



Sharing Origin Information in Online Community: How Social Enterprises Drive Ethical Consumption

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Abstract. The promotion of ethical consumption in the online agricultural product market has garnered significant attention. This study examines how social enterprises can effectively utilize online communities to foster ethical consumption by emphasizing origin information. By analyzing consumer reviews from the online communities of the Japanese agricultural product store, the findings reveal that consumers prioritize not only the taste and health benefits of agricultural products but also the importance of their production origins. This study underscores the pivotal role of strategic communication within online communities and offers practical insights for social enterprises to design marketing strategies that align with ethical consumption values, thereby supporting regional revitalization and advancing sustainable development goals.

Keywords: Origin information, Online community, Ethical consumption

1 Introduction

Online communities can be restructured as a collective of "social interactions" based on "common bonds" that encompass the three characteristics of traditional communities: "locality," "shared connections," and "social interaction"^[1]. These online communities function as a means to clearly identify specific consumer segments and obtain information for effectively customizing services accordingly. They also contribute to the establishment of consumer loyalty and the promotion of two-way communication. For instance, in online communities formed through platforms such as regional SNS, consumers often possess a willingness to support their localities, going beyond mere information gathering, which suggests a potential link to ethical consumption^[2]. Thus, leveraging online communities may serve as an effective means to stimulate consumer empathy, heighten interest in local regions, and promote ethical consumption^[3]^[4]. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a lifestyle shift toward purchasing agricultural products online; however, the mechanisms of consumers' ethical behavior have not significantly changed. Consequently, regions and enterprises are expected to make substantial contributions to realizing a society aligned with the SDGs and to the development of marketing strategies. Given this background, the role of online communities in promoting consumers' ethical consumption is deemed highly significant.

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1.1 The Growth of Social Enterprise and Ethical Consumption

The growth and increasing recognition of social enterprises has been a prominent topic of discussion in recent years in Japan. As early as 2006, Tanimoto (2006) identified this emerging trend, analyzing it through two key dimensions: Economic Benefits and Social Responsibility^[5]. By utilizing these two dimensions, Tanimoto classified the positioning of various organizations within society, illustrating how business practices have evolved in response to shifting societal expectations (See Figure 1).

Ordinary Enterprises primarily focus on high economic benefits, often prioritizing profit generation over social and environmental concerns. In contrast, non-profit organizations (NPOs) are traditionally more concerned with social responsibility, often at the expense of economic gains. However, this dichotomy has become increasingly blurred as society has grown more aware of and concerned about social issues. The growing recognition that businesses have a significant role to play in addressing these issues has led to a shift in the way companies approach their operations. Rather than solely focusing on maximizing profits, businesses are now being encouraged to integrate social responsibility into their core practices.

In this context, social enterprises, which balance both economic goals and social missions, have become a vital solution to the challenges of sustainable development. These enterprises seek to operate in a way that generates economic value while simultaneously addressing societal needs. They recognize that the pursuit of economic benefits cannot be achieved without consideration of their social and environmental impacts. This shift in business practice is not only driven by ethical considerations but also by a recognition of the potential long-term benefits of social responsibility, such as enhanced brand reputation, customer loyalty, and increased employee satisfaction.

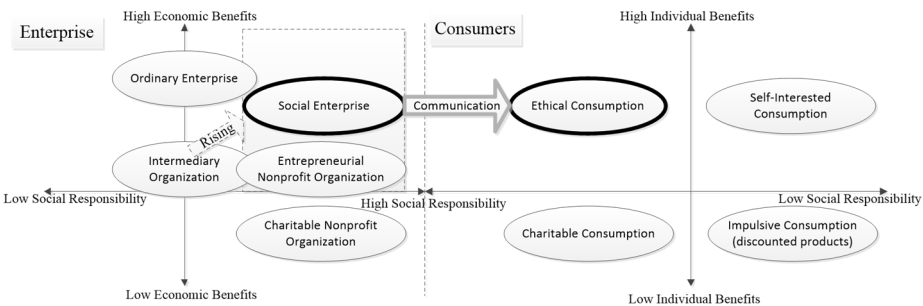


Fig. 1. Communication between social enterprise and ethical consumption of online consumers

Alternatively, Consumers are becoming more aware of the ethical implications of their purchases and increasingly support businesses that prioritize social and environmental issues. This shift is amplified by online communities, where informed consumers can hold companies accountable. Social enterprises are well-positioned to leverage these preferences, as their models align with the values modern consumers seek.

Online consumer behavior can be categorized using two key dimensions: individual benefits and social responsibility (See Figure 1). Based on these dimensions, consumer behavior can be divided into four distinct types. Self-interest consumption refers to

consumers who focus solely on their individual benefits. Their purchasing decisions are driven purely by personal convenience, cost savings, or utility, without regard for broader societal or environmental impacts. Charitable consumption describes consumers who prioritize social responsibility while placing minimal importance on their own individual benefits. Their primary motivation is to support societal causes or organizations, even if such actions do not yield direct personal gain. Impulsive consumption involves purchasing decisions made without consideration of either individual benefits or social responsibility. Such behavior is often spontaneous, driven by momentary emotions, or lack of planning, with little regard for the broader implications. Finally, ethical consumption, which is the focus of this study, represents consumers who prioritize both individual benefits and social responsibility. They make purchasing decisions that satisfy their personal needs while simultaneously supporting broader societal causes. Ethical consumers are characterized by their strong alignment of values and purchasing behavior. They are willing to engage with businesses that address social issues, such as environmental sustainability or community welfare. Ethical consumption is increasingly recognized as a sustainable and enduring behavior. It fosters a strong connection between consumers and socially responsible enterprises, ultimately contributing to long-term societal and environmental benefits.

1.2 The Objective of This Study

The objective of this study is to investigate how social enterprises can leverage online communities to promote ethical consumption by communicating origin information. This research examines a case study Japan, focusing on a social enterprise that utilizes online communities to engage with consumers. Reviews from various platforms, including blogs, Amazon reviews, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and other message boards associated with the case study, were collected and organized using KH Coder software. Correspondence analysis was subsequently conducted in SPSS to verify the effectiveness of sharing origin information in fostering ethical consumption behaviors toward regional agricultural products. Through these efforts, the research aspires to offer actionable insights and recommendations that support both the promotion of ethical consumption and the sustainable development of regional agricultural markets.

1.3 Introduction of Social Enterprise for Case Study

This study examines a case in Kumamoto Prefecture, Kyushu, Japan, where local farmers have come together to collaboratively sell agricultural products online. The online sales strategy emphasizes delivering various types of information to consumers, including product details, the names and profiles of farmers, harvest history and timing, preservation methods for agricultural products, greetings from farmers, cooking methods for the products, and, most importantly, active promotion of origin information. A key aspect of this approach is the clear communication to consumers that their purchases directly contribute to improving the economic benefits of the production area, thereby supporting regional development.

The primary communication methods include disseminating information through platforms such as Amazon and engaging with consumer feedback. Additionally, the farmers maintain a dedicated website with contact details such as email addresses and phone numbers to facilitate direct communication with consumers. Furthermore, they actively utilize social media platforms (SNS) to share information about the production area and respond to consumer inquiries, fostering interactive communication.

Consumers in online communities, in addition to valuing the safety and quality of agricultural products, also place importance on the origin information. This study seeks to explore whether these communication strategies can enhance consumer awareness of the production area and motivate them to increase their purchases as a means of supporting local farmers.

2 Methodology

From the blogs, Amazon reviews, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and other message boards associated with this case study, consumer responses were analyzed using KH Coder software to identify words that appeared more than 10 times. Subsequently, correspondence analysis was conducted in SPSS to visualize the relationships among consumer responses^[6]. This approach provided an in-depth examination of how the themes of safety, quality, and origin were positioned within consumer priorities. The analysis sought to validate the significance of origin information and its relative importance in purchasing decisions. By mapping these relationships, the study offers a clearer understanding of how consumers perceive and value origin information within the broader context of online agricultural product consumption.

2.1 Results

Table 1. Consumers' reviews from online community

Dimension	Words	Rice (1196)	Wheat flour (1119)	Bread (1217)	Total (3532)
Safety	Organic	102	123	82	307
	Inspection	94	67	79	240
	Pesticides	100	81	30	211
	JAS	53	55	33	141
	Chemical Fertilizers	51	42	17	110
	Safety	19	38	32	89
	Nature	28	51	1	80
	Radioactivity	23	14	10	47
	Safety	8	12	20	40
	Chemical-free	9	13	12	34
	Health	10	0	9	19
	Farming Method	16	0	0	16
Quality	Taste	9	28	46	83
	Careful	36	3	33	72
	Sweet	40	0	0	40
	Hinohikari	31	4	0	35
	Delicious	26	3	3	32
Region	Kumamoto	61	91	129	281
	Kyushu	23	15	14	52
	Direct Delivery	25	2	13	40
	Mountain Area	12	0	0	12
	Environment	10	0	0	10

*Extract only words that appear more than 10 times.

*Collecting the consumers reviews and organized by KH coder

*The review period spans from March 2010 to October 2024

A total of 3,532 relevant online consumer responses were collected (Table 1) over a period spanning from March 2010 to October 2024. These responses focused on three primary agricultural products: rice (1,196 entries), wheat flour (1,119 entries), and bread (1,217 entries). The data were categorized into three thematic areas: safety, quality, and origin. This categorization highlights the key factors that consumers prioritize when purchasing agricultural products online, offering valuable insights into their decision-making processes and preferences.

The analysis of consumer reviews across the three product categories—rice, wheat flour, and bread—reveals consistent patterns in the frequent mention of origin information, specifically referencing Kumamoto and Kyushu (see Table 2 and Figure 2). This consistency underscores the critical role of origin as an influential factor in shaping consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions for agricultural products. For rice, consumer feedback prominently highlights quality-related terms such as Hinohikari (a well-known rice variety), "delicious," and "sweet," reflecting a strong emphasis on sensory and culinary attributes. In contrast, for wheat flour, the focus shifts towards safety,

with frequent mentions of terms such as "nature," indicating that consumers prioritize the naturalness and safety of the product. This preference is likely driven by health-conscious purchasing motivations.

Table 2. The result of correspondence analysis

Dimension	Singular Value	Inertia	Chi Square	Sig.	Proportion of Inertia		Confidence Singular Value	
					Accounted for	Cumulative	Standard Deviation	Correlation
								2
1	0.39	0.15			0.68	0.68	0.02	-0.01
2	0.26	0.07			0.32	1.00	0.02	
Total		0.22	441.55	.000a	1.00	1.00		

a. 42 degrees of freedom

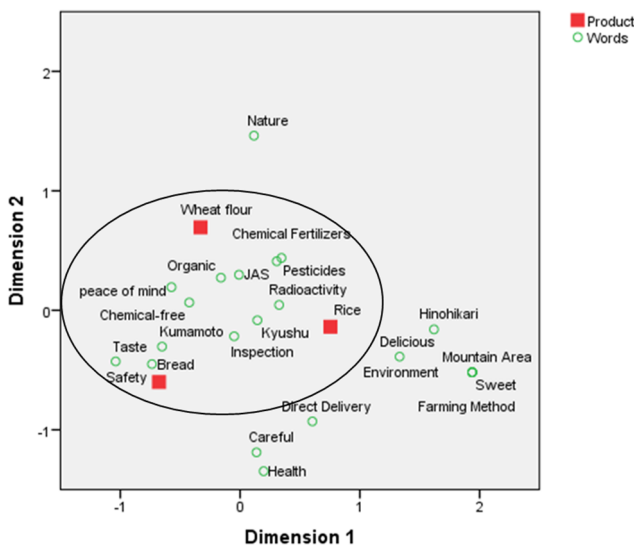


Fig. 2. The result of correspondence analysis for online consumers reviews by SPSS

Interestingly, while the themes of quality and safety vary between product categories, the mention of origin remains nearly identical across all three products. This suggests that origin information acts as a unifying and consistently valued attribute, irrespective of the specific agricultural product. These findings highlight the strategic role of providing origin information in online communication as an effective approach for promoting agricultural products. By emphasizing the provenance of products, businesses can appeal to consumers' growing preference for transparency and authenticity, fostering trust and enhancing the overall value perception of the products. This result underscores the importance of integrating origin-focused narratives into the marketing strategies of agricultural enterprises, particularly in the context of online platforms.

3 Conclusions and Limitations

This study examined the development of social enterprises and the growing emphasis on ethical consumption, underscoring the pivotal role of providing origin information within online communities as a mechanism to foster agricultural product sales. The findings highlight that the communication of origin information serves as an effective strategy to enhance consumer purchasing intentions, emphasizing its relevance in agricultural marketing frameworks. Moreover, the study provides critical insights for businesses aiming to strengthen consumer engagement through online communities, offering strategic directions for leveraging these platforms. By doing so, it contributes to broader efforts in regional revitalization and the promotion of sustainable development practices.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of aligning marketing strategies with the ethical preferences of consumers. Understanding the consumer's interests is key to effective communication and even to establishing a brand. Studies have shown that consumers increasingly value interactivity in content marketing, which explains the rising attention to live streaming^[7]. Social enterprises can leverage live streaming to showcase origin-related products and environments, fostering consumer interest in the region and promoting ethical consumption. This, in turn, may not only encourage sustainable purchasing behaviors but also contribute to the development of regional brands. The integration of origin information within the communication process not only meets consumer demand for transparency but also supports the broader goals of sustainability and ethical consumption. This approach, while enhancing consumer trust, also contributes to the long-term success and reputation of social enterprises, positioning them as responsible and trustworthy actors within the marketplace. Furthermore, the ability to effectively communicate the origin of products can differentiate agricultural products in competitive online markets, fostering consumer loyalty and encouraging repeat purchases.

In this study, consumer feedback was categorized into three main themes: "safety," "quality," and "place of origin." While these factors were shown to significantly influence purchasing decisions, agricultural product purchasing involves numerous other considerations. One notable aspect that was underrepresented in the feedback was "price," which is often a key factor in evaluating the overall value of food. A potential reason for the limited discussion on price could be attributed to the context of online agricultural product sales in Japan, where prices tend to be higher than those in offline settings. As a result, consumers may prioritize factors such as "safety," "quality," and "place of origin" over price, with the higher cost already being an implicit consideration. Additionally, cultural factors may also play a role in shaping consumer preferences and behaviors. These aspects require further investigation and validation to provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer decision-making in online agricultural markets. Future research could explore how the perception of value—incorporating price alongside other factors—affects consumers' purchasing decisions. Moreover, examining the cultural differences in consumer attitudes toward price and ethical consumption in other countries could yield valuable insights for cross-cultural marketing strategies.

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