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TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR UPCYCLING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY: THE CASE OF UPCYCLE WINNIE MCHENRY

ABSTRACT

Upcycle Winnie McHenry, in Johannesburg, South Africa, upcycles materials that would otherwise end up as waste in landfills. Upcycle also offers training to community groups on how to upcycle, and how to earn a living doing so. These are often a combination of individual and group projects that are community-based. In addition, Upcycle involves the business sector by providing unwanted materials (such as billboards, corporate gifts and merchandise to be de-branded and upcycled) and community groups often sell some of these back to the business involved. In other words, Upcycle's project is based on the circularity of the economy. This article draws on a range of theoretical views from a number of sub-disciplines of communication studies to suggest a framework a upcycling social development projects. This framework is further informed by the case of Upcycle Winnie McHenry.

Keywords: upcycling, circular economy, development communication, sustainability, community development, Upcycle Winnie McHenry, SDG 12

INTRODUCTION

Conventional models of the economy suggest linearity; that is, a linear line from production to use, and at the end of the life of the product, to waste in landfills and perhaps pollution. In contrast, the circular economy assumes that products are designed for longer-term use and multiple uses. This means that, in line with a green economy, the circle is from product design, to production, to use, and then to reuse and upcycling to prolong the life of the product, and at the end of the life cycle of the project, to recycle, in order to start the circle again. This closed circle design is based on environmental concerns.

A similar circular thinking is found in the newer theories in the field of development communication. Earlier models of social development focused on the linear transmission of products and/or skills, often in a top-down manner from experts to developing communities. In contrast, newer models of social development assume a collaboration between developing communities and developing agents. In such models, the communication model is not linear (transfer of skills and information) but circular, where the interlocuters exchange roles from communicator and recipient. This suggests a circular and dialogical engagement.

A similar circular thinking is also evident in the newer theories explaining the relationship between the business sector and society. Earlier models of businesses' engagement with society essentially explained that business relies on humans as the workforce, that the business sector extracts wealth from society through selling services or products, and as a token of goodwill the business sector engages in some form of community ventures as a way of attracting a better workforce and to create a caring public image of the business (often called corporate social investment), and in turn, this humanitarian image seeks to attract greater markets. In contrast with early rudimentary thinking, a shift is seen that leads away from primarily considering the business towards a greater engagement with society. This has been described in strategic communication in a range of ways, notably a win-win model, a postmodern organisation, and corporate social responsibility – with the latter being explained in a number of forms. The notion of corporate social responsibility is seated in the philosophy of sustainability and interdependency that was became commonplace with the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s. Out of this understanding, the notion of the triple bottom line merged, which describes the interdependency between society and business and the environment (popularly referred to as profit, people, planet).

Taking cognisance of the shift towards circularity, this study investigates Upcycle Winnie McHenry, in Newlands, Johannesburg, South Africa. On Upcycle's website (Upcycle Winnie McHenry, n.d.a) and their Facebook page (Upcycle Winnie McHenry, 2024), multiple references are made to the circular economy aimed at prolonging the life cycle of products and recycling at the end of the life of a product. According to both the website and Facebook page, Upcycle also focuses on establishing good relations with the business sector by encouraging businesses to either sponsor upcycling projects, or to donate items to be upcycled, or to buy upcycled products. A third focus is on Upcycle's community-invited training projects that are mostly aimed at long-term involvement. The community invites and offers support to community members to start their own upcycling businesses. Such ventures are linked to one another, to Upcycle's retail outlet, and to business partners.

Against this background, the purpose of this article is twofold. Firstly, to draw on theoretical shifts towards circularity to create a framework for combining circular thinking in various subdisciplines of communication studies as applied to social development projects. Secondly, this framework is informed by the case of Upcycle Winnie McHenry. This framework might offer insight into how such projects can be designed, could become a blueprint for similar ventures, and on a theoretical level, the

framework is novel in the sense that it integrates circular models of communication in a range of subdisciplines of communication studies.

SUSTAINABILITY, INTERDEPENDENCY AND CIRCULARITY

In the 1960s the environmental movement gained traction based on the understanding that the planet can only support a finite number of people and if humans do not curb their use of the planet, life on earth and the future of the human race will be jeopardised (Mazmanian & Kraft, 1999; Dalton, Recchia & Rohrschneider, 2003; Rootes, 2022; Kline, 2011). Based on the notions of sustainability, interdependency and circularity a range of theoretical positions came to the fore.

The circular economy initially focussed on slowing down the consumption of inputs for industrial production (Stahel, 2016). Later it was applied to the lifecycle of products – from the extraction of raw materials, through the production, consumption and reusing or repurposing of a product to prolong its lifecycle, repairing it instead of replacing it when broken, and then to recycling it in order to minimize landfill waste (Stahel, 2016; Arruda *et al.*, 2021). In other words, the circular economy disrupts earlier models of economy, from linear “take, make, dispose”, to the understanding that all life on earth is interconnected and the earth only has finite resources, meaning that the life of products needs to be prolonged (Kirchherr *et al.*, 2023).

Taking this trajectory further, Boulding (2013) suggested a closed economy, which means that resources are recycled, and “waste” is reused an infinite number of times (cf. Qian & Wang, 2016). Extending this initial simplistic view, Boulding (2013) later advocated against the persistent open economic systems that rely on the ongoing extraction of raw materials and waste discharge into the environment. In other words, a closed-loop-design, or cradle-to-cradle design is suggested, and it was cemented in the 1970s by the formation of the industrial ecology subdiscipline (Wautelet, 2018). In similar vein, Stahel (2016) advocates for product design that enables unlimited material reuse to eliminate waste (cf. Wilts *et al.*, 2016). Graedel and Allenby (1995) emphasise the critical need to minimise the use of resources and the generation of waste, focusing on analysing how materials and energy move through industrial processes in the industrial ecology (cf. Wautelet, 2018). Boulding and Stahel’s works are foundational in the 21st century circular economy and played a fundamental role in the formation of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). The Foundation is a major organisation responsible for the promotion of the circular economy, presenting the foundations of a circular economy to governments and industries around the world.

Aside from the above-mentioned philosophical base, the circular economy is also focused on designing out waste, using renewable energy, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems (Velenturf & Purnell, 2021). Within this approach, the design of products and materials is considered in terms of how to drastically reduce or completely eradicate waste. From this point of view, product design is focused on ensuring that products are designed for reuse, repair, or recycling

during their entire lifecycle – from the moment they are extracted to when they are disposed of (Zink & Geyer, 2017). The reduction of fossil fuel use and the promotion of renewable energy in manufacturing are the main objectives of the Framework (Yang *et al.*, 2023).

Thus, the understanding that all life on the planet is interlinked and interconnected, and if there is a change caused by one of the life forms, it impacts the others, undergirds the notion of interdependency and this informs the thinking about circularity. On an environmental level, the disappearance of one species on earth impacts other life forms. For example, if all saltwater fish are destroyed, it will have a wider ecological and economic impact than only for those people who eat fish. It will also disrupt the ecology of the ocean, which in turn will impact ecological biodiversity. However, the interdependency of one life form on others is interpreted wider than only in ecology; for instance, what happens in one country impacts other countries (such as international refugees, for instance). That is not the concern of this article, but it nevertheless illustrates the interconnectedness of life on earth.

Against the backdrop of interdependency, the wave of change of the 1960s and 1970s continued, with many former colonies gaining political independence. This Global South approach was undergirded by the United Nations' MacBride Commission reporting on the unequal geopolitical power relations that manifested in the "soft influence" of the Global North's media and information systems (Mansell & Nordenstreng, 2006; Thusu, 2015; Aguirre Alvis, 2018). These views are anchored in centre-periphery thinking and the subsequent dependency thinking of a Global South understanding of the world (Matunhu, 2011; Treacy, 2022). At this point, a strong critique against the unbalanced power relationships in "modernist" development aid became prominent, criticising a linear transmission model of information and infrastructure instead of a participatory community-based model (Newell, Picketts & Dale, 2020). The problem with top-down and unstable power relationships is that cultural transmission most often accompanied such development aid, and in turn, created markets for donor countries in the Global North, further exacerbating dependency and unequal power relationships (Gibson, Andersson & Shivakumar, 2005; Develtere, Huyse & Van Ongevalle, 2012). This thinking, the dependency critique, paved the way for an equal-equal partnership or collaboration between donors and beneficiaries, in what came to be known as the participatory approach (Waisbord, 2020).

It is against this background that this article provides an analysis of Upcycle Winny McHenry's activities. It would appear from the above that the circularity of interdependency is a foundational thought in the theory of a range of related subdisciplines. And, in fact, circularity, partnerships and active participation in upcycle projects undergirds the work of Upcycle's website (Upcycle Winny McHenry, n.d.b; Upcycle Winny McHenry, n.d.c). For this reason, this study investigates three theoretical views, namely participatory culture, social capital, and the rhizome, as they share complementary principles. All three theories have been applied separately in a social development context but have not necessarily been combined, and they have not been applied to communication and upcycling.

PARTICIPATION, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE METAPHOR OF THE RHIZOME

Participatory culture

Historically, social development initiatives often negate the value of community stakeholders, particularly the people and communities meant to benefit from these efforts (Green, 2002). This negation led to a disconnect between the initiative and the real needs and experiences of those it meant to serve (Freire, 2020). The consequence of this approach, “modernisation”, is that many development projects failed to address communities’ real needs and challenges.

External support is important in many cases, but it is not always necessary for impactful sustained social development (Moallemi *et al.*, 2020). Often communities have unique context-specific problems, which require unique resources, knowledge, and agency to address them through self-organized initiatives (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). At times, the sidelining of key stakeholders happens unintentionally rather than deliberately (Freire, 2020; Valters, 2014). This can occur when development institutions lack adequate resources or cultural understanding, hindering their capacity to provide effective projects that truly benefit communities (Waisbord, 2020).

Aside from the development communication views on participatory communication, Henry Jenkins offers a further perspective on participatory culture. Jenkins (2006) strongly advocates for community members’ direct and immediate involvement in creating and sharing content, which fosters grassroots communication and collaboration. From this perspective, individuals learn from one another through shared activities, creating a “bottom-up” communication model. This approach is characterised by active engagement and sharing experiences whereby everyone participating has a voice (Jenkins, 2006; Waisbord, 2020). Community members can collectively identify their basic needs and priorities with open dialogue and collaboration (Jenkins, 2006). Through this process, initiatives uphold the authentic concerns and aspirations of the community and the environment that they occupy. Community members’ collective knowledge, skills and resources can contribute to or initiate sustainable and innovative development (Freire, 2020; Waisbord, 2020).

The Upcycle initiative is an apt example of how community involvement can create social change, capturing the core idea of sustainability: caring for people and the planet whilst earning a living (Elkington, 1994; McHenry 2021). It is about local people coming together to think of new, creative ways to solve problems, showing that when a community takes the lead, it can facilitate growth that includes everyone, forming stronger connections (or ties) between people, and more people becoming involved. By working together to address environmental issues, adopting eco-friendly habits, and saving natural resources, the initiative contributes to the earth’s health. It also opens doors for businesses that are good for both the environment and society, encouraging economic growth that does not disregard environmental and social

responsibilities. This way of getting everyone involved not only reduces waste but also strengthens the community, making it more just, and giving its members the power to make a difference.

The sense of community founded in participatory theory can be a source of resilience and empowerment (Jenkins, 2006; Waisbord, 2020). Resilience and empowerment are key factors in enabling communities to overcome challenges as a group (Jenkins, 2006). Participatory culture is a different way to handle power and injustice (Waisbord, 2020). It helps by letting those people, who usually do not get the opportunity to speak, the chance to share their ideas. This can make society fairer and more just because everyone has a chance to be heard. Through active participation in community initiatives, individuals can gradually develop and gain new skills and knowledge, building their capacity to lead and contribute to positive change (Jenkins, 2006). This can empower community members to take on leadership roles and advocate for their interests.

The application of participatory culture theory is particularly relevant to understanding how Upcycle Winnie McHenry go about its activities. This initiative turns waste into useful resources and allows community members to choose activities based on their interests and skills, whether experienced or not. The participants engage in collaborative learning, resource sharing, and innovative clothing manufacturing practices to solve problems. This aligns with the view that participatory culture fosters communal learning and growth. The participants are directly involved in determination and collaborative learning and develop stronger ties to the initiative and their community.

Social capital

Bourdieu's description of social capital, and its newer interpretations, can be used as the backdrop for reading participatory development projects, and also how Upcycle fosters community resilience. Through active engagement, collaboration, and the building of social networks, Upcycle's initiatives seek to strengthen the community's capacity to face challenges and to build resilience. This, in turn, enhances the sustainability of both the project and the environment. Together, participatory culture and social capital as theoretical lenses provide a framework for understanding how initiatives can promote lasting change by empowering communities and building strong, interconnected networks.

Bourdieu and Coleman first introduced the concept of social capital, each offering unique perspectives that have influenced its understanding in sociological and economic contexts (Häuberer, 2011). Bourdieu (1986) initially defined social capital as the sum of actual or potential resources linked to possessing a durable network of relationships. Based on his understanding, these relationships provide individuals access to resources and support that could be utilised for various purposes. Bourdieu (1986) focused on the benefits of forming networks, emphasising that social capital accumulates over time through interactions and mutual recognition among members.

Coleman (1988) emphasised a more functionalist view, while echoing Bourdieu's focus on relationships. He asserted that social capital is not only about possessing relationships but about how these relationships support certain actions in terms of social organisation. According to Coleman (1988), social capital depends on entities that enable individuals to attain goals that would otherwise be unreachable without these networks. This interpretation points out the cruciality of social structures in facilitating individuals to engage in beneficial actions, highlighting the practical applications of social capital.

More recently Putnam (2001) extended the initial interpretations of social capital, emphasising the importance of social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust that unfold within these networks. He associated the concept with the collective value obtained from connections amongst people and the trustworthiness that emanated from mutual exchanges and shared experiences. Putnam (2001) further maintained that social capital did not only bring benefits to individuals but also enabled communities through fostering bottom-up communication, cohesion and cooperation. Social capital helped to build trust and promote collective action (Putnam, 2001).

Bourdieu's (1986), Coleman's (1988), and Putnam's (2001) explanations of the social capital theory reveal different angles. Bourdieu (1986) discusses the resources associated with institutionalised relationships, while Coleman (1988) points out the structural dimension of social relationships, and Putnam (2001) explores the reciprocity and trust norms that accompany social network establishment. This led to the contemporary understanding of social capital rooted in the resources, benefits, and social norms stemming from social networks and mutual recognition.

The notion of social capital emphasizes the interconnectedness of life forms on earth, recognising that humans are part of a larger web of relationships with the natural environment and other living beings (Bourdieu, 1986). This perspective suggests the morality of shared life, highlighting the ethical imperative to preserve and enhance collective well-being (Putnam, 2001). Thus, reciprocal respect is essential, transcending social status and fostering inclusive relationships (Coleman, 1988).

Effective social capital formation involves active listening, valuing diverse perspectives, and balancing advice-giving with receptive engagement (Putnam, 2001). Ultimately, social capital seeks mutual benefits for humans, cultivating collective resilience, cooperation, and improved well-being. This is the foundation for understanding the principles of sustainability, which prioritise people and the planet over profit.

In the context of upcycling, social capital plays a key role in community-based initiatives (cf. Putnam, 2001). It leverages the strength of networks and trust to unite individuals, fostering a shared environmental consciousness (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital further enables organisations to recognise the inherent value of individuals across all social classes, promoting equal opportunities (Coleman, 1988). By doing so, social capital empowers communities to generate sustainable livelihoods without compromising the environment (Seyfang, 2009). It can also encourage institutions to prioritise social and environmental responsibility (Portes, 1998) and it seeks to promote moral values and social cohesion (Putnam, 2001). Through emphasising

social capital, upcycling initiatives can build resilient community networks (cf. Bourdieu, 1986). Additionally, strong social capital can foster cooperative relationships (Coleman, 1988), enhance environmental awareness (Seyfang, 2009), and it can ultimately help create a more inclusive and sustainable upcycling ecosystem, where economic, social, and environmental benefits converge.

The social capital of so-called “strong ties” and “weak ties” should be combined in a participatory manner. Putnam (2001) suggests that weak ties would be people in a similar developmental dilemma. This means that they should “team up” or collaborate not only amongst themselves, but with people or groupings with other skills, and in this way form strong ties (Kim & Fernandez, 2023). In fact, ties with people in the same situation may be of little help to each other, but such “weak ties” could also be strong due to proximity, reciprocity and understanding (*ibid.*).

Winnie McHenry’s upcycling initiative displays a sensitivity for strong social capital primarily by facilitating trust and reciprocity within the established networks of the surrounding community members. The relationships fostered through this initiative demonstrate social capital’s core concept, namely, enabling individuals to collaborate, share resources, and engage in co-learning (Bourdieu, 1986). This network enhances community resilience and improves the capacity to address pressing sustainability challenges (Seyfang, 2009).

Investing, respecting and harnessing social capital can play a vital role in reducing transaction costs by streamlining communication and decision-making processes within the community. Trust among community members facilitates smoother interactions, allowing individuals to collaborate more effectively without constant monitoring or negotiation. This reduces the time and effort required to coordinate activities, making it easier for upcycling projects to operate efficiently. Moreover, the reciprocity embedded in these networks ensures that resources, knowledge, and support are distributed equitably among the participants, further strengthening the bonds within the community. Through the lens of the social capital theory, it becomes clear that initiatives like Upcycle contribute to environmental sustainability and build the social fabric that underpins strong, resilient communities. The exchange of knowledge, resources, and trust within these networks ensures that upcycling projects are productive and sustainable in the long run.

The metaphor of the rhizome

Using the rhizome as a metaphor for social relations, French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) described human relations as organic, instead of hierarchical and structured. As a post-structuralist project at the time, their views provided a groundbreaking foundation to examine the systems and networks of social organisation and relations. Conventional hierarchical models of organisation, which are linear and fixed, have been challenged and in many ways disrupted the dominant thinking on linearity, inflexibility and rigidity. The metaphor of the rhizome puts forward horizontal, decentralised, and circular distributions of power that advocate for interconnectedness, multiplicity, and flexibility (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

This point of view disrupts the top-down, linear approach using hierarchical tree-like structures that describe organisational structures and relations. Instead, it advocates for a more sophisticated, connected approach in which the realities of contemporary cultural, social, and community systems are reflected (Kairiené, 2020). This concept promotes a deep understanding of how relationships, information flow, and social systems evolve in non-linear and unpredictable ways.

Adding to this, the idea of circularity and the equal distribution of power is of note. Anyone can become a part of decentralised networks at any point in time, but only if they have the same purpose as the rest of the network. This suggests an extraordinarily adaptable and ever-changing social network, or more accurately, networks of networks. Sometimes, parts of the network might stop working, but then new parts can grow out of those or from other areas, showing how it can renew itself. If one part stops working, the connected parts often find new ways to grow, either by reconnecting to old parts or forming new connections. Each part of the network usually has several ways it can go, which means there is not just one fixed plan, but rather a continuous evolution. This way of thinking challenges the usual top-down structures and offers an interconnected approach to how we understand and organise social relationships. This explains the contemporary world in which various initiatives intersect and collaborate, enhancing community-driven development with a keen focus on environmental sustainability (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). The rhizome theory also serves to amplify marginalised voices, valuing a wide array of perspectives and experiences while fostering social unity (Portes, 1998).

In application, the rhizomatic model has proven effective across diverse areas, including community development, environmental sustainability, and social justice efforts, as communities are interconnected but not easily disrupted. Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome metaphor applies not only to academia but also to social struggles and community dynamics. Their thesis proposes a multitude of rhizomatic structures form diverse and interconnected semiotic chains, power relations, and socio-cultural practices (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In this context, the notion of a rhizome is a way of understanding how communities can organise, grow, and sustain themselves in ways that resist rigid, centralised control, allowing for a more flexible, adaptable, and inclusive but dispersed social organisation.

Several scholars have applied elements of the rhizome theory to study community relationships and the supporting communication. For instance, Backhaus *et al.* (2024) emphasise the role of community broadcasting in creating and maintaining diverse, resilient networks. Their research highlights how self-regulating community-driven media can function as a rhizomatic structure, non-linear, decentralised and adaptive, allowing for a multiplicity of voices and perspectives to flourish. This aligns with the broader application of the rhizome theory in communication and media studies, where it is often used to understand the fragmented, interconnected nature of media systems and the participatory cultures that emerge from these (Cronjé, 2016).

Based on the above, Cronjé (2016) extends the metaphor of the rhizome to dynamic, open-ended learning networks of social/human organisation. Within a learning environment, for instance, he argues that learners construct personal learning

networks based on their perceived and actual needs, and these networks, much like a rhizome, are fluid, interconnected, and constantly evolving. This perspective expands the application of the rhizome theory to education and knowledge-sharing within communities, reinforcing the idea that learning and development occur through non-hierarchical, decentralised structures (*ibid.*). This mirrors the organic, lateral growth of relationships and knowledge that characterises rhizomatic systems, where new connections can form at any point, unrestricted by a central authority (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Grassroots communication benefits from the rhizome metaphor, providing a framework for understanding the decentralised networks of community members (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Rhizomatic structures' principles – flexibility, adaptability, and diversity – are crucial for effective grassroots communication (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2001).

The rhizome theory also aligns with recent discussions in various areas of sustainable community development. Gibson-Graham (2006) advocates for diverse, decentralised economies that resist global capitalism's dominant, hierarchical structures. Their work proposes that local, community-based economic initiatives can function as rhizomes, growing laterally and diversely, resisting centralised control, and fostering community resilience (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This perspective is particularly relevant to upcycling, where initiatives like Upcycle can serve as models for alternative, sustainable economic practices that prioritise local knowledge, adaptability, and community engagement (Upcycle Winnie McHenry, n.d.a). When community projects focus on valuing people and the environment and making a profit in a balanced way, they build trust, encourage everyone to work as a team, and get more people involved (Jenkins, 2006; Bourdieu, 1986).

When applied to upcycling, rhizomatic thinking offers a way to understand how community relationships can form and evolve in a decentralised, adaptive manner. Upcycling initiatives, such as the Upcycle initiative led by Winnie McHenry, are examples of this rhizomatic structure. Upcycle transforms waste into valuable resources for production while engaging with community members in a non-hierarchical, inclusive manner. By inviting individuals, regardless of their skill levels, to participate and choose activities that interest them, Upcycle fosters an adaptable and inclusive environment for learning and growth. This participatory, open-ended approach reflects the rhizomatic principle that relationships and knowledge grow organically and laterally through collaboration and shared experiences (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In upcycling initiatives, rhizomatic structures have the potential to nurture resilience and sustainability, which are sometimes limited or lacking in conventional hierarchical systems. In Deleuze and Guattari's view, the rhizome can grow and renew from multiple network sources, making it an adaptable structure. In the same way, upcycling projects that integrate the rhizome theory could potentially address challenges of the environment, society and the economy more effectively as they rely on multiplicity and interconnected networks of participants. The principles of the rhizome theory, such as adaptability, can ensure that upcycling projects are self-reliant and can withstand external pressures as they foster learning through community relationships (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK

Conceptual framework

Based on the exposition above, it can be argued that the theoretical and literature basis of this article points to the following aspects on which a framework can rest:

Interdependency, environmental sustainability

- ◆ The earth can only sustain a finite number of life forms, and only for a finite period of time.
- ◆ All life forms are interdependent, so are nations and sectors of society, including business, and product life cycles.
- ◆ Prolong the life of raw materials by converting them into products through reusing, upcycling, and recycling.
- ◆ People, planet, profit.

The circular economy

- ◆ Prolong the life of materials, redesign, reuse and upcycle.
- ◆ Little or no landfill waste through good design and re-design.
- ◆ Circular life cycle.

Social capital and respectful relations towards all humans

- ◆ An interconnectedness of all life forms, humans included, on earth.
- ◆ The morality of a shared life on earth.
- ◆ Reciprocal respect despite social status.
- ◆ “Listen” as much as “giving advice” on social development.
- ◆ Pool a range of people’s social capital, horizontally, vertically and diagonally to combine their skills in a developmental project.

Participatory culture

- ◆ Base all actions on the triple bottom line of sustainability and interconnectedness (people, planet and profit).
- ◆ All humans are equal.
- ◆ All products and developmental initiatives should consider humans equally and treat all involved equally.
- ◆ A sense of belonging and meaning is important for humans.

Rhizome

- ◆ Circularity.
- ◆ Decentralised power – all actors are allowed to act as a node, should they wish to (now, or at a later stage).
- ◆ It is flexible, always growing; at some stage, the points of a rhizome might die, and another might grow from it or from another point.
- ◆ It is self-rejuvenating.
- ◆ If one point dies, the points that are connected often develop other points of growth with previous or new points of growth.
- ◆ Each node usually has more than one pathway.
- ◆ There is no single plan – just growth.

Applying the framework to Upcycle Winnie McHenry

Seated in an environmental consciousness, an understanding of the interconnectedness of life on earth, that raw materials are finite, and waste should be reduced, the circular economy seeks to design products that have the potential of multiple lives in terms of repurposing, reusing, upcycling and recycling. Upcycle Winnie McHenry's website (Upcycle Winnie McHenry, n.d.b) and Facebook page (Upcycle Winnie McHenry, 2024) confirm this as their mission. They do so through many ventures in the categories of cardboard, e-waste, fabric and glass upcycling.

Taking the philosophy of environmental health further, Upcycle Winnie McHenry's activities involve partnering up with the business sector, NPOs and community groupings (Upcycle Winnie McHenry, n.d.b). Firstly, in terms of the business sector, Upcycle's projects involve, among others, receiving corporate advertising billboards, unused corporate merchandise (clothing and gifts), as well as sponsorships for projects (buying back upcycled products made from corporate billboards and merchandise) and sponsorships for community training projects. Secondly, in terms of NPO involvement, Upcycle forms partnerships with a range of social development initiatives, often focusing on the youth. Such partnerships partly sponsor training projects. Thirdly, in terms of community relations, one of the driving forces behind Upcycle is community training, which is not only environmental health education, but actively producing upcycled products with the aim of either selling these in Upcycle's shop or in the community or back to the business sector (thus, funding more training projects). All of this is aimed at training the next generation of upcyclers and empowering them to start their own upcycling businesses. In terms of the latter, the aim is to put them into contact with the business world, who in turn sponsored some of the training.

Upcycle aims not only to live the philosophy of the circular economy but has extended it into the working cycle of their training. This means they have enlarged the concept of the circular economy to apply it not only to the economy, but to the level of human circles. Secondly, what Upcycle is doing is in line with the notion of social capital

use, suggesting that people in a social development context should not only strive to have strong horizontal ties (between people in the same situation) but should form partnerships with people in other spheres. Such vertical ties strengthen a developing community as its network of ties are varied and the project's participants can open doors for each other and new ventures.

In terms of development communication, the participatory approach suggests that a respectful, equal value relationship exists between the developing agent and the recipient community. Accordingly, the role of the expert transmission of information is circular, and the agent and the community learn from each other. In the case of Upcycle Winnie McHenry (n.d.b), when a community approaches them for training, they gather all the role-players' views and then co-design training in ways that fit the community.

From this it is clear that Upcycle Winnie McHenry (n.d.b) foregrounds circularity – both in products and in engaging with other people in other sectors (the community, business, NPOs and the public). Some of these relationships develop into productive partnerships, while others might only last for a short time. Instead of linearity, this is aptly described by the metaphor of the rhizome, as some partnerships last longer than others, some are sporadic and project-based, and some do not develop at all.

FINAL REFLECTION

This article makes two contributions to the field of communication science. The first is integrating the notion of circularity evident in a range of sub-disciplines, and the second is to inform a combined view of the former by considering the case of Upcycle Winnie McHenry. Options for further research could be to test the framework set out in this article in more upcycling projects, and to investigate the applicability to explain and/or guide social development projects in adjacent sub-disciplines.

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