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Megamarketing and sustainability in contested markets: a longitudinal analysis of media discourses about palm oil

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Abstract

Palm oil is an ingredient largely used in the context of baked products, desserts, energy, and cosmetics. However, the use of this product has been significantly criticized by many stakeholders because its consumption has been considered unhealthy for human beings, while its production has been deemed environmentally unsustainable and even associated with human rights abuses. We consider this to be a fruitful context to observe how different meanings about a contested product emerge and evolve over time as a result of delegitimizing and legitimating processes. In particular, through a qualitative and quantitative content analysis, we examine a sample of 1,155 LexisNexis articles published from 1993 to 2016 and dealing with the concept of palm oil. We demonstrate that discourses about palm oil have changed over time across three different periods. In Phase I (1990s), health concerns result to be the dominant dimension in palm oil discussions. During Phase II (2000s), environmental issues become the main discussed topic and, in Phase III (2010s), human rights tend to be the salient argument. We discuss these results in light with institutional theory and, particularly, with the concept of megamarketing (Kotler 1986) in contested markets. Future directions are also presented at the end of the paper.

Keywords: Legitimacy, Neo institutional theory, Contested markets, Palm oil, Sustainability, Megamarketing

Track: Sustainable Marketing

1. Introduction and theoretical background

Following the development of approaches based on institutional theory in several fields of social sciences (Suchman 1995), consumer researchers are also paying increasing attention on the processes through which market and consumption systems evolve over time and on the role played by consumers in these processes (Gielser and Thompson 2016). By adopting a broader, sociocultural approach to the study of consumer behavior, consumer researchers are, thus, more and more interested in analyzing how cultural changes affect individuals' attitudes and behaviors over time (Giesler and Fischer 2016). This new view also opens the door to a new perspective of marketing, which should take into increasing consideration the socio-cultural context in which consumption practices take place. For instance, by building on the concept of megamarketing, which is defined by Kotler (1986) as "the use of strategic efforts by a firm or firms to gain the cooperation of multiple stakeholders", Humphreys (2010) helps better understand how new industries (i.e. in her case, the casino gambling industry) may emerge and develop as a result of a specific social and political context. Similarly, Chaine and Slimane (2014) highlight the advantages of taking an institutional approach in marketing. Specifically, they list three contexts in which institutional dimensions hold particular importance: (1) viewing consumption as an institution; (2) understanding positioning actions at two levels of legitimacy: the product and the product category; and (3) studying companies' influence and market transformation strategies through the concept of megamarketing.

Although several authors (e.g. Yang and Su 2014) recognize the importance of considering institutional environments to better understand organizational behavior, structure, strategy, governance, and process, marketing research in this domain is only at an early stage (Chaney et al. 2016). More research is thus considered fundamental in order to develop this promising field (Giesler and Fischer 2016; Gielser and Thompson 2016). In particular, while the majority of authors focus on the legitimization of consumption practices or new industries, we believe that one of the most understudied areas is that of contested markets and delegitimation processes. In this regard, Humphreys et al. (2016, p. 2) maintain, "extant literature on marketing and megamarketing has addressed market creation issues but left much untold about the dynamic around market disruption". However, we notice that, especially in some contexts such as food production and consumption, it is quite common to observe the development of controversies into the market (Chiles 2016; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). Accordingly, Humphreys et al. (2016) adapt the concept of megamarketing to also study conflicts between companies that try to delegitimize a market and companies that aim at maintaining the status quo. Interestingly, they demonstrate that subjects aiming at delegitimizing a particular practice tend to adopt similar processes as those who try defending it from criticism (see also Maguire and Hardy 2009). The authors then conclude their inspiring article by calling for new research in this field, which, especially using longitudinal methods, could better clarify in which conditions the three pillars of legitimacy (i.e. cognitive, normative, and regulatory pillars; Scott 2001) may be disrupted or maintained over time (Humphreys et al. 2016; p. 8). We try

to contribute to this emerging field of research by analyzing the evolution of discourses about palm oil over time.

2. Research domain

Palm oil is an ingredient largely used by food companies, especially in the context of baked products and desserts. Similarly, palm oil is highly employed in the context of energy and cosmetics. In fact, “its high fat content and low cost make it appealing for products ranging from biodiesel to shampoo to biscuits, cookies, and all kinds of processed food” (De Fries 2014). Currently, Indonesia and Malaysia, where almost 90% of the global palm oil is produced, are among the most important players in this field (Rival and Levang 2014). However, “while oil palm is cultivated on 7% of the world agricultural land devoted to oil production, it provides almost 40% of the world vegetable oil production” (Rival and Levang 2014). Importantly, Seegräf et al. (2010) report that about a half of the products in a typical supermarket tend to contain palm oil. And Hansen et al. (2015, p. 140) maintain that palm oil is now “the most produced and consumed vegetable oil in the world”.

We are particularly interested in this product because its use has been significantly criticized by various stakeholders, such as social movements, social organizations, and final consumers (Cova and D’Antone 2016; D’Antone and Spencer 2014, 2015). This product can thus be considered a “contested” product in the sense described by Humphreys et al. (2016). Among the reasons for this criticism, many important stakeholders (e.g., doctors, bloggers, journalists) have reported that consumption of this saturated fat is unhealthy for human beings, while other commentators remark that the production of palm oil implies deforestation and pollution; thus, it is unsustainable. For these and other reasons (e.g. recently, the palm oil issue has also been related to child labor and other human rights abuses; Amnesty International 2016), many consumers are increasingly reacting very negatively to its use and they have started spreading negative word-of-mouth, boycotting products that contain palm oil and even signing public petitions to ask companies to stop using it (e.g., Economist 2010; Guardian 2014). We thus consider the case of palm oil a fruitful context to observe how different meanings about a contested product emerge and evolve over time as a result of delegitimizing/legitimizing processes.

3. Empirical analysis

In our work, we empirically analyzed the news coverage of palm oil in order to better understand the evolution of palm oil discourses over time. Our sample consists of 1,155 media articles published from 1993 to 2016, which were downloaded from the American LexisNexis database. In this regard, it is important to note that media articles are traditionally used to analyze the evolution of public discourses over time (e.g. Humphreys 2010; Humphreys and Thompson 2014). We first conducted a qualitative analysis to identify the most common ways in which the concept of palm oil was criticized. This first analysis enabled us to identify three different types of palm oil issues most common in our dataset and analogously considered relevant in similar

research (e.g. Corciolani et al. 2016; Giesler and Veresiu 2014): health, environment, and human rights issues. Then, we conducted a quantitative, automated text analysis of these materials (Humphreys 2014) to measure the change in these types of discourses over time. In particular, we found that, in our dataset, palm oil discourses have evolved through three distinct periods. Specifically, in Phase I (1990s), health concerns resulted to be the dominant dimensions in palm oil discussions. During Phase II (2000s), environmental issues were the main discussed issues and, in Phase III (2010s), human rights tended to be the salient topic.

4. Discussion

We interpret these results by arguing that discourses about the contested product of palm oil have shifted from more self-interest to more social justice issues. In this regard, Chiles (2016) claim that nutrition and food security (biosecurity) are typically “self-interest” issues while environment, labor, animal treatment, and vegetarianism are typically “social justice” issues that tend to come up during discussions about food controversies. We also know from previous research that “tensions between social obligations and self-interest can influence not only how consumers assess the morality and appropriateness of others but also how they themselves behave” (Grayson 2014, p. vii). What we think is particularly interesting in our analysis is that we observe an historical progression from the former to the latter type of issues. We thus try speculating that, while criticism about palm oil has increased over years, public discourse has shifted from a discussion of health problems related to the use of palm oil towards sustainability and human rights issues. This way, a new type of palm oil, the so-called “sustainable palm oil” (Boons and Mendoza 2010; D’Antone and Spencer 2014, 2015), might eventually be legitimated. In fact, while trying to respond to issues that directly threatened individual consumers (i.e. health problems) could be difficult for the industry, focusing on more general aspects (i.e. environmental and human rights’ issues), make it possible to legitimate a new type of palm oil, which is presented as a solution for the latter problems. We thus observe an interesting process of legitimation, which is developed as a response to the critical, delegitimizing one and that tries to change the focus of public opinion in order to stimulate more attention on universal problems, which companies propose to solve, instead of paying attention on individual ones (i.e. personal health), which are more problematic to be faced.

5. Future research

In order to better comprehend the overall picture, we are now trying to interpret which sociocultural mechanisms were more important in causing the above progression over time. In order to do that, we think it could be useful to collect new data, which might shed more light on why palm oil discourses shifted from more self-interest, individual aspects (i.e. health concerns) to more social justice, universal aspects (i.e. environmental and human rights concerns). For instance, food companies’ CSR reports, websites or social media pages could be analyzed to understand how companies have changed their communication about palm oil over time. Similarly, other media, such as

important websites, blogs or forums dedicated to discussing palm oil issues could be investigated to identify how they are influencing the field. Finally, an analysis of international and national regulations about palm oil could enlighten the emergence of distinct discourses about palm oil in different countries and/or historical periods.

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