Using engagement to change entrenched consumption practices around food waste

Short Abstract

Gaining insights into a possible institutional change around Food Waste (FW) becomes an important issue while the simple but entrenched consumption practices underlie the FW behavior. The current research aims to approach this need by investigating the role of Actor Engagement (AE) in practice change.

Using Netnography, this research aims to explore the daily institutional efforts of actors engaged with online communities built by Love Food Hate Waste (LFHW) on Facebook in two different contexts.

Preliminary findings identify the strategies used by practitioners to promote FW-reducing practices and corresponding patterns of AE behaviors (AEBs) as a form of institutional work accommodating different stages of practice change.

Findings highlight the possibility of ensuring purposeful AE and suggest observing and organizing AEBs to have a reflexive and adaptive approach to practice change.

The research can broaden the landscape of AE research toward fostering sustainable consumption and social engagement marketing.

Keywords: Food Waste, Actor Engagement Behaviors, Practice Change

Introduction and Research Aim

Household FW[1] is a consequence of entrenched food consumption practices[2] which are shaped through various social, cultural, and material factors (Evans, 2011), habitual, and stubborn to change (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014). As behavior change initiatives are conceptualized as attempts to intervene in the organization of practices (Hargreaves, 2011), practitioners should take practices into the center of their campaigns (Schatzki, 2001) with an adaptive and reflexive approach (Evans et al., 2012). Yet this is not a straightforward task because practice change emerges from reflexive actors' disorganized daily institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2013) and cannot be modeled fully and tracked with measurable outputs (Watson et al., 2020). Therefore, gaining insights into a potential institutional change around FW becomes an important issue for FW reduction but research here is scant.

We argue that AE can provide a ground for practitioners to evaluate a behavior change campaign's impact on practice change. To substantiate this argument, we address three research questions.

RQ1: What kind of strategies are used by practitioners to intervene in the organization of practices around FW?

RQ2: Correspondence to these strategies what kind of AEBs are manifested?

RQ3: How do the manifested AEBs serve practice change?

Background

While social practice approaches are applied to comprehend the research context and problem, this study builds on the integration of AE, Institutional Work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), and Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) (Lusch and Vargo, 2018). This study particularly focuses on the behavioral dimension of AE because AEBs influence others' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, therefore, are a form of institutional work (Alexander et al., 2018). In other words, micro-level AEBs, even though established by them, can influence the meso or macro-level institutional structures (Storbacka et al., 2016), practices being one of them. Through AEBs (i.e. influencing, mobilizing (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014)), actors engaged with FW reduction campaigns can initiate the peer conversation to challenge the status quo of wasteful practices, form alternative sustainable practices, and disseminate them (Raymond et al., 2014) which are required for a substantive behavioral transition (Evans et al., 2012). In addition, it might be possible to prompt the transition of engaged actors into pseudo-social marketers who utilize their resources to contribute to campaigns' objectives such as engaged customers who enhance the product experience (Harmeling et al., 2017). Therefore, given the difficulty of designing and observing the practice change, managing the behaviors of engaged actors as change agents could be a more effective behavior change strategy.

Methods

The present research utilizes a non-participatory Netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2017). We selected two public Facebook communities of Love Food Hate Waste (LFHW) aiming to raise public awareness around FW in two different contexts (Scotland and New South Wales). They are highly relevant because they aim to intervene in the organization of practices around FW, provide rich content, and ensure active and regular communication (Kozinet, 2017). These platforms motivate and empower actors to engage with the community and contribute to the practitioners' purpose by writing comments and sharing their thoughts and experiences. The content posted by the practitioners to promote FW-reducing practices and the

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[1] The biggest contributor to the total FW generated in the UK (WRAP, 2021).

[2] Some of the most mentioned practices are excessive purchasing, poor storage practices, edibility assessment through date labels, and failure to consume leftovers.

comments made by the engaged actors constitute the data. Our focus is on discourses used to recontextualize practices around FW (Van Leeuwen, 2008). We adopted the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) providing a systematic inductive approach to concept development. As we are in the stage of first-order code development, the next section discusses the most significant preliminary findings.

Results and Discussion

Three strategies among the ones used to promote FW reduction stand out according to online engagement metrics (number of comments, shares, and likes). Each strategy delivers different AEBs as a form of institutional work accommodating different stages of practice change. First, practitioners aim to promote the practice of using up leftovers in a tasty, practical, and healthy way by **sharing recipe ideas**. In return, actors work to contribute to the practitioners' effort in creating a desirable practice through **raising/solving a problem** and **sharing their own experiences,** and in disseminating its performance through **inspiring others**. Second, practitioners aim to build a collective legitimacy around freezing practices that could help consumers to cope with FW by **giving tips and tricks**. Actors engaged with this content to **legitimize** and **delegitimize** and originate a **negotiation** around the normality of the promoted practice which is a necessary process for a practice change. Therefore, actors engaged to both legitimize and delegitimize contribute to the practitioners' objective. Finally, practitioners **make a comparison** between the environmental impact of FW and other top-of-mind issues such as single-use plastics to raise public awareness. Shifting the focus of interaction from practices to the message, this strategy drives actors engaged to **question the trustworthiness** of the message, **bring others into doubt** about the FW issue, and **criticize** message framing. These AEBs undermine the practitioners' effort in disrupting the belief that FW is normal and unavoidable and therefore indirectly work to maintain the status quo of wasteful practices. In a summary, preliminary findings show that it is possible to ensure purposeful engagement through some strategies (i.e., sharing recipe ideas and giving tips and tricks) and by avoiding others (i.e., making a comparison).

Implications for Theory and Practice

Actors engaged with LFHW communities contribute their resources toward practitioners' social marketing functions by influencing others' norms and beliefs. At the same time, AEBs can be shaped through the content provided by these programs. Therefore, behavior change initiatives and bottom-up AEBs together can transform consumption practices around FW. Allowing, promoting, and observing AEBs could enable social marketers to build reflexive, emergent, and adaptive programs that are sensitive to the practice change that emerges from the bottom. In other words, through the organization of AEBs, practitioners can work as intermediaries (rather than institutional entrepreneurs) who are less concerned with effective persuasion techniques (Moloney, S. & Strengers, 2014).

Exploring how practice change is realized through the distributed agency of engaged actors, this research can broaden the landscape of AE research toward fostering sustainable consumption and social engagement marketing. The FW phenomenon offers an opportune context because food practices are the central point to conceptualizing the change toward sustainability (Paddock, 2017). In addition, by integrating AE and institutional work as a middle-range theory to discover empirical evidence about SDL (Jaakkola, Conduit, and Fehrer, 2018), this study has the potential to contribute to the advancement of SDL as the metatheoretical framework (Lusch and Vargo, 2018).

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