

**Understanding Environmental Advocacy Work through Social Media: The Perspective of
Project *Save 182***

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Abstract

Most environment– themed researches have used traditional content analysis (Atwater, et.al, 1985) to assess the importance of environmental concerns by counting articles and frequency of specific issues or words and by measuring trends in coverage of environmental issues. (As cited in Kalof, 1993) This research explored otherwise and adopted phenomenology to provide understanding of the lived experiences of the environmental advocacy movement, *Save 182* and its utilization of social media to campaign for a sustainable environment for *Baguio City*, Philippines. Findings indicated the immense contribution social media interactions bring in creating opportunity for action and change.

Keywords: sustainable environment, social media, phenomenology, action, change

Understanding Environmental Advocacy Work through Social Media: The Perspective of Project Save 182

With the advent of the Internet and networked technology in communication in the 21st century, the use of social media is ubiquitous among this generation. Social media has been used in a wide range of activities – starting from socializing with peers, keeping in touch with family and friends, advertising, promoting products in business, marketing, education, entertainment, and politics. (Goldenland, 2012)

A survey conducted by Pew Research Global (2012) indicated the remarkable spread of information social media has accompanied by the tremendous speed of data transmission within seconds of upload or posting of information online. In countries such as Britain, United States, Russia and Spain; expressing opinions online about politics, community issues and popular culture are evident.

Social media's rise to prominence has indeed experienced some serious following. People are living in a world that is being constantly changed by communication technology and because of that, everyone can have a voice that can be heard – a concept that holds true also specifically of environmental issues.

Baguio, an urbanized City located in the Northern Luzon Island of the Philippines has been reckoned to be naturally beautiful as residents and visitors single out the temperate climate and intrinsic beauty of its landscapes as its major attractions. However, data gathered from

Baguio Islands Philippines (2012) revealed that the population has been growing rapidly at an annual growth rate of 4.39 percent or an actual increment of about 7,897 individuals a year. Due to this, the environmental quality in the City has been confronted with problems such as improper gardening / *kaingin*, forest fires, squatting on watersheds, denudation of forests and de-vegetation due to illegal cutting of trees.

The occurrence of these problems ignited the emphasis of lobbying for environmental programs and initiatives from various groups. Concerned citizens have been alarmed with the rate of degradation of Baguio City's environment. Strong clamors to preserve the remaining forest covers, protect watershed areas and parks of the city, and at the same time regulate commercial expansion were evident. (Opiña, 2012) They voice out their minds online through social media networks which continue to grow and have become one of the most popular means to account people's everyday life practices and demand for respect for the environment. (Short, 2011)

Save 182, (<http://facebook.com/Save182>) is one group who has tapped into the broad reach of social media platforms to involve, inspire and influence the community of Baguio City. It is a movement led by environmental activists who included church people, students and concerned citizens in a series of protest actions reiterating their opposition to the expansion project of a giant mall that is detrimental to some 182 *Benguet Pine* and *Alnus* trees in the City of Pines. (Bagni, 2013) This is said to be the latest environmental issue that the City is facing presently – aside from several others that have surfaced such as air pollution, problems about proper waste disposal and Baguio sanitary landfill.

The purpose of this study was to understand environmental problems in Baguio City and describe the roles of social media in environmental advocacy work from the point of view of *Save 182*.

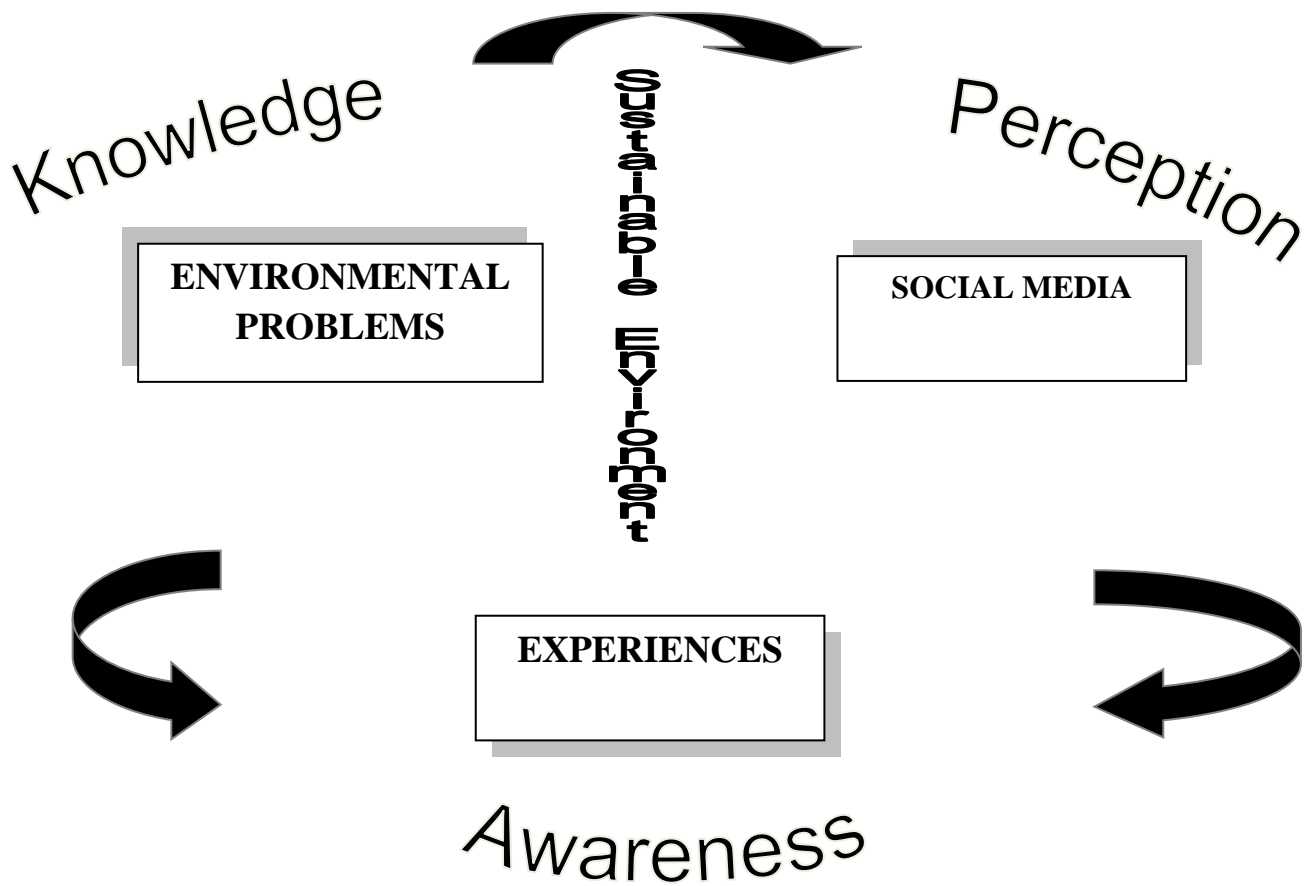
Phenomenology as the Research Approach

Phenomenology originated as a school of philosophical thought during the 18th century. It was described to be the “science of phenomena” which is focused on describing the experiences of individuals. Becker (1992) adds by saying that experience is a valid, rich and rewarding source of knowledge and without it; there would be no human world. (As cited in Morrisey & Higgs, 2006)

German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1936) said that any phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for investigation and had focused on defining the essences of experiences, encouraging researchers to “turn to the things themselves”. (As stated in Pallud, 2009)

French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1964) added that it is important to note that individual perceptions are based upon a person’s locality in life and every perception takes place within a certain landscape of a person’s mind. (As stated in Vermont Scholar Journal, 2013) Additionally, he said that life is a string of perpetual moments that transforms into the passage of time.

Phenomenological approaches are said to be good at surfacing deep issues, making voices be heard, and prompt action for change. (Lester, 2013) It was my intent to establish the essential experiences of the members of the Project *Save 182* movement in their pursuit for a sustainable environment through the aide of social media.



Review of Related Literature

Social networking sites have grown tremendously due to the development of computer – mediated communication. Boyd and Ellison (2007) discuss that these websites are where people sign up as users and get to communicate or keep with friends or even strangers. (As cited in Lee, et.al, 2011) Social media and social networks are integral components of our daily, personal, professional and community lives. These technological developments have not only changed the way media is used but have also resulted in new lifestyles, outlook, behavior, and attitudes in communities and nations. (Rahman and Thomas, 2011)

Intensity of use of Social Media

First appearing in the 1990's, Wink (2011) mentioned social networking sites engage users with one or more social connections to bond with the outside world. (As cited in Coleman and Lane, 2012). Coyle and Vaughn (2008) say that “Social networks exist because humans are societal and require relationships in order to survive.” Additionally, Durden, Hill, and Angel (2007), suggest that social networks are critical to the well-being of human beings.

There have been significant increases in the use of social media sites such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter for both business and personal reasons in the past couple of years. It has been used to increase business presence on the web, to allow for announcements to selected followers; both business and personal, and to promote new ideas and products. The advance usage of social networking systems is rapid and compelling. Licoppe and Smoreda

(2008), state that people are continually connected to each other on their blackberries, *Ip hones*, *Ipads*, tablets, netbooks, and computers. Texting, talking, e-mailing and communicating through electronic rather than face-to-face methods are done at an accelerating pace.

Ruppert (2013) adds that these technological advancements are sufficient to revolutionize brand engagements. Brands have the ability to personally engage with customers like never before. People like to see brands respond when they comment on a Facebook post or mention the company in a tweet. The use of social media to handle the bulk of customer service inquiries is slowly becoming a standard practice. Furthermore, Quick (2013) adds that government agencies and nonprofit organizations spread their messages through setting up online networks and databases that can be used as information centers to increase education and awareness.

What Social Media can do for the Environment

Protecting the environment has never been more important than it is right now. With the staggering explosion of the human population, ever-growing depletion of natural resources, and the residual effects of pollution and global warming being felt in our modern society, many environmentalists have made a concerted effort to reach the public with their message through social media websites in an attempt to raise awareness.

Billions of people worldwide connect with one another by means of computers and laptops every day. Much of this communication takes place through social networks. It was apparent that this is the most effective method for getting the word out and stimulating interest

about this important topic. (Hubert, 2012)

Tiber INC, a Jordanian youth-oriented media organization worked to document environmental problems, identified protected areas and other natural resources by texting, tweeting and posting on *Youtube*. These included documenting garbage and construction violations by the use of their cell phone cameras. Furthermore, they have mapped the country's nature and wildlife reserves to raise awareness about the need to protect them, and hailed the hard work of municipal sanitation employees. (As cited in Hattam, 2010)

In 2011, the Namibian government was congratulated by international organizations for taking bold and determined steps to deter rhino poaching in that country. They have established an SMS hotline to allow the public to help defeat rhino poachers. As mentioned in WWF's website, in Namibia, rhinos are especially protected animals and twenty year sentences are imposed for poaching. Dealing with rhino horn is considered by the country to be "as dangerous as illegal diamond dealing."

Fraser (2011) stated that "perhaps the most intriguing capability of social media involves something that goes deeper than data" pertaining to the University of Virginia's initiative – Chesapeake Bay Game, an interactive computer simulation described with a "power to change minds". It was developed by a multi-disciplinary faculty and student team that combines video game format with current demographic, economic, and scientific data to create a powerful tool with real-world applications and impact. The Chesapeake Bay watershed was impacted daily by a broad range of individuals, communities and industries that live and work in its boundaries.

Representing the 27 million residents in the watershed, players in the Bay Game make decisions based on an assigned stakeholder role. Farmers make decisions about whether to leave land fallow or apply cover crops to their fields, for instance, and land developers decide between regular and sustainable development.

Jessop (2013) in his article mentioned that the question of just how powerful social media is getting and where it will lead is becoming an ever more important one. The most notable function of social media is that it can teach and promote causes. It has the power to be of great force for good as evident in UNICEF and *Greenpeace's* following on Twitter garnering 600,000 + and under 1.5 million followers respectively.

In the Philippines, Director of Law of Nature Foundation Anna Oposa spearheaded “*Save the Philippine Seas*” which was spurred by reports of massive coral reef destruction in the country. Oposa’s (2011) inventiveness sparked a social networking campaign that united Filipinos through a national blog day to save the Philippine seas.

Social media's potential to educate the public about their personal responsibility to protect the environment is truly endless. Technology has made it possible to be instantly updated on reports such as unethical practices by large corporations over the improper handling and disposal of chemicals, deforestation, oil spill cleanup, and many more.

Social Media and Environmental Reform

In an influential article, Gamson and Wolsfield (1993) mentioned that “social movements need news media for three major purposes: mobilization, validation, and scope enlargement.” (As cited in Howley, 2010) Social media coverage is instrumental in communicating the movement’s goals, status, and activities to its core constituency. Moreover, Marchi’s study (2005) revealed that new technology and today’s savvy media practices aides in publicizing concerns to help generate support for people living in affected environmental conditions.

Environmental education schemes expanded – especially in countries where environmental issues grew dramatically. (Holdgate, 1982) Environmental protection required efforts of advocates and lobbyists to introduce or revise legislation. According to *Environmental Health Perspectives*, a monthly journal, lobbying is a necessity for anyone hoping to attract political backing on key environmental issues. Bill Roberts, Environment Director for the *Environmental Defense Fund* and the organization’s chief lobbyist explained: “We have to lobby and deal directly with Congress to get them to consider the ideas we think will make a good environmental policy. Just writing a report or producing a think piece is not going to do it.” (Vault, 2013) The piece continues, “To fashion solutions to a staggering number of environmental issues, legislators need information, and that is where lobbyists play an important role.”

Advertising the need to protect our environment through social media and over the Web was said to be a much better method than handing out pamphlets to every individual one meets

on a street corner. Repeated viewings of environmental topics through social networks may not influence everyone that watches them, but will entice those who do respond to help further the cause in the best way. (Fraser, 2011)

In the UK, the Network for Social Change (2013) provided support for environmental cutting-edge projects. Beneficiaries included the likes of *Stop Climate Chaos* –a group of people dedicated in taking action on climate change who assert a supporter base of more than 11 million people reached through different social media channels and *Friends of the Earth International* who campaign, create and promote solutions that create sustainable environments and just societies.

Namrouqa's findings derived from *Jordan Times* (2012) list Jordan as one of the countries that put emphasis on the great opportunity to make a positive behavioral change in protecting the environment. In the news column *More Environmentalists Using Social Media for Activism*, Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN), Jordan's leading environment organization, was recognized for their valuable contribution on the *Halt Ajloun Deforestation Campaign* that attracted more than 5,000 supporters on Facebook and succeeded in stopping the construction of a military academy in Ajloun's Bergesh Forest. Omar Shoshan, head of the environmental policies and advocacies department of RSCN said, "We are printing fewer posters and brochures, while reaching a larger number of people in Jordan and abroad", pertaining to social media networks' environmental friendly capability.

350.org (2009) marked history with its International Day of Climate Change Action. More than four thousand actions, in over 170 countries have made *The International Day of Climate Action*, a massive global event. Through this event, millions of people told their leaders that they demand strong and immediate action on climate change. Highlights from the day included major rallies at iconic landmarks like the Taj Mahal, Machu Picchu, the Pyramids and the Great Barrier Reef. (Matthews, 2009)

In the Philippines, *Move Dumaguete* was initiated by Rappler's Move.PH Chat Series (2011) following the effects of roaring floodwaters that surged through the streets of the City after a heavy downpour caused by Tropical Storm *Sendong*. Authorities claimed it was the worst flashflood that ravaged Dumaguete and other areas of Negros Oriental in about 10 years, affecting 12,260 families or 61,300 people. Rappler Project Coordinators discussed how to use social media platforms to push issues about the environment and the talk also told compelling stories of affected residents.

Social media networks allow users to construct and communicate representations of their identities online. Loader (2008) also noted that interactive media provided channels for social movements to take digital content from supporters and from other sources, which can then be juxtaposed, re-contextualized and distributed. (As cited in Crowther and Hemmi, 2013)

Barriers to a Better Environment

The emergence of information made available online heightens awareness of people. Amidst the desirability of improvements campaigned for, there have been debates of fundamental questions of environmental goals – achieving them and most importantly how far we can realistically expect to go with changes and reform.

Trudgill (1990) outlined six obstacles or barriers that impede progress toward a solution – *Agreement, Knowledge, Technological, Economic, Social, and Political* (AKTESP) factors.

Among *agreement* barriers include the difficulty of achieving consensus about the scope of solutions and the means of achieving them. What one person sees as a problem, another may not; what is seen as reasonable and as an acceptable practice to one group can be unacceptable to another.

Knowledge of basic processes has to be reviewed in terms of the ways in which it was gained and used. Inappropriate or insufficient knowledge may mean difficulty in producing accurate plans. Alternatively, the knowledge maybe appropriate and widespread, however lack of *technology* might not be appropriate for the social structure or economy of the people involved.

Trudgill (1990) argued that even if the causes and effects are clear and we also know how to tackle the causes, it may cost too much to do so or it may be socially or politically unacceptable. These *economic, social and political* barriers constitute the basics of

environmental uplifting.

Finally, Trudgill suggests that if we decide on environmental goals, we can identify situations which fall of these goals, specify problems, enumerate their significance, and propose resolutions to attempt to overcome the barriers and eventually implement solutions to attain progress.

The Research Methodology

My research strategy included preparation of interview questions ahead of time and use of information gathered from key informants of the *Save 182* organization. I had topic guides that I used as reference to facilitate easier flow of discussion. Follow up questions were supplied during the course of the interview which aimed to seek clarification on important issues. Additionally, I took the time to schedule focus group discussions that probed on members' collective insights on relatable environmental matters. Permission to conduct both was granted on the second week of December 2013 after I emailed my letter of intent for this research coursed through one of the group's administrators. Consent to record both interviews and focus group discussions were sought from the concerned parties. The interviews with the key informants succeeded the conduction of focus group discussions and both lasted one whole afternoon.

Through purposive sampling (Glaser & Strauss; Morse, 1991), two members of the organization served as key informants. They were chosen because they have spearheaded most of

the group's activities conducted within the City and continuously moderate social media functions online. Fifteen members of the group – both men and women between the age of 25 and 55 (mostly students, teachers, and several professionals) were recruited to grace the focus group discussions. Interview sessions among the key informants and information obtained from focus group discussions were voluntary and confidential.

Explication of Data

I adopted Hycner's (1999) explication process in this study derived from Groenewald's (2004) paper. Hycner cautions that 'analysis' has dangerous connotations for phenomenology. The term usually means a 'breaking into parts' and therefore often means a loss of phenomenon. On the other hand, explication implies an "investigation of the constituents of phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole." (1999, p. 161) Groenewald further quoted researchers Coffey and Atkinson's (1996) definition of analysis as the "systematic procedures to identify essential features and relationships" - a way of transforming the data through interpretation.

Phase One: Bracketing and phenomenological reduction

This step involved me going over through the audio recordings and notes of the interviews and focus group discussions that I conducted. Information obtained were transcribed, re-read and carefully examined. Following the concept of horizontalization (Hathorn, et.al, 2009) derived from Moustakas (1994), I did not omit statements or phrases as all were regarded to have equal value.

Phase Two: Delineating units of meaning

The significance of data reduction was an equally important step in this study. Repeated reading of transcripts and notes were necessary to derive meaning. Clearly redundant elements and vague expressions or statements were eliminated. (Moustakas, 1994)

Phase Three: Clustering of units of meaning to form themes

As every significant statement or phrase was initially treated as possessing equal value, this next phase deleted those which are irrelevant to the topic and others that are repeated or overlapping. Creswell (1998) and King (1994) refer to this as units of significance. (As cited in Groenewald, 2004)

The following themes emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions conducted to explore members' perception of environmental problems and advocacies: *information dissemination, defense of City's heritage, instrument for change, individual initiatives and uncertainty.*

Information Dissemination	"I personally regard social media as the most accessible tool to get our goals across through a variety of audiences within the City"
	"..communication exchange is instant...Feedback is instantaneous."
	"As it is the latest trend, I know that we have the opportunity to make information viral every time we use it."
Defense of City's Heritage	"There is little left of the City that we used to know and as a group we are fighting to keep that..."
	"..we want them to understand the concept of environmental sustainability. If they keep on doing what they have been doing, where would their actions take Baguio 5 - 10 years from now?"
	"..definitely.. Preserve what is left of our heritage for the future generation to see and savor..."
Instrument for Change	"Social media is powerful, and has social awareness effect to people especially the younger generation."
	"..As we owe much that we have achieved through social media, we were able to steer community-oriented policing activities"
	"It is easy to spread word about the movement through social media and our take off presentation points about the City's history and its raison d'etre..."
Individual Initiatives	"I have been invited to a couple of forums on environmental advocacy and in those occasions, I share what Save 182 does as a group."
	"The effort is necessary to sustain what the group has started and we want to ensure that effort does not die."
	"Joining this cause was a good investment on my end... how we affect those connections that we have initially created is very important."
Uncertainty	"...uncertainty. We know not exactly where this would lead us in the future. However, in standing for the environment, beauty and dignity, we shall remain"
	"We will strive to keep the spirit of Save 182 and cling on to the belief that there's hope for a sustainable Baguio"
	"..I feel a certain sense of passiveness... After all, vying for a sustainable Baguio is a tough ordeal."

Phase Four: Summarizing, modifying and validating of interviews

Groenewald (2004) further highlighted the need for 'validity check' to determine the essence of information elicited from the data captured. Higgs (2001) seconds this by enumerating credibility, soundness and ethical conduct to be essential criteria in a phenomenological study. (As cited in Morrissey & Higgs, 2006)

During the course of interviews and focus group discussions conducted, I had to fill in questions on topics or statements I felt were unclear amongst the participants. This was done to verify that I carefully understood the experience they have relayed. Furthermore, the notes that I took during the conduction of both activities were equally relevant as it enabled me to condense information and insights for the topic.

Results and Discussion

Save 182 has depended mostly on the medium of social media in its campaign against the expansion project of a giant mall that is seen harmful for Baguio City's environment. Members believed that removing the trees on *Luneta Hill*, one of the very few remaining forest covers in the City's Central Business District would cause irreparable damage to the area's ecosystem as well as pose danger to the citizens who either work, study or live directly below the hill. Signature campaign movements, updates on group activities and posting of group initiatives were mostly visible on their Facebook page and various forums and blog sites.

Information Dissemination

Explication of data revealed that the group owed much that it has achieved for Baguio's environment via dissemination of valuable information of the movements' cause online through social media. *Allen* said, "I personally regard social media as the most accessible tool to get our goals across through a variety of audiences within the City." *Chris* concurs this by referring to the medium as "the latest trend and information becomes viral every time we use it." *Janice* believes that "communication exchange and feedback received is instantaneous".

Defense of City's Heritage

It was also prevalent in the interviews and focus group discussions conducted how the members declare concern to preserve what is left of the City's heritage for the future generation to relish. *Michael* shared, "We want them to understand the concept of environmental sustainability. If they keep on doing what they have been doing, where would their actions take Baguio 5 to 10 years from now?" *Marie* added, "As it is, there is little left of the City that we used to know and as a group we are fighting to keep that and preserve what is left of our heritage for the future generation to see and savor."

Instrument for Change

The group believes that the same medium yields social awareness among the community. *Michelle* explained, "We were able to steer community-oriented policing activities. When the Mayor announced the plan to have portions of *Melvin Jones Park* gated and grounds concreted,

we again used social media to voice our opposition to this and started an online petition. Later on, we received word that the City's Engineering Office has abandoned the aforementioned plans." *Kathleen* seconds this by referring to social media as a "powerful medium that spread word about the movement which has garnered much attention locally and internationally." *Erika*, one of the group's acting administrators relayed, "Social media eases our take off presentation points about the City's history and its *raison d'etre* (reason for existence) in various forums we attend to."

Individual Initiatives

The members also acknowledged the importance of *offline* work and interpersonal communication to succeed in their endeavors. For instance, *Ivy* talked about being invited by affiliate NGO's on a couple of occasions and from there, she shares what *Save 182* does as a group. *Mel* responds to this by recognizing that they have to double their efforts on what they have started and that includes not only by communicating through social media, but sharing activities personally with various members of the community as well.

Uncertainty

Despite discussions disclosing social media's immense effect for their movement, an opposing viewpoint also stood out. There was a reflection of uncertainty toward learning if individual efforts or initiatives exerted in the pursuit of a sustainable environment will be enough for the younger generation or citizens to follow. For example, *Fritz* stated, "In some of my

personal interactions, there have been unavoidable circumstances wherein I just feel a certain sense of passiveness among the people I talk to in terms of what we as a group are trying to accomplish. After all, vying for a sustainable environment versus plans of modernization against those huge corporations is a tough ordeal. We know not exactly where this would lead us in the future. However, in standing for the environment, beauty and dignity, we shall remain.” *Karlo* retorted, “Change is not something that is done overnight. We want to make these corporate bottom lines see our point of view that future development plants should perhaps be more eco-friendly, sustainable and also think of the greater good. I personally think it is a long shot but I hope we can keep up the vision and spirit of *Save 182*. There’s hope for a sustainable Baguio.”

From the study undertaken, it was evident that social media paved an innovative way for *Save 182* to share and use pertinent information on environmental concerns. However, findings stressed that achieving their goals were not deterrent to communications within the realm of social media - but individual initiatives and interpersonal dialogues were aptly taken as well.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Social media is an important technological trend that has big implications in various aspects of people's lives. Studies have shown how powerful the medium is and how it steers consciousness amongst the public on several issues - in this study particularly, demonstrating concern for the environment.

This study has revealed some perspectives and experiences of one particular environmental advocacy group concerning their adoption of social media in their endeavors. Due to the scope of the study being confined to Baguio City and just a single movement, the results are not able to represent the generalized condition within the region. Future researchers who wish to explore a similar study may want to deepen their comprehension on essential environmental issues by not limiting themselves in observing one group but perhaps by immersing themselves also in another. Additionally, more and broader respondents could be contacted for better results accuracy.

The researcher was not able to do any forthcoming observational studies or sessions with the group to follow up on their engagements. It is recommended that subsequent works consider doing such.

Finally, while the current spheres of social media interactions contribute to the development of the themes in this study, the researcher also suggests individual variations be concluded because these are as important as the commonalities determined about the phenomenon researched.

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