Political Consumerism and Social Media

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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). A citizen may doubt 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). An individual’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. A political consumer’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 explore 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). An individual can use 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). 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 page\(^1\) 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 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.

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\(^1\) 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

\(^2\) 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).
Results

First, I provide details into comments/likes left on the five items Nestlé posted in the time period under examination. On February 26th, Nestlé 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?”

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.

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).
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 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. 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**

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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/](http://www.behindthebrands.org/)
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 paper provides a first look at 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.


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