

Defining Sustainability on Campus: A Network Analysis of Competing Student Conceptions

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Abstract

Campus sustainability programs typically confront a familiar if not recurring problem: while students and faculty are generally supportive of sustainability initiatives there are considerable differences among students as to what ‘sustainability’ means and how it might relate to local issues on campus (Walshe 2008). This incongruity of prior student knowledge is unfortunate for two reasons: (1) action on a specific issue is often delayed by the need to launch an antecedent awareness campaign; and (2) framing differences that exist among students can lead to confusion about the purpose/goal of a proposed initiative (Berkowitz 2004). Marketers aiming to promote programs of sustainability on campus can, therefore, benefit by understanding how the notion or concept of sustainability is represented within and among their target audience.

The current study analyzes 460 open-ended responses from US students who were asked to define ‘sustainability’ at the outset of a survey on attitudes and behaviors related to local campus issues and activities during the Fall of 2015. Student responses are content analyzed for parts of speech and frequency of term expression (Feldman and Sanger 2007; Neuendorf 2002). Following Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley (2018), a structural topic model approach is used to establish categories from the variables of gender, academic year, major of study, and campus involvement. Results are presented and implications for marketing strategy are discussed.

The managerial implications for sustainability programs on college and university campuses are also explored and discussed. Following Berkowitz (2004) the social norms theory approach is framed in the context of social marketing strategies (Wymer 2011). Particular emphasis and attention are placed on leveraging some of the traditional tactics that beset promotional marketing and advertising. Not only do these methods and techniques prove effective over time but they are arguably closely aligned with the sustainability goals of many universities and colleges.

References:

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Keywords: unstructured data analysis, structural topic model, text analysis.

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners:

Techniques of unstructured data analysis are used to recommend strategies and tactics for marketing sustainability programs on college and university campuses. Structural topic models are discussed in the context of the social norms approach and other social marketing strategies.

Track: Green Marketing/Sustainability

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