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Abstract: *This purpose of this study was to explore online anti-brand communities as a form of social action. This paper provides an understanding of why online anti-brand communities form and how the Internet shapes the educative character of 21st Century social movements.*

Introduction and Purpose

As a backlash against capitalism, there is a growing resistance to transnational brands and corporate globalization. Consumers around the world are joining together to voice their opposition to corporate domination. To cite a few trends, consumers are opposing global brands and linking environmental issues, human rights and cultural degradation to globalized corporate agendas. These anti-branding demonstrations are emerging as a new form of social action. Historically, social movements have mobilized support through the development of a clearly defined goal that attempts to deliver benefits to a narrow segment of society. Old social movements occurred between the years 1945 and 1970 and were associated with economic growth, distribution, and security (e.g., workers rights, civil rights). Family, work, and consumption-centered social matters were disputed with clearly defined goals to enhance the political-economic system (e.g., justice, liberty, equality, emancipation). New social movements represent modern culture and are associated with peace, feminism, ecology, and personal autonomy (e.g., gay and lesbian movement, feminist movement, environmental protection movement).

These broad descriptions of new and old social movements are generalizations, and adult educators continue to debate and critique the specific and defining criteria of new and old movements. However, there is sound concurrence among scholars that social movements are important learning sites capable of generating knowledge and action which leads to social change (Finger, 1989; Foley, 1999; Holford, 1995; Holst, 2002; Kilgore, 1999; Spencer, 1995; Welton, 1993; Youngman, 2000). The "anti-brand movement" is similar to "old" and "new" social movements noted in adult education but it also has some unique aspects. First, the online antibrand movement represents a convergence of old and new social movement issues. Issues discussed in anti-brand communities range from workplace equality and corporate domination to environmentalism and marketing propaganda. Second, the Internet has changed the way people participate in social action. With World Wide Web capabilities, action strategies and coalition building are not restricted by space or time. These two unique characteristics represent a new kind of movement utilizing different resources and taking on broader goals.

The purpose of this study was to understand the nature of online anti-brand communities as a form of social action. The investigation was guided by three research questions. First, why do online antibrand communities form? Second, what action strategies do online antibrand communities engage in and how does the Internet shape those activities? Third, how does learning occur in online antibrand communities?

The Anti-brand Movement

The Internet plays a major role in the anti-brand movement because it provides communication methods for people around the globe irrespective of geographical space and/or time zones. Historically social movements have emerged in a geographical pattern, revolving around physical gathering spaces. Today social movements are transpiring in virtual space, which sets the stage for new forms of protest, organization, cooperation, and coalition-building.

In many cases, social action communities originate and communicate solely in cyberspace. This virtual community is built around common social and political interests. Communities form online because people are able to come together, regardless of geographical proximity, and identify with a common need, goal, or identity. In the case of anti-brand communities, the community is situated around common detestations of corporate brand names. Various consumer groups have formed to support each other in their efforts to resist marketplace practices and globalized consumption patterns.

Method

A comparative qualitative case study design was employed to address the purpose of the study. Four criteria were used in selecting the cases for this study. The first criterion was to select communities that oppose popular, transnational brand names. Second, case differentiation was maximized through studying communities that opposed diverse corporate product and service offerings. Third, online communities that had been in existence for more than six months were identified. Lastly, active communities were studied which ensured information-rich cases. Using these criteria, three online antibrand community cases were examined: anti-Starbucks, anti-Walmart, and anti-McDonald's.

Data collection consisted of a total of 15 in-depth interviews, printouts of web-based discussions, and website documents (i.e., newsletters, updates, announcements). Web-based communications were analyzed for the following: (1) the content of conversation, (2) the promoted and dissuaded products/services, (3) the number of people discussing topics synchronously and asynchronously, (4) activities/events being arranged or protested, (5) formal and informal patterns of communication, (6) website graphics and pictures, and (7) symbolic or connotative meanings of words posted on the site and/or used in conversations. Using the constant comparative method of data analysis, individual case and cross-case analyses were conducted. Descriptions of interactions among social action participants as well as quotes, documents, and artifacts were examined to provide a holistic description of each case. This descriptive data was used to establish common traits or themes within each case. For cross-case analysis, data from each individual case was compared with the other cases to identify common themes across cases.

Findings

Data analysis revealed four distinct reasons why antibrand communities form: 1) in response to a common sense of moral responsibility, 2) to provide a support network to achieve common goals, 3) in response to workplace difficulties, and 4) to provide resources for taking action. Findings suggest the Internet radically affects these social action strategies in five major ways: 1) speed, 2) convenience, 3) nature of community formation, 4) anonymity and 5) widespread viewership. Learning occurs within online antibrand communities through observations, dialogue and discussion, and story-telling. Here, these findings will be elaborated more fully.

Anti-brand Community Formation

The most salient reason why anti-brand communities form is in response to a common sense of moral responsibility. Moral responsibility is a sense of obligation to the betterment of society. Community members collectively articulate matters of right and wrong with regard to corporate actions. Within each of the three anti-brand groups studied, a common entity (i.e., Starbucks, Wal-Mart, McDonald's) challenged community members' worldview of how a corporation should function. In response, moral systems are challenged and community members feel a common call to action. During interviews with anti-brand community members, words such as "oppressive," "exploiting," "destructive," "unethical" and "monopolizing" were used to describe the corporations they were fighting against. All fifteen participants in this study talked about a personal commitment to fight against a corporation. At some point in time, they all made a conscious decision to play an active role in their anti-brand campaign. Each participant decided that it was his or her responsibility to make a change.

Second, anti-brand communities form to provide a support group to achieve common goals. It was evident, from the onset of this investigation, that a social support network existed within all three communities. Through nurturing social interactions via the Internet, each community resembled a support group, which also served to legitimize their fight for a common cause. These support networks have three common characteristics. They are based on a reciprocal exchange, they mimic a family structure, and they are purposive.

Third, online anti-brand communities form to provide a means for coping with difficulties at work. Through pep-talks, sympathy, and personal counsel, community members strategize together about how to overcome challenging workplace issues such as demanding schedules, unfair pay, unsympathetic managers, or rude customers. In addition, employees receive ad hoc solutions to problems at work. The web community provides a social structure that is not provided at work, offering individual self-assurance and support. When corporations lack a supportive environment, findings suggest that employees search for and find solace from website communities.

Fourth, anti-brand communities form to provide resources for taking action. Sharing resources is an important means for creating and maintaining a community. Regarding the anti-Starbuck's case, the website was created to provide others with information about Starbuck's unethical practices. Soon the website transformed into a central location for information sharing. With the anti-Wal-Mart case, the Internet served as a more efficient and effective means for reaching people and providing them with the necessary information for fighting against sprawling companies. Over time, the website became a locus for the accumulation of knowledge and coalition building. The anti-McDonald's website was created to educate people around the world about the McLibel court case. By utilizing the Internet, the fight against McDonald's transformed from a localized campaign to an ongoing worldwide coalition. In all three cases, the website was created to educate others by providing resources for getting involved and taking action.

Internet Influences

The Internet shapes action strategies by expediting social action activities. Speed significantly advances the abilities of online anti-brand groups in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. For example, the anti-Wal-Mart community once relied on communication via a community newsletter which was sent out monthly. Now, the Internet provides a more efficient and effective means for information sharing. When events occur, community members can be updated instantly. Community members no longer need to rely on traditional forms of media

(i.e., newspaper, radio, television) to communicate to large numbers of people or to gather current information. Instead, members are able to log on to the community website any time of day to get instant updates.

Second, the Internet shapes social action strategies by making participation, information-sharing, and identification of social groups more convenient. Participation in social action activities is made more convenient through the ubiquitous aspects of the Internet. Anti-brand members with busy lives are now able to participate on a regular basis because they can contribute to the community at any location - work, home, or vacation. Loyalty with regard to participation is an important aspect of group cohesion. Online communities are able to remain loyal to the group by participating in a variety of virtual ways: online discussions, donating money online, helping keep the website updated, signing online petitions, or recruiting new members. These acts of participation provide community members the flexibility to be involved without ever leaving their home.

Third, the Internet shapes social action strategies by influencing community formation. Community formation has changed by means of connecting diverse people groups around the world, keeping members in constant proximity, and providing superintendence for website managers. Communities sustained online have the ability to connect people irrespective of their geographical place. Intangible commonalities rather than visible likenesses bring members together. Communities of this nature are rich with diversity, consisting of members with various ages, races, genders, and nationalities. Since participation is virtual, community members are not judged on the basis of certain characteristics (e.g., age, race). Rather, members are valued on the basis of their contribution to the community.

Fourth, the Internet shapes social action strategies by providing anonymity for community members. Anonymity, in web-based communities, is made possible by the intangible aspects of the Internet. Most participants in the anti-Starbucks and anti-McDonald's communities concealed their identity in community activities and during their interviews for this study. In several cases, identities are hidden because the community member is a current employee for the company being opposed. For all three communities, sharing personal identities were optional. Even the group leader for the anti-Starbucks community did not feel comfortable sharing his true identity. Evincing one's identity is a risky feat, since these communities are taking action against large, powerful corporations.

Fifth, the Internet shapes social action strategies by achieving instant widespread viewership. Widespread viewership means that people from around the world, from different backgrounds and different countries can view the website. This is a major advantage for web-based social action campaigns. Anti-brand campaigns no longer need to expend the financial resources necessary for television, radio, or newspaper messages. The Internet provides an effective medium for free communication to an unlimited number of people.

Learning within the Anti-brand Movement

Online observations play several roles in the learning process of community members. Most importantly, the culture of the community is learned through observations. For the anti-brand communities examined in this study, the culture of each community is manifested through cultural characteristics such as common vocabulary terms, patterns of discourse, joint sense-making, and socialization patterns. These communicative styles are learned through observations. In addition, the core values of the anti-brand community are conveyed to others through observations. Website visitors observe online discussions, read about success stories, and become familiar with the community's social actions. Observations are critical in the

visitor's decision to become part of the community. During this observation time, a visitor is either convinced or unconvinced about the importance of the community's goals. Members also learn through observing other members' discussions. By reading through the various discussion topics, members learn by being a silent third party in conversations among other members. From this vantage point, members are able to survey situations through the eyes of two or more people. Members learn through role-playing problems or scenarios. They are able to see the viewpoints of those conversing by putting themselves in the position of another person.

Second, personal growth is a core construct in the notions of informal learning. The lifelong process of learning serves as a liberating and satisfying activity for the individual. Discussion venues within online anti-brand communities act as a support system for this personal venture. Dialogue and discussion for all three communities examined in this research study take place in organized online discussion formats. The anti-McDonald's community uses debating rooms that are designated for discussing certain topics. The anti-Wal-Mart and anti-Starbuck's communities use discussion boards to facilitate conversation. These discussion areas maintain safe environments for core community members to grow and develop intellectually. Community members are connected to the same ideas and as a result they become connected to each other.

Third, storytelling within online anti-brand communities is a medium for learning by means of sharing common experiences. The like-mindedness of the community is conveyed through the portrayal of meaningful stories. Storytelling brings authenticity to the discourse that takes place within online anti-brand communities and is typically based on real world experiences. Artistically, the storyteller takes his/her reader on a journey where the reader is able to visualize the experiences of the storyteller. Storytelling is an important process as it reinforces the morals, values and goals of the community. It also assists new members in learning the communal ethics of the group. In other words, ethical values are depicted such as the kind of stories that are accepted and not accepted within the group. For example, the anti-brand communities examined in this study do not allow offensive or vulgar language; thus, this type of language is not used in storytelling. In addition, anti-brand members share interpretive strategies, which serve to explain the meaning of events or occurrences. As a result, the community develops a method of decoding societal trends.

Discussion

The theoretical framework providing organization to this study is that of social movements in adult education. According to Holford (1995), social movements "make profound contributions to knowledge" (p. 105). This study corroborates previous work suggesting that learning occurs within social movements and concludes that online anti-brand communities are a viable form of social action for the 21st Century. Tilly (1999) states that a social movement is recognizable when "it consists of a sustained challenge to power holders." The antibrand movement is a sustained challenge to powerful corporations. It is sustained in the sense that online antibrand communities have been in existence for the past decade and the number of communities continue to grow. For example, the three antibrand communities in this study have all been in existence for more than 10 years; the anti-Starbuck's community is in its most nascent stage, initiated 11 years ago. In addition, each antibrand community in this study has grown three-fold in size from the time of its inception.

Likewise, this study concludes that the online medium is able to maximize potential for social action strategies. The Internet is a new innovation that has changed the way people communicate, interact, and function (Levin & Cervantes, 2002; Rheingold, 2000; Shumar &

Renninger, 2002; Sierra, 2003). Inherently, the Internet has also changed the way people participate in social action. This study illustrates current societal changes affecting social change and is a harbinger of future social movement proceedings.

Finally, this study concludes that online antibrand communities are important sites for learning. This study identified a number of ways in which learning takes place within social movements and how the Internet facilitates these learning processes. This study also illustrates how learning occurs in groups. As Kilgore (1999) notes, understanding learning in social movements is to understand "the centrality of the group's vision of social justice that drives it to act – mostly in conflict with other groups – in the larger social, economic, and political fields of meaning making" (p. 191). In this study, antibrand members constructed a vision of social justice in a corporate-dominated world and this vision drove the community to action.

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