Communication Strategies on Palm Oil Sustainability: Agri-Food Chain Actors Use of Social Media Twitter?

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ABSTRACT

From production to consumption, palm oil is a global food chain facing various sustainability dimensions. The study focuses on Twitter social media communication strategy of world agri-food chain actors on sustainability of palm oil. The study focused on a content analysis of twitter messages of palm oil producers, agri-food manufacturers and retailers. Preliminary results show that palm oil producers aim at promoting public opinion's positive image of palm oil. Food manufacturers and retailers instead limit their communication on reacting to consumers' solicitations, such as questions, doubts or complaints on palm oil use.

Keywords: *Agri-food chain; palm oil; Twitter; social media; sustainability*

Introduction and objectives

Palm oil is the world leading vegetable oil used for several purposes, as biofuel, food, cosmetics, and animal feed. 80% of its production is used by the food industry (World Bank 2011), as key ingredient for processing bakery, chocolate, snacks and other processed food (Henderson and Osborne 2000; Nor Aini and Miskandar 2007). From production to consumption, palm oil is a global food chain facing various sustainability dimensions (Corley 2009; D'Antone and Spencer 2014; Rist et al. 2010). The effects of palm oil are controversial and debated at global level, thanks also to social media that facilitate interactions among various food chain actors, including consumers (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis 2014). The study aims at analyzing Twitter social media communication strategy of agri-food chain actors on sustainability of palm oil, focusing on environmental, socio-economic and health dimensions.

Methodology

Data collection included global agri-food chain palm oil producer or user companies' Twitter accounts identification, representing global top companies in term of financial and economic dimension – turnover and market capitalization data. The sample includes 15 palm oil producers and associations, 28 European or multinational manufacturers of bakery and chocolate products, and 30 European retailers. These were identified consulting databases and rankings: Amadeus - Bureau Van Dick, SPOTT 2016, WWF Scorecard 2016, Deloitte ranking based on Planet Retail 2016. The companies identified have 107 Twitter accounts that tweet on palm oil. Data on Twitter messages were collected in September 2016 mainly through Ncapture software. Data elaboration was a quantitative content analysis with Term-Frequency-Analysis and Keyword-In/Out-Context, carried out with Nvivo10.

Preliminary results

Twitter messages mentioning palm oil are around 18.000. European retailers tweet on palm oil more than European bakery and chocolate manufacturers. Yet, European manufacturers tweet intensively both with their corporate Twitter accounts and with their products' brand accounts versus retailers that tweet exclusively with their own corporate accounts. There are differences among the various countries. Food manufacturers and retailers use Twitter to provide information on specific campaigns or corporate policies adopted on sensitive issues, as in the field of sustainability actions. They use Twitter both to act and to react, therefore they publish both original tweets, retweets, or replies. The sustainability issue is variously addressed by the chain actors. Palm oil producers mainly focus on the *environmental* aspects - environmental sustainability, certification, labelling, forest, deforestation, wildlife, animal, nature, biodiversity, pesticide, greenhouse gasses, productivity, land use, land grabbing, RSPO; and *socio-economic aspects* - versatility of use, land use, land rights, costs, price, labor, smallholder, farmers. Food manufacturers and retailers on the *environmental* dimensions - certification, labelling, food processing, RSPO, WWF Scoreboard; *health* - nutrition, malnutrition, health, diet, obesity, ingredient, fats, trans-fats, toxicants, food safety; and neutral *informative* information.

Conclusions

Palm oil producers use Twitter differently from the other chain actors. Palm oil producers aim at promoting public opinion's positive image of palm oil. Food manufacturers and retailers aim at using their Twitter accounts as a marketing instrument, so to inform consumers about their corporate policies about palm oil use, the list of food products made with certified palm oil or palm oil free, or to react and to reply to consumers' solicitations, such as questions, doubts or complaints.

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