

I did not know about the “Freeganism” movement until I decided to become vegan. The vegan routine not only introduced me to a new lifestyle, but it also helped me to explore counterculture tendencies such as those that practice minimal consumption of goods. Recovering wasted goods from dumpsters may seem an alternative for people who believe that we are victims of consumerism and of the economic interests of big corporations. There is a lot of disbeliefs and debates about Freeganism, and questions such as: How successful is this practice? Is it really a boycott to the current economic system? Is it an ideology or just a trend that seeks to attract followers? Does social media’s presence support or not the mission?

The freegan community has an international online presence, particularly on the Facebook platform. The community is very active posting information that is supported with multimedia components such as videos and photos. The Facebook page Freegan.info follows the same editorial criteria of the website identified under the same name [Freegan.info], where the community clearly exposes its goals: “Freegans are people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources. Freegans embrace community, generosity, social concern, freedom, cooperation and sharing in opposition to a society based on materialism, moral apathy, competition, conformity, and greed” (Freegan, 2018, para 1).

The community represents itself through the following principles of strategies: 1) Waste reclamation, 2) Waste minimization, 3) Rent-free housing, 4) Going green, and 4) Working less. Following an academic definition, The Freegans could be identified as a “new social movement (NSMs)” (Miller, 2011, p. 135). Freegans follow rules that differ from the mainstream setting of the consumption of goods. As Miller pointed out “NSMs tend to be less economically or class-

oriented and more focused on social changes in lifestyle, cultural, or identity-related issues” (p. 136).

The communication strategy

After my contextual analysis of their social media platforms’ behavior, I believe that they should employ new communication strategies for promoting the mission as a global initiative. For instance, Freegans in New York are active in terms of the use of social media; however, their efforts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube require a better leadership in distributing the message. It requires a “permanent campaign network” as Bennet (2004) and Chadwick (2006) have emphasized (cited in Miller, 2011, p. 144). The strategy should operate similar to a “permanent political campaign with a linear collaboration approach”, as Miller pointed out. “Online collaboration and information gathering among groups is taken in turn to ensure the long-term action is maintained after public awareness of the issue fades” (p. 144).

Some social media posts demonstrate that certain Freegans just practice this way of life only for amusement and with no specific ideology, political, or social motivation. Other members promote the identity of the group through digital vignettes where they talk about their personal stories as Freegans. They also post practical advice about the Freeganism movement and how to deal with stereotypes and expectations about the group. Nevertheless, their Facebook page should focus their message on enhancing understanding among Freegan members and non-members. Even though they are promoting discussions about activities and public events with the purpose of raising awareness of food waste, it is still not enough to promote its beliefs.

Freeganism could be an initiative with more relevance and engagement among individuals who support friendly environmental lifestyle.

Beyond the Stereotype

Those who do not belong to the community contribute to the group's identity by sharing social media pictures or videos of Freegans. Some of these multimedia ideas become viral because Freeganism is still an initiative that is viewed with certain suspicion. Therefore, people who are not members share the posts primarily based on curiosity. Indirectly, they are producing a positive response for the Freegans. There is a public perception that Freegans are hippies, lazy people with addictions to alcohol or drugs. The movement's true mission needs to be emphasize on their social media: educating on the amount of waste we generate every single day and what we must do to reverse that tendency.

Additionally, there is a debate about sanitation and safety. Public health officials have promoted campaigns in order to discourage dumpster diving for sanitation reasons. These efforts, along with negative media coverage, have impacted the perception of the Freegan movement and it has increased the social stigma about individuals who follow this practice. The "social disapprobation" as some experts argue is one the main battles of the movement. The award-winning investigative journalist, Nelufar Hedayat, who has written extensively about the Freegan movement, has exposed the crisis of food waste in the United States. He spent time dumpster diving with New York City Freegans, and he was shocked by the amount of food and goods that ended up in the garbage every single day. We should embrace Hedayat's statement that "knowledge is power [...] you don't the ability to change laws right now, you do get to decide what you buy and who you buy it from" (cited in Branch, 2018, para 8). Beyond supporting or not Freeganism, some components of this initiative should inspire people to reduce our waste.

References

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