

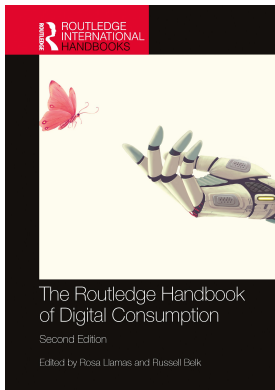
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THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF CONSUMER MOVEMENTS

Jay M. Handelman

The idea of a consumer movement is widely regarded to have been born at the dawn of the 20th century, embodied by the formation of the National Consumers League (NCL) which was established in 1899 (Glickman 2009). While there is a long history of harnessing the purchasing power of consumers (in the form of boycotts, for example) in an effort to impact a myriad of social causes, the rise of a consumer movement is a different and more recent occurrence. As embodied by the NCL, for the first time, consumers themselves came to be recognized as a distinct group that required its own lobby to protect consumer interests and drive social change through moral consumption behavior (Glickman 2009).

However, in the digital age of the 21st century, the disintermediated nature of internet and social media communication afforded by digital technology has democratized the voice of the consumer. As such, the implied paternalistic, top-down approach of the traditional consumer movements of the early 20th century may no longer fully capture all the dynamics of consumer movements in the digital age. Verhoef et al. (2021) identify three stages of transformation that organizations go through as they are confronted by, and adopt, digital technology: digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation. Drawing on this lens of the three stages of digital transformation, this chapter will consider how the structuring and social change impact of a consumer movement has come to be transformed.

The Historical Foundation of the Consumer Movement

In general, a social movement is an effort by activists with a particular passion and concern for a given social and political arrangement to mobilize people into the collective effort to change the current social order so as to bring about a more desirable state of the world (Den Hond and De Bakker 2007). Historically, the link between social movements and the power of the consumer has been very strong. For example, American colonialists who organized the nonimportation of British products (the Boston Tea Party of 1764) used the power of consumer activism in a social movement against the corruption of the British rulers of the day; in the 1820s, abolitionists called on consumers to only buy non-slave made products in a social movement to abolish slavery (Glickman 2009); the anti-Nike boycott of the 1990s called on consumers to join a movement aimed at limiting the globalization of our economic system (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). In all these examples, the power of the consumer

was harnessed in a social movement against a target other than the consumer – corrupt governments, slavery, globalized economic arrangements. Therefore, it stands to follow that in a *consumer* social movement, people are mobilized into a collective effort to change the current social order around consumers and the morality underlying the composition of a consumer society.

This idea of a consumer movement arose in the early 20th century in the context of the Progressive Era in the United States which was a time of great social activism. With the new economic arrangements that ushered in the 20th century, Progressives recognized the rising power of the consumer as both a potential source of danger and hope in their quest for a better society. If consumers acted selfishly by making consumption decisions without any regard to the consequences of those decisions, what Progressives considered to be immoral consumption, this would potentially undo the social progress made on other fronts. For example, Progressives saw consumers as having a responsibility to the workers who made the products. Consumption decisions that were made without regard to the worker, such as demanding only the lowest priced products even if they were made by non-unionized workers, would undermine much of the progress that had been made to empower workers through the formation of labor unions.

While Progressives recognized the power of the consumer to affect social change, they also regarded the consumer as overwhelmed and ignorant to the complexities of the new economic world order. Based on the idea that the consumer, just like the worker in the Marxian narrative, was a victim of a highly complex economic system controlled by a powerful business elite, leaders of the newly formed consumer movement sought to transform the consumer from helpless victim to societal savior (Glickman 2009; Murray and Ozanne 1991). To do this, the NCL, as a leading organization in the early days of the consumer movement and self-proclaimed “expert” in consumer matters, sought to resolve what they saw as consumer vulnerability and ineptitude. They did this by determining moral and safe consumption options for consumers, and then encouraging consumers to alter their consumption behavior in ways that would shape the social order. By protecting the consumer from the power of corporations while guiding consumers on what was considered by Progressives as moral consumption, consumers could emerge as a powerful force for good in society (Glickman 2009; Witkowski 2010).

Moralizing and Mobilizing

There are two fundamental assumptions that underlie the historical rise of the 20th-century consumer movement and its ability to affect social change. These assumptions are premised on Marxist, critical theory (Murray and Ozanne 1991) and resource mobilization accounts of social change (McCarthy and Zald 1977). The two assumptions combined – moralizing and mobilizing – place the power of social change in the hands of expert activists and their ability to amass consumers to alter their consumption behavior so as to force social change.

First, consumer movements are grounded on a premise of morality as framed by the “expert” activists. These “expert” activists seek to engage consumers in a process of critical self-reflection so that they may arrive at an awareness of the interests and ideological imperatives that have come to shape the social structures that constrain human potential and freedom (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994; Murray and Ozanne 1991). As an example, early Progressive era consumer movement organizations, such as the NCL, enlisted highly educated people to research the impact of consumption on workers and the environment and to find alternative moral forms of consumption that they could instill in consumers (Glickman 2009).

Second, the consumer movement of the 20th century has largely been regarded as a top-down, hierarchical arrangement in which “expert” activists worked to protect vulnerable consumers, and then through education and critical self-reflection, these consumers would come to be mobilized into powerful movements that would force desirable social change (Glickman 2009; Murray and Ozanne 1991). As such, successful social change is accomplished by the power of “expert” consumer movement activists to mobilize sufficient resources to challenge and defeat the status quo social arrangements that are being upheld by adversarial stakeholders such as corporations and governments (Buechler 2011; Etzioni 1967; McCarthy and Zald 1977).

Examining these assumptions through the lens of 21st-century advances in digital technology leads us to reconsider how we regard the structuring and power dynamics of a consumer movement, and the corresponding paths to social change. The ways in which digital technology can transform organizations and how this might impact the organization of the consumer movement is now considered.

The Three Phases of Digital Transformation

Verhoef et al. (2021) note that the advancement of digital technology can serve to drastically transform organizations – how they organize themselves, the kinds of people who become involved with the organization, and how those in the organization engage with other stakeholders. Verhoef et al. (2021) arrive at three phases of digital transformation that businesses and markets go through, with each phase altering the way businesses must organize themselves to succeed. As noted in the previous section, consumer movements arise from the mobilization of people into a shared collective effort to change a given social arrangement related to consumer society. As such, a consumer movement may be considered a type of organization of people, ideas and resources. As Verhoef et al. (2021) examine the ways in which the advancement of digital technology changes the way those in and around an organization behave and interact, there is reason to believe that the advance of digital technology may alter the ways in which people come to be mobilized and engaged in a consumer movement. As such, this chapter adapts Verhoef et al.’s (2021) three-phase transformation to consider how the dynamics surrounding a consumer movement may also be transformed through the advancement of digital technology. Before considering how the various phases of the advancement of digital technology may alter a consumer movement, Verhoef et al.’s three phases are first defined.

The first phase of digital transformation is *digitization*. This phase involves the encoding of analogue information into a digital format, thus integrating information technology with existing organizational structures and practices (Verhoef et al. 2021). At this phase, organizational processes may be improved and enhanced, but the core business model remains relatively unchanged (Verhoef et al. 2021). Applied to the concept of the consumer movement, this phase of digital transformation would help to accelerate and amplify activist efforts, but not necessarily transform how we might think about a consumer movement.

The second phase of digital transformation is *digitalization*. In this phase, organizations consider how digital technologies can be used to alter existing business practices (Verhoef et al. 2021). For example, new online and mobile communication channels enable consumers to interact with companies in different ways, thus changing traditional interactions. Digitalization requires organizations to adopt new structures and alter existing processes in order to reflect the new opportunities presented by the new technology (Verhoef et al. 2021).

The third phase is *digital transformation*. In this phase, new business models are created that are driven by different logics in how value is created. This goes beyond changing

organizational practices, which is the case in the second phase of digitalization. Instead, digital transformation utilizes digital technologies to enable interactions across people and organizations in ways never before possible. As such, the whole organization is transformed (Verhoef et al. 2021).

Each of these three phases can be used to consider how consumer movements may be transformed with the adoption of digital technology. The internet has been regarded as a liberating technology that has democratized communication and by extension, activism. The digital technology underlying internet and social media platforms allows for a bottom-up form of connective action where formal structures can be avoided, creating the potential to upend the top-down formalization of traditional consumer movements (Greijdanus et al. 2020).

Further, the relatively anonymous nature of the online environment enables an “online disinhibition” where “pseudonymized online community members” are “less responsive to all social norms” (Greijdanus et al. 2020, 50). Therefore, the online environment has not only made activism more accessible, but the anonymizing characteristic of the internet and social media helps to empower the voice of each individual. Rather than power being amassed to the movement organizers who can mobilize the most resources as is the case with traditional consumer movements, power comes to be dispersed amongst individual community members.

Additionally, the interactivity enabled by online communities has people self-segregating into like-minded networks (Greijdanus et al. 2020). These “echo chambers” may encourage the formation of monocultures where the same shared realities are validated (Echterhoff and Higgins 2018). A relatively monolithic community culture comprised of individuals speaking their own voice raises question about the role of morality in mobilizing individuals to action.

Taken as a whole, digital technology has the potential to significantly transform the organization of a consumer movement and as such, transform the way in which consumer movements may impact social change. The three phases of digital transformation conceptualized by Verhoef et al. (2021) provide an organizing framework to consider how each type of advancement in digital technology may change the way we conceptualize consumer movements. The next part of this chapter investigates the consumer movement at each of the three phases of digital transformation, considering both the impact on the way in which a consumer movement functions and the way in which social change may occur.

Three Phases of Consumer Movements and Social Change

Phase 1: Social Change through the Amplification of the Consumer Movement

Recall that in phase 1 – digitization – digital technology is integrated with existing organizational functions in order to better facilitate these practices. Digital communication across internet and social media channels allows for a greater diffusion of protest information, enabling widespread promotion of individual participation in collective action (Garrett 2006). Importantly, this communication can be sustained over long periods of time across physically dispersed groups of people (Cernison 2019; Howard 2002). For example, researchers who examined the Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring movements noted the ability of digital communications to “accelerate the spread of protests” by “permitting activists to share content through their interpersonal connections (Cernison 2019, 33; Gaby and Caren 2012).

More recently, digital technology underlying social media platforms played a key role in the rise of the BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement (Gawthrop and Illingworth 2020). Following the murder of 17-year-old African-American high school student Trayvon Martin in 2013, BLM cofounder Alicia Garza shared the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” that echoed across social media channels on its way to becoming a global human rights movement (Gawthrop and Illingworth 2020). Consistent with resource mobilization theory, digital communication networks allow for the fast and widespread communication and mobilization of protest events, political opportunities to capitalize on protest, and an effective means by which the moral framing of the protests can be accomplished (Cernison 2019; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996).

A second way in which consumer movements are amplified by digitization is through the creation of new online spaces for protest (Della Porta and Mosca 2005; Gaby and Caren 2012). For example, Change.org which refers to itself as “The World’s Platform for Change”, has a number of “petition experts” who can help activists to launch petitions against companies around the world. This online platform enables activists to accumulate hundreds of thousands of signatures in support of petitions that target the transgressions of companies (Minocher 2019). Another example is the “virtual sit-in” as a form of online demonstration where activists direct a web-based program to send repetitive requests to the webpages of a targeted organization. When these webpages receive thousands of such requests at once, the website’s bandwidth is clogged, causing the site to shut down. This was the case when activists organized a virtual sit-in against the German airline Lufthansa in protest against the use of Lufthansa planes to deport immigrants from Germany (Sauter 2014).

In this account of consumer movements, digital internet and social media communication enable the amplification of networked communication to, and between, potential activists. This, combined with the affordance of new online spaces for protest, allows consumer movements to benefit from the involvement of more people engaged in more forms of activism. This digitally-enabled amplification of the consumer movement allows for the mobilization of more resources (people and sites of activism) to pressure organizations to change.

In this phase, digital technology is adopted by “petition experts” (Minocher 2019) and sit-in organizers (Sauter 2014), as a couple of examples, in an effort to enlist other consumers to share their moral rage and join in activist attempts to pressure companies to change their practices. The traditional assumptions of consumer movements are upheld in which social change happens through the top-down effort by activists to frame the morality of their cause to entice consumers to join the cause, thus enabling the mobilization of sufficient resources to challenge the status quo social arrangements (Buechler 2011; Etzioni 1967; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Consistent with traditional consumer movements, movement mobilization is driven by a moral outrage that has come to be shared by a group of consumers who become activists in the movement (McAdam et al. 2001; Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018). Digital technology serves to amplify this effort while the traditional structures of a consumer movement remain intact.

Phase 2: Social Change through the Power of Individual Discourse

Recall that in phase 2 – digitalization – digital technology is used to alter the way in which people communicate, leading to new processes and paths for change. The privileging of the “expert” activist in mobilizing a consumer movement as the primary path to social change may be called into question when considering the democratizing effects of digital communication. With individual consumers empowered to voice their views, there is an opportunity to think of other forms that consumer movements may take and as such, other paths to social change.

While accepting that prevailing market structures can be contested through social action, Thompson (2004) suggests that new structural arrangements embody new patterns of power relationships that will in turn come to be contested. Taking a Foucauldian perspective, Thompson (2004, p. 174) draws attention to the “dialectical dynamism” of market change in which “corporate power and antibrand activism are countervailing forces in a dynamic system of shifting and perpetually morphing relationships between power and resistance”. Foucault’s analysis of power shifted the emphasis away from resource-based advantages located in particular social actors (such as “expert” activists), instead locating power in the rules that guide and shape discourses present in society (Foucault 1980; Tovar-Restrepo 2012). For Foucault, locating power in discourses affords social actors the opportunity to leverage elements of particular discourses to resist (or countervail) dominant norms and beliefs (Thompson and Haytko 1997). Therefore, rather than market change occurring as a result of the moral activist mobilizing enough resources to overwhelm the immoral antagonist, Thompson (2004) documents more of a co-evolutionary process of social change that arises from the dialectical dynamism between activists and marketers. The democratization of communications afforded by digitalization has empowered individual consumers, through their discourse, to shape the ideologies and logics that legitimate or delegitimize social arrangements.

An example of this change in the way a consumer movement is formed and empowered can be found in the examination of the growth of social media communities comprised of young people decrying the growing threat of climate change. Marris (2019) points out that the emerging narrative amongst the young activists has come to frame climate change as a human justice issue as opposed to simply an issue of saving the environment. Online videos of young people speaking this message are being shared millions of times leading to the message being embedded in mainstream media (Marris 2019). The result is that longitudinal public opinion surveys in major industrial nations are showing the public as increasingly receptive to the global justice message (Marris 2019).

In contrast to the Critical Theory perspective in which social change occurs as a result of overcoming a false consciousness against a hegemonic system of oppressive social arrangements, we see consumers as actively appropriating and reinterpreting ideological discourses that underlie the social arrangements of concern. Thompson and Arsel (2004) note that these discourses allow groups of consumers to identify around particular tropes to forge interpersonal connections by way of common consumption interests. Power dynamics shift from “experts” who can mobilize groups of people, to discourses that, over time, effectively shape mainstream belief systems about the way the world should be. The reshaping of ideology driven by these compelling discourses puts pressure on societal constituents to change the prevailing institutional arrangements.

The digitalization of communication empowers individual consumers to contribute to the shaping of the discourse and ultimately the ideology that guides institutional arrangements. These powerful tropes are not distributed by elite organizing activists, but rather widely dispersed by previously disempowered individuals who now have a voice. As Marris (2019) points out, in the context of the changing narrative around climate change, what makes these narratives so much more powerful is the fact that they are being voiced by young people who are *not* in formal positions of power. Digitalization illuminates new consumer movement processes and therefore different paths to social change.

While digitalization illuminates different processes and paths to social change compared to the traditional resource mobilization perspective, these first two consumer movement phases – amplification and the power of individual discourse – do share a common

assumption. Both phases present the activists involved in the movement as knowledgeable, engaged, and focused on the given issue. In other words, these first two phases of consumer movements regard social change as driven by activists with goal-driven interests that are mediated by power (Tovar-Restrepo, 2012). Greta Thunberg, the teenage Swedish activist who has come to embody much of the movement against climate change, or Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi who are the founding activists of the BLM movement, all are illustrative of activists without institutional power but who have been able to amplify their message and drive a particular narrative aided by digital technology. What also binds these activists together is their focused and purposive commitment to their respective causes. These goal-driven activists gain power advantages by knowledgeably tapping into and reworking discourses that embody powerful ideologies, thus enabling these social actors to affect social change (Tovar-Restrepo, 2012). However, in light of the dynamics afforded by online communities brought together by digital communication, there may be reason to question this agentic determinacy as the only means to social change.

Phase 3: Social Change through Unintended Change Processes

The very assumption that consumers hold such sustained and collaborative interest in definitive market arrangements may be more of an exception than a rule. For example, in their examination of the brand public, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015) find that consumers, rather than forming clear collective identities around well-defined brand communities, instead use the brand as a medium upon which to express diverse versions of identity. This concept of the brand public applied to social change leads one to de-emphasize the centrality of motivated and agenda-driven activists, and instead direct attention to everyday consumers who bring to the market an array of conflicting and shifting identity-based concerns that draw upon all aspects of social life. What emerges is a picture of a less than cohesive and engaged social actor who may be more focused on expressing narratives that align with individual identity rather than on restructuring social arrangements (Kozinets, Handelman, and Lee 2010). This perspective challenges the idea of a “transcendental subjectivity” which is so core to the previous two phases of consumer movements (Tovar-Restrepo 2012, p. 76).

Kozinets (2019) examined a range of social media activity by consumers engaged in playful, imaginative discourses about capitalist institutions and the morality of consumer society. These expressions of profanation on social media platforms had participants asserting and defending their respective moral stances while debating and ridiculing the moral stances of others (Kozinets 2019). Rather than coming together as a cohesive, organized collective driven by a common vision of social change, these social media participants sounded more like a group of people shouting at each other (Kozinets 2019). But that does not mean this dynamic of online profanation cannot amount to social change. As Kozinets (2019) notes, these discourses create imaginary worlds that simultaneously serve to delegitimize status quo social arrangements. The creation of these imaginary worlds might be considered the first step toward actual social change (Kozinets 2019).

Considering the disparate nature of online, social media discourses that do not lead to collective action requires that we adopt theoretical perspectives that embrace these more indeterminate paths to social change. Understanding new paths to social change requires that we consider how the consumer movement may be experiencing a digital transformation.

With this in mind, consider the work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1987, 1997) whose theorizing of social change rejected the essentialist notion of the subject, positing instead “an

undetermined subject” (Tovar-Restrepo 2012, p. 69) whose human psyche is driven by imagination, a radical creativity which means that “humans cannot *not* posit norms” (Castoriadis 1997, p. 375). Humans always pose and repose the question of the norms that drive social arrangements, thus always striving to break the closure imposed by the inertia of those existing social arrangements. Castoriadis (1987) referred to this innate drive for people to posit new norms while questioning existing arrangements as the “project of autonomy”. Questions of what is just, equal, and free are always posed a new in society. For Castoriadis, it is the core of human nature to quest for autonomy, and thus the rupture of the corresponding closure to social change, as end unto itself:

The project of autonomy is an end and a guide but does not involve determined solutions. It does not resolve situations. The aim of autonomy to break closure does not suppose in itself a specific and determined social form. Autonomy is a creation and as such, is not an event but a continuous creative and dynamic process.

(Tovar-Restrepo 2012, p. 79)

In rejecting the essentialist vision of the subject who strives for determined solutions, Castoriadis highlights the existence of an undetermined subject, a socio historical creation defined by the sustained conflict between the closure of existing social arrangements and autonomy at any given point in time. Through this sustained, undetermined conflict, the defenses used by institutional actors to sustain a status quo state – closure – fail because of the ongoing threats in multiple directions driven by autonomous seeking individuals (Tovar-Restrepo 2012). The radical creativity of individual members of society drives the conditions that constantly transgress social closure. These innovating activities never end, and the closure of social institutions is never complete. Castoriadis (1987, 1997) regards change as an intrinsic characteristic of society whereby societal arrangements are built on “magma” as they are subject to never-ending shifts in indeterminate directions.

Rather than stable societal structures being punctuated by episodes of activism marshaled by organized collective movements, we come to consider social change as being endemic to society. Castoriadis was theorizing this type of social change well before internet and social media technology existed. However, the mechanisms that Castoriadis considers as instrumental to this type of indeterminate change – the constant tug-of-war between the radical imagination of people driven by autonomy and confronted by institutional forces of closure – may be considered vastly enabled through digital transformation. As Adams (2012) notes, much of the extant scholarly work on social change does not take into account the non-subjective domain of social action. Social change tends to be confined to instances of individualistic and collective purposeful action mediated by power (Adams 2012). Instead, Castoriadis directs our attention to the forces of social change that are not guided by goal-driven reason, but by the indeterminate spirit of the human psyche. The hurly-burly of internet and social media platforms upon which most adults now communicate may provide the very rocket-fuel needed to drive this indeterminate social change.

Research Opportunities

The presentation of these three phases of consumer movements is not meant to suggest that the formation of consumer movements has gone, or is going through, a sort of linear progression from phase 1 to phase 3. As the illustrations throughout the chapter show, the

structuring of contemporary consumer movements and their paths to social change may simultaneously reflect all three phases of digital transformation. In addition, the presentation of these three phases driven by digital technology advancement does not suggest that traditional “analogue” forms of activism are no longer relevant. For example, climate change activist Greta Thunberg, and BlackLivesMatter founders Patrisse Cullor, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi have all been movement leaders instrumental in driving good old-fashioned street protests and other forms of traditional analogue types of activism. However, these three phases driven by the advancement of digital technology provide an opportunity to examine different ways that consumer movements come to be structured and the different mechanisms by which social change occurs, suggesting that social change most likely occurs through a simultaneous combination of determinate and indeterminate analogue and digital forces. Examining these three phases of consumer movements may help to further illuminate these social change dynamics. Table 37.1 provides a summary of the three phases of consumer movements along with suggested directions for future research.

Table 37.1 Three Phases of Consumer Movements and Research Opportunities

<i>Consumer movement phase</i>	<i>Process of social change</i>	<i>Stakeholders and their roles</i>	<i>Research opportunities</i>
Phase 1: Amplification of the consumer movement	Power resides in the mobilization of activism that punctuates status quo social arrangements.	Consumer movement leaders who frame the call to action. Consumers who are inspired to action. Institutional actors who are targets of the movement.	R1: How does digitization enable activists to amass mobilizing power? R2: Does digitization lead to meaningful movement participation by consumers? R3: How might the dynamics created by the digitization of consumer movements compel institutional social actors, such as the companies and their brands being targeted, to change their practices?
Phase 2: Power of individual discourses	Power resides in the aggregated discourses from consumer movement participants that counter dominant ideologies underlying status quo social arrangements.	Consumer movement leaders whose narratives help shape the moralizing that mobilize consumers. Consumers who engage in moralizing discourse. Institutional actors who are the targets of the moralizing.	R4: How might the digitalization of a consumer movement lead to the legitimacy of new moral discourses / de-legitimacy of old moral discourses? R5: Through what mechanisms will the changing moral discourses through the digitalization of consumer movement processes affect change in the practices of the targeted institutional actors?

(Continued)

<i>Consumer movement phase</i>	<i>Process of social change</i>	<i>Stakeholders and their roles</i>	<i>Research opportunities</i>
Phase 3: Unintended change processes	Ever-present narratives of autonomy serve as the “magma” underlying social arrangements. Institutional actors either attempt to invoke closure or continuously adapt to the changing narratives.	Individual consumers who engage in continuous discourses of autonomy. Institutional actors who work to invoke closure or who evolve their social arrangements.	R6: In what ways does digital technology enable the aggregation of consumer discourses into forces of autonomy? R7: Through what mechanisms might internet and social media technology enhance the ability of institutional actors to invoke closure on the autonomy efforts of consumer movement participants? R8: In what ways might digital technology enhance the ability of institutional actors to evolve their social arrangements in the face of autonomy?

Source: Own elaboration.

Researching Phase 1 of Consumer Movements

In phase 1 of a consumer movement, power resides with the activists who are able to mobilize enough resources (consumers and their acts of activism) that can punctuate the stability of status quo social arrangements. With sufficient social force, institutional actors come to be pressured to change their practices. The focus of this phase of consumer movement is on the in-the-know activists who are able to frame the call to action, the consumers who are inspired to action, and the institutional actors who are the target of the consumer movement. Research on this phase 1 dynamic can be directed at these three groups of social actors and whether digitization amplifies the power of the organizing activists, their ability to achieve sufficient consumer mobilization, and whether social change is more likely to occur.

Research Question 1: *How does digitization enable activists to amass the power to mobilize a consumer movement?*

Research Question 2: *Does digitization of the consumer movement lead to meaningful movement participation by consumers?*

Research Question 3: *How might the dynamics created by the digitization of consumer movements compel institutional social actors, such as the companies and their brands being targeted, to change their practices?*

Researching Phase 2 of Consumer Movements

In phase 2 of a consumer movement, power is seen to reside in the discourses that counter the dominant norms, values and beliefs, thus shaping new ideologies that guide the changes

in social arrangements. Given the change in consumer movement processes afforded by digitalization, the focus of research rests on consumers who are drawn to partake in the moral arguments of the given social cause, and on the ways in which these changing narratives affect change in the practices of the institutional actors targeted by the movement.

Research Question 4: *How might the digitalization of a consumer movement lead to the legitimacy of new moral discourses / de-legitimacy of old moral discourses?*

Research Question 5: *Through what mechanisms will the changing moral discourses through the digitalization of consumer movement processes affect change in the practices of the targeted institutional actors?*

Researching Phase 3 of Consumer Movements

In phase 3 of a consumer movement, ever present expressions of autonomy are regarded as the “magma” upon which social structures are built. In this perspective, target institutional actors either work to impose social closure, or they endlessly adapt to the ever-shifting terrain. In this respect, rather than punctuating otherwise stable social arrangements as in phases 1 and 2, consumer movements are instead regarded as an ever present but indeterminate force of social change. In this consumer movement phase, the focus is on individual consumer participation in the shaping of societal discourses. In addition, attention is directed at the activity of institutional actors and how they may attempt to impose closure on these cultural discourses, or alternatively, how they may also contribute to the shaping of these discourses. Research might be directed at the ways in which digital communication facilitates this transformation in the way in which we think about consumer movements and social change.

Research Question 6: *In what ways do internet and social media technology enable the aggregation of consumer discourses into forces of autonomy?*

Research Question 7: *Through what mechanisms might internet and social media technology enhance the ability of institutional actors to invoke closure on the autonomy efforts of consumer movement participants?*

Research Question 8: *Alternatively, in what ways might internet and social media technology enhance the ability of institutional actors to evolve their social arrangements in the face of the autonomy efforts of consumer movement participants?*

Conclusion

The historical foundation of the consumer movement has been premised on the ideas of moralization and mobilization. Here, consumer movement leaders and “experts” frame the moral arguments surrounding the given societal issues thus guiding the ways in which consumers are meant to understand these societal issues, and then work to mobilize enough support amongst consumers to affect the desired social change. However, there is evidence that the advance of digital technology has served to challenge our largely top-down, hierarchical understanding of consumer movements, changing the ways in which movements come to be structured, and therefore also expanding the ways in which social change might occur.

This chapter has considered three phases of consumer movement change driven by the advance of digital technology. In the first two phases – amplification of the consumer

movement and power of individual discourse – digital technology greatly empowers the activists driving the consumer movement, mobilizing more consumers to join the movement, and giving those consumers greater power through the amplification of their own discourse. These first two phases tend to challenge the assumptions of a top-down hierarchical structure of consumer movements, opening up new paths of mobilization and impact on change targets. What these first two phases also share in common is that the empowered activists involved in a given consumer movement are fully engaged in the movement and committed to the seeing the desired social change happen.

It is in the third phase – digital transformation – that we come to consider the most radical changes in the assumptions underlying a consumer movement. In this third phase, movement participants have their dialogue amplified, yet their commitment to a unified, cohesive movement with a clearly articulated moral vision is cast into doubt. Social media echo chambers where all participants articulate their own vision of a given social order with little commitment to actual action may be regarded to open up indeterminate influences on the ideological structures underlying society. This is known as the process of autonomy. This dynamic of autonomy afforded by the digital technology underlying internet and social media platforms raises new research questions that may guide future investigations of consumer movements.

Further Reading

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