

# Environmental dialogue in online communities: negotiating ecological citizenship among global travellers

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Consumer culture, ecological citizenship, netnography, online communities, sustainable tourism.

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate how web-based online communities bring about new forms of environmental dialogue. We suggest that these online sites play an important role in setting the stage for new forms of cultural production, dissemination of environmental knowledge and environmental dialogue, through which particular forms of ecological citizenship and consumer culture are being created and sustained. Based on an empirical study of an online community of 'global travelers' carried out using netnographic methods, the study shows how environmental knowledge is being disseminated, negotiated and made sense of in the online environments of the global marketplace. Our findings illustrate, in particular, how online communities may work out an agenda for sustainable consumption practices and lifestyles, and create new forms of consumer citizenship. Regarding the environmental policy implications of our study, we argue that there is a need to facilitate the creation of online environments where consumers can participate in the construction of active consumer citizenship.

## Introduction

In green political thought and environmental policy-oriented consumer research, many of the traditional market-based and liberal democratic political solutions to sustainable development have been recently problematized. Policy initiatives that deploy fiscal measures to encourage consumers to choose ecologically sound alternatives in the markets have been criticized for not inducing deep enough changes in consumer attitudes, social value systems and other institutional structures that would result in a significant shift towards more sustainable consumer culture/society (Dolan, 2002; Dobson and Valencia Sáiz, 2005; Seyfang, 2005; Valencia Sáiz, 2005; Moisander, 2007). Moreover, because environmental problems such as the consequences of travel and tourism are essentially global in nature, it is argued, sustainable development calls for new transnational political solutions that do not rely on the centrality of the nation state as the core of political community and citizenship (Dobson, 2003; Valencia Sáiz, 2005). Hence, increasing attention is focused on the new roles that civil society could play in achieving green political objectives, and the need for more participatory, grass roots solutions and initiatives that are based on the active role of consumers as political citizens has been emphasized (Auld, 2001; Casimir and Dutilh, 2003; Collins, 2004).

In this paper, we draw from recent theoretical discussions of ecological citizenship (Dobson, 2000, 2003; Dobson and Valencia Sáiz, 2005; Seyfang, 2005; Valencia Sáiz, 2005) to explore the new roles that consumers may play as political agents in the global marketplace. More specifically, our aim is to investigate the ways

in which web-based consumer communities may bring about new forms of environmental dialogue and create a political space where consumers can participate in the construction of active consumer citizenship for sustainable development.

Our analysis unfolds by elaborating on 'ethical' ecological consumption practices in the context of travel and tourism, which have gained a growing interest among consumers, marketers and researchers (e.g. Butcher, 2003, 2008; Dolnicar *et al.*, 2008). Taken that the global environmental and cultural consequences of travel are of immense importance,<sup>1</sup> it provides a fruitful perspective on exploring ecological citizenship. For example, the previous academic literature has identified new, alternative forms of travel such as 'ecotourism' (Ziffer, 1989; Fennell, 2003), 'new moral tourism' (Butcher, 2003) or 'justice tourism' (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008) which give rise to *individual* forms of 'life politics' embedded and manifested in contemporary consumer lifestyles (Butcher, 2008). In this view, it is via consumption – not political parties – that people have come to voice their interests and demands for a more sustainable and just global order.

By means of a case study of global web-based consumer community, where keen travelers look for information, share their experiences and meet their kind, we illustrate how a sense of political community is created around an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1984) of global ecological citizens in the discussion

<sup>1</sup>It is estimated that today, some 700 million people are travelling internationally per year for no other reason than leisure, and by 2020, there will be close to 1.6 billion international tourists (Butcher, Jim, 2003, p. 6).

forums of the website. Our study suggests that online communities may play an important role in setting the stage for new collective forms of cultural production and environmental dialogue, through which particular forms of ecological citizenship and consumer culture can be created and sustained. Our findings illustrate, in particular, how web-based consumer communities may work out an agenda for sustainable consumption practices and lifestyles and create new forms of consumer citizenship.

Overall, our aim is to contribute to a better understanding of the notion of ecological citizenship by illustrating and elaborating on the ways in which the roles, responsibilities and duties of ecological consumer-citizen are actively negotiated in online environments and how a sense of global political community may be created through environmental dialogue in online environments. In the sections that follow, we first take a cultural perspective (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Moisander and Valtonen, 2006) to ecological citizenship as the interpretive framework that guides our analysis. Then, we illustrate the ways in which members of a web-based consumer community of global travelers engage in an environmental dialogue and create an imagined community of ecologically concerned global citizens, which serves as a symbolic site for consumer participation and political engagement in the private sphere. We conclude by suggesting some ways of supporting this dialogue so as to assist ecological citizenship in becoming a more formidable political force in the global economy.

## Theoretical background

### Ecological citizenship and environmental politics

The recent years have seen a rapprochement of environmental politics, citizenship and consumer culture, symbolized by the concept of 'ecological citizenship' (Dobson, 2003; Seyfang, 2005; Valencia Sáiz, 2005). While this form of citizenship is still somewhat undervalued as a theoretical or practical concept in environmental policy (Dobson, 2003), there exists a lengthy tradition of work related to the social and political dimensions of consumption during the past three decades (see Uusitalo, 2005; Trentmann, 2007).

Several challenges for environmental policy have been outlined. Globalization, in particular, has influenced and shaped our understandings about environmental problems: first, it is evident that as a result of global commerce and consumption environmental problems (e.g. global warming), their effects are global rather than local or national. This fundamental challenge to environmental politics suggests different global approaches into defining social problems and their political solutions (e.g. Dobson, 2003; Valencia Sáiz, 2005). Second, it is argued that globalization may benefit local–global relationship and contribute to the realization of sustainable society – as nowadays it is possible to 'think and act globally and locally at the same time' (Valencia Sáiz, 2005; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Although important work on the idea of environmental or ecological citizenship has been done over the last 10 years (e.g. Steward, 1991; Delanty, 1997; Barry, 1999), more systematic development of the concept has recently been carried out by Andrew Dobson (2000, 2003).

Dobson (2003) elegantly shows how ecological citizenship can be derived from ecological political theory. He traces ecological

citizenship from the traditional and contemporary conceptual architectures of citizenship, especially those of liberal and civic republican. In much of the existing work, the ecological citizen is depicted mainly as a rights-claiming and responsibility-exercising subject, who occupies the public sphere, and takes the nation state as the political 'container' of citizenship. Dobson (2003) stresses, however, that ecological citizenship needs to be distinguished as an independent and novel concept.

Rather than viewing citizenship as contractual and restrained to national membership, and hence, geographical territory, Dobson (2003) contends that ecological citizenship is a type of 'post-cosmopolitan', de-territorialized citizenship. This means that from the ecological point of view, it is required that citizenship is closely related to global 'ecological footprints' and justice in terms of governing the size of these footprints. Therefore, it is argued that ecological citizenship entails also non-contractual, 'feminine' virtues, such as compassion and care, and that they operate to a large degree in the private as well as the public arenas. Dobson defines ecological citizenship in the context of environmental sustainability as 'both an example of post-cosmopolitan citizenship and a particular interpretation of it'. It possesses all the basic features of post-cosmopolitan citizenship, such as its stress on responsibilities rather than rights, and its determination to regard these responsibilities as non-reciprocal rather than contractual, and thus stands in contrast with both liberal and civic republican articulations in its sense that these virtues need to be drawn from the private as well as public arenas (Dobson, 2003, p. 139).

While Dobson's (2003) theoretizations open up novel ideas about how to think about sustainability and ecological citizenship, it leaves room for doubt around a number of questions. His solution relies heavily on the role of public formal education system as the prime 'teacher' and encouragement of ecological citizenship. We argue, however, that Dobson does not focus adequate attention on the possible active roles of consumer-citizens, which is problematic for supporting the 'post-cosmopolitan citizenship'. In addition, Dobson's theorizing unveils practically without any empirical evidence. In this paper, our aim therefore is to study empirically the possible active roles of consumer-citizens in the construction of ecological citizenship.

### Environmental citizenship as a cultural practice

Previous environmental consumer research is dominated by the 'rational or utilitarian approach', in which consumers are viewed merely as maximizers of individual value/utility in their consumption choices (Moisander *et al.*, 2000; Uusitalo, 2005; Rokka and Uusitalo, 2008). In much of this literature, emphasis has been laid on consumer rights and responsibilities (of both consumers and companies) in consumer policy. Similarly, to date, research on environment-friendly travellers and tourists has tended to rely on survey methods and environmental attitude models (Budeanu, 2007; Dolnicar *et al.*, 2008). However, such a perspective lacks the ability to take into account the social-cultural and communal aspects of consumer culture through which consumer behaviour can be explained. Next, we draw from cultural consumer research (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Moisander and Valtonen, 2006) to see what opportunities it may open up for ecological citizenship.

From this perspective, ecological citizenship can be conceived as a 'cultural practice' through which people make sense of reality and themselves. We therefore take that ecological citizenship is something that is constantly under construction, and is negotiated in both political as well as private arenas. Although culture can be defined in numerous ways, we regard culture as a complex system which includes culturally shared and standardized discourses (or cultural discourses) and the everyday discursive, social and material practices (everyday practices) through which meaning and cultural artefacts are produced, and through which people express themselves, interpret each other and make sense of their everyday, social life (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006, p. 8). These everyday cultural practices and cultural discourses are constantly produced, transformed and contested in social interaction.

So what does ecological citizenship as a cultural practice mean? We propose it is a practice of giving meaning to and making sense of the rapidly changing world and environmental problems as well as of one's role in sustainable development. It is a cultural identity that is maintained and made sense of through particular ways of thinking about and acting upon environmental problems. In this sense, ecological citizenship entails and enables action and thinking: it is through socially instituted practices that people manage their life and make it meaningful. These social practices put aside the individual and 'rational' subject in the sense that they direct attention to the socially shared norms, values, ideas and meanings that people use to make sense of their socially and culturally particular ways of life, including consumption behaviours.

In the subsequent analysis of our empirical case, we briefly re-examine and illustrate this communal and social aspect of ecological citizenship in the contemporary marketplace. Studying the ecological citizenship as a cultural and socially instituted practice and by drawing on recent work on the so called 'new' web-based communities of consumption (e.g. Kozinets, 1997, 2002; Cova and Cova, 2002; Cova *et al.*, 2006), we wish to problematize the taken-for-granted views of ecological citizenship and to offer new perspectives on environmental policy.

More specifically, we illustrate how a global online community of travellers builds a form of transnational political community, by creating and sustaining what Anderson (1984) calls an 'imagined community'. Drawing on this anthropological understanding of a community, it is a particularly useful way to describe and analyse complex communities. Anderson suggests, it allows us to think about the communities not the way they should be distinguished, either false or genuine, 'but the style in which they are imagined' by the members of the community (Anderson, 1984, p. 6). In this definition, communities are viewed as socio-historical constructs and cultural artefacts of particular kind. We argue that the concept of imagined community can also help us to better understand the nature of the global traveller community where the ecological citizenship is being negotiated.

## Ecological citizenship as a membership of transnational imagined community

### Research design

To illustrate our argument, we report findings from an empirical study that focuses on a global online community of travellers. We present it as a case of the new forms of environmental dialogue

that is currently taking place in online environments. The web-based community that we analyse can be described as a social network or tribe of consumers who engage in online interaction via computer networks (Kozinets, 1997). These consumer networks are commonly described as rather weakly bound, de-territorialized and ephemeral communities in which consumers participate in discussions that take place in discussion forums and chat rooms of websites around emotionally shared interests and experiences (Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2002; Kozinets, 2002). These communities are distinguished by their members' shared lifestyles and tastes, sense of belonging and collective consciousness, common rituals and practices, emotional links and even shared moral responsibilities (e.g. Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

The online community we studied is designed to help dedicated travellers in planning their trips, sharing travel experiences in forums or blogs, and to offer a comfortable means of booking trips and accommodation. The community consists of 139 906 registered users from 244 different countries, with diverse personal backgrounds in terms of gender, age, professional skills and travel experience. Typical community members can be characterized as dedicated, enthusiastic and experienced lifestyle travellers who also express their concern for the negative consequences of the ever-growing tourism. Our investigation of the most active members indicates that this group is also fairly heterogeneous in terms of their backgrounds: students, Internet workers, low-budget travellers, managers, elderly and retired people – a diverse group of 'digitally literate' consumers. The community site has been fairly active for 7 years, the members having posted a total of 280 169 forum entries across 45 914 forum threads, and the rate of new users signing up per day was approximately about 160 users.

We analysed the online community by means of netnographic methods. Netnography is a variation of ethnographic research strategy developed for the study of online cultures, originally proposed by Robert Kozinets (1997, 1998, 2002). It may be described as a 'written account of on-line cyberculture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology', where cyberculture refers to culture that is mediated by online communications technology (Kozinets, 1997, p. 470). The aim of the researcher in this approach is to gain an 'insider's perspective' – faithful to the perspectives of the participants – in the online field site he or she is studying (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006, p. 51). Although netnography has gained a lot of popularity in the field of marketing and consumer research, hitherto, it has seldom been applied in environmental research. Netnography is used in this study because it opens up new possibilities for studying environmental consumption practices.

Our analysis was carried out first by examining the community and its members: how they represented themselves in the discussion forums, blogs and individual websites. In analysing the data, we focused on the 'words, concepts, ideas, images, classifications, norms, values, role expectations and signifying practices that are used to refer to and represent knowledge about objects, people and events of all sort' (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006, p. 194). Accordingly, with the cultural approach taken in this study, we analysed empirical materials (discussions in the online forums) as cultural texts which provide access to the cultural forms and understandings through which people make sense of their world.

Our primary data set consisted of naturally occurring textual data obtained from the online discussion site of the community. It

was gathered and downloaded from the community forums and discussion sites to understand the essence of the community: what is the community all about, how is it represented in texts and images. As the community included members from all over the globe, it provided an excellent opportunity to study how environmental dialogue and ecological citizenship are produced and negotiated in a transnational context.

We focused our empirical analysis, especially, on the discussion areas where the members of the community engaged in collective exchange of experiences, interpretations and outlooks on travel, lifestyle, politics, ethics and everyday life – in other words, in building an ‘imaged community’ for themselves (Anderson, 1984). We centred our attention to the different ways through which ecological citizenship was negotiated and contested in the environmental dialogue that took place in the course of the discussion. We stopped analysing further data when we reached a saturation point, i.e. when the gathering and analysing of new materials did not produce any significantly new insights. Next, we report the analysis of 36 threads representative of the community’s environmental dialogue and ecological consumption practices.

### ‘Imagined community’ of global travelers

... To travel means to meet other people, experience their cultures and to make, but also to keep good friends. By bringing more people together – albeit before, during or after travelling – we will create more understanding for different cultures and countries and ultimately a better world for everyone to travel in. (Traveler community principles)

As the extract above illustrates, the online site creates travellers an important virtual space and means of engaging in discussions about their travel experiences and other aspects of life. The discussion forums, postings and individual websites, texts and images, form a constellation of cultural meanings, values and artefacts from which the sense of the community can be traced back. It is through these numerous strips of stories, images and signifying practices that the global community is formed.

From our perspective, the community creates and also maintains a political space through the creation of an imagined community (Anderson, 1984), which is played out in and enabled by computer networks. First, the traveller community is imagined in the sense that in the discussions and images shared by the members, the lines between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ may be blurred. The further away the computer-mediated images and landscapes of the world are from the direct experiences of people’s everyday life, the more likely they are to construct their own ‘imagined worlds’ (Appadurai, 1996), which may well be visionary, aspirational, and at least partly fictional or fantastic. However, such ‘imagined worlds’ are also very real; they are constantly being produced and documented by people in different forms of practices, texts and images, and eventually circulated in the media. There is also a constant ‘battle of imagination’ (Appadurai, 1990, p. 304) which is driven by global disjunctures between different landscapes, which are not stable but irregular and fluid, constituted, for example, in the ongoing interplay between the market-place actors.

Second, this imagined community makes visible to us the ways in which the tremendous complexity at hand – such as the ecological, cultural and technological developments – is being made

sense of by common people. They gather together strips of facts, experiences, opinions and myths about how they live their lives, and make statements about how they should live. In a way, they help the community to tackle the overwhelming issues of global economy they are faced with, by offering explanations and materials to identity negotiation. The discussions, hence, provide particular kinds of cultural scripts of reality, sometimes even in forms of statistical reports available in the Net, to build up the imagined worlds.

Third, the community that we analyse is necessarily imagined because there is no possibility for the members to meet each other face to face. Anderson (1984, p. 6) describes that the members of an imagined community will almost never know, meet or even hear of their fellow members, but in the minds of each member lives an image of their communion. This is also the case with the traveller community with members from all over the world. Hence, the nature of the community becomes best described by conceptual rather than physical boundaries as the network of members becomes increasingly ephemeral, de-territorialized and virtual (Cova and Cova, 2002). For this reason, Anderson (1984) emphasizes how the role of media is an important resource for constructing the imagined community – which is also true in our example.

Given the technological possibilities of online social networking, consumers may now stay in contact in ways before unimaginable, creating new forms of community (Kozinets, 2002). Constantly on the move around the globe, and instantly messaging to each other through computer-mediated networks, the traveller community brings about a multitude of landscapes of encounters and experiences, creating a virtual transnational and multicultural setting of a particular kind. By means of the members’ interaction, and the transnational dialogue they produce, the travellers not only educate each other in planning and preparing for trips but also help others to deal with various problems and dilemmas. As someone on the forums put it:

Travel is the great educator and moderator of life. It tends to put issues and people in perspective and to defuse difficulties between nations. Travel as often and as far as you can.

Lessons will be learned that are otherwise unattainable ...  
(16th Aug ‘06, 12:53)

In the following section, we briefly illustrate how environmental knowledge is disseminated in the community and how ecological citizenship is negotiated through environmental dialogue.

### Environmental dialogue and negotiation of ecological citizenship

As the members of the traveller community are globally mobile and thus have broad experience of international environments and multicultural settings, they feel at home wherever they go, moving comfortably within the standards of several cultures. But being faced with the ever-growing mass tourism and its visible consequences, including waste, pollution and climate change, the community struggles in front of numerous ethical dilemmas and pragmatic inconveniences in trying to make sense of its consumption practices and lifestyles.

I definitely am torn. On the one hand, travelling is a passion and something that would not be easy to give up. On the other hand though, I’m convinced we all need to take steps to

minimise our environmental impact and it's hard to go past one of the largest single contributions we make privately, which is recreational travel. My personal response is to do all I can to minimise my impact . . . (31st Dec '06, 02:15)

In their discussions, the travellers distribute environmental knowledge, sharing personal views and information about 'facts', statistics and policies concerning the environment. In doing so, they sometimes present thought-provoking and knowledgeable insights, such as the following posting:

Today I heard on the news that the EU transport ministers are close to reaching an agreement with the US about far-reaching liberalisation of the transatlantic sky routes, which is expected to result in 'a 30% increase of transatlantic commercial air traffic'. [. . .] air travellers themselves are now more responsible than ever to care for the environmental consequences of their ultra-mobility. What do you think? (22nd Mar '07, 05:28)

The community also discusses the negative environmental consequences, mass tourism and mass consumption in general. Faced with complex environmental problems, cultural degradation, poverty and inequality, the community tries to find appropriate ways of dealing with them through a dialogue, in which the roles and responsibilities of travellers are shaped. In this respect, the online dialogue reflects Butcher's (2003) depiction of the 'new moral tourist' who expresses altruistic motives by seeking to experience and sustain cultural and environmental difference, and by voicing critical views on modern 'progress' of society. For instance, the prevalent ways in which the 'ecologically conscious' travel should be conceived is contested in the environmental dialogue of the community, as the following quote illustrates:

Yes, I too fly occasionally, and yes, my ecological footprint is way too large, too. However, I sincerely try to limit my flights (I cross the oceans roughly once a year), don't fly intracontinentally at all, and try to 'compensate' for the burden I exert on the environment by making other people aware, volunteering in a number of environmental initiatives, etc. Of course I am not saying that no-one should fly, even though that would be a most effective way to reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses. I merely want the travelling community to think about the way they move around, and not just consider the world your own cultural snackbar that you can go to, eat at, pay and leave behind your rubbish, so to speak. And that doesn't just apply to the environmental impact of travellers' behaviour, but also to cultural and economical effects. (7th Jun '06, 02:06)

In this way, the members of the community seek and negotiate responsible ways of travelling, looking into the issue from various perspectives, and giving multiple meanings to sustainability and 'sustainable lifestyle'. This necessarily involves more than simple rules of thumb, rights or duties. Emotional and virtuous responses can be found throughout the discussions; also, more 'feminine' type of virtues, such as compassion and care (Dobson, 2003), seem to characterize the traveller community:

Just look at the amount of experiences, stories and information that is shared between fellow travellers around the globe. Through this forum alone, we gain a greater understanding of different cultures and experiences that everybody has gained through travelling. My conclusion – sharing is caring and travelling, if done appropriately, is not selfish. (17th Jun '06, 04:28)

In their discussions, the community depicts an environmentally concerned traveller who is torn between the positive experiences gained through travel and the negative effects they have on the environment and local cultures. Through dialogue, the community seeks alternative solutions to the common ethical dilemmas such as the harmful effects of flying:

It's a tough question. I think cutting down on flying is the only real solution. [. . .] At the very least, offsetting your trip is a good thing to do. (10th Mar '07, 02:07)

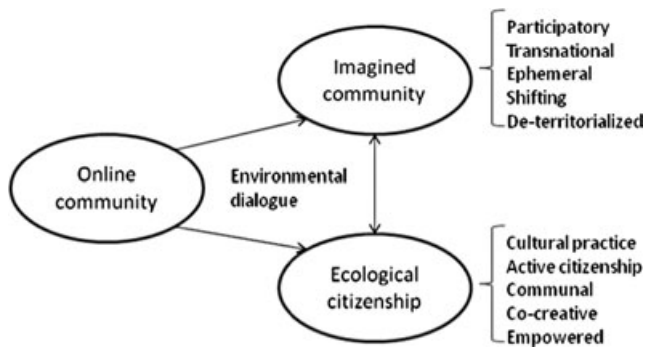
In the discussions, many of the received ways of thinking about sustainability become problematized and also politicized. For example, similar to other critiques directed towards environmentally sensitive and socially responsible tourism (e.g. Mowforth and Munt, 1998; Butcher, 2003, 2008), the community members are often sceptical about the 'ecosell' and 'green-washing' of tourism, or 'ethical add-ons' commonly fashioned by the marketers. The online community thus functions as a site for open debate and dialogue, as the comment below illustrates:

Everybody now is into eco-tourism, be it state forest departments, state tourism development corporations, state forest development corporations, state industrial development corporations, tour operators, the hospitality industry, big and bigger business houses, NGOs, local communities, foreign consultants, research and academic institutions . . . everybody is in the fray. Everybody seems to believe that eco-tourism is a magic wand that will help them get that piece of cake. [. . .] So, rather than changing what you are doing, the solution has been to simply change what you call it. Not tourism, but eco-tourism! (22nd Apr '06, 07:23)

To conclude, through the transformative dialogue on the role of consumers in sustainable development, the community gradually becomes a kind of virtual political space, and creates a 'container' for the sort of citizenship that can be practised and exercised in the private sphere. And the community serves as a 'teacher' of this form of ecological citizenship:

To be honest, I think that some of the benefits of travel outweigh some of the harmful effects. I agree that travelling is severely detrimental to our environment, but I think that the social awareness it can bring outweighs that. Travel is usually selfish, but it can also help develop people who are less selfish. Most people I see trying to help out less privileged people in other countries have had to travel to be aware of the problems in the first place. Watching it on TV simply doesn't have the same effect. (6th Jun '06, 21:14)

As summarized in Fig. 1, through discussion and dialogue, the web-based consumer community of global travellers offers its members a variety of narratives, repertoires of images and cultural models for making sense of environmental problems. It also helps them to invent and identify appropriate political and practical roles for themselves as consumers in the pursuit of sustainable development. The environmental dialogue carried out at the website creates and maintains the community and enables its members to form affective ties with each other, which is needed for shared cultural meanings – and resources – to emerge. Out of this dialogue, a notion of ecological citizenship as a socially instituted practice emerges. As a cultural practice, this form of ecological citizenship is closely linked with socially accepted norms, meanings and values, or rules that define the appropriate and understandable ways to behave and act in particular situations and contexts.



**Figure 1** Framework for environmental dialogue in online communities.

## Discussion

In this paper, our aim has been to shed light onto the role of web-based consumer communities as sites of cultural production and political participation. We argue that computer-mediated social networks may empower people to build the sort of ‘imagined communities’ that are needed to invent and create sustainable forms of cultural identity for consumers as ecological citizens.

Moreover, our analysis highlights the important role of community and consumer participation in the private sphere in the construction of sustainable consumer cultures. Although the previous theoretical work (Dobson, 2003; Valencia Sáiz, 2005) has argued that the political space for ecological citizenship is not the state or the municipal, the private sphere as a political, ideological and participatory space has received only little attention. Therefore, we propose that in addition to formal public education and more traditional governmental policies, active consumer citizenship be facilitated and encouraged, for example, through computer-mediated social networks, to assist sustainable development.

Theoretically, our study contributes to discussions of (1) ecological citizenship; (2) production of global, online consumer cultures; (3) tribal aspects of sustainable consumerism; and (4) the application of netnographic methods in environmental research. Drawing on cultural consumer research, we suggest that ecological citizenship be regarded as a cultural practice through which people give meaning to and make sense of their roles in sustainable development. It is a cultural practice in the sense that it is constantly under construction and negotiation through cultural dialogue in the political community it entails. We argue that such cultural practices and resources influence environmental consumer behaviours by opening up the possibilities for intelligible action, through enabling and constraining culturally accepted behaviours. This perspective directs attention away from the idea that ecological citizenship can be encouraged simply through financial rewards, environmental labelling or formal education. Our findings would also seem to suggest that a better understanding of the tribal and communal aspects of consumption, accentuated by the social online media, is important for promoting environmental consumerism and ecological citizenship.

In part, our findings also problematize Butcher’s (2008) conceptualization of ecotourism as ‘life politics’ which emphasizes the more individualistic forms of politics ‘within which the ethical consumption is prominent’ (Butcher, 2008, p. 317). In contrast,

we suggest that the site of politics can have new collective or tribal forms as a part of which consumer lifestyles or citizenship emerges. Such collective forms as web-based communities may also open up new possibilities for bringing about change through policy making. As an example, we suggest that environmental research may benefit from the application of netnographic methods (Kozinets, 2002) for better understanding environmental consumption practices.

While promoting ecological citizenship is undoubtedly a highly challenging task, owing to the tremendous complexity of ecologically sound consumption (Moisander, 2007; Rokka and Uusitalo, 2008), our study reports some evidence of the possibilities of creating more active forms of ecologically oriented consumer citizenship. More empirical research, however, is required on the processes of participation, empowerment and social involvement that facilitate the construction and development of ecological citizenship.

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