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Green Business and the Culture of Capitalism: Constructing Narratives of Environmentalism

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Green Business and the Culture of Capitalism:

Constructing Narratives of Environmentalism

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

There are widespread colloquial arguments claiming that any actions taken to combat climate change will be bad for business and the economy, scaring people into continuing their support for the status quo for fear of their financial security. Alternatively, those attempting to combat ecological destruction have subsequently made transitions to sustainable development of products and shifting consumer behavior within this system. There is one core argument that both sides have, albeit in different ways – capitalism and environmentalism are seemingly incompatible; one cannot be successful without the eradication of the other. While it may appear there are only strict binary options in this situation, there is a unique liminal space that houses a missing connection: "green" businesses are not only supporting environmentalism, but are profiting, creating jobs, and contributing to the economy, thus supporting the current economic system and ultimately countering *both* sides of the popularized narrative that the two cannot coexist. After conducting a narrative analysis of 50 member stories published by the Green Business Network, four major themes emerged: 1) The Good American Character's Connection to Business, 2) The Morality of Green Business, 3) Green Business Allyship with Capitalism, and 4) What's Missing?. They are challenging the popularized narratives and showing an alternative path; you can participate within the culture of capitalism, run a successful business, help people, *and* minimize environmental harm. The narrative of the GBN shows that it is not necessary to entirely dismantle capitalism or continue to damage the environment in the same manner; green businesses have shown themselves as successful at participating within capitalism while also minimizing harm toward the environment.

INTRODUCTION

"And if this elevation, this joyousness, can be attributed in part to your contact with mystery, cannot it equally be attributed to your abrupt realization that there are superior forces "out there," forces that for all their potential menace, nevertheless might, should they elect to intervene, represent salvation for a planet stubbornly determined to perish?"

-Tom Robbins, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

Though referring to UFOs, the above epigraph could just as easily be referring to the culture of capitalism, a social fact existing "out there," beyond the farthest reach while simultaneously regulating the most intimate interactions. Where we have to be and when, what we buy and why, what we talk about over an overpriced beer, why that beer is overpriced, and what overpriced even means are all everyday experiences created, perpetuated, and understood within this system. Because this system has been made a "real" part of our worlds through the process of meaning-making and interaction, very few ask these questions - it just is. Without questioning the commonsensical, taken-for-granted world around us, the consequences are easily ignored because they just *are*.

It has been argued that environmental degradation is an essential part of the success of capitalism as an economic system. For decades, this notion has been accepted and supported within the dominant social paradigm (Fisher & Jorgenson 2019). For example, there are widespread colloquial arguments claiming that any actions taken to combat climate change will be bad for business and the economy, scaring people into continuing their support for the status

quo for fear of their financial security (O'Neill & Gibbs 2016). Alternatively, those attempting to combat ecological destruction have subsequently made transitions to sustainable development of products and shifting consumer behavior within this system. There is one core argument that both sides have, albeit in different ways – capitalism and environmentalism are seemingly incompatible; one cannot be successful without the eradication of the other. The malleability of capitalism, courtesy of the socially constructed character of the world, perhaps allows for the incorporation of "green commodity discourse" (Prothero and Fitchett 2000) in a way that is beneficial for both economics and the environment. This shift in the culture of capitalism, existing "out there" could indeed be the intervention needed to save a planet so stubbornly determined to perish.

As sense-making devices in social life and perpetuators of cultural understanding, stories are used in myriad ways to justify their missions and portray values. Drawing from Fine (1995), Nolan suggests that social movement stories take the form of "horror stories," "war stories," and "happy endings," and are told to justify, encourage, and reaffirm participation in social movements (2002:157). Stories are used similarly here; many are familiar with the colloquial stories about the coal miner who lost his job because of shifting away from fossil fuels or the emaciated polar bear on an ice cap half its size. While it may be easy to say that "capitalism need not be forever allied to the cause of eternal environmental exploitation," on-the-ground implementations of this idea are far more difficult, but green businesses have initiated a solid attempt (Prothero and Fitchett 2000:51).

While it may appear there are only strict binary options in this situation, there is a unique liminal space that houses a missing connection: "green" businesses are not only supporting environmentalism, but are profiting, creating jobs, and contributing to the economy, thus

supporting the current economic system and ultimately countering *both* sides of the popularized narrative that the two cannot coexist. Green businesses have the potential to play a grassroots-level activist role in combating environmental degradation in terms of larger institutions like the economy, and the narratives they construct influence the extent to which their activism is successful. Thus, how are narratives being utilized to marry the two with seemingly irreconcilable differences? What type of narrative is being created for green businesses?

To answer this question, I conduct a narrative analysis of The Green Business Network (GBN), the largest organization focused on certifying businesses as socially and environmentally responsible, with multiple requirements a business must satisfy in order to become certified. As the largest network, housing 1,534 members, I analyze stories produced by the GBN about their members to explore the narratives in a unique middle-ground that is assumed not to exist.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Narrative

Broadly speaking, narrative can be defined as stories people tell. Stories are omnipresent in all realms of life and take myriad forms – conversations, movies, lectures, policy hearings, and internet articles as just a few. The ways in which they are disseminated are just as numerous. While the specific content of stories varies dramatically, the required elements mostly stay the same: "somewhere (*scene*) something happens (*events*) to someone/something (*characters*) and this conveys a lesson about something (*moral*)" (Loseke 2019:8). Narratives can be located in everyday conversations, public policy hearings, newspapers, political speeches, and websites, among many others. The distinctly social character of narratives necessitates their constructing, telling, hearing, and evaluating as being rooted in particular historical, institutional, and social contexts, which influences the ways in which people interpret which stories are believable and important (Loseke 2007). In a time of seemingly endless and often overwhelming opportunities to consume information, people are exposed to a "milieu of multiple narratives" (Gergen and Gergen 1983:263). Even so, people have limited options for choosing "a" story, as not all stories are told or popularized due to mass media outlets privileging stories that reflect prevailing political biases (Loseke 2007; Panno et al. 2019). Organizations author narratives that justify their services; in this instance, the Green Business Network is authoring narratives that justify their environmental focuses by utilizing member stories. This characteristic of narrative productions of meaning is important because GBN goes far beyond selling products, but rather extends to selling stories, cultural ideas, and value systems surrounding environmentalism.

As such, narratives of green businesses in the United States are rooted and contextualized within the deeply embedded cultural story of capitalism, explicitly or not. For these narratives to "make sense" to those who receive them, there must be some semblance of recognizability upon which they can grasp and associate with previously established shared meanings. Courtesy of the importance of familiarity, comfortability, and the status quo, green businesses are constrained by mainstream context and must navigate tensions between traditional business expectations and environmental philosophies (O'Neill & Gibbs 2016; Maxton-Lee 2020).

An increased focus on the role of power and subsequently invisible social forces, like culture, in creating and circulating realities represents a useful theoretical lens for examining the available cultural templates that are circulated by those in power. Culture serves as a "tool kit," providing various symbolic resources to construct meanings and devise courses of action in social life (Swidler 1986). By assisting in ordering reality and making sense of our lives and others, stories are some of the most important tools we have.

Culture of Capitalism

Economies that paradoxically require infinite growth from finite resources are stuck on the treadmill of production, which requires environmental degradation in pursuit of economic growth and development "where their well-being is not improved by economic growth, yet the impacts of this pursuit of growth causes massive, unsustainable environmental damages" (Curran 2017:28). Societies driven by economic expansion are in an endless conflict with nature (Schnaiberg 1980). Here, the ends justify the means; profit and success outweigh environmental degradation (Porter 2010; Fisher & Jorgenson 2019).

Beyond operating as an economic system, capitalism also operates as a cultural system. Courtesy of individualism, personal success measured by accumulation of wealth is a core tenet of the culture of capitalism and is viewed as far more important than the impacts that environmental destruction will have on the collective (Fisher & Jorgenson 2019). This system "works" now for the people it is intended to work for, but is not viable in the long-term, as irreparable damage is inevitable. Systems built upon the utilization of scarce resources are only efficient in the short-term, but this was the intention all along; "they were never intended, nor are they any good at protecting grandchildren" (Lovins 2015:14).

It has been posited that reforming the current economic system is more feasible than presenting radical alternatives; capitalism (as a *system*) is flexible enough to allow for the shift toward sustainable technologies/practices and environmental reforms (Fisher & Jorgenson 2019). To the naked eye, capitalism may seem to have always operated solely as an economic system. However, even Weber's (1905) early notions about capitalism link it to religious undertones that perpetuated its growth. Protestantism encouraged material wealth because it had been interpreted as success that transfers to the afterlife. This concept has been maintained and expanded far beyond religion as materialism and consumerism remain some of the main features of the culture of capitalism. Discourse rooted in this current dominant social paradigm has established the idea that greater consumption will lead to greater happiness and fulfillment (Prothero and Fitchett 2000). Capitalism goes far beyond regulating economics, extending into the social realm where it governs how we structure our daily lives and interact with others. While the capitalistic economic system itself is capable of change, it is rather *ideology* and the cultural system that prevents it. The various aspects of capitalism have been reified and made 'real' over many years to the point that it seems permanent and unchangeable. However, through a constructionist lens,

it can be understood that capitalism is socially constructed in the first place, has changed over time, and can change yet again to accommodate new ideas and values, like environmentalism.

Practices that rely on detrimental manufacturing processes, like the utilization of fossil fuels, simultaneously drive environmental disaster and endanger the economy; the economy relies on the environment, and not the reverse. The culture of capitalism and consumerism fuels these actions by placing such emphasis on commodities that result from these practices. However, commodities are not defined by their material qualities, but rather the socially constructed meanings surrounding said qualities that indicate certain values and statuses. Prothero and Fitchett (2000) call for a *green* commodity discourse that utilizes the current system to incorporate environmental aspects. Because the value of a commodity most often lies within its symbolic meaning rather than material qualities, this opens an avenue for exploring environmentally friendly production processes and commodities. Because of the way that capitalism has been reified and made to seem unwavering and unchangeable, "it would seem logical to identify and locate solutions to current ecological concerns within existing social frameworks" (Prothero and Fitchett 2000). Ecological concerns are immediate but the ability to entirely overthrow capitalism is not. At this moment in time, the work must be done from within the current system through modification of what exists instead of complete abandonment of a globally dominant system. A shift in commodity discourse can be used to "seek an alternative, sustainable relationship between capitalism and the environment" (51). One aspect of green commodity discourse is to utilize the market itself to communicate a greener message to the public.

Because of the relative power held by businesses versus laborers, it is suggested that businesses have the capacity to adjust sustainability discourse and use the market to manage

nature and environmental issues (Maxton-Lee 2020; O'Neill & Gibbs 2016). Perhaps the greatest responsibility falls to the corporate sector because "if you want to change government, change business because business runs government" (Lovins 2015:12). Green businesses have the ability to play a role in "eco-activism" by utilizing the economy as an avenue for challenging the dominant system (Maxton-Lee 2020). Market mechanisms are extremely powerful in driving environmental protection while simultaneously enhancing profitability (Lovins 2015).

It would seem that the marriage between capitalism and environmentalism simply could not work due to irreconcilable differences, but with a bit of compromise from both parties, the outcome could be far more positive. Environmentally-friendly organizations must work towards redefining themselves within the dominant social paradigm "as being integral to the mainstream economy rather than hanker after subversive ideals and the romanticism of the revolutionary" (Prothero and Fitchett 2000:51). The possibility for incorporating ecological objectives into the capitalistic system is strong; implementing a green commodity discourse is perhaps a first step towards greening capitalism.

Power, Ideology, and Narratives

It is becoming increasingly clear that a large-scale structural shift is needed, rather than expecting individuals to change their consumption habits that have been engendered by this very system. It is unrealistic to think "if we only had more of these individuals, the problems would be solved" (O'Neill & Gibbs 2016:1732). Environmental issues are more often discussed from an individualistic perspective rather than a structural one, but there may be the occasional weak structuralist argument that goes something like "manufacturing processes emit a lot of pollution, but if people stopped driving so much and started recycling, everything would be fine." This

argument still places the ultimate responsibility on individuals rather than acknowledging the role larger structural factors play in various social problems; the cultural power of individualism outweighs that of the opposing structural perspective (Royce 2019).

When it comes to the politics of reality and the creation and circulation of stories, questions of "who," "how," and "how much" are ultimately questions of power, ideology, and inequality as politicians and the media are "expectable formula story authors" (Loseke 2007:664). Stories supported by dominant ideologies are reified and made "real" through everyday interaction and ultimately, in social institutions, where they are then beyond any one person's or group's control.

Eerily similar to the American Dream, a facet of capitalism, individuals are faced with 'responsibilization,' in which they are made personally responsible for situations over which they have no control - like environmental degradation (Maxton-Lee 2020). It is not solely about the consumer - they are only able to choose from options presented to them, and green businesses are attempting to enact change by providing alternative options, but are still restricted by larger cultural, political, and economic systems. Narratives regarding the incompatibility of economic growth and environmentalism are so pervasive and strongly supported by dominant ideologies that it is difficult to imagine green narratives that are not framed in this manner. As they navigate these conflicting tensions, iterations of green narratives ultimately include aspects of both "green-ness" and economic growth in various ways (Maxton-Lee 2020).

Despite the fact that environmentalism has been shown to be profitable, we need a new story because "facts don't drive change" (Lovins 2015:6). Because "stories are political tools," (Loseke 2019:6) narratives have the ability to influence public opinion and ultimately policy. Narratives have an important relationship with social change, as they are often designed for

specific audiences and used strategically to serve particular purposes (Cobb 2016). Because the market is a driving factor behind change, businesses must strategically present themselves to consumers in order to secure their place in the market and increase their ability to enact change. Thus, stories authored by organizations like the Green Business Network in the form of member stories are utilized to justify and disseminate their environmental goals within the realm of capitalism. What are these stories? How does the Green Business Network frame itself and portray its goals and values?

Green Business

Narratives of green businesses are relatively underexplored, but are not entirely absent in empirical research. However, a *sociological* interpretive narrative analysis of green businesses is notably absent from the existing body of literature. Much of this work currently lies within the realms of business, management, economics, and environmental science and policy. Additionally, existing research focuses on the narratives of individual entrepreneurs and their motivations behind starting green businesses; narratives presented by green businesses to potential consumers are unexplored.

From a business perspective, Muñoz and Cohen (2018) identify three dominant narratives of entrepreneurs and their sustainability ventures: 1. The New Path Forward: entrepreneurs who employ this narrative emphasize integrity, responsibility, and "doing the right thing" (166) to incorporate notions of fairness, justice, and equity in their ventures, 2. A New Responsibility for Entrepreneurship: these entrepreneurs see themselves as local change makers who have the ability to create better conditions for their business partners and community writ large, but also as a part of the larger environmental movement, and 3. A New Business Ideology: these

entrepreneurs subscribe to the notion that sustainability in business is not only about concern for carrying capacity of the natural environment, but also about moral and ethical responsibilities surrounding human survival and progress.

Similarly, O'Neill and Gibbs (2016) "explore the narratives employed by green entrepreneurs to situate themselves within/outwith the wider green economy" (1727) and concluded that they employ four dominant narratives: 1. It's not about hugging trees: green entrepreneurs who employ this narrative put concerted effort into balancing their environmental motivations with stereotypical entrepreneurial characteristics and often conforming to mainstream business practices, 2. Pragmatism and the impact of the mainstream economy: environmental benefits are secondary to ensuring financial gain and securing a spot in the green business niche, 3. Compromise and hybridity: this represents a shift from radical ideas that have become diluted in the transition in mainstream business characterized by incremental changes; and 4. Radical transformations: profit and business ideals are secondary to encouraging a higher quality of life in a lower-impact way in terms of environmentalism. Overall, the narratives of green entrepreneurs are rarely "all or nothing" in terms of focusing solely on business or environmentalism, but these narratives are rather complex and fluid.

These articles highlight several different aspects of the narratives of green businesses I am seeking to explore further. Green businesses do indeed occupy a unique liminal space between narratives of mainstream business and environmentalism, but this does not mean there is only one narrative in this space. There are different variations of narratives for green business that seem to exist on a spectrum between the two extremes. They emphasize the variation, complexity, and breadth of narratives constructed by green businesses. Different businesses will hold myriad values and ideals that will shape their missions and ultimately the stories and

identities they construct. Businesses will likely include aspects of the culture of capitalism and environmentalism in many different ways and at varying degrees. There is not one particular green business narrative that is 'out there' to be discovered, but these articles rather highlight the ways in which narratives and identities are subjective, contextual, and varied.

O'Neill and Gibbs (2016) argue for the importance of political, social, and cultural contexts in which narratives are constructed and the influential roles they play; my research builds upon this by emphasizing the relationships between the culture of capitalism and how the Green Business Network constructs their narratives to promote individual green businesses within this specific cultural context. Moisander and Pesonen (2002) explore the spectrum between "acceptable" green consumption and what is conceptualized as radical. Similarly, GBN must strategically construct their narratives in a particular way that allows them to participate in the mainstream while upholding their environmental values, but also while not presenting themselves as radical reformists in a way that can marginalize their businesses. Again, this is rooted in dominant ideologies and broad cultural values so green businesses must figure out how to navigate this middle ground in a way that they deem adequate. These are the notions green businesses must navigate in constructing their narratives; how much of their incorporation of certain aspects of environmentalism *and* the culture of capitalism is "too much" or "not enough?" Struggles for legitimacy take place throughout various levels of social life and are framed by dominant ideologies and powerful groups (Maxton-Lee 2020).

It would be careless to dismiss the contributions of those working within any of the above realms, but it also would seem as though none offer the combination necessary to address the topic from a sociological perspective and in any concrete way. Environmental sociology has certainly played an important role in examining the relationships between "social life" and

"natural life," but the conceptualization of the environmental movement and the participation within it cannot be rooted in issues of "the environment" and/or our relationships to it alone. While environmental sociology takes on issues of both meaning-making and environmental issues, it lacks a distinct focus on the importance of cultural contexts as it relates to the social construction of realities, social problems, social movements, and activism. Emphasizing the role of power, ideology, and culture as it relates to the merging of narrative and environmental sociology, I explore the ways in which an interpretive narrative analysis of green businesses is more theoretically and epistemologically sound in analyzing this process than are any one of its components alone.

Prothero and Fitchett (2000) offer several theoretical suggestions towards building a green commodity discourse in attempt to eradicate environmental destruction as a necessary part of capitalism. They discuss the issue of how to research the connection between "macroconceptual issues and possible plans of implementation" (52), which is what I have to set out to do here, building upon their theories about green commodity discourse and the merging of capitalism and environmentalism. Narratives are available for empirical study, thus allowing us to build upon these theoretical ideas and begin to examine how organizations like the Green Business Network are framing themselves within in this particular system.

METHODS

As an interpretive sociologist, I see the world as a social construct that results from meaning-making. Truth, facts, and objectivity do not exist independent of the people who created them. At the same time, while people do create "truth," "facts," and "objectivity," I recognize that these get reified and made "real" through everyday interaction and ultimately, in social institutions, where they are then beyond any one person's or groups' control. As a result, people then have to navigate the ways in which "truth" and "facts" have material consequences in everyday life. It is this process that highlights how meaning is created and applied to all aspects of social life through language and categorization, which makes it orderly, intelligible, and predictable.

Borrowing from both symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, I understand shared meaning to be a product of social interaction, where individuals act towards things based on the meanings that those things have for them (Blumer 1969). Scholars such as Schutz (1970), Foucault (1969), and Holstein and Gubrium (1994) have built a foundation for studying how individuals create and experience their lives as real. The objects given meaning through reflection are always social products, cultural objects that are ordered through "stocks of knowledge," or "commonsense constructs and categories," and developed through typifications (such as language) that render experience recognizable and substantiate the everyday world as "real" (Holstein and Gubrium 1994).

Capitalism, as cultural object, is understood through these "stocks of knowledge," assumed, understood, and taken for granted under the natural attitude. Similarly, 'the

environment," has been produced a cultural object. There is no "capitalism" or "environment" without the contextual, ever-changing, subjective meanings attached. Though they may operate as social facts, these structures are nothing more than what we have made of them.

Given the importance of meaning, language enables us to classify the world into "islands of meaning" (Zerubavel 1991) and thus come to understand how we are to feel about it and act towards it. It would seem that "capitalism" and "environment" reside on entirely different islands altogether, but perhaps green business ventures serve as the bridge that makes their connection visible. As culture objects, stories also not only serve as important sense-making devices for the self and others, but also as a vehicle for production and dissemination of cultural meanings (Loseke 2011; Jones and McBeth 2010).

In what follows, I elaborate on this type of cultural "work" performed by stories produced by the Green Business Network. The relationship between narratives and social change is strong, as they are often designed for specific audiences and used strategically to serve particular purposes; one such purpose includes the justification and garnering of support for social movements (Loseke 2007). How does the GBN go about producing these stories effectively, specifically within the context of the seemingly contradictory culture of capitalism?

Study Design

While a variety of qualitative methods allow for the study of complexity and meaning, I conduct a document analysis of member stories produced by the Green Business Network through a narrative lens. My research question focuses on narratives constructed by the Green Business Network about their members. Document analysis is a nonreactive form of research in

which the presence of a researcher does not influence the generation of data, as the documents have already been written (Loseke 2017). This is not to say that the researcher is objectively removed from the process altogether, as personal, epistemological, and disciplinary positionalities will influence the collection and analysis of data throughout the endeavor, but rather that my presence will not alter the narratives that are produced and shared (Charmaz 2006). Conducting a document analysis will also allow for an increased sample size that is often prohibitive for other qualitative methods, such as interviews. Additionally, this information is publicly available, thus presenting no concerns about protection, risk, or harm for others (Loseke 2017).

Both a strength and weakness of document analysis is that it cannot address questions about intent behind what is written, how it is perceived, or any resulting consequences; it can only address questions about what is written (Loseke 2017). While I am looking to analyze the narratives produced by the Green Business Network about their members, I cannot speak to how individuals perceive or act upon these narratives, nor can I speak to the intent behind the presented information by its creators. That is rather a different research endeavor altogether that would involve the asking of these questions to audiences and creators alike; these questions cannot be answered without first being asked. I am interested in how the GBN shapes the narrative about itself through the stories produced about individual businesses.

With a specific interest in narratives about green businesses, I have chosen Green America's Green Business Network (GBN) because of its availability of a membership directory, variation of business types, and various requirements and regulations related to green business certifications. GBN is self-reported as the "first, largest, and most diverse network of socially and responsible businesses in the country" ("About the Green Business Network" 2019). Green

America broadly defines green businesses as those that "are socially and environmentally responsible…care for their workers…protect their customers and clients…and improve their communities" ("What's a Green Business?" 2019). GBN has several requirements businesses must meet in order to receive and retain their certification. Requirements vary by type of industry but include aspects like prohibiting various toxic chemicals and animal testing, requiring reusable or recycled packaging materials, and utilizing energy efficient materials and processes in production, packaging, and store or office management, among many others. Upon satisfying certification requirements, businesses pay an annual membership fee. Many other organizations that offer different green certifications either do not have a publicly available membership directory, or do not have specific requirements to obtain a certification beyond simply paying a fee, thus justifying my focus on the Green Business Network. Any business can simply advertise itself as "green" or "environmentally friendly," but I am focusing on those that have been certified and legitimized by an outside organization.

In total, GBN currently hosts 1,534 certified businesses. Various categories of businesses include food, personal care, clothing, and construction, among many others. On the full directory page, a user can search by keyword, location, product, category, or type of ownership. In their "About" section, they offer a directory of member stories used to promote both individual businesses as well as goals of GBN as a whole. I will be examining 50 of the 100 member stories.

Data Collection and Analysis

Regarding data collection, I focused on information presented in the Member Stories section concerning the narratives the Green Business Network constructs about their members.

Through a narrative lens, analysis begins to reveal the stories, themes, and codes portrayed by the GBN about their members and ultimately themselves as an organization.I have approached data collection and my analysis inductively, guided by Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory framework. After compiling and reading through all data collected from the aforementioned source, I carried out initial coding by going through the data line-by-line, condensing and organizing it by lines, phrases, and segments in order to add labels that depict what the data are about. By repeatedly familiarizing myself with the data, I was able to make note of emergent themes and preliminary connections courtesy of the "analytic handle" (Charmaz 2014:6) provided by coding. I then engaged in focused coding, constructing and applying categories that emerged through the process of initial coding. Though, as described in the above sections, I have a general interest in the utilization of aspects of the culture of capitalism and environmentalism in green business narratives, I did not aim to actively seek out these themes in my analysis. Instead, I chose to focus on interpreting the data within the context of formula story narratives.

Formula Story Narratives

Formula stories are a particular type of cultural identity and narrative that consist of prototypical characters engaging in predictable behaviors within a recognizable plotline that leads to expectable moral evaluations. The believability, and thus importance, of stories is necessarily rooted in social contexts that reflect symbolic codes, or the normative expectations of what people think and know. Formula stories are not so widely recognized because they directly reflect lived experience (Loseke 2001) or have any "inherent" meaning within themselves, but because of the intersubjectivity of interaction, which ultimately creates meaning (Loseke 2019).

Because of the socially constructed character of social life and the notion that there is not one culture under which the entire world (or country, or state, or town) operates, multiple variations of stories and symbolic codes will circulate and are understood in different ways in different contexts. Unlike in the aforementioned structuralist narrative approach, cultural processes, various contexts, and individual interpretations are of the utmost importance in a constructionist view of narratives.

While the structure of the formula story itself remains constant, the individual elements of each narrative necessarily change. In some cases, the same characters are present but switch roles in the opposite narrative; some characters are only present in one story. The plotlines vary, as do the moral evaluations. An interpretive approach toward narratives allows for more flexibility in crafting a story rather than a rigid, generalizable structure.

In terms of characters the victim "is a symbolic code requiring cognitive appraisals that *moral* people have been *greatly* harmed through *no fault* of their own" (Loseke 2009:503). Emotion codes understood through culture assist us in understanding that we should feel "sympathetic" towards these "innocent" individuals. The idea of the villain is created relationally to the victim; villains are those responsible for perpetuating harm toward victims (Loseke 2009). While the specific content of stories varies dramatically, the required elements mostly stay the same: "somewhere (*scene*) something happens (*events*) to someone/something (*characters*) and this conveys a lesson about something (*moral*)" (Loseke 2019:8).

Formula stories obtain their recognizability and predictability by utilizing symbolic codes and emotion codes in ways that reflect how audience members understand the world. Symbolic codes are systems of ideas about how the world does work, while emotion codes are systems of

ideas about "when and where and toward whom or what emotions should be inwardly experienced, outwardly displayed, and morally evaluated" (Loseke 2011:253).

In order to obtain a familiarity with the data, reading and re-reading it to get a sense of the data as a story is required. In analyzing formula stories, Loseke (2011) asks the following questions: What is the plot? Who are the major characters? What is the moral? What emotions do characters or plots encourage? Who might evaluate this story as believable and impor-tant, and why? Who might evaluate this story as unbelievable and not important, and why? Because the meanings of story characters, plots, and morals depend on understandings readers bring with them, expect that there will be several equally justifiable interpretations of key story ingredients; the sources and consequences of those differences are important empirical questions. In the following findings section, I describe how the GBN stories follow a formula story narrative to unveil what stories the GNB is telling and, what the implications of the stories they are telling may be.

FINDINGS

In the findings section below I will review the four main themes that emerged from the member stories: *1). The Good American Character's Connection to Business, 2). The Morality of Green Business, 3). Green Business Allyship with Capitalism, and 4). What's Missing?.* First, I introduce the general format of the member stories to provide background for their shared characteristics. Next, I will describe each theme, then I will give a few excerpts from the member stories that exemplify each theme. Finally, I will discuss the implications of each theme and tie them back to previous theory and research concerning the culture of capitalism and the symbolic language used in these narratives.

Authorship and audiences are two main facets of storytelling. These particular stories were written not by the story characters, but rather by the Green Business Network. Organizational narratives are in the service of promoting the goals of the organization. More specifically, these stories are formula stories in that each and every one is about promoting the value and possibilities of green business. Therefore, the stories told share a similar form, a form capable of encompassing businesses of many types—from energy production to bakeries to furniture manufacturing to services such as housecleaning. These stories contain all of the elements of a formula story: an individual (character) encounters a negative experience relating to the environment (event), either in America or abroad (scene), and decides to fill a business niche to incite change related to said negative experience (moral). For example, Sharon (character), founder of Eco-Bags Products, Inc., saw plastic bags stuck in trees and floating in

the street (event) in New York (scene). To combat plastic waste, she started selling reusable bags because "you can start a business and do good" (moral).

The Good American Character's Connection to Business

While the American Dream is a formula story itself, it also serves as cultural code that aids in other stories being understood. The main character in the American Dream story is that of the "good American." The good American is a moral character who is self-reliant, engages in endless labor, and meets problems with optimism and resolve. (Loseke 25). Through codes of individualism (self-determination and self-responsibility) and capitalism (the value of work, private profit), the good American character is one who is dedicated to achieving success through individual effort. This character is often a good American worker, one who takes demeaning jobs for low pay, keeps their head down and follows the rules, works hard and provides for their family. The narratives presented by the GBN rather focus on the good American *business owner*.

These stories follow the plot of the American Dream in the way that the character is presented with trials and tribulations, which are overcome by hard work. Ideally, the story has a happy ending in which hard work and sacrifice pay off and success is achieved. Stories of the American Dream and GBN member stories alike emphasize the importance of individual effort. For example, Suzanna of One Love Organics, "found her passion in skin care" and began experimenting with products in her kitchen. She made each product herself and gave prototypes to friends and family. Their reviews were less than stellar, so she kept working to perfect her recipes until she reached the point of launching her business. The company's growth has allowed for Suzanna and her husband to leave their former jobs in full pursuit of this dream. Christopher

of Contempl8 T-shirts is the only employee - he designs, produces, and sells all of his products himself. Charlie of Lotech has partnered with his family to create tools that make composting easier. He says "we are the makers, designers, printers, advertisements, students, and testers so our customers support us directly." Tarik of TY Fine Furniture is the only designer and master woodworker in his business of using naturally fallen trees to create furniture.

This theme promotes the idea that anyone can be a business owner. The stories contain many individuals that did not have experience running a business, formulating a product, etc. but wanted to make a difference, so they started the process from the ground up. This starts with something in their personal experience leading to a vision of a 'need' for a product that fulfills a market niche they believe to be important. Exemplifying individualism, the original idea came from within and given the endless opportunity available to everyone, with a little bit of elbow grease, you too can be a successful business owner! Additionally, the American Dream is immune to systemic discrimination and inequalities, conveying that dedication and hardwork is all you need in order to be successful Thus, historically marginalized groups are then responsible for their own failings and inferior position on the social ladder (Royce 2017). GBN member stories follow the plot of the American Dream by showcasing several stories of immigrants, women, and those in the LGBTQ community, painting a picture of the American hero who can overcome all adversity and hardship and be successful. These stories appeal to cultural codes of individualism, family, and meritocracy while emphasizing the endless opportunity for *you* to be the next rags to riches story.

For example, Emanuel Bronner of Dr. Bronners, is a German-Jewish immigrant who sold handmade soap in the streets of San Francisco in order to support his family. Dr. Bronner's now grosses an annual $120 million in sales as a carbon neutral company. Mary of Breaking Ground

Contracting earned a degree in construction in 1994 but found that the industry was not welcoming to women. After several low-level, low-wage jobs, she decided to launch her own sustainable construction company that leads commercial, governmental, and recreational projects. Kiran of Arcadia Power had a strong idea, but had no background in entrepreneurship or software development. To bring his vision to life, he educated himself in accounting, financial models, and customer relations, and became an expert in energy markets and clean-energy purchasing, with over 150,000 customers in all 50 states.

These stories go beyond being a traditional good American, but a good American business owner who cares about the environment. Characteristics of traditional business operations include outsourcing labor to foreign countries and utilizing nonrenewable resources to cut costs (Royce 2017). Because of the focus on profit, long term effects on the environment and people alike are an afterthought, if a thought at all. It has been traditionally understood that environmental degradation is an essential part of the success of capitalism (Fisher & Jorgenson 2019; O'Neill & Gibbs 2016), but green business owners are showcasing otherwise. Green business owners prioritize business operations that are good for "people and the planet" ("Dr. Bronners," "Greyston Bakery, "Organic Valley"). They profit, provide employment, and contribute to the economy, all while using non-toxic ingredients, natural materials, and recyclable packaging materials, caring about employees, providing a living wage, and contributing to community growth and well-being. They are meeting all of the traditional capitalistic goals, but taking a different route.

As exemplified above, the good American is one who is hardworking and supports capitalism. This is being transferred to these business owners who are making American-made products, supporting American workers, and contributing to the American economy. This point

is crucial, as it reveals a key lesson the stories are trying to convey: the things that we thought were essential for a successful business, like outsourcing labor, running a sweatshop, or destroying the natural environment, are not necessary. With this understanding, the stories convey that the American Dream has enough power, with all of your hard work, to overcome the barriers of having a business without exploitation. You can be a good American, *and* a good environmentalist, *and* a good capitalist.

The Morality of Green Business

As discussed previously, formula stories are a particular type of cultural narrative that consist of prototypical characters engaging in predictable behaviors within a recognizable plotline that leads to expectable moral evaluations. The believability, and thus importance, of stories is necessarily rooted in social contexts that reflect symbolic codes, or the normative expectations of what people think and know. Symbolic codes are partnered with emotion codes, or sets of ideas about how one should feel in various contexts. For example, the symbolic code of 'victim', or someone who has been harmed through no fault of their own, typically corresponds with the emotion code of 'sympathy.' Similarly, the symbolic code of 'villain', or the person(s) doing the harm, is usually associated with emotion codes such as anger, hatred, and contempt.

One of the most important aspects of a formula story is that of a moral evaluation. Stories about green businesses are not only attempting to show that they are 'good,' but that they are better than traditional businesses. They are working to convince consumers that purchasing goods and services from these businesses is the right thing to do. Based on the GBN narrative, any other choice is one that would harm infants, dogs, gorillas and other innocents. By utilizing

appeals to emotion and morals, green businesses can encourage consumers to make the 'right'
decision.

The symbolic code of "green" is a central organizing device in this story. Because the
story revolves around the creation of a certain type of business, story coherence depends upon
readers who approach it with a pre-existing understanding that "green" business is different from
other types of businesses. The descriptor of "green" encompasses far more than what is good for
the environment; not only is "green" never explicitly defined, but it is an umbrella term that
includes various other ideas. Terms like "American made," "simple," "natural," "safe, fair, and
healthy," "living wages," "fair treatment," "sweatshop-free," "locally sourced," "socially
conscious," "handmade," "recyclable," "minimalist," "pure," "clean," "environmentally
responsible," and "plant-based" are used throughout each story to describe the business
endeavor. Variations of environmentally friendly (e.g. … responsible, … conscious, … kind,
ecofriendly) are used 32 times throughout the GBN member stories, though this idea is never
defined. There is no argument or proof as to how and why these things are good, but "green" as a
symbolic code reflects the ways in which audience members understand the world. These codes
are not only statements of fact about the business, but also of moralities (Loseke 20).

Because of the socially constructed character of social life and the notion that there is not
one culture under which the entire world (or country, or state, or town) operates, multiple
variations of stories and symbolic codes will circulate and are understood in different ways in
different contexts. These stories are seemingly intended for readers who share the values of the
Green Business Network, who are interested in environmentally friendly products, or those who
are interested in becoming a certified member. They must already share in the understanding that
the aforementioned terms are known to be 'good' without further explanation. If the intended

audience already holds this shared understanding, what then are they trying to convince their audience is good, if it is not the idea of environmental friendliness? They are not simply working to convince the audience that "green" business is good, but that these particular businesses are good *because* they are green and not only are they good, but they are *better*. The GBN member stories promote the idea that these particular businesses are better by contrasting them against traditional businesses. For example, the story about Mehera Shaw, a clothing company, says "Unlike big retailers that care more about the product than the people, Keller decided to focus on the people first, knowing that with the right workers, a great product would inevitably result." The National Federation of Community Development Credit Union focuses on tailoring services to low-income people "unlike conventional banks." Jan of The ReWall Company says that his products do not release harmful chemicals unlike conventional building materials.

The GBN narrative is not only selling products, but selling an access point for impact by providing options that match your currently held values, while also selling the same capitalist narrative, but with a new twist. They are presenting the idea that there can be ethical consumption within capitalism, you can support the economy without further damaging the environment. Not only do these stories present moral evaluations about businesses, but also about consumers. Stories encourage readers to "do the right thing" by utilizing and consuming "safe," "natural" alternatives. Knowing that there are better alternatives on the market, a consumer can be assumed to be doing the "wrong" thing if they consume conventional products and services. Thus, you purchase a product from a *good* American business owner, running a *good*, *green* business, you are by default a *good* consumer!

Green Business Allyship with Capitalism

As discussed above, there are colloquial understandings that capitalism and environmentalism cannot coexist successfully. The GBN stories do not portray capitalism as the villain, but rather present the idea that we can have it all. There can be business success measured traditionally in terms of size and profit, while treating workers fairly, promoting community, protecting the environment, and encouraging health and wellness. Throughout the member stories, indications of success are not that different from the capitalistic business model. For example, GBN businesses report multimillion dollar annual sales, customers across the country, selling in major retail stores, hiring a large number of workers, global sales, and newspaper and magazine features. These businesses have simply identified a niche in the market and, quite literally, capitalized on it.

Interestingly, the only reporting of success is in terms of traditional capitalisic indications. They do not discuss how much water their process saves, how much plastic they are recycling, or how much money they save using alternative energy. They discuss that these things are indeed happening as a part of their business model, but they do not discuss any measures of "green" success. Though these stories are short, I expected this to be some of the most important information to include. That is not to say that this information is not available elsewhere, nor was it left out intentionally, but why is this information notably absent? I can only theorize, but it is possible that in order to be seen as a legitimate business rather than a 'radical hippie store,' they need to report traditional indicators of success, like profit and expansion. Traditional capitalism is a cultural code that is so deeply embedded that reporting sales and retail partnerships plays a role in the recognizability of the story. A green business is good for other reasons discussed above, but in terms of capitalism, it is only a good business if there is profit.

What's Missing?

Another notably absent feature in this story is the hardship business owners experienced (and overcame!) throughout the process of starting a business. There is no discussion of the time, resources, or money it took to start a business, let alone become a successful one. There is very little discussion of any negative aspects throughout the process, aside from the 'negative' experience that led to the vision. Everything else just seemed to happen after that. In the stories, the transition between the vision and starting a business is quite abrupt. The stories start by discussing the negative experience, the idea that came afterward, and then "she started importing and selling," "she launched her own...construction company," "she started her own online store," "Fila and his wife Molly founded Asha Imports," "Permaculture Gardens was born," and "he started a small company part-time."

This is where the GBN member stories vary from the American Dream story, which emphasizes the hardships faced, which sets the stage for glorifying the successes of those who struggled. However, this same notion highlights the aspect of the American Dream that there is an assumption that opportunity and resources exist if you are willing to work hard enough to get them. The American Dream is blind to race, class, gender, religion, and sexual orientation and encourages the idea that success only comes from individual actions, attitudes, and motivations. But this is not the only place in these stories that systemic inequalities are ignored.

Not only are hardships regarding starting a business missing, but there are no discussions regarding accessibility and affordability of green products and services. Buying green is not for everyone because it is often restricted by income and location. This issue is most often faced by people of color, immigrants, women, and sexual minorities. They publish stories about businesses started by people who are part of these communities in a way that seems like they are being used as token characters. They are selling the idea that green businesses are not only

environmentally responsible, but socially responsible. However, they forget to mention that many people in these communities simply cannot afford their products due to systemic inequalities. This seems to be another layer of capitalism in which they give the illusion of inclusivity by showing people who are "like you" starting a business but not how people "like you" can access these businesses. Several stories make it a point to mention that they hire felons, they have an all-woman team, or they sponsor employment visas. While the focus on providing an inclusive and healthy work environment for all employees is commendable, there seems to be little focus on inclusivity in the consumer base.

DISCUSSION

After identifying the formula story put forth by the Green Business Network, it appears it is not that different from the culture of capitalism narrative after all. The narratives of the culture of capitalism and the GBN both have an explicit focus on helping people. It was assumed that the GBN narrative would represent a unique middle-ground between the two narratives, but rather it simply refutes both. Traditional capitalism posits that environmental degradation is necessary while environmentalists claim the environment cannot possibly be protected under capitalism. The narrative of the GBN shows that it is not necessary to entirely dismantle capitalism or continue to damage the environment in the same manner; green businesses have shown themselves as successful at participating within capitalism while also minimizing harm toward the environment.

These stories represent a successful attempt at the American Dream. The dominant ideology in the United States, individualism, has allowed for the creation and perpetuation of the cultural story of "The American Dream," in which all people are provided the same opportunities for success and upward mobility, but only through hard work, sacrifice, and personal responsibility – not by chance. There are widespread colloquial arguments claiming that any actions taken to combat climate change will be bad for business and the economy, ultimately serving as a barrier for people to successfully achieve the American Dream.

These businesses are not only reifying and strengthening the culture of capitalism script, but also repairing it through the "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality associated with the American Dream by starting this business, against all odds, even though they did not know

what they were doing. Moreover, their venture has proven successful. Their business endeavors have also attempted to remedy several social problems while contributing to local and national economies, and providing forms of employment and power to others who can then pursue their own version of the American Dream.

The Green Business Network utilizes this narrative because it is effective, and it is effective because it follows a predictable plot line, is recognizable and believable, appeals to emotion, and provides a moral evaluation. But I must ask, effective for whom? The audience on the receiving end of this story is likely those who already express an interest in being environmentally friendly and purchasing from green businesses, as they are the ones who are most likely to visit this particular website. The narrative structure of this story could very well be effective in convincing people who are not already concerned with the health of the environment, but the platform on which it is located could prove to be a blockade to expanding its audience. If one of the GBN member stories were to be published by a major news network accessed by various groups of people, there may very well be a different outcome. If the 6 o'clock news shared a segment about household products that could harm children and provided better alternatives, it has potential to reach more people who would not otherwise be seeking out this information. While this is pure conjecture, this idea could indeed lead to further research about narrative effectiveness and audiences.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, both sides of the colloquial environment vs. capitalism debate have been refuted by the narrative present in the Green Business Network member stories. They are challenging the popularized narratives and showing an alternative path; you can participate within the culture of capitalism, run a successful business, help people, *and* minimize environmental harm. Their success emphasizes the importance and usefulness of a green commodity discourse, exemplifying that capitalism is indeed a malleable system that can be adjusted to serve both people and planet.

As mentioned above, Prothero and Fitchett (2000) call for a green commodity discourse that incorporates environmental aspects into the current system and green businesses seem to be doing just that. One main aspect of green commodity discourse is to utilize the market to communicate a greener message to the public and challenge the dominate system. Green businesses have successfully identified solutions to current ecological concerns within existing social frameworks and have established solid efforts in combatting further environmental destruction while maintaining capitalist goals. It would be amiss to call their efforts a compromise when they are instead using their relative power to engage in "eco-activism" by utilizing the economy to challenge the status quo when it comes to requiring environmental destruction in capitalist progress. However, given the ways in which the GBN seamlessly integrated environmentalism narratives into the capitalist narrative, it provides insight into how these sorts of interventions will not *challenge* capitalism, but strengthen existing capitalistic structures.

What is particularly interesting about the GBN narrative is that the environment was not the main focus. Rather, they utilized emotional pleas focused on *people* and how they have been harmed by environmental destruction. While this could very well be intentional, there is no way to know intention based on the data alone. However, the data shows that the GBN is utilizing aspects of a formula story like recognizability, predictability, and familiarity that could allow for these stories to be effective. This story is nearly identical to that of the culture of capitalism, perhaps one of the most widely understood narratives in the country. Following the script of the American Dream, individuals started a business endeavor from the ground up in order to meet a need, they catered to both laborers and consumers alike by providing employment opportunities, promoting progress and innovation with new products and services, contributing to economic growth, all the while minimizing environmental degradation. They are actively refuting the notion that progress requires further ecological harm, and instead positing that the saving of the environment is essential to capitalism's continuation and protection of peoples' well-being. Despite some extent literature supporting the idea that environmentalism and capitalism are not contradictory, my findings do not agree with that line of thought. Diverging from previous research, capitalism and environmentalism cannot coexist without capitalism co-opting the environmental narrative.

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