

The Role of Environmental Dialogues in Online Female Communities¹

Developing an environmentally conscious behaviour is a complex problem, which challenges the individual. To give up the evolved daily routine requires not only consciousness and positive attitude toward the issue, but adequate knowledge. Processing the information can be as complicated as acquiring it. To identify the appropriate behavioural alternatives external confirmation is needed. In this respect, new ways of communication – for instance in case of online communities – can play a significant role. Dialogues in these sites give opportunities for dissemination and negotiation of environmental knowledge. The study is based on the assumption that there are gender differences in approaching to environmental questions. This research focused on women. The article analyses what are the main topics and aspects that appear most often in the online female communities, and in what context they are discussed. The authors carried out a qualitative study using netnographic method.

Keywords:

environmental conscious behaviour, online communities, netnography, women

INTRODUCTION

To improve sustainable life style is challenging for people. On the one hand, it can be beyond individual's power. On the other hand it requires the brake down of inappropriate habitual behaviour. These patterns are deeply coded by socialization and education of the individual. The first impressions about the environment can determine how the person appreciates nature, fellow beings and other elements of environment later. Therefore upbringing and education play an important role to improve sustainable behavioural patterns. Since traditional gender roles give more opportunity for women to form children's early viewpoint we find it important to gain a deeper understanding about how women think of environmental problems and which level of responsibility they take.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to Webster (1975) a socially conscious consumer is: „a consumer who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change”. Considering the model, a socially conscious consumer is a person who has all necessary resources in terms of income, education and social position needed to support the community, and the need for active participation is also an element of what they expect from themselves. The individual acts consistently in line with these attitudes, both on an organizational level and in their individual purchasing decisions (Webster 1975).

The definition of Meffert and Kirchgeorg (1993, In: Piskóti, Nagy 1998) deals specifically with environmentally conscious consumers. They suggested that environmentally conscious consumers be defined as natural persons and legal entities who are characterized by a certain ecological consistency in their purchase decisions. Consumers realize that the development, production, distribution, consumption, use and even the disposal of any product places a heavy burden on the environment and causes additional costs. They strive to minimize these negative effects and additional costs.

Becoming a conscious consumer and adopting an adequate behaviour is a long and complex process, during which the individual gets

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acquainted with consumer goods and services and learns how to behave under market conditions. These are the processes as a result of which consumers become capable of enforcing their interests, of taking into account sustainability aspects and of protecting natural resources (Ádám 2002).

In order for sustainability criteria to be incorporated into consumption habits, it is essential to identify the factors which affect consumers' relevant decisions the most. According to Zsóka (2007), the first step towards sustainable consumption is the environmental consciousness of the individual, the presence and the depth of which they characterized based on *ecological knowledge, ecological values, ecological attitudes, willingness to act and actual behaviour*.

The complexity of the matter is also evinced by the fact that there is more than one way to be environmentally conscious (Hofmeister et al. 2009). The majority of consumers tend to choose only one or two factors instead of using the entire scope of opportunities. According to Meffert and Kirchgeorg (1994, In: Nagy 2005), *environmentally conscious* consumption might take the following five forms:

1. reducing the consumption of traditional products,
2. demand modification (purchasing environmentally friendly products instead of traditional ones),
3. consuming environmentally efficient products,
4. participate in waste recycling,
5. complaining and protesting.

These behaviours (the first, second and fourth) affect people's routines. Their development, therefore, takes rather long time people usually adopt them during their childhood. Changing traditional manners, consequently, requires the breaking of existing routines.

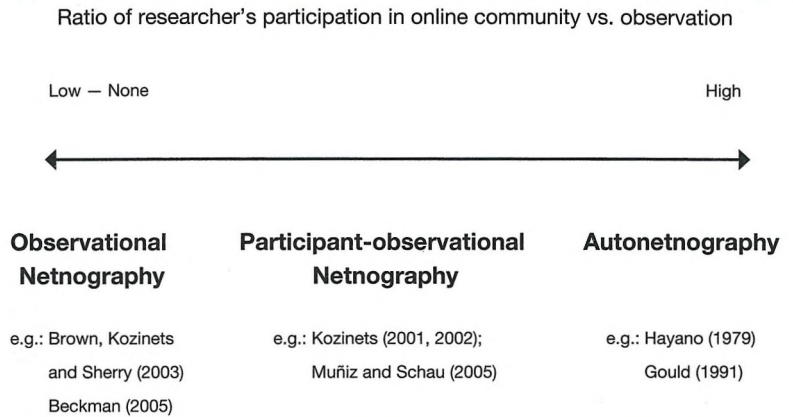
QUALITATIVE STUDY

Methodology

We carried out a qualitative study using netnography. Our aim in this approach was to gain an insider's perspective in the online communities (Moissander and Valtonen 2006, 51). Based on Kozinets (1997) netnography is a 'written account of on-line cyber

Figure 1

A spectrum of different types of netnography



Source: Kozinets, In: Belk

culture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology'. Using this method opens up new possibilities for studying consumption practices (Rokka and Moissander 2009). In addition, netnography can be combined with other methods subject to the research aim. Accordingly, the scope of researcher's participation in online communities can be differing. It depends on the type of netnography chose by the researcher (Kozinets 2006). The ratio of researcher's participation can be summarized the following way (Figure 1).

We conducted an observational netnography to study the members of the community without intervention. This method proved useful as an *exploratory tool* to investigate environmental topics. However, we have to point out that the study does not allow us to make general conclusion.

Ethical issues

For the purposes of the members' dignity and interests we changed the names of all members. Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were ensured by this coding. The codes did not include any information about the members, except for the stage of their family life cycle.

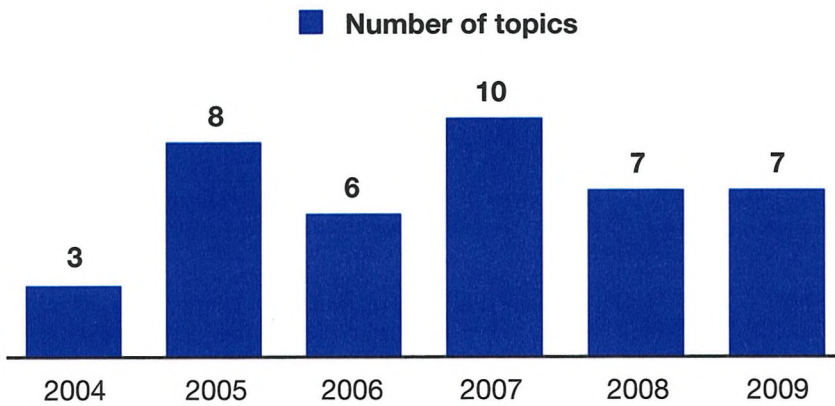
Data collection and analysis

The analysis focused on the forums of a community web site for women (Nók Lapja Café – NLC). The community site has been working for 9 years. This allowed us to analyze a wide range of dialogues as to what are the main topics and aspects that appear most often, and in what context they are discussed.

We analyzed all the topics related to environment having more than 20 posts. These topics dissemi-

Figure 2

Number of starting topics related to environment between the period of 27.04.2004 and 27.02.2010



nated and negotiated of environmental knowledge in depth. We studied these topics between the period of 27.04.2004 and 27.02.2010 (Figure 2).

We found altogether forty (40) topics focused on environmental questions. Twenty-five (25) out of the total had only few posts to analyze. Considering the starting date of the topics, the year of 2007 proved to be the most active period (Table 1).

The data collected consists of 805 posts having an extent of approximately 129 pages. The material was read 5 times before categorization. The analysis of data was based on this categorization.

FINDINGS OF THE QUALITATIVE STUDY

Participants

The forums were started mainly by average lay people interested in environmental protection. Only a few member mentioned that he or she practices as a professional, for example as an environmental engineer. This influenced the way they discussed the problems. No strongly engaged environmentalists were involved, and the participants had a slightly anthropocentric world approach. They argued for the moderate and reasonable use of the environmental resources: „Since the environment was

created to be used. Naturally just to such an extent that it would not be harmed. Maybe that is what missing now...”

The innovations and technological development seemed to be the engine for the environment protection.

Discussed topics

While reading the forums it became clear, that the discussed issues were strongly determined by the gender of the participants. The main issues in all forums were the use of *detergents* in the households cleaning

Table 1

Forums that contain more than 20 posts in the topic of environment

Starting date	Last post	Forums	Posts	Days	Category
11.10.2007	10.07.2008	Eco Friendly Practices	128	273	Home
27.05.2008	06.02.2010	Environmental protection	114	620	Lifestyle
10.06.2007	10.07.2008	What do you do for the environment?	108	396	Topical
27.04.2005	23.01.2006	Eco Friendly Tips	96	271	Topical
22.06.2006	17.05.2007	Anglers, environmental protectionists	49	329	Let's have fun
11.10.2007	10.07.2008	What do you do personally for the environment?	45	273	Home
24.01.2010	25.01.2010	!!!Environmental protection!!!	44	1	Topical
03.08.2008	13.11.2008	Environmental Consciousness1	43	102	Topical
11.12.2005	10.07.2008	Environmental Consciousness2	41	942	Lifestyle
09.09.2006	13.09.2006	Environmental protection1	28	4	Travel
28.02.2006	10.04.2006	Environmental protection2	24	41	Topical
11.08.2005	12.08.2005	Environmentally Conscious Lifestyle	23	1	Lifestyle
26.11.2004	10.04.2006	Environmental protection	22	500	Topical
01.08.2008	03.08.2008	How to protect the environment	20	2	Lifestyle
25.12.2009	26.12.2009	7 Environmentally Friendly Christmas Trees	20	1	Comment the article

habits, the pros and cons of washable nappies, and the proper ways of waste disposal.

Concerning the detergents, the attendants tried to avoid the harmful chemical substances, in order to stay healthy, clear of allergy and environmental consciousness. They shared information in almost every forum about:

- the many ways how vinegar can be used in cleaning the whole house; and
- environmental-friendly washing powder and soap nut.

The use of these tricks has also obstacles, mainly in terms of convenience. The vinegar has its characteristic smell the whole family dislikes, and it caused problems for the participants to find the washing powder and soda in the common shops.

Waste collection and selective waste collection seems to be the top issue for the bloggers. The subtopics changed from time to time:

- in the early topics in years 2004 and 2005, the main problem was the not proper infrastructure

Table 2

The intensity of the discussed topics in time

Main topics		2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Selective waste collection	PET bottle	***	*		*	*		*
	Used cooking oil	*	*	*	***	*		**
	Waste disposal problem	***	**	*	**	*		*
	Unnecessary packaging		**		**	*		
	Battery, medicines, bulb		*			**		
	Inadequate waste containers	***		*				
Cleaning	Cleaning supplies		**	*	***	*		
	Detergents, soap nut, vinegar		***		***	**		*
	Washing up					*		
Food	Bio food		*		**			
Christmas Tree							***	
Education	Parental responsibility			**		*		
	Homework			***				
Beauty care	Animal testing		**					
	Home made tricks							
Use of resources	Energy consumption	*	**		*	**		*
	Water consumption	*	**		*	***		*
Transport	Public transport		*		**	**		**
	Bicycle		*		**	*		

for selective waste collection. The containers were too far from home, they had too small holes, what made hard and slow to throw the pet bottles to it. The participants even talked about the noise pollution, caused by the garbage cars. It appears to be necessary to note here, that this was the time, when selective containers started to come into general use in Hungary.

- from year 2006 the questions were focused on effective waste collection. The respondents still had problems with the waste-selection. They discussed the kinds of plastic that can be put in the containers, or where the used cooking oil can be disposed.

The forums often started with comments reflecting the kind of behaviour the participant shows towards environmental protection. In this respect appear the public transport and the bicycle as *vehicles of transport* that environmental friendly are.

The energy and water consumption was another subtopic, which the participants dealt with besides the detergents or the waste collection. In 2005 there was a big debate on the pollution of water, discussing mainly that the water is full of hormones and chemicals. The overall conclusion of this debate was that they wouldn't stop taking contraceptive pills, because consequences of that were still better than having a growing number of abortions (Table 2).

Another best practice to share was the use of textile bags instead of the plastic ones from the shop. If the participants received plastic bags in the shop, they claimed to reuse it as a litterbag. It was mentioned, that the shop assistants considered this attitude of the participants as awkward.

The nappy-choice was also an issue perceived by great interest. Conscious mothers preferred the washable types. However, it was argued, that washing of those could also cause severe water pollution, as a consequence of which nobody could establish the best behaviour.

Way of communication

In the forums of years 2004 and

2005, the communication was really simple. The participants merely described how they protect the environment, what kind of homemade tricks they had.

Later the forums became more lively, and the real conversation began. The attendants changed their opinion, asked questions and tried to answer them to the best of their ability. And that's the point where the emotions started to play a significant role. The committed environmentalist and people with rational or pessimistic prospect of the future all got involved in hard debates. One reason for the strong emotional responses could be the fact, that women approach environmental issues more sensitively. These arguments were mainly between two or three people; the other participants of the forum ignored it, and tried to follow other conversation.

Friends and enemies of the eco-friendly home

During the discussions concerning best practices, members also shared their experiences and worries about the brands. Cleaning supplies and washable nappies were mentioned most frequently in this regard. The members reported that they tried to avoid using toxins in the house. According to the posts Cillit Bang, Domestos, Vanish and Cif were claimed to be the most dangerous cleaning brands. Frosch and LOC were mentioned on the opposite side. Saving health was a strong motive to use eco cleaning

Table 3

Brands came up in the topics		
Brands	Friends	Enemies
Cleaning	Frosch	Cillit Bang
	LOC	Domestos
	Denkmit	Vanish
	Vinegar	Florasept
	Soap nut	Cif
	Gall soap	Hypo
Baby care	Moltex	
Beauty care	DrHauschka	Safeguard
	Weleda	
	Santé	
	Alve	
	Alverda	
	Renessaince	
Recycling	Biofilter	
	IT	
IT	Red Hat	
	Blackle.com	

product. Members found that allergy and skin rashes could originate from aggressive cleaning products. Those who were environmentally conscious in their homes complained that they could not keep out these toxins completely from their lives since institutions, such as day nursery, offices, etc., did work with these products.

„Fortunately, there are already a lot of super eco-friendly products available on the market! What every lazy housewife including me can do as a minimum is to throw out all of the toxins such as Cillit Bangs and buy Frosch products!”

Surprisingly the usage of washable and eco nappies was driven solely by environmental motives. Nobody adverted to the hygienic aspects of disposable diapers (Table 3).

Animal testing proved to be a serious obstacle to buy certain products. It was acceptable for the members in case of the health industry, but not in the beauty industry. Members looked for the no animal testing labels on the package of the beauty care products. Natural ingredients played also an important role in making purchase decisions. Although beauty care topics were not as deeply discussed as cleaning, most brand names were mentioned here.

„I did not find it on the product and I could not understand it! Because Nivea for example, which is also animal friendly, uses it neither! Recently I have written to Nivea why they do not use the „no animal testing” label, but no answer was received! I lost my faith in this point!”

As for the waste collecting problems, members often complained that they had no idea how to select the used cooking oil. This question challenged the community. There were many practices shared, but best way could not be declared. The dialogues caused many conflicts among the members, because they tried to lead each other in an inadequate direction in many cases. As to our knowledge, the best way to solve this problem is to pass used oil to Biofilter since this company collects and recycles it.

Environmental conscious housewives were curious about IT questions, as well. Apart from switching off the computer after using, they suggested saving energy with using Black.com for searching or Red Hat as operation system.

In summary, the participation of environmental conscious members in internet forums was driven by their interest in the experiences and best practices of others. The shared information expanded not only on best practices but on products and companies, as well. Many times the community was able to convince „new arrivals” of using a product/solution and helped

each other to get more information on the details (e.g. Why is it special?, Where to buy it?, How much does it cost?, etc.).

CONCLUSION

Albeit the members had a strong motive to behave in an environmental conscious way, they seemed to be helpless in many cases. It was very important for them to know why they are doing something and regularly received positive feedback that they were doing things right, and it was worth the effort. The communities played a key role in this process. However, it needs to be noted, that the power of these communities can be as dangerous as beneficial. Without authoritative information members can lead each other in an inadequate way and deepen these improper behavioural patterns in the future. Accordingly, supporting this online community sites with appropriate information is one of the key elements to gain positive achievements in spreading environmental conscious behaviour.

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