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Youth Citizen-Consumers In Action: The Thunberg Effect In Addressing The Climate Crisis

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Abstract

In recent times, young activists have organized several notable citizen-consumer movements that agitate for change on a range of issues including gender and race inequality, gun control, and climate change. We examine one such movement, the Strike for the Climate, started by teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg, to understand the forces that elevated her solo protest at the Swedish parliament buildings to the global stage. Using Netnography and textual content analysis of Twitter data, we present preliminary themes.

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Summary Brief

Youth Citizen-Consumers in Action: The Thunberg Effect in Addressing the Climate Crisis

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In recent times, young activists have organized several notable citizen-consumer movements that agitate for change on a range of issues including gender and race inequality, gun control, and climate change. We examine one such movement, the Strike for the Climate, started by teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg, to understand the forces that elevated her solo protest at the Swedish parliament buildings to the global stage. Using Netnography and textual content analysis of Twitter data, we present preliminary themes.

Introduction

As consumers are “construed as citizens and community members whose lives are affected by marketing systems” (Saaticioglu and Corus 2019, 17), we adapt Ray Chaudhury and Albinsson’s (2015) framework of citizen-consumer practices to the current context in which youth citizen-consumers resist the political status quo regarding climate change by taking action and responding to the climate crisis. To examine how youth citizen-consumer movements transition from online connection to offline action, we highlight the global movement, Strike for the Climate, initiated by Greta Thunberg to address climate crisis. We use the following broad research questions to guide our efforts: 1) What facilitated the meteoric growth of the movement initiated by Thunberg? 2) How did Thunberg become the leader of a global youth movement?, 3) What actors and networks helped enable the growth of the movement?, and 4) In what ways did the interplay between online and offline actions develop the movement from its roots to its present day status?

Literature Review

Ray Chaudhury and Albinsson’s (2015) framework focuses on the various tensions that consumers experience in their every-day lives as a result of the dominant marketplace system (DSP). Based on such tensions, “collectivities give voice to their grievances and concerns about the rights, welfare, and well-being of themselves and others” through various activism efforts that demand for change (Snow, Soule, Kriesi, 2004, 4). To this end, the advent of internet-based technologies provide activists with an important tool with which to connect, educate, and coordinate organized actions. Indeed, Web 2.0 technologies distinguish modern campaigns from their predecessors based on “speed, spontaneity, and element of surprise” (Albinsson and Perera, 2013, 360). Social media are used to foster community, encourage participation, and help consumers focus their efforts on various options for social change (Kozinets and Belz 2012).

Method

Our study adopts a netnographic case study approach to explore how Greta Thunberg’s solo activism effort, her weekly school strikes, evolved into a global youth movement in a short timeframe. Presently, Twitter is the social media platform favored for real-time political discourse as its hashtags allow for the rapid dissemination of information. Based on our netnographic understanding of Thunberg’s speeches, panel discussions, social media discourse, textual content analysis of twitter data is undertaken to identify common thematic patterns (Goritz, Kelleck and Jörgens, 2019).

Preliminary Findings

Analysis of Thunberg’s Twitter data indicates that she directs attention to protests undertaken under the climate strike umbrella by showcasing global school strikes, media coverage of climate crisis related topics, and localized news coverage of climate change protests. As opposed to the commonly used phrase “climate change,” Thunberg uses the more potent term ‘climate crisis.’ Thunberg’s frustration with the lackluster language surrounding the climate crisis represents the background in Ray Chaudhury and Albinsson’s (2015) framework. Moreover, Thunberg uses phrases such as ‘Climate emergency’, Carbon budget, ‘#Severe Weather,’ ‘#Extreme Weather’ in her discourse. Our ongoing data analysis indicates that this shift in language around climate change promoted by Thunberg is further

diffused by media coverage of her and the broader movement she created. Thunberg's school strike movement has garnered endorsements from adults such as parents of school strikers, prominent figures around the world as well as support from professional groups. Moreover, it serves to encourage other environmental grassroots organizations. Receiving support from adults exhibiting a wide range expertise (professional, social, economic and political) within the DSP is one of the most important advances of youth led activism.

Discussion and Conclusion

Thunberg, as she undertook various measures to reduce her carbon footprint including foregoing eating meat and travelling by plane, initially operated from the fringes of the DSP at the level of the individual youth citizen-consumer enacting personal change through everyday lived experiences. Through peaceful protests against government apathy in the face of the climate crisis, Thunberg moved from the fringes of alternative consumption to the space of being an activism oriented citizen-consumer leading a movement. Her matter-of fact communication style, and effective use of social media coupled with other interested parties (e.g. environment focused groups) publicizing Thunberg's efforts has garnered her attention from multiple established entities including mainstream media, national and global institutions, and politicians. What we term the Thunberg Effect empowers youth to criticize adults in the DSP and challenge them to do more to address the issue at hand. Youth citizen-consumers demand a more transparent discourse, which call upon media and politicians to report on the climate crisis as it truly is - a crisis.

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