


Article

Eco-Discourses in a Virtual Rural Community

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Abstract: This case study explores social media discourses of a virtual ecovillage community based in Central Romania, in a Hungarian speaking region of Transylvania. The investigated virtual community embraces the idea of ecovillage as a local constructive answer to the challenges of the global ecological crisis, based on strategies of revitalizing local ethnic traditions, promoting sustainable development solutions, and innovations. Our key question is the relationship between tradition and innovation—as revealed by the discursive practices of the ecovillage Facebook group’s most active members. Using ecolinguistic discourse analysis as a frame of reference, the investigation unveiled the role social media played in fostering the formation of a virtual intentional community, and in clarifying the shared values of the group. We found that the local ecovillage is part of a larger regional and global movement, unfolding the organic connection between the Hungarian and the Romanian intentional communities, and the reframing of traditional values within innovative, sustainable everyday practices.

Keywords: ecovillage movement; eco-discourses; Hungarian-Szekler ethnic traditions; innovation; intentional community; social media; Romania



Citation: Bakó, R.K.; Hubbes, L.A.; Tamás, D. Eco-Discourses in a Virtual Rural Community. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 3082. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13063082>

Academic Editor: Stefan Bratosin

Received: 31 January 2021

Accepted: 8 March 2021

Published: 11 March 2021

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1. Introduction

The focus of this study is community—a certain type of it—and its discourses: Environmentalist narratives centered on ecovillages. In postmodern times—as Blackshaw put it—“community has transformed from a way of life into a narrative” [1] (p. 27): A social media construction open to interpretation. With mediatization [2,3], the digital turn [4], and the rise of networked individualism [5], our sense of belonging becomes an anchor, be it real or virtual. During pandemic times, virtual communities have an even stronger appeal, and environmental concerns an even louder voice. Our aim is to explore, compare, and contextualize, through discourse analysis, environmental and traditionalist narratives of an open Facebook group called “Székely Ökofalu” (Szekler Ecovillage)—a Hungarian speaking virtual community rooted in Central Romania’s historic region of Transylvania—Szeklerland. An unobtrusive netnographic research has its benefits and challenges: Flexibility and open-endedness allow a broader range of interpretations grounded in context—however, it limits our ability to go beyond what is available and accessible online in the research timeframe. In-depth analysis is possible through alternative data sources, by incorporating previous research results, and by secondary data analysis. Revisiting interview data from previous research gave us the missing dimension of a netnographic data gathering strategy.

Virtual interactions facilitated by social media platforms are at the center of today’s communications and environmental movements research. “With the rise of the global protest wave at the end of 2010s, attention has grown for the communicative dimension of social movements.” [6] (p. 1). Current studies highlight the role digital communication plays in the environmental movement field, either as means of active engagement [6–8], as hub of leadership manifestation [9,10], or as a space of rhetorical [11] and dynamic [12] utopias.

Community formation in general, and ecovillages in particular, are affected by the phenomenon of medialization, or the ubiquitous presence of media within the various substructures of society. It strongly impacts socialization and community formation processes [13], as well as shaping the future [14]. In the case of ecovillages, we have to take into consideration the medialization of knowledge, since most of the shared information on ideologies and practices is distributed as media content: Videos, articles, event calls, or lectures. Digital platforms enable creation and distribution of multimedia content shaping the basic attitudes of the community members and affecting community building.

It has never been easier to get connected and engaged in a green campaign, a local food purchase, an environmental educational activity, or building an eco-sustainability community online [15]. Movements have expanded both across geographies, generations, income groups, and cultures [16]. Emergent research interest has shown the essential role of social media in the formation and communication of sustainable communities [6,15,17,18]. It is important to see the ways in which the Szekler Ecovillage group is similar and different from other intentional virtual communities, the level of its members' engagement into conversations and activities, as well as the types of messages they convey. Ecovillages are forms of intentional communities that have more than a two-decade history of research and practice internationally [15,19–23], but still remains a new topic in Romania [24,25].

The main aim of this investigation is to explore the relationship between tradition and innovation—as it unfolds through eco-discourses within the group. Innovation is a central issue in the discussions of the ecologist movements oriented towards sustainability, as research shows [26–30]. In contrast (without an unequivocal consensus on the sense of the term), the impact of traditions on environmentalist ideas is seldom investigated in the reviewed literature [22,31–33]. It is important however to note that traditions might play a similarly essential role as innovations in seeking ways to turn away from the modern unsustainable lifestyles towards environmental sustainability. This issue seems scarcely investigated by the wider research interest, or framed narrowly as an opposition of technologically advanced innovation in the Global North versus the traditional lifestyle of the developing Global South [27,34]. In contrast to this latter approach, our study looks at the ways in which discourses about local, ethnic, cultural, spiritual, and practical traditions complete and compete with narratives of modernity and innovation for creating a sustainable environment.

When talking about innovation as a shift from unsustainable lifestyles to an environmentally friendly, locally rooted model, Deborah Frieze [35] conceptualizes four types of actors: *Protectors*—those who promote the new, non-consumerist values from within the old system; *hospice workers*—concerned with helping the helpless of the old, unsustainable status-quo; *illuminators*, who spread the word about the new, localist paradigm; and the few *trailblazers*: Those who implement the innovative, green, and local lifestyles. These four types are identified as discourse types in the communication of our investigated Facebook group.

This case study is an exploratory qualitative research based on unobtrusive observation. The authors registered as members into the investigated Facebook group without actively partaking in the communication process and ongoing debates. Topics such as localism and environmentalism, the prospect of founding a real ecovillage, and living in it shape the discussions of the “Székely Ökofalu” Facebook group, involving participants in a genuine virtual community building. A thematic content analysis was performed using data collected from the 467 posts, after sampling key communicators' 374 entries as relevant for the purpose of our research. The textual and media materials contained in the selected Facebook posts were investigated using content analysis and interpreted within an ecolinguistic discourse analysis framework. Content analysis was instrumental in categorizing the research material, whereas ecolinguistic analysis provided the interpretive framework for our investigation.

The study is dedicated to the understanding the representation, adoption, and interpretation of global environmental ideas—in other words eco-discourses—in a local setting,

within a virtual rural community; the answer to our key research question is unfolding through this communicative process. The starting point is grounded in the triad of the three terms that define the object of the research: Virtual rural community, which best describes the investigated Facebook group 'Szekler Ecovillage' (in Hungarian: „Székely Ökofalu”). The term 'virtual' denotes the digital online platform, namely Facebook as a social networking medium where participants of the group communicate. The term 'rural' refers to the offline setting or environment where the participants are dwelling and/or towards where they orient themselves in their intention of creating an ecovillage: Szeklerland, a traditionally rural region with relatively small and medium provincial towns. 'Community' in the present case, beyond denoting a Facebook group, means a loose network of users (including devoted environmentalists, ecovillage supporters, agroecological operators, enterprising families, as well as a majority of interested bystanders) sharing common values and ideals and united by their explicit intent or interest in creating an ecological settlement. It must be put forward that although the group has originally been created as a virtual communication platform for an existing ecovillage, in its present state, it remains indeed a virtual ecovillage community. This too is an important aspect in formulating the research questions.

Thus, the main research questions concern the relationship between tradition and innovation regarding the various aspects of unfolds gradually through the group's online communication. Who are the main participants and opinion leaders of the "Székely Ökofalu" Facebook group? What are the main driving forces that operate the group's activities? Why do the participants organize themselves into a virtual intentional community (objectives), and with what success? Where do they seek their place and role (online, within the group, and offline: Within the larger community)? The issue of 'when' poses several questions related to the temporal aspect: Having several year of history (est. September 2014), apart from the creation and duration, the dynamics of the group may also offer valuable insights. How do the members partake in, contribute to the group interactions, and how do they communicate? How do they organize themselves into a virtual community? What are the main topics, values, principles, or interests of the group? Which are the topoi of tradition and those of innovation? Are the community's online eco-discourses fed mainly by tradition or rather by innovation? How are they represented? In what ways are they communicated? How do these topics, values, and principles relate to each other (also in terms of their importance and proportion) in the group's communication? Do they form a coherent discourse? How do they integrate into a greater master narrative?

Knowing the "Szekler Ecovillage" ("Székely Ökofalu") Facebook group's central issue and general orientation, it came as no surprise that we encountered discourses dominated by environmentalism, sustainability, localism, traditionalism, restoration, and innovation. Hundreds of posts and comments tackled the issues of tradition and innovation and topics of local and global interest. The various discourses present in the contributions of the group members elicited a worldview built on pluralism and eclectic bricolage, a syncretism of ideas.

2. Theoretical Background

Analyzing ecovillages we find a complicated field of discourse. The most important keyword of this discourse is environmental awareness and environmentalism. This way of thinking has a long history, well mapped by Indian sociologist Ramachandra Guha in his work entitled "Environmentalism: A global history" [36]. He differentiates between two great waves of environmentalism. The first wave appeared in the 19th century during the industrial revolution—when a few sensible minds foresaw the damages and searched for solutions. The second wave starting in the 20th century identified the emerging and deepening ecological problems as global crises. Such environmentally conscious thinking does not limit itself to acknowledging the crises: It works on finding solutions.

This train of thought reveals that environmentalism has both a theoretical and a practical aspect. The theoretical aspect includes the totality of philosophical and ethical thoughts

encompassing new attitudes towards the environment and nature. The most important trend in ecosophy is deep ecology—highlighting the self-worth of nature and the equal value and interdependence of all beings [37,38]. Another important line of thought is eco-ethics, focused on the new responsibilities we all have in a damaged world. Hans Jonas [39] has a groundbreaking ethical theory, transcending the old anthropomorphic approach by introducing the concept of nature's self-right and by extending human responsibilities to the natural environment. Land ethics states that the environment's well-being takes precedence over individual interests [40], and spaceship or lifeboat ethics puts forward similar ideals [41]. The practical side of environmentalism—focused on finding solutions to the environmental crisis—catalyzed green movements, dealing with several problems: How can humanity cope with the growing problems of the environment and society; how to change ways of thinking and behavior for a more sustainable future. The keyword is 'sustainable'—a search for balance between society and the environment.

Ecovillages emerge as possible solutions to the environmental problems by creating self-sustaining communities aimed at mitigating the negative effects of globalization. Robert Gilman defines an ecovillage as „a human scale, full-featured settlement which integrates human activities harmlessly into the natural environment, supports healthy development and can be continued into the future indefinitely“ [42] (p. 23). The goal is to reach long-term environmental sustainability of a given place—an ideal yet to be reached by real-life ecovillages.

There is no consensus regarding the concept of sustainable development, which gains different meanings on global and local level—a global approach is often applied to local contexts [43]. In the case of ecovillages, sustainability means a search for means by which to make the most of available resources the most eco-friendly way. Thus, sustainability is linked to the concept of innovation, because in many cases, certain solutions require the most modern technologies. Eco-innovation is innovation that helps with the efficient use of resources while protecting the environment [28]. At the same time, it is important to note that environmental sustainability is merely one side of social sustainability, which is an integrative concept. The ecovillage communities link sustainability to its environmental, social, economic, and spiritual aspects by using a holistic approach, which points beyond the protection of the environment [44].

Sustainable lifestyle choices are imagined either on a wide ideological palette [45], or in a rather coherent space of ideals and values, as in our virtual eco-discourse community. While current agricultural practices and innovations are adopted on a large scale by the mainstream society [46,47], intentional ecovillage communities are interested in learning unusual “niche practices“ [48] (p. 3) as part of their value system and identity. Grassroots innovations “support the processes of local niche creation, i.e., the incubation of sociotechnical innovation in the face of mainstream values“ [29] (p. 235). Since harmony with nature represents a core element of the ecologist value system, sustainability is not (necessarily) correlated with the modernist idea of development in the localist ecovillage endeavors—conceivable also as social innovation [30] enterprises—focusing on the preservation of the natural environment as well as traditional heritage.

Most ecovillages are intentional communities created by the common will of a local group, and yet connected to global movements [49]. Ecovillages try to be an answer to the global ecological and spiritual crisis and as such are markers of the modernity crisis—an age focused on unlimited growth, science, and innovation. Behind the creation of ecovillages there are various counter-narratives to mainstream views based on extrinsic values—market economy, capitalism, statehood, traditional education, and historical religions. Ecovillages are caught in the middle between global and local, traditional and new, with broad social and political value systems.

Wagner [20] has identified three areas of research on ecovillages: Those concerning the individual, the community, and those focused on culture. Today's investigations are mapping the birth of ecovillages, their energy consumption, and environmental sustainability solutions of specific cases [50,51]. It is worth mentioning that ecovillages are studied

not only by the academic investigations, but also by peer organizations and communities. These initiatives pay special attention to each other's strategies and successes in solving issues related to environmental sustainability. Such focused interest appears in virtual eco-communities as well: In the group's discussions, posts presenting functional ecovillage models, describing, and evaluating them. Our case—a virtual ecovillage—is an opportunity to examine the online identity construction discourses, accessible to all. Some ecovillages are built around a specific spiritual idea—such as Krishna Valley in Hungary—while most do not have a commonly shared view. They are created around the founder's views, rooted in religious views, farming, and production alternatives, medicinal practices, and teaching strategies. Ecovillages display pluralism, syncretism, and the technique of mixing and matching or bricolage [52]. Such conceptual blending is part of the virtual ecovillage discourses as well: Alternative religiosity, localism, and traditionalism.

Although mainstream religions have recently adopted an environmentally conscious thinking, we tend to consider it more impersonal, whereas nature-oriented spirituality is less formal. Hungarian ecovillage researcher Judit Farkas notes that we tend to associate spirituality with personal experience and growth, and the deeper understanding of the individual's place in the world [53]. The nature-centered spirituality related to ecological activism is called eco-spirituality by Bron Taylor [54]. The central idea of eco-spirituality is the understanding of humanity as part of nature, the equal value and interdependence of all beings. Followers adopt an ecocentric ethics, which does not put humans above nature but considers them part of it, and greatly dependent on it, and interlinked with all other beings. Bron Taylor interprets eco-spirituality as the religious thinking adapted to environmentalist thinking. The idea of nature as a sacred entity is also present in other doctrines such as animism or pantheism, Gaianism, New Age movements, new pagan movements, and other nature religions—another generic term introduced by Catherine Albanese [55]. A related concept is eco-paganism, a form of neo-paganism. The doctrine is rooted in environmental philosophies, neo-paganism, and tribal or native religions. Letcher [56] defines a typical eco-pagan person as one who believes in energy lines, neo-shamanic cosmologies, and reincarnation. According to their own spiritual eclecticism, eco-pagans might borrow from theosophy, Buddhism, hippie movements, local folklore, and organize them around a central pagan belief [33,57].

The legitimacy discourses of eco-villagers are not reduced to specific spiritual doctrines: Place and local traditions also play a role. Roger Scruton—a conservative green philosopher [58]—emphasizes that the love of home motivates us to preserve the environment because it includes our deepest connection to the surrounding world. Such environmentalism prioritizes local initiatives, civic self-organization, and small, friend-based networks to global organizations. Conservative green philosophies show that locality and regionalism—as well as nationalism may have an environmental aspect [59].

A bioregionalism-related concept gaining popularity in Hungary and in Romania (Transylvania) is organic culture: On a societal level, the essence of organic culture is the all-encompassing harmony of the entire human life with the rhythm of nature [60]. According to this doctrine formulated by cultural historian Gábor Pap, in the past, rituals, habits, and actions of the Hungarian people adhered to the structure of the Wheel of the Year (the astrological circuit of the Sun) epitomizing the interconnectedness between all creatures [61]. There are several international examples promoting organic interconnectedness with nature, such as the Transition Movement, permaculture, and the Anastasia Movement. The Transition Movement founded by Rob Hopkins [62] focuses on sustainable solutions in order to mitigate climate change and energy crisis. Permaculture, a movement initiated by Austrian farmer Sepp Holzer, develops human settlements and agricultural systems by copying and mimicking natural ecological processes [63]. The Anastasia Movement originates in Russia and builds small self-sustaining organic farms, family estates—the so-called dachas, with an eco-spiritual touch: Reverence to Mother Earth [64], and also to 'Mother Russia' [32]. Such global movements are similar endeavors to ecovillages, which in turn tend to be local variants of ecological endeavors adapted to regional traditions.

The center of our investigation is the Szekler Ecovillage virtual community—with a significant amount of local heritage incorporated in its discourses. Historical heritage of Szeklerland—a distinctive region of Transylvania—Central Romania includes the institution of Szekler village community (Latin: *communitas villae*) as a relatively autonomous, self-sustaining community that survived feudalism. The economic basis of the village community was the jointly owned land, and the social basis was the large family embedded in a clan. The public ownership was the association responsible for the jointly owned woodland or pasture. This co-ownership institution is still existent in many Szekler villages to this day [65]. A prominent researcher of Szekler village communities, István Imreh [66], describes the Szekler as an environmentally aware person, responsible for future generations, rooted in traditions and hardworking. Such values are promoted by the virtual eco-villagers under study as well, with a touch of new practices and eco-pagan rhetoric.

The phenomenon of ecovillage movement has called the attention of scholarship in Western and Central-Eastern European countries since its emergence [22–25,67,68]. Meanwhile, international academic interest focuses on the medialization of eco-villages [69,70] whereas Romanian cases are yet to be covered. This study is aimed at bridging the knowledge gap.

3. Methods

The “Szekler Ecovillage” Facebook group was selected as the subject of this case study because previous netnographic research has shown its contribution to discourses related to ethnic identity, preservation of folk traditions, and sacralization of the nation. These narratives termed together as “new national mythology” turned out to be closely intertwined with a rhetoric of healing, where threads of the abovementioned spiritual trends “mingle with ecologist ideas turning towards the environment, building on the concepts of organic culture, and together they create lifestyle models and working communities oriented towards both traditions and the future” [71] (p. 135). The Facebook group provides an ideal virtual community building platform and a proper field for netnographic analysis.

A netnographic empirical research was performed following two important main stages: Firstly, data collection, selection, and systematization, and secondly, interpretation of the selected findings. In the first stage, we created a database of the 467 posts published from 24 September 2014 to 11 January 2021. Posts were arranged in temporal order first, and then 15 thematic categories were created in agreement with the research team, based on the key theme of the post [72]. In the second stage, a second reiterative read of the posts was focused on the values promoted, and a deeper interpretive data systematization was performed based on key values expressed in the posts. In the next step, we looked into key communicators of the Facebook group under study, based on the number of posts they published. We distinguished between very active (with over 12 posts) called opinion leaders, active contributors (between one and 11 posts published or authors of at least five comments), and silent observers, such as the authors themselves, with no posts or less than five comments.

For the sampling of our units of analysis—relevant posts of the open Facebook group Szekler Ecovillage—we used the cascade model [73] conceptualizing the flow of information in complex networks from nodes to periphery: We selected as nodes the six most active communicators as opinion leaders and the 13 active contributors. Thus, for the deeper, interpretive ecolinguistic analysis, we sampled 374 relevant posts out of the total 467 posts. “While a theme can be used to attend to the more implicit and meaning of data, other analytical products such as categories are related to the explicit and surface aspect of data analysis... Therefore, theme development can be a complex and time consuming process in comparison to the formation of categories.” [72] (p. 2)

3.1. Analytical Methods

We analyze the Facebook-group active members’ discourses in two ways: A descriptive content analysis aimed at mapping topics, controversies, and genres, and an in-depth

ecolinguistic interpretation of key messages [73], by looking at frames, contexts, and stories unfolded through social media interaction. An ecolinguistic approach to discourse analysis fits both the aim and the scope of our research: To highlight the ways in which community members under study contextualize their values, attitudes and actions related to sustainable and environmentally friendly lifestyles [74]. Keywords of this approach incorporated in our analysis are framing and reframing, stories, intrinsic vs. extrinsic values, and conceptual blend.

Qualitative content analysis was the most suitable methodological option for our eco-discourse investigation, given the topical and length variety of Facebook posts, and the feasibility of a full scan of textual content: it “reduces data, it is systematic, and it is flexible.”, and also “it requires the researcher to focus on selective aspects of meaning, namely those aspects that relate to the overall research questions” [75] (p. 170). When selecting our descriptive labels for the discourse categories, we proceeded inductively, in order to be “as near as possible to the material, to formulate them in terms of the material.” [76] (p. 3). A thorough and double-loop scan of the ecovillage online discourses was instrumental for developing “a saturated set of themes” [77] (p. 212) and a coding process flowing organically from the text, with interpretations grounded in context. Interpretive framework was given by the literature on ecovillage theories and practices, sustainability paradigms, and the previous field research in the region [71].

For the aims of this qualitative study, in regard to the collected communication content, we used a purposive sampling or judgement sampling, which involves the researchers’ expertise to select the most useful material for investigation. Following this principle, we have selected 374 posts of the 19 communicators (see Table 1) considered to be thematically relevant from the 467 total entries present on the group’s timeline until the end of the data collection period (11 January 2021). These posts were then categorized with the inductive method described above. In regard to the most representative communicators of the group we also used purposive sampling: The most active members were selected according to the number of their posts (above 10 entries), or in the case of members with lesser posts we considered their high engagement in discussions by commenting and sharing relevant posts together with the amplitude of reactions (likes, comments) to their entries.

3.2. Group Description

The “Székely Ökofalu” (“Szekler Ecovillage”) is an open, public, Hungarian language Facebook group founded on 26 September 2014 with 710 members (as of 11 January 2021). Its founder, administrator, and moderator, (OL1) formulated the description of the group as following:

This group was created to give impetus for the formation of sustainable communities in Szeklerland. We would like to encourage those people who plan to move into rural regions, and organize themselves consciously by connecting to each other. This is an instrument for the interested to find each other, to form teams, for us to find adequate locations, to plan together, and to start off on the way of realization. We can share here ideas, thoughts, experiences, and desires. (reformulated on 11 October 2018).

The symbolic identity of the group is represented by the group’s header photo showing an idyllic image of a traditional old Transylvanian mountain village landscape with green orchards and small wooden cottages. The group is characterized by vivid activity and lively communication (however as we will later point out the timeline shows a particular dynamic), with hundreds of posts, entries, media materials, and dozens of debates. A short overview of the media content archived in the group shows 467 posts, 317 pictures, and 2 albums (one about Krishna Valley eco-village with 50 photos). Among the relevant posts we can find 44 events, 18 calls for action, 7 polls, 10 seed market or change announcements, 16 lectures (9 internal, 4 advertised external, 5 linked videos), 5 announced trainings, 7 announced workshops, 7 brainstorming sessions, 6 presentations, and most importantly,

126 posts (9 less relevant) of various genres and lengths presenting model ecovillages, community initiatives, self-sustaining families, individual farmers, or ecohomes.

Table 1. Opinion leaders and active contributors: Description, themes, and discourses.

Name	Status	Since	Gender	Posts	Main Themes	Discourses
OL 1	Founder and admin	24 September 2014	male	200+	ecovillage, sustainability, community, architecture, organizing, networking	T, I *
OL 2	core member	September 2014	male	44	technology, innovation, gardening, spirituality	I, T
OL 3	core member	March 2015	male	18	preservation, community, ecovillage, volunteering, organizing, herbs	I, T, A
OL 4	core member	April 2015(left April 2016)	male	64	ecovillage, gardening, bartering, self sustaining, permaculture, spirituality, knowledge sharing	T, I, A
OL 5	core member	June 2015	male	29	technology, innovation, preservation, permaculture, spirituality, community	I, T
OL 6	member	December 2019	male	12	folk healing courses, tradition, books, spirituality	I
AC 1	member	September 2014	male	8	agriculture, biodiversity, gardening, composting	I, A
AC 2	member	September 2014	male	1	rules, principles	I
AC 3	member	October 2014	male	1	Denmark eco-villager family experience	I
AC 4	member	2015	male	2	offering own paintings for the benefit of the community	A
AC 5	member	2015	male	4	permaculture speciality literature, books	I
AC 6	member	2015	male	5	gardening, permaculture	I
AC 7	member	2015	female	6	governmental programs, project and tender opportunities	P
AC 8	member	2015–2017	female	8	gardening, alternative bio-cultivation, self sustainable settling possibilities	I, A
AC 9	member	2015	female	3	operating ecovillage initiatives	T, A
AC 10	member	2015	female	6	practical solutions, gardening	I
AC 11	member	2016	male	5	settlement model, autonomy, tradition, spirituality, anti-vaccination protest	I
AC 12	member	2016	female	6	home schooling	I, A
AC 13	member	2019	male	6	eco-farming, conferences, farmer organization initiatives, history	I, A, P

* Types of discourses: I = illuminator; T = trailblazer; A = assistant; P = protector.

The group's membership shows multiple dynamics. From its founding on 26 September 2014 to 11 January 2021, the group grew to a number of 710 members, with the following thresholds: By the end of January 2015 it reached 100, in the following three months rising to 200, then three months later, at the end of June 2015 to 300; and the symbolic 500 was reached in March 2016, while 700 was reached on 12 December 2020. The membership is not equally active: We proposed a hierarchization according to their participation. Three main categories may be distinguished: Highly involved opinion leaders (with dozens of posts and comments) (6 members, including the group founder); active contributors (13 members with sporadic posts but usually engaged participation through comments), and finally, silent observers (with scarce or no participation in the group communication). For the purposes of this study we have mainly selected contributions from the opinion

leaders (OL) for analysis and from the more prolific active contributors (AC) of the group (see Table 1 below). Although the “Székely Ökofalu” is an open, public Facebook group, and all posts available on its timeline are public posts, from research ethical considerations, we chose to anonymize them.

3.3. Group Membership

According to netnographic data collecting principles [78], we adjusted the key units of analysis—the discourses of the group’s main activators—to the aim and scope of the investigation, and to the research questions. Among the 710 Facebook group members, three user categories have been identified, following the *cascade model* of information diffusion in networks from nodes to periphery [79]: Opinion leaders (abbreviated OL), active contributors (AC), and silent observers (SO)—shown in Table 1 below. OL and AC members appear in their order of registration, with key information.

The focus of the above data aggregation is on the corpus of 367 posts and comments of the six OL, complemented with posts and comments of the 13 AC. Table 1—beside visualizing basic data concerning the group’s main activators (opinion leaders and active contributors)—also presents the main themes of their most frequent posts (expressing their primary interests), and, based on these topics, an approximation of the type of discourses they represent according to the four roles described by Deborah Frieze’s [35] terminology. In this respect, we termed ‘trailblazer’ discourses, which encourage implementing the innovative, green, and local lifestyles and stimulate community building with the aim of establishing eco-settlements (usually formulated by members who play an identical role in real life too). The ‘illuminator’ discourses denote sharing knowledge (either ideological, or spiritual, or practical), spreading the word about the ecologist, localist paradigm. These two discursive types often cannot be clearly distinguished from one another, just as the actors who represent them, merging into a coherent organic narrative (and action). While Frieze’s third type: ‘hospice workers’ refers also to concrete actors concerned with helping the helpless of the old, unsustainable status-quo, we could easily identify narratives, announcements that either offer material help of some kind (seeds, products, instruments, land) or physical assistance (co-working, beeing) or expertise support (experience, know-how, training). For a more adequate labeling of the group discourses corresponding to the role of a ‘hospice worker’ actor, we proposed the term ‘assistance’ discourses. ‘Protectors’—in Frieze’s terminology—are those who promote the new, non-consumerist values from within the old system; and here, in the group’s communication we also found posts that could be interpreted as such promoting support (governmental programs, project, and tender opportunities).

4. Empirical Findings

Content Categorization

Given the orientation of the “Szekler Ecovillage” Facebook group, we could expect—and the data analysis confirmed—that in spite of the large number and variety of personal and media content posted on the group’s timeline, these materials show a relative coherence along a restricted number of genres, topics and value systems. Although with varying relevance over time, the entries pertain mainly to the spheres of environmentalism, spirituality, tradition, and innovation, with a special focus on community and practical implementation. When building the primary excel database during data collection we could observe a remarkable variation in both the frequency and the relevance of the posted materials. For the purposes of this investigation, posts are considered relevant if they refer closely to one or more of the topics of the spheres mentioned above, and within it—having in mind the objective of the Facebook group expressed in its name—they are essential, if they deal with the idea of ecovillage or with the aim of community building towards this goal.

As we can see from Table 2, although the number of members keeps continually growing, still, over the years there has been a decreasing tendency not only in the number

of relevant posts, but also in the number of closely environmentalist themed entries. It must be noted that the overwhelming majority of these latter ecovillage- and community-related posts, that we may call the master narrative of the Facebook group's discourses, belong to OL 1, the founder and admin of the group. One could expect that, in turn, tradition- and ethnic identity-related posts become more frequent, but although rising somewhat in proportion to the former, this growth is not really characteristic if we look at the topics of the entries. As a general impression, we could observe not so much a shift from ecological interest towards ethnic tradition but rather a large diversification of the subjects and also a gradual 'domestication' of the core narratives. In this respect, the fading of the highlight on the ecovillage related discourses may signal a process of trivialization of the cause in parallel with the growth of membership leading from the initial esoteric, intimate nature of the group towards an open, exoteric, public loose network of like-minded individuals.

Table 2. Frequency and relevance of posts.

Year/ Number of Members	No. of Posts	Relevant Posts	Essential Posts	Main Theme
2014 (four months)/<100	25	24	14	founding, definition, description, models of, polls for ecovillage, community building, networking
2015/ <400	157	138	47	meetings, lectures, workshops, brainstormings, visits, models of, polls for ecovillage, community building, networking, practices, possible locations
2016/ ~500	110	85	20	meetings, lectures, trainings, brainstormings, visits, models of ecovillage, community building, networking, practices, possible locations, funding possibilities
2017/ <600	71	68	11	trainings, visits, beeing, location seeking, funding possibilities
2018/ ~600	26	17	5	mission restatement, location seeking, plans, funding possibilities
2019/ >600	22	14	5	workshops, programs, university specialization started, possible locations
2020/ ~700	43	10	1	question related to existence of Szekler ecovillages

The subjects of entries are highly varied, nevertheless they can be classified under seven main topical groups, each containing several subtopics. Often, the subjects of the posts imply multiple topics, for example those related to self-sustainable farming practices or eco-settlement location seeking are strongly related to ethnic traditions, cultural heritage, or mystical nature-spirituality, and organically, to community building strivings. Thus, in a good number of cases, the entries may be listed under several different topics, which results in the number of items under categorizations exceeding the actual number of posts in the group's timeline.

The seven main topical categories can be summarized as follows: (1) Eco-ideology; (2) tradition and culture; (3) spirituality; (4) innovation; (5) practices; (6) models; and (7) community.

The first, and most important topic, given the orientation of the “Szekler Ecovillage” Facebook group, may be termed ‘ideology’, meaning primarily environmentalist ideology. It comprises various subtopics, such as sustainability, preservation, and biodiversity. It also includes entries expressing criticism (sometimes political) of contemporary social, economic systems, and generally, of modernity. Criticism is directed against globalization, urbanization, industrialization, economy, capitalism, pollution, and the modern way of life in general. It must be noted, however, that in spite of the implicit subversiveness, the overall picture and intended message of these entries expresses constructivism and an optimistic, self-confident view of the future. Furthermore, as stated above, these entries often merge environmentalist worldview and future-orientation with discourses of tradition, rediscovery, and preservation of old ways of agriculture and husbandry, as well as the praise of local rootedness and landscapes. A good number of the posts pertaining to this category express convictions regarding the self-worth of nature and the equal value and interdependence of all beings. They reflect concerns and responsibilities assumed regarding the restoration of a damaged world, or preservation of the natural habitat. The idea of sustainability is a central issue along the group’s timeline from the first entry to the latest one. Permaculture farming, wild gardening and orchardry, innovative land cultivation methods, seed markets, etc., often appear in the topics of the posts, either linked with traditional techniques or based on innovative technologies (and sometimes combining the two approaches).

The second main category bears a double label: ‘tradition and culture’. Originally intended as two topical groups, it was necessary to blend them into one, since in most cases, the occurring (or implied) term of ‘culture’ refers to some traditional element or aspect of culture, and vice versa. This category comprises entries that may be grouped under subtopics: Revivalism/traditionalism, meaning the rediscovery and revival of old traditions; architecture, denoting built heritage and settlement (village) organization and architecture; ethnic and regional identity involving national history, local folk characteristics, and customs; as well as regional interethnic and intercultural relations and traditions. Last, but most importantly, this category includes the subtopic of organic culture, a term explained above in the theoretical framework. Not to be confused with eco-culture and permaculture, with which it shares many essential characteristics. Organic culture refers not to the organic ways of agricultural production, but to the organic unity of traditional folk culture with nature and the universe. This is the ideal the members of the “Szekler Ecovillage” virtual community strive to implement in practice, in reality. Local embeddedness, (Hungarian, Szekler) ethnic traditions, the old lore regarding land and harmony with nature are frequent themes in the posts. They all express an aspiration to revive the faded knowledge of organic culture, to bring back its importance in governing the life of the prospective eco-community. This latter subtopic, together with all its practicality, already points towards the next category.

The third category is ‘spirituality’—it comprises religious ideas in the classical meaning; mystical ideas, such as the above mentioned doctrine of organic culture in its spiritual aspect, but also eco-pagan, ethno-pagan elements, various new religious spiritualities. The subtopic of eco-spiritual movements also belongs here, the most prominent example being the Russian Anastasia movement, which is very popular among the group members, present in several posts. Several entries concern religious or mystical topics (even unrelated to the group’s central eco-discourses), others invoke eco-spirituality or mystical doctrines regarding the ethnic predestination to restore the harmony of nature, and preserve, revive, the lost organic culture of humanity.

The fourth category contains entries related to ‘innovation’: Its subcategories can be distinguished as technical innovations and innovative technologies in agriculture and architecture. The entries belonging to this category refer primarily to grassroots innovation solutions, but also to ideas of social innovation.

The fifth category may be resumed as ‘practices’. In close connection, and often overlapping with the posts pertaining to the previous category, here belong entries dealing with

agriculture, permaculture, wild gardening, forest gardening, architecture and settlement organization, recycling, seed markets and exchanges, formation, and training.

The sixth, very rich category presenting best practices contains ‘models’—it may be divided into such subcategories as ‘walk out’ [35] individuals, families, communities, homesteads, and ecovillages. Although there are numerous international examples from Europe and all over the world, most promoted ecovillages are from Hungary. It is essential to note nevertheless that however ethnocentric the “Szekler Ecovillage” Facebook-group may seem, Romanian ecovillages too are praised quite often along the Hungarian examples. Besides the high number of articles, videos, reports, and news pertaining to this category of posts, there are several maps highlighting the most known ecovillages and eco-communities of Europe and also of Transylvania.

The seventh topical category is ‘community’, which comprises the—mostly internal, group-related—entries dedicated to virtual and real-life community building and networking with the goal of establishing an ecovillage. These posts are exquisite examples of the communicative processes of intentional community organizing, and a novel way of grassroots social innovation bridging the virtual space with the offline world.

5. Discussion

From the communication of the group—however varied the posts may be—we can read a coherent worldview. Against the large number of members, the essential central discourse or master narrative is practically formulated by a restricted number of highly engaged opinion leaders and active contributors. These communicators are the ones who define the main topics, agendas of the Szekler Ecovillage. Communities translate their way of life into narrative—and this is clearly the case of our virtual rural community. A large part of the strivings to create a living ecovillage in Szeklerland take the form of speech acts enunciated on a social media platform. Calls for action, model settings, polls, brainstorming, debates, and comment-discussions virtualized the case of ecovillage founding and community building into a veritable rhetoric utopia—not only planned but lived as such.

In the following discussion, we focus primarily on the most active, ‘node’ opinion leader, the founder, OL1, whose visions define and mirror the orientation of the “Szekler Ecovillage”, who in Deborah Frieze’s referred terminology [35] is both a trailblazer and illuminator. The mission of the group is formulated already at the beginning by OL1 in the statement of the group description:

We would like to establish an Ecovillage in Szeklerland. Do you also desire to live a balanced life in a community, in the proximity of nature? Join us, we can achieve the goal only together! This group was created to give impetus for the creation of a sustainable community (or more) in Szeklerland. We would like to stimulate those people who plan to move to the countryside and join an ecovillage project. It offers means for us to find each other, to organize a team, to find an adequate location, to plan, and to start off on the way to realization. (28 September 2014).

These general goals are translated into a more personal engagement, an *ars poetica* with a confession alluding to Martin Luther King’s famous 1963 rhetorical speech: “*I have a dream:*” writes OL1 “*I wish to live in an ECOVILLAGE!*” In this oratory call for action, he formulates the principles according to which such an ideal place would exist: It has to be located in Szeklerland, where he feels at home; it should be eco-, bio, healthy, and environmental; it should be surrounded by a natural landscape; it should be populated with a real cooperating community; it should be rooted in the Hungarian culture, based on the hundreds of years of experience and wisdom; the inhabitants would work according to their needs for self-sustainment with organic technologies; they would live in ecological houses; and (after other listed guiding principles) lastly—they would live in Love and harmony (28 September 2014). On his call of making this dream reality the initial members of the group reacted with both likes and comments taking further his thoughts. Worth

to be noted, that at this moment, the founder of the group was well beyond the state of dreaming: He had already a well-working ecovillage initiative in the Caşin microregion of Szeklerland [80], together with other enterprising friends and families.

In addition to his rhetorical call, OL1 published (1 October 2014) a compiled definition of the ecovillage translated from the main website of the Global Ecovillage Network (<https://ecovillage.org/about/about-gen/>, accessed on 12 January 2021) completed with explanations. In this post, beside stating the importance of creating self-sustaining communities as possible solutions to the environmental problems he also calls the attention to new responsibilities we all have in a damaged world. This definition, in completion with the initial mission-statement of the group and OL1's above referred 'ars poetica' legitimate the foundation of a dedicated Facebook group for building a genuine ecovillage in Szeklerland. Approaching these founding texts with Stibbe's ecolinguistic analysis [73,74], we can observe multiple framings: On the first level, the ecologist discourse is placed into a localist frame (it has to be located in Szeklerland, in Transylvania, where members feel at home; it should be rooted in the Hungarian culture, based on the hundreds of years of experience and wisdom); on a second level, by invoking Martin Luther King's famous 'dream-speech' the narrative is enriched with a sense of liberation and emancipation. As another important idea, these texts point towards a general rule that would apply to the entire communication of the community: Namely to a conceptual blend—expressed already in the name of the Facebook group: "Szekler Ecovillage". Here the global idea of ecologism, oriented towards innovation and future, meets and merges with the discourses of localism, the importance of ethnic cultural traditions, the two threads blending into a single, special narrative that serves as the legitimation of the forming community.

The Szekler Ecovillage group was created with the aim of organizing the likeminded environmentalist people living scattered in Szeklerland and elsewhere in Transylvania into a group with a definite goal. The Facebook group would offer not only means for more efficient connecting and communication, but also for coordinating activities, building community, and sharing knowledge. These purposes can be clearly identified in OL 1's more than 200 posts and countless comments along the group's timeline. He not only posted mobilizing messages, questions, polls, calls for brainstorming, and organizational problems, but he also shared his vast knowledge and experiences. Additionally, he described and mapped models for the group, concerning visited ecovillages and ecological communities in Hungary and around Europe.

In a post describing his visits in various European ecovillages (14 February 2015), OL1 compares the practices, mentalities, and spiritualities experienced during his 2008 study tour. While summarizing his experiences he emphasizes (in a somewhat ethno-centric attitude) the living, preserved organic nature of the Hungarian, Szekler local tradition (lore and knowledge), which he contrasts with the 'traditionless' European ecovillages. His central idea is that Hungarian ecovillagers could offer much help and experience for their Western friends due to their rich, living traditions. On the other hand, the entries posted by the founder show another important aspect, which is generally characteristic to the group's online narratives (several of the other opinion leaders posting similar contents): Romanian ecovillages from Transylvania and other parts of Romania are presented as positive, working, living models to be followed. In this respect, OL1 shows himself an example by promoting cooperation, friendship, mutual assistance between the Romanian ecovillagers and the Hungarian (Szekler) ecovillage aspirants. The group discourses reflect an unusual openness towards the ethnic majority, which stands in sharp contrast with the usual ethnocentric mentality of the region.

From the very start of the group, significant core members joined in the discussion, and they may be considered illuminators too. These opinion leaders and active members keep up the lively flow of the group communication. Shortly after the founder's mission statement, an active member (AC 2) formulated some thoughts about necessary rules and principles invoking the tradition of the historical Szekler village's self-government, which sparked an intensive debate in the group.

Such elaborated debates are rare in the group. Most opinion leaders and active members alike usually post external news, announcements, videos, articles, or simple calls to action, without causing too many reactions or responsive comments. As we could see from the overview of relevant and essential entries (the majority of which was posted by OL 1) in Table 2, the group's resonance has slowly faded over the years. While the orientation of the group's eclectic, bricolage worldview remains unchanged, the central issue of creating a living ecovillage gradually lost primary importance in the topics posted by the members. On the question (18 June 2020) of a recently registered member whether the group knows of any ecovillages in Hungarian-speaking regions of Transylvania, only negative responses arrived, and even OL 1 answered referring to—until now—failed initiatives and prospects.

In its present phase, the Szekler Ecovillage group remains a narrative, a rhetorical utopia with an open-ended future.

6. Conclusions

The “Szekler Ecovillage” Facebook group was selected as the subject of our investigation because previous netnographic research has shown a specific constellation of eco-discourses. These narratives blend the concept of organic culture based on tradition with the idea of eco-sustainability, and together they create a lifestyle model, which serves as a base for building up a viable ecovillage community oriented towards both traditions and the future.

The investigation has answered our research questions. We could identify the main participants and node communicators of the “Székely Ökofalu” Facebook group: Among the 710 members, we found 6 opinion leaders with more than 10 entries during the six years since the establishment of the group, and 13 active communicators with less entries, yet high engagement in discussions by commenting and sharing the posts, as well as in sparking reactions from the participants. Key communicators are educated, urban intellectuals. The central opinion leader of the group (OL1) is its founder and administrator, an architect dedicated to the cause of establishing a viable ecovillage. The main motivations of the group is the hope to create a functional sustainable community living in harmony with their local natural environment, according to the ancestors' traditions. With the aim of establishing such an intentional community, they organize themselves into a virtual community on a networking social media platform—Facebook offers them an optimal space for their purposes. The six years' history of the “Szekler Ecovillage” Facebook community offered valuable insights into the group's communication and an active medialization of shared knowledge. We could observe a decreasing tendency not only in the number of relevant posts, but also in the number of closely environmentalist themed entries in parallel with the diversification of the discussion topics. While the group's communication shows a descendent tendency over recent years, the continually growing number of members shows a viable virtual community. Facebook as an intergenerational platform facilitates digital storytelling opportunities and spaces for meaningful interaction [81] for an increasing number of silver surfers, as the age group of the Ecovillage community diversifies.

Further online netnographic research is necessary for a deeper exploration of the communication dynamics of the virtual ecovillage community, and prospective field investigations would also contribute to the better understanding of the ecovillage movement locally. Communication is the catalyst of community formation, therefore broader research agendas are necessary to explore online and offline, formal and informal communication, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. We made a small step towards exploring communication practices of one virtual ecovillage community—a small yet new step.

Using the cascade model to select our units of analysis, we mapped and interpreted 374 eco-discourses of the six opinion leaders and the 13 active contributors of the virtual rural community “Szekler Ecovillage” from Central Romania. Framing and reframing environmental discourses of a sustainable lifestyle under the more determinant metanarratives of localism and ethnic identity, these stories convey a complex relationship between tradition and innovation as an answer to our key research question. The community's

online eco-discourses, the values and principles shared by the group members, rooted in both traditional culture and aspirations towards a harmonic, nature-oriented future, form a coherent worldview, showing spiritual eclecticism and bricolage thinking.

Discourses of tradition and innovation merge into a conceptual blend [57,58], with a focus on social innovation. Global and progressive elements of the discourses mix with the localist and traditionalist aspects. The conservative nature of the ethnocentric and localist discourse is complemented and organically intertwined with an innovative mentality, nature-centered spirituality and ecocentric ethics, open towards other nations and communities. With a focus on 'sustainability', searching for the balance between society and the environment, from 'niche' technical innovations and grassroots social innovations, through revitalized ancestral lore and traditions, the "Szekler Ecovillage" discourses unfold a dynamic, rhetorical utopia. We are witnessing the birth of a narrative reinventing the future [82] by reviving the past.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.K.B. and L.A.H.; methodology, R.K.B. and L.A.H.; investigation, L.A.H. and D.T.; resources, R.K.B., L.A.H., and D.T.; data curation, L.A.H.; writing—original draft preparation, R.K.B., L.A.H., and D.T.; writing—review and editing, R.K.B.; visualization, L.A.H.; supervision, R.K.B.; project administration, L.A.H. and D.T.; funding acquisition, R.K.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by SAPIENTIA FOUNDATION–INSTITUTE OF RESEARCH PROGRAMMES, grant number IPC 21/1/12 June 2019. The APC was funded by SAPIENTIA FOUNDATION–INSTITUTE OF RESEARCH PROGRAMMES.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Primary data collection and categorization table can be accessed on the research group's blog: <https://semeistos.wordpress.com/projects/> under the "Eco Discourses on the Szekler Ecovillage Facebook Group" project.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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