

How are Political Consumers Engaging with Social Media?

Janelle Ward

Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

0049

The Asian Conference on Media and Mass Communication 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

Political consumerism and social media are both defined by their connection to personalized communication and an intertwining of production and consumption. This paper aims to better understand how political consumerism (that is, when consumers choose producers and products with the goal of supporting ethical practices, like fair trade labor, or changing objectionable ones, like environmentally hazardous production) is represented via social media engagement. The primary question is: in what ways are political consumers engaging with social media? The paper provides an exploratory analysis of social media and examines the discursive actions that political consumers utilize in an online environment. Specifically, the paper provides an introductory look at how political consumers are using Facebook to engage with the fan page of a well known, global food company. The paper will also reflect on the possibilities of social media engagement to empower political consumers.

Introduction

Scholars are keen to understand how globalization impacts people's identities (Beck, 2000; Castells, 2004; Giddens, 1991). Especially in relation to political identity, this is compelling because traditional participation like voting is declining (Norris, 2002). Jenny doubts her representatives care what she thinks about issues like the economy or immigration. But she makes an effort to buy local and organic. Scholars see this as political consumerism, or a balance between personal identity, consumer choice, and commitment to global ethical issues (Scammell, 2000; Stolle and Micheletti, forthcoming, 2013; Ward, 2010b).

Political consumerism can be identified according to two particular traits: It is personalized, or seeped in one's individual identity; and it intertwines production and consumption. First, the experience of being a political consumer is personalized: The individual increasingly feels responsible for shaping her identity (Bennett, 2012). Jenny's personal consumption choices are a reflection of her political self. She believes organic is a healthy choice, but it is also a statement against pesticide use. Second, political consumerism intertwines production and consumption. Jenny's zucchini purchase today is a vote in favor of a local farm; the fair trade sweater she buys tomorrow is a statement of solidarity with garment workers.

Does this really matter? Historically, yes. Marginalized groups, tired of political exclusion, were empowered through their action as political consumers. In the early 1920s, Mahatma Gandhi urged the people of India to boycott British products. In 1966, the Housewives' Revolts in the United States had women voicing dissatisfaction with soaring food prices and in the process, better understanding their roles in society (Young, 1994, in Micheletti, Follesdal, & Stolle, 2004). It arguably matters even more in an era where political identity is shifting. Recent empirical research has found a positive, significant relationship between political consumerism and political participation in a European context (Stolle, Hooge, & Micheletti, 2005; Ward, 2010a; Ward & de Vreese, 2011) and in the United States (Willis & Schor, 2012). There are therefore strong links that legitimize political consumerism as a form of political participation. It is time to go deeper and study this phenomenon in a contemporary social media environment and understand the role that political consumers play in empowering others.

Social media allows users to publish updates on their personal lives, post photos or videos, and express a variety of opinions (like political consumerism, communication via social media is personalized). In such an environment users can meet others and establish communities based on mutual interests (Ward, 2009). Jenny uses social media as a political consumer. She shares her consumption choices on Facebook and links relevant articles on Twitter. Second, social media use intertwines production and consumption. Research has demonstrated a convergence between media producers and consumers (Deuze, 2007). Scholars have uncovered connections between online media use and political consumerism (Shah et al., 2007) and social media have been said to encourage political participation (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011; Rainie & Smith, 2012).

Now, imagine the interaction between political consumerism and social media. Their combined influence can potentially lead to empowerment: the process by which people enhance their self-efficacy and cultivate power to act on issues they define as important. Separately, this is the case: Research has shown that political consumers characterize their consumption as empowering, both as citizens (Atkinson, 2012) and as consumers (Shaw, Newholm, & Dickinson, 2006). Stolle, Hooge, and Micheletti (2005) found that political consumers are resourceful, highly educated, and affluent, with high rates of political interest and participation. In a social media context, research demonstrated psychological empowerment (i.e., self-efficacy, perceived competence and desire for control) can be enhanced by how much one creates content online (Leung, 2009).

Scholars have uncovered various indicators for ethical consumption behaviors. For example, peers play an important role in making green purchasing decisions (Lee, 2011). Griskevicius, Tybur, & van den Bergh (2010) found activating status motives (a desire for prestige) led people to choose green products over more luxurious nongreen products. Mazar & Zhong (2010) demonstrated that people act more altruistically after mere exposure to green products than conventional products. In terms of social media, recent results are promising. In an electoral context, Bond et al. (2012) showed that people were more likely to vote if they received Facebook messages telling them their friends had voted, and the effect was strongest from closest (most interacted with) friends. The proposed research is important in determining whether political consumers, given their influential status, have a trickle down effect on the wider population.

Methodology

Qualitative research is uniquely suited to match this theoretical perspective because it is concerned with understanding participants' meanings (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is combining more conventional approaches with the huge amount of free data available online (Gordon, 2011). This project additionally offers a quantitative element in the form of experimental research, allowing the development of a causal model of empowerment. The research question states: in what ways are political consumers engaging with social media?

The primary research interest is to explore how political consumers engage with social media. I monitored Nestlé's Facebook page¹ for one week. The examination took place between February 26 and March 5, 2013. I was interested to see if political consumers had – on their own initiative – taken to the product's Facebook page. In a broader sense I was interested in observing and reporting on any content that was overtly oriented towards political consumerism. I examined two forms of communication from political consumers on Nestlé's Facebook page: Comments/likes left on items posted by Nestlé, and Recent Posts by Others which allows fans of a page to post their own comments to the page, though in a separate section. For reasons of space, I looked at one particular indicator embedded in the literature on how political consumers can act: discursive

¹ Food/Beverages: "As the leading nutrition, health and wellness company it is our commitment to enhance the quality of life every day, everywhere. Nestlé. Good Food, Good Life." As of March 5, 2013, the page had 827,040 likes and 6,619 talking about this. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Nestle?ref=ts&fref=ts>

actions (Micheletti & Stolle, 2008).² Discursive actions are seen as Facebook comments or posts expressing, for example, a concern about how infant formula contains toxins.

Results

First, I provide details into *comments/likes* left on the five items Nestlé posted in the time period under examination. Despite a fairly large amount of global attention paid to the Oxfam campaign launch on February 26th, Nestlé chose not to address the report or the fact they received the top (but still dismal) score of 54 percent. Instead, they posted an item in line with their normal strategy: a photograph of legumes. Facebook users “Say NO to Nestlé this Christmas” and “Say NO to Nestlé ALL YEAR” were the most active in the examined time period, for example by leaving comments after Nestlé’s February 27th post on “What’s your favorite outdoor family activity?”³

Individual Facebook users also participated, for example on March 3rd, when Nestlé posted a picture and asked fans to “SHARE this if your pet spoiled you with kisses today.” One user complained about Nestlé’s stance on access to water, and another asked Nestlé to remove GMO⁴ corn and soy from their pet food. The first comment, incidentally, did garner a response from Nestlé, along with a link to their policy on the water issue.

March 4th was Nestlé’s last post in the examined time period. It was the only post addressing corporate social responsibility: It encouraged fans to provide nominations for the 2014 Nestlé Prize in Creating Shared Value. There were no comments on this item when the research concluded.

Second, I report on the *Recent Posts by Others* posted during the time period under examination. There were 16 posts by political consumers during that time. Though less prominently displayed on the page, users often used this feature to voice their discontent with Nestlé’s policies or products. Most were negative and were posted by a variety of users. Most complaints stemmed from the use of GMO in food products, and other topics were addressed like child labor in the cocoa industry. Some were geared more towards asking Nestlé about specific products. For example one user wanted verification that aspartame was not present in Nestlé’s infant formula (Nestlé confirmed this), or what to do about a faulty food product. Nestlé responded to these questions but had a split policy in relation to the more political posts – sometimes ignoring, sometimes replying with official information and policies.

Though not nearly as common as criticism, there was one positive post from a Facebook user praising a Nestlé plant in Ohio for supporting a community music appreciation

² The literature also discusses how political consumers enact their identity through lifestyle choices (Micheletti, Stolle & Berlin, 2012; Stolle & Micheletti, forthcoming, 2013) and boycotting/buycotting (Andersen & Tobiasen, 2004; Ward, 2008; Ward, 2012; Ward & de Vreese, 2011).

³ Though not an individual Facebook user, this account directs to a community described as a “Seasonal Nestlé boycott campaign - encouraging people new to boycotting Nestlé to begin by doing it for Christmas. Sister page to Say NO to Nestlé this Easter and Say NO to Nestlé this Halloween.”

⁴ Also known as genetically modified foods (GM foods, or biotech foods), which are foods derived from genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

event. The period of examination occurred immediately after Oxfam launched a campaign assessing the agricultural sourcing policies of the world's ten largest food and beverage companies and encouraging consumers to hold these companies accountable.⁵ One user did post a link directing to Oxfam's campaign, with the message "Shame on you." Nestlé did reply to this posting, with a link to their "Creating Shared Value news" as well as their own reflections on the Oxfam report's findings.

Discussion

So political consumers post their views on a corporate Facebook page. So what? I'm interested in a few different answers to that question. First, I'm fascinated by the interaction between political consumerism and social media. Their combined influence can potentially lead to *empowerment*: the process by which people enhance their self-efficacy and cultivate power to act on issues they define as important. Separately, this is the case: Research has shown that political consumers characterize their consumption as empowering, both as citizens (Atkinson, 2012) and as consumers (Shaw, Newholm, & Dickinson, 2006). Research demonstrated psychological empowerment can be enhanced by how much one creates content online (Leung, 2009).

Second, I'm interested in the potential impact these social media actions have on the peer group of political consumers. For example, peers play an important role in making green purchasing decisions (Lee, 2011). In terms of social media, recent results are promising. In an electoral context, Bond et al. (2012) showed that people were more likely to vote if they received Facebook messages telling them their friends had voted, and the effect was strongest from closest (most interacted with) friends.

Globalization means we have less control over where our clothes are made or the future of her job. Yet each day we are empowered when we decide what type of food we are going to consume, and how we share these decisions on social media. Specifically, empowerment is defined as the process by which people enhance their self-efficacy and cultivate power to act on issues they define as important. Empowerment is essential to focus on as it plays a key role in identity building, particularly at a time when the political identity of young people is being redefined.

The driving question that remains is whether political consumerism is effective and sustainable (Shah, Friedland, Wells, Kim, & Rojas, 2012). Now is the time to provide intensive research on this topic, along with a commitment to target its application to society. In an era where individuals are speaking out about lifestyle choices via social media, this project provides valuable insight to understanding the nature of their engagement and how to increase the effectiveness of political consumer "opinion leaders." Political consumerism's power lies in its appeal to those formerly disengaged; empowerment is a potent consequence.

⁵ On Tuesday, February 26, 2013, Oxfam launched their "Behind the Brands" campaign: From the campaign launch, Nestlé was one of the best food companies, though with the low score of 54 percent. Available at: <http://www.behindthebrands.org/>

References

- Andersen, J. G., & Tobiasen, M. (2004). Who are these political consumers anyway? Survey evidence from Denmark. In M. Micheletti, A. Follesdal, & D. Stolle (Eds.), *Politics, products and markets: Exploring political consumerism past and present* (pp. 203-221). New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.
- Atkinson, L. (2012). Buying in to social change: How private consumption choices engender concern for the collective. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644, 191-206.
- Beck, U. (2000). *What is globalization?* Oxford: Polity Press.
- Bennett, L. (2012). The personalization of politics: Political identity, social media, and changing patterns of participation. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644, 20-39.
- Bond, R. M., Fariss, C. J., Jones, J. J., Kramer, A. D. I., Marlow, C., Settle, J. E., & Fowle, J. H. (2012). A 61-million-person experiment in social influence and political mobilization. *Nature*, 489, 295–298.
- Castells, M. (2004). *The power of identity: The information age: Economy, society and culture* (Vol. 2). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA and London: Sage.
- Deuze, M. (2007). Convergence culture in the creative industries. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(2), 243–263.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gordon, W. (2011). Behavioural economics and qualitative research – a marriage made in heaven? *International Journal of Market Research*, 53(2), 1-15.
- Griskevicius, V., Tybur., J. M., & van den Bergh, B. (2010). Going green to be seen: Status, reputation, and conspicuous conservation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98(3), 392–404.
- Lee, K. (2011). The green purchase behavior of Hong Kong young consumers: The role of peer influence, local environmental involvement, and concrete environmental knowledge. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 23, 21-44.
- Leung, L. (2009). User-generated content on the internet: An examination of gratifications, civic engagement and psychological empowerment. *New Media & Society*, 11, 1327–1347.
- Lusoli, W., & Ward, J. (2005). 'Politics makes strange bedfellows': the Internet in the 2004 European Parliament election. *International Journal of Press / Politics*, 10(4), 71-97.
- Mazar, N., & Zhong, C. B. (2010). Do green products make us better people? *Psychological Science* 21(4), 494–498.
- Menchen-Trevino, E., & Karr, C. (2012). Researching real-world Web use with Roxy: Collecting observational Web data with informed consent. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 9(3), 254-268.
- Micheletti, M., Follesdal, A., & Stolle, D. (2004). Introduction. In M. Micheletti, A. Follesdal, & D. Stolle (Eds.), *Politics, products and markets: Exploring political consumerism past and present* (pp. ix-xxvi). New Brunswick and London:

- Transaction Publishers.
- Micheletti, M., & Stolle, D. (2008). Fashioning social justice through political consumerism, capitalism, and the Internet. *Cultural Studies*, 22(5), 749-769.
- Micheletti, M., Stolle, D., & Berlin, D. (2012). Habits of sustainable citizenship: The example of political consumerism. In A. Warde and D. Southerton (Eds.), *The Habits of Consumption*, COLLeGIUM, Volume 12. Available at: http://www.helsinki.fi/collegium/e-series/volumes/volume_12/index.htm
- Norris, P. (2002). *Democratic phoenix: Reinventing political activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rainie, L., Purcell, K., & Smith, A. (2011). The Social Side of the Internet. Available at <http://www.pewInternet.org/Reports/2011/The-Social-Side-of-the-Internet.aspx>
- Rainie, L., & Smith, A. (2012). Politics on Social Networking Sites. Available at <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Politics-on-SNS.aspx>
- Scammell, M. (2000). The internet and civic engagement: The age of the citizen-consumer. *Political Communication*, 17, 351-355.
- Shah, D., Friedland, L. A., Wells, C., Kim, Y. M., & Rojas, H. (2012). Communication, consumers, and citizens : Revisiting the politics of consumption. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644, 6-18.
- Shah, D. H., McLeod, D. M., Kim, E., Lee, S. Y., Gotlieb, M. R., Ho, S. S., & Hilde B. (2007). Political consumerism: How communication and consumption orientations drive "lifestyle politics." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611, 217-235.
- Shaw, D., Newholm, T., & Dickinson, R. (2006). Consumption as voting: An exploration of consumer empowerment. *European Journal of Marketing*, 40(9/10), 1049-1067.
- Stolle, D., & Micheletti, M. (forthcoming 2013). *Political consumerism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stolle, D., Hooge, M., & Micheletti, M. (2005). Politics in the supermarket: Political consumerism and a form of political participation. *International Political Science Review*, 26, 245-269.
- Tumasjan, A., Sprenger, T. O., Sandner, P. G., & Welpe, I. M. (2010). Predicting Elections with Twitter: What 140 Characters Reveal about Political Sentiment. Proceedings of the Fourth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/bbv4kuo>
- Ward, J. (2001, May). The effects of priming and non-verbal behavior on self-disclosure. Presented at the Hilldale Undergraduate/Faculty Research Award symposium, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- Ward, J. (2005). Opportunities for engagement in cyberspace: Political youth Web sites in the 2004 European Parliament election campaign. *Information Polity*, 10(3/4), 233-246.
- Ward, J. (2007). Addressing young people online: The 2004 European Parliament election campaign and political youth web sites. In R. Kluver, N. Jankowski, K. Foot, & S. Schneider (Eds.), *The internet and national elections: A comparative study of web campaigning* (pp. 136-149). London: Routledge.
- Ward, J. (2008). The online citizen-consumer: Addressing young people's political

- consumption through technology. *Journal of Youth Studies* 11(5), 513-526.
- Ward, J. (2009). Social academia: The impact of web 2.0 on research practices. *The Broker*, 15, 11-18.
- Ward, J. (2010a). Political consumerism as political participation? Evidence from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In K. Brants & K. Voltmer (Eds.), *Challenging the primacy of politics: Political communication in postmodern democracy* (pp. 167-182). Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Publishers.
- Ward, J. (2010b). Purchasing or protesting? Expanding the notion of the (online) citizen-consumer. In P. Dahlgren & T. Olson (Eds.), *Young citizens, ICT's and democracy* (pp. 35-50). Gothenborg: Nordicom Books.
- Ward, J. (2011). Reaching citizens online: How youth organizations are evolving their web presence. *Information, Communication and Society*, 14(6), 917-936.
- Ward, J. (2012). *Communicating citizenship online*. Euricom Monographs: New Media & Democracy. New Jersey, USA: Hampton Press.
- Ward, J., and de Vreese, C. (2011). Political consumerism, young citizens and the Internet. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(3), 399-413.
- Willis, M. M., & Schor, J.B. (2012). Does changing a light bulb lead to changing the world? Political action and the conscious consumer. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 160-190.

