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Executive Summary: Communicating Sustainability Solutions Through Photojournalism

Introduction

While current strategies and interventions promote urban community sustainability, effective communication of these solutions is lacking. Documentation of current research tends to be difficult for non-academics to understand. Sustainability scientists and practitioners need a way to meaningfully communicate their experiences and solutions to the lay public. This project sought to address this communication barrier by visually presenting sustainable community development solutions. Urban and community gardens and their members in Phoenix and Tempe, Arizona, and Copenhagen and Aarhus, Denmark, were photographed, interviewed, and examined to demonstrate that photographs can tell a holistic sustainability story.

The photographs focused on aspects of life and behaviors that have contributed to happiness in local communities. A website was created and a gallery event was mounted for public review and discussion. Gallery attendees and website visitors were asked to complete a survey to assess gained knowledge of sustainability solutions, and the degree to which photography was an effective tool in communicating sustainability solutions.

Feedback confirmed that this visual medium allowed people to think about how to incorporate sustainable community solutions into their own lives and may have changed people's interest in, and thoughts about, sustainability and sustainable solutions. The survey results demonstrated that photographs can successfully communicate sustainability ideas. Specifically, viewers gained an increased awareness of how community and urban gardening can increase happiness, well-being, and sense of community. This visual approach can continue to be used to better communicate additional sustainability solutions ideas and methods to the public.

Methods and Interventions

Articles were located by searching words and phrases such as “happiness,” “communicating through the arts,” “community gardens,” and “community development.” Useful articles were vetted for their relevance to this project through reviewing the abstracts, introductions, and conclusions. Chosen articles were then analyzed more in-depth to pinpoint main ideas that supported or opposed my hypothesis. The primary subjects chosen for photographs included garden landscapes, individual plots, and garden members. I made visual edits using *Capture One 10* software and then previewed the collection to a focus group. An Excel sheet was then compiled listing the chosen photos together with a ranking system pertaining to how many people selected each photo. The selections were made based on how well the photograph communicated sustainability ideas. A website was created by myself (view [here](#)) and a gallery showing of photographs was arranged with the Southeast Regional Library in Gilbert, Arizona for Friday, November 3, 2017. A public discussion of the photographs was conducted, and surveys of website and gallery viewers were distributed and collected.

Nine gardens were visited: two in Phoenix, two in Tempe, one in Copenhagen, and four in Aarhus. Gardens were chosen based on their proximity to where I was staying, that they were urban or community gardens, and that I got in touch with an employee before visiting. The number of gardens included was simply a result of time constraints. The questions for garden members remained consistent throughout most interviews and focused on assessing the degree to which participants thought their happiness and well-being increased since becoming involved in the garden, and their reasons for this. The project survey was presented in a questionnaire format for event attendees and website visitors to answer and was distributed through Google Forms and

on physical paper. Its purpose was to assess gained knowledge of sustainability solutions and how effective a tool photography is as a means of sustainability solutions communication.

Before implementing this project, it was difficult to develop specific parameters that would indicate overall success in terms of sustainability and happiness. I think it is valid to quantify the number of people whose lives or lifestyles were enhanced or made more sustainable through their actions, which would indicate a positive change. More specifically to this project, success is that the photographs were, in fact, able to communicate ideas to the general public about the positive impacts of gardening on happiness, well-being, community, and sustainability.

Project Outcomes/Results

Preliminary results of the Danish garden member interviews were positive with regard to impacts on their happiness and well-being. Regardless of age, gender, background, etc., members answered that gardening has improved their happiness and well-being by at least some degree, e.g., through being outside and away from daily stresses. This project's major task was to assess whether using photojournalism to communicate sustainability solutions was successful, both in the gallery showing and on the website. The fact that almost all respondents affirmed that the photographic presentation allowed them to learn something they otherwise would not, such as the existence of these gardens and how they are beneficial to well-being, demonstrates that using photojournalism is a successful method of communicating sustainability ideas.

Other important findings relate to the ability to educate people on topics with which they were previously unfamiliar, and the ability to incite an interest in the audience to become involved in community gardens. Here, 65.2% of survey respondents from the gallery show and website said they learned something new from the event or website. For example, a survey respondent stated they learned it is "a great stress reliever and helps with protecting our youths' futures." 82.6% of survey respondents said that they gained an interest in participating in gardens, with 65.2% saying they were likely or very likely to do so. This demonstrates that it is possible to provoke interest and action through visual methods and open discussions.

In the short term, this project may have positively affected people's interest in sustainability and sustainable solutions. Through participating in the event or viewing the website, it is likely that attendees were able to draw connections to (and in increase their understanding of) the ways in which the concepts relate to their own lives. Longer term impacts could include that gallery attendees and website viewers gained an increased awareness about sustainability, increased knowledge about sustainable solutions, a global perspective about these topics, and ultimately will make behavioral changes that lead to increasing overall sustainability.

Possible Next Steps

It would be impossible to claim that this single project addressed the entire challenge of communicating sustainability ideas to the general public; however, I believe it made an overall positive impact. I do not think there are any gaps in what I did nor is a different approach necessary to make it more successful – only that it is a small-scale effort to conquer a global problem. My project can serve as a template for future sustainability scholars and documenters to produce more content that successfully communicates sustainability solutions, and can be utilized in other communities to educate and motivate people about sustainability.

For the specifics of my project, the only way I can see an extension is through hosting similar events to reach broader audiences. If the initial survey efforts were continued, the results could be further formalized and assessed as to whether using photography can be a successful means of communication for sustainability and happiness issues. On a broader scale, there is room to expand this project by traveling to different cities and completing a similar project in regard to content, or conversely, to follow my project format but for an entirely different topic.