Session 3
Consumption, Marketing and Climate Change

Towards a holistic approach to sustainable consumption: Understanding the instituted realism of plastic packaging

Alex Skandalis, James Cronin, Charlotte Hadley, John Hardy, Linda Hendry, Maria Piacentini, Matteo Saltalippi, Alison Stowell and Savita Verma, Lancaster University Management School

Abstract

The quest for sustainable consumption has often foregrounded the primacy of the “attitude-behaviour gap” (Prothero et al., 2011). Nascent work in critical marketing scholarship however has problematised the aforementioned gap as a methodological and ideological construct that privileges the perspective of the sovereign decision-making consumer subject (Carrington et al., 2016; Caruana et al., 2016). This problematisation stems from the perceived neglect of structural issues that are conducive to wastefulness and the shared meaning systems that legitimise unsustainable and oftentimes irrational or destructive consumption-related lifestyles and environments (Thomas, 2018). In line with this workshop’s theme on consumption insecurities, we explore how the legitimacy and obstinacy of plastic packaging has emerged and taken root in the UK consumptionscape resulting in its complex embeddedness in people’s everyday lives. We ask: what are the wider historical, economic and culturally instituted factors that nurture the acceptance and usage of plastic packaging, and the material and technical contexts wherein consumer interactions with plastic packaging occur? In addressing this question, we theorise the institutional mood of realism inculcated around plastic packaging that has ensured consumers perceive their uses of it as prosaic, immutable and the only conceivable reality.

Plastic packaging has been normalised as a far-stretching commercial skin which covers a plethora of goods and integrates them into market-based practices and logics (Hawkins, 2020). Plastic waste is not only the result of the actual waste of the material itself but also of the variety of ways in which it is enacted, utilised, and circulated (Dris et al., 2020). Drawing from an institutional theory perspective, we interrogate the cultural-cognitive, normative, pragmatic, and regulative elements (see Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2017) that give legitimacy to the consumption of plastic packaging. Following Humphrey’s (2010: 491) suggestion that “the establishment of physical reality” is an additional crucial way of garnering legitimacy for consumption practices and
habits, we consider also the logistical and commercial built environments that ensure the omnipresence of plastics packaging in the marketplace.

We suggest that unsustainable consumption practices are located within an institutional environment which entails taken-for-granted perceptions and well-established meaning systems in relation to plastic packaging consumption (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Holt, 2012). We highlight the usefulness of institutional theory approaches to thinking through a holistic approach to sustainable forms of consumption in a plastic packaging driven consumer culture (Gollnhofer, 2017; Närvänänen et al., 2020; Yngfalk, 2019). Here, we follow in the logic that alternative practices must first be normalised amongst consumers to ensure meaningful steps progress towards sustainability are achieved. We also integrate the thoughts of critical scholars who recognise the importance of addressing the “realisms” – or “ideological straitjacket[s]” – that make behaviours, lifestyles and entire structures stubbornly commonplace and difficult to change (Colquhuon, 2021: 3; Fisher, 2009; Hester, 2017). Doing so allows us to bring to studies of sustainable consumption a plurality of structural and systemic factors that intersect with, shape and steer the individual and micro-social behaviours of consumers often beyond the reach of their own awareness (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011).

References


Exploring the social capital of celebrity environmental activists on Twitter and how this influences concern for climate change

Caledonia Gunn, Catherine Canning, and Elaine Ritch, Glasgow Caledonian University

Abstract

This study explores the social capital of celebrity environmental activists and consumer perceptions of their influence and credibility via Twitter. Technological advances and social media also offer a platform for celebrities to interact and communicate with a global audience; Twitter alone has captured the attention of 191 million daily online users (Oberlo, 2021), of which 28.9% of those users are 25-34 years old, falling into the millennial generational cohort (Hootsuite, 2021). Almost 40% of the United Kingdom’s population rely on social media to receive their daily news (Statista, 2020). Young adults will be familiar with many celebrities whose activities are typically highlighted in the media (Alexander, 2013). Celebrities routinely create commercial profit by endorsing products on social media; yet, celebrity endorsement is also gaining traction within activism and the non-profit sector (Mar Garcia des los Salmones, 2013). Celebrities have the power to attract global public attention while simultaneously mobilising public engagement in the social causes they are dedicated to (Park, 2020). This is an important angle, as social media and digital technology has enabled a hypercognitive generation who are comfortable communicating, collecting information and engaging as a community (Francis and Hoefel, 2018). Yet, there has been little research examining perceptions of celebrity activism, particularly through a social capital lens.

The study examines three types of celebrity environmental activist: Leonardo DiCaprio, Greta Thunberg and Al Gore - who have a large twitter presence and use this to influence engagement with climate change. The research is framed by Putman’s (1993) conceptualisation of Bourdieu’s (1986) Social Capital which denotes three spheres: moral obligations and norms, social networks and social values (Siisiäinen, 2000). Celebrity endorsement is valuable to brands as they direct consumers’ attention, ensure advertisements are memorable and encourage trust among consumers on the basis of their prior “relationship”. Therefore, it could be argued that the commercial benefits of celebrity involvement could be gained for non-commercial applications such as promoting climate change awareness.
Data were gathered through 11 semi-structured interviews of millennials, utilising convenience sampling. Findings revealed two key factors which contribute to millennials’ perception of Twitter based celebrity activists’ credibility. Authenticity was important, as within the rise of social media and influencer culture, consumers have been exposed to celebrities promoting products and social causes for financial capital, rather than genuine reasons. Therefore, a sincere authentic approach, together with a parasocial relationship was effective in enhancing consumer perception of a celebrity’s credibility. Participants responded positively to both Leonardo DiCaprio and Greta Thunberg as attractive, credible and honest activists. Parasocial relationships also existed with all 3 celebrities with participants. The findings are consistent with Park (2020) who noted that parasocial relationships and emotional bonds between consumers and celebrities will impact attitudes and potentially behavioural change in relation to the climate crisis.

References available upon request.
The Take a Bite out of Climate Change Project
Ximena Schmidt Rivera, Brunel University London and Team*

Abstract

Food systems currently contribute to about a quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions (GHGE). Since emission intensity varies greatly between different foods, changing food choices towards those with lower GHGE could make an important contribution to adapt and mitigate climate change. However, the understanding of this opportunity lacks across the society, with little robust scientific information accessible and available to all citizens.

'Take a Bite out of Climate Change' (TakeaBiteCC) is an innovative project aimed to address this issue by developing fun outreach and educational materials to engage with the public to raise awareness of this topic, promote sustainable food consumption behaviours and empower citizens to understand how they can help to reduce their climatic impact and hopefully demand changes in the food system.

The TakeABiteCC team includes researchers in various disciplines from different UK and international universities. In 2019, an exhibit was run at various science festivals around the UK and adapted for use in workshops in India, Gambia, Brazil, and Myanmar.

In 2020, we ran a lockdown compliant #TakeABiteAtHome, developing one month of free online materials) aimed at children (ages 7-14) to be used with schoolteachers and parents/carers. Videos supported by written activity sheets were released each day of the week, embedded on our website, and on our YouTube channel. Each week had a theme related to a different stage of the food system and an expert coordinator; Week 1 - Planet to Plate, Week 2 - At the Farm, Week 3 - At the Shops, Week 4 - At Home, and a two day Wrap Up. The weekly activities included Go Mondays (fun facts), Work-it-out Tuesdays (Worksheets), Interview Wednesday (experts explain specific issues), Q&A Thursday (experts get together to answer questions) and Showcase Friday (exposé of audience’s work).

Since the creation of TakeABiteCC, we have developed a series of free adaptable online materials in many formats to enable the engagement with diverse audiences in different set ups; some of these materials include: 1) Climate Food Flashcards, a free downloadable resource about the variation of GHGE caused by producing different foods, including some useful nutritional value information and the amount of water use, to start conversations about healthy sustainable diets; 2) Climate Food Challenge, an online game to learn which food choices have the biggest climate impact; 3) Farming For The Future,
a board game to show where GHGE are produced on a farm and how to make it more sustainable, producing fewer emissions and achieving other environmental benefits e.g. promoting biodiversity; 4) Climate Calculator, a free online resource, to help user estimate the GHGE of different food choices like recipes or menus.

Beyond informing the public, our aim for future projects is to involve people as citizen scientists, so giving an opportunity to lead other generations into urgent transformation of food consumption and the whole food system.

In our presentation, we will focus on two aspects: 1) how this initiative has developed diverse and adaptable materials that help with awareness raising and potentially behavioural change towards sustainable food consumption; and 2) how it volunteering nature has joined together national and international researcher and practitioners in the field of food climate change.

*The Team

Alana Kluczkovski, University of Manchester  
Joanne Cook, University of York  
Rebecca Lait, University of Manchester  
Jacqueline Tereza da Silva, HCor Research Institute  
Helen F. Downie, University of Manchester  
Alison Fletcher, University of Manchester  
Lauryn McLaughlin, National Trust  
Carla Adriano Martins, University of Manchester  
Andrew Markwick, University of Manchester  
Wayne Martindale, University of Lincoln  
Angelina Frankowska, University of Manchester  
Ali J. Birkett, Lancaster University  
Sara Summerton, University of Manchester  
Rosemary Green, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine  
Francesca Harris, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine  
Joseph T. Fennell, University of Manchester  
Pete Smith, University of Aberdeen  
John Ingram, University of Oxford  
Zoe Wolfenden, Fairway Primary School  
John Lynch, University of Oxford  
David Johnson, University of Manchester  
Jason C G Halford, University of Leeds  
Melissa Lord, Ogden Trust  
John Mclaughlin, University of Manchester  
Julian Leon Huppert, Jesus College, Cambridge  
Jade Ajagun-Brauns, University of Manchester  
Christian J. Reynolds, City, University of London; University of Sheffield  
Ximena Schmidt Rivera, Brunel University London  
Sarah L. Bridle, University of Manchester
References available upon request.