption be a pro-ecological act. Section 4 argues for the need to view individuals and their actions as embedded into, and influenced by community membership.

2. Materialism, well-being and sustainability

Halberl, Fischer-Kowalski, Krausmann, Martinez-Alier and Winiwarter (2009) historical research shows how different forms of societies operate on a different magnitude of material consumption. The transition from agrarian to industrial represents a material intensity increase from anywhere from 2.5 to 8.3 times Gutowski, Cooper and Sahni (2017). Wiedmann et al. (2015) demonstrate that as a country's socioeconomic metabolism shifts from agricultural to industrial production, the domestic extraction of materials decreases, but - due to the increased level of international trade - the overall mass of material consumption generally increases. It implies that as wealth grows consumption becomes increasingly resource intensive, turning the economies deeper down the unsustainable trajectory.

Material reduction goes against the very core principles of Western economics, which are organized according to Boda, Fekete and Zsolnai (2009) around (i) profit-maximization, (ii) cultivating desires, (iii) introducing markets, (iv) instrumental use of the world, and (v) self-interest based ethics. Progress, development is associated with the GDP index, which measures market transactions in a given period; "the more the better". But, as for example Gutowski, Cooper and Sahni (2017, p.13) argue, "[in] spite of the clear historical trends relating materials use with economic development, it is necessary that we consider alternative metrics and relationships between human well-being and materials. Both the measure of GDP and the activity of material consumption can be challenged as contributors to human well-being." Accordingly, psychologist Tim Kasser (2002, p.22) states: "[people] who are highly focused on materialistic values have lower personal well-being and psychological health than those who believe that materialistic pursuits are relatively unimportant. These relationships have been documented in samples of people ranging from the wealthy to the poor, from teenagers to the elderly, and from Australians to South Koreans." This phenomena is described by the Easterlin-paradox, namely that after reaching a certain level of material welfare (income) it does not increase subjective (perceived) well-being further. Therefore, the material-orientedness of economic development, after a certain threshold level, should be questioned, if one assumes that the purpose of economic activity is well-being (Easterlin, 2003). O'Neill,

Fanning, Lam and Steinberger (2018) conclude that qualitative social goals, such as increase in life satisfaction could be pursued using non-material means.

Materialism is an integral part of the human goal and value system, which in Burroughs and Rindfleisch's (2002) study fell within the cluster of self-enhancement values for power and achievement; it was also nearby values for hedonism and stimulation. At the same time, materialism stood in relative conflict with collective self-transcendent values religiosity, benevolence, family, community, universalism, and conformity (Kasser, 2016). It implies that materialism and non-materialism as value and goal systems are in conflict with each other and the crowd-out effect can be recognized in their relationship. Indeed, Kasser, Cohn, Kanner and Ryan (2007) demonstrate that the more a nation organizes its economy around corporate capitalism, the more its citizens will value materialistic aims such as money, power, status, achievement, and the less its citizens will value aims such as egalitarianism, harmony, community feeling. Materialism refers to that individual belief that purchasing and possessing goods leads to increased happiness and life satisfaction while non-materialism is the refusal of such belief (Lee & Ahn, 2016). Consumption doesn't necessarily add to well-being.

Linking materialism, wellbeing and sustainability Kasser (2017) finds that frequent engagement in pro-ecological behaviours is positively correlated with personal wellbeing. Kasser comes up with "three possible explanations for the compatibility of pro-ecological behaviours and wellbeing: (i) engaging in [pro-ecological behaviours] leads to psychological need satisfaction, which in turn causes [wellbeing]; (ii) being in a good mood causes people to engage in more prosocial behaviours, including [pro-ecological behaviours]; and (iii) personal characteristics and lifestyles such as intrinsic values, mindfulness and voluntary simplicity cause both [pro-ecological behaviours] and [wellbeing]." In our framework pro-ecological behaviour is a concept containing a wide range of sub-concepts, of which sustainable consumption is one. In the next section we overview the literature, whether consumption can be, and if so how, a pro-environmental act.

3. Sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption - defined as a conscious form of behaviour in relation to consumer goods, limiting or rather reducing the environmental impact of consumption (Schaefer & Crane, 2005) - is one key concept which has been researched extensively in relation to subjective well-being (see for example; Kasser, 2009; Corral-Verdugo, 2011; Xiao, 2011; Neulinger et al., 2020). Regarding sustainable consumption several approaches have been developed.

Green consumption is an intent to purchase products (and services) which are considered to be environmentally friendly, e.g. buying fair trade products, organic produce or ecological detergent (Zralek & Burgiel, 2020). According to Helm et al. (2019) green consumption does not require change in consumers' lifestyle because it is embedded in consumerist culture. It encourages consumers to purchase goods with less environmental impact, inspires consumers

to express their values (e.g. caring for environment) through their acquisitions – through the market, but it does not question the need for new goods and thus the environmental impact of the overall consumption.

Non-consumption or reduced consumption – in contrast to green consumption – refers to buying and owning less that one could afford. Deciding not to purchase goods, but repairing and using old ones instead of replacing them with environmentally friendly new ones represents a shift from a materialistic lifestyle (Helm et al., 2019). Non- or reduced consumption can be performed due to financial reason, recently however, non-consumption has been explored as a reference of the rejection of consumerist culture and to "live less materially" (Miller 2010, 71 in Nixon, 2020 Pp. 45.; Helm et al. 2019).

Even though not buying goods can have a significant effect on reducing material needs of economic production, studies related to non-consumption rather focus on more visible, and more spectacular acts, such as demonstrations or boycotts (Nixon & Gabriel, 2016). These activities – when consumers are seen as activists – fit better the dominant theory of consumption where consumers are engaged in rather than absent from something (Nixon, 2020). Recently however, studies started to discover non-consumption for sustainability as a choice of 'not to buy, own or use' - avoiding consumerism rather than participating in a movement (Wilk, 1997, 181 in Nixon, 2020, p.45). Nixon (2020) refers to non-consumption as "an umbrella term for the range of social phenomena that includes forms of inaction, non-participation or withdrawal from the full gamut of cultural practices under consumerism" (p. 45).

Similarly to Nixon's (2020) definition, non-consumption practices are often framed as anti-consumption or consumer resistance (Cherrier, Black & Lee, 2011). Anti-consumption is explained by Cherrier, Black and Lee (2011) as a consumer act motivated by environmental and social considerations, but also by personal ones such as seeking development of self-identification. In this sense, searching for a better life does not involve acting against consumerist culture, but rather pursuing ways which contribute to individual fulfilment within the consumer society. Supporting this argument Lee and Ahn (2016) add that the refusal of goods of anti-consumers can be limited to certain products or brands. As Lee and Ahn (2016) explains, a consumer can reject buying furniture in IKEA motivated by perceived irresponsibility of multinational companies or bad personal experiences, but the same person might not reject buying furniture from local producers, thus not rejecting completely the idea of material possession.

In contrast, consumer resistance usually concerns resisting against a universal 'antagonist' (Cherrier, Black & Lee, 2011, p. 1759) who is considered to be dominant (e.g. multinational companies). Consumer resistance for sustainability concerns broader goals outside of the micro environment of individuals, and resistant consumers often evaluate commodities according to universal characteristics (e.g. all multinational companies are perceived as irresponsible).

While Cherrier, Black and Lee (2011) explore intentional non-consumption, Nixon (2020) reveals further, incidental pressures (beyond intentional choices) which drive individuals to

buy less than one could afford. These include frustration caused by overwhelming information (e.g. advertisements), avoid manipulation of the market, feeling of confusion and incompetence (e.g. getting lost in the supermarket or in the parking area). Similarly, Nixon and Gabriel (2016) identified cases where non-consumption takes place to avoid emotional harm. In case of their informants consumption causes real anxiety; beside physical dangers, e.g. being lost, losing parking tickets interviewees described feeling ill, nauseous and painful, heavy breathing caused by frustration of the need to go shopping, or by being overwhelmed by their own desire (wanting to buy) which leads to conflicting, ambiguous (negative) feelings. In these cases consumerism is seen as dirty, market places are polluting and in contrast, not consuming is considered to be clean and pure.

Overlooking the literature of sustainable consumption we see divergent and often contrasting approaches ranging from the "what to buy?" all the way to the "sustainable consumption is an oxymoron, as markets have no respect towards ecological limits". Just like all disciplines, marketing will have to internalize ecological literacy - as for example Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawanv (2010), Lefebvre (2013) and Sirgy (2002) suggest - to address the most pressing sociological issues. In the next section we outline one possible approach which merges marketing research with ecological concerns.

Individuals as consumers are part of a larger system and consumption patterns are embedded in a broader cultural and institutional context (Maniates, 2014). Both Maniates (2014) and Spash and Dobering (2017) argue that taking the individual as the unit of analysis – as it occurs in consumer-studies – is un- and counterproductive. First, viewing the individual as a consumer whose only range of action is through the market by their acquisitive decisions neglects a wide array of actions (such as non consumption practices) which could be a more effective way to move out from the materialistic lifestyle and reduce consumption footprint. Second, focusing on the individual might consider action to be of small significance on a systemic scale. Emphasizing the individual responsibility in regards to sustainability denies the role of institutional and political context which define the conditions of consumerist society and therefore restrict individual action (Spash & Dobering, 2017). Contrary to the individual level, prior studies demonstrate that communities are among the major driving factors toward sustainability (Kiss, Pataki, Köves & Király, 2018). Therefore, we aim to learn how communities can affect individual's consumption practices related to sustainability.

4. Role of communities in sustainable consumption

According to McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig (2002) communities are spaces where meaning is negotiated and created. Such group meaning and the standards of the group can have an affect on individual behaviour (Lewin, 1947). Many studies claim that community-based action targeting sustainability might succeed to change behaviour, attitudes and understanding on sustainability issues (for example Staats, Harland & Wilke, 2004, Middlemiss, 2011). Community-related commitment plays a significant role in pro-environmental behaviour which can be developed due to the social influence of a community

(Hofmeister-Tóth, Kelemen. & Piskóti, 2012; Staats, Harland & Wilke, 2004). Based on this line of thought we argue that communities can contribute to develop sustainable consumption as a form of pro-environmental behaviour. Change is more likely - according to Middlemiss (2011) -, if focus is on the participants' lifestyles, requiring the individual's active involvement in the life of a cohesive community. Forno and Graziano (2014) demonstrate that individuals receive emotional, cognitive and practical support from the group by being members and participating in the shared meaning making processes.

5. Summary

Summarizing, in our paper it has been demonstrated that 1) strong communities can have a significant role in transition toward sustainable lifestyle and a significant impact on individuals pro-environmental behaviour; and 2) individuals' pro-ecological behaviour is positively correlated with personal wellbeing. Our starting point is that action is individual, but possibly informed, inspired, encouraged and instructed by group membership. In our ongoing research project we initiate inquiry groups (called eco-teams) following the methodological approach of the co-operative inquiry. Co-operative inquiry, within the family of participatory research, aims to design a safe communicative space where people with similar interests and motivation can share and reflect on their experiences and their knowledge in order to better understand and to change their behaviour (Heron, 1996; Reason, 2006). We aim to deepen our understanding on how engagement in communities related to sustainability can contribute to individuals' sustainable consumption practices and well-being; and turn the knowledge gained into practical outcomes. As a result of the complete, multi-year research process, we aim to reveal the relationship between sustainable consumption, community and well-being.

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