

Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in Rural India through Developing Online Communities of Purpose Using Social Technologies

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Abstract : To solve the life and livelihood related problems of socially and economically backward rural women in India, several Women Self-Help Groups (WSHG) are formed in Indian villages. WSHGs are micro-communities (with 10-to 15 members) within a village community. WSHGs have been conceived not just to promote savings and provide credit, but also to act as a vehicle of change through the creation of women micro-entrepreneurs at the village level. However, in spite of huge investment and volume of people involved in the whole process, the success is still limited. Most of these entrepreneurial activities happen in small household workspaces where sales are limited to the inconsistent and unpredictable local markets. As a result, these entrepreneurs are perennially trapped in the vicious cycle of low risk taking ability, low investment capacity, low productivity, weak market linkages and low revenue. Market separation including customer-producer separation is one of the key problems in this domain. Researchers suggest that there are four types of market separation: (i) spatial, (ii) financial, (iii) temporal, and (iv) informational, which in turn impacts the nature of markets and marketing. In this context, a large group of intermediaries (the 'middleman') plays important role in effectively reducing the factors that separate markets by utilizing the resource of rural entrepreneurs, their products and thus, accelerate market development. The rural entrepreneurs are heavily dependent on these middlemen for marketing of their products and these middlemen exploit rural entrepreneurs by creating a huge informational separation between the rural producers and end-consumers in the market and thus hiding the profit margins. The objective of this study is to develop a transparent, online communities of purpose among rural and urban entrepreneurs using internet and web 2.0 technologies in order to decrease market separation and improve mutual awareness of available and potential products and market demands. Communities of purpose are groups of people who have an ability to influence, can share knowledge and learn from others, and be committed to achieving a common purpose. In this study, a cluster of SHG women located in a village 'Kandi' of West Bengal, India has been studied closely for six months. These women are primarily engaged in producing garments, soft toys, fabric painting on clothes, etc. These women were equipped with internet-enabled smart-phones where they can use chat applications in local language and common social networking websites like Facebook, Instagram, etc. A few handicraft experts and micro-entrepreneurs from the city (the 'seed') were included in their mobile messaging app group that enables the creation of a 'community of purpose' in order to share thoughts and ideas on product designs, market trends, and practices, and thus decrease the rural-urban market separation. After six months of regular group interaction in mobile messaging app among these rural-urban community members, it is observed that SHG women are empowered now to share their product images, design ideas, showcase, and promote their products in global marketplace using some common social networking websites through which they can also enhance and augment their community of purpose.

Keywords : communities of purpose, market separation, self-help group, social technologies

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