
Guest editorial: Sustainability marketing and sustainability management: exploring new perspectives on sustainable development

Guest editorial

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Introduction to the special issue

Being in a state of climate emergency and having a persistent increase in social and economic inequalities, our contemporary society faces the devastating consequences of the ongoing unsustainable development that characterizes it. Despite the intentions of governments, businesses, public organizations and citizens to change this destructive course, the actions for achieving sustainable development are still insufficient and unsuccessful. Introduced more than three decades ago, the concept of sustainable development, which is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987), has a central role in the global agenda for addressing sustainability challenges. However, the multiple calls for urgent action over the years did not lead to satisfactory progress on facilitating sustainable development. As the recent sustainable development report demonstrates, major science-driven transformations are required to accelerate sustainable development, with science having a critical impact on increasing awareness, generating knowledge and proposing effective tools for multiple stakeholders (GSDR, 2023).

Extant research across various disciplines provides numerous empirical models, confirming the criticality of sustainable development for our society (Allen and Malekpour, 2023; Clark and Harley, 2020). Although previous studies lack consensus about the optimal scenario for facilitating sustainable development, they indicate effective alternative pathways to a more sustainable future. To exemplify, the emerging approaches for advancing sustainability highlight social-ecological systems (Reyers *et al.*, 2018), systems of sustainable consumption and production (Schröder *et al.*, 2019), social-ecological networks (Felipe-Lucia *et al.*, 2021), green recovery (Gusheva and de Gooyert, 2021; Lahcen *et al.*, 2020) and social tipping processes (Winkelmann *et al.*, 2022) among others. Contributing to research and managerial practice, these novel theoretical perspectives share valuable insights on potential transformations required for achieving sustainable development and inspire various stakeholders to act as change agents for sustainability. Considering the limited number of studies exploring new models of sustainable development, future research is needed to advance the understanding of phenomena catalyzing, as well as hindering, sustainable development, create alternative propositions and provide more empirical evidence guiding decision-makers in the private and public sectors.

Within the discipline of marketing, the research stream on sustainability marketing emerged in the 1960s and continued to develop over the years, attracting growing attention among marketing scholars (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019). The topics addressed in prior research on sustainability marketing evolved from examining the sustainable properties of all elements of the marketing mix to investigating sustainable consumption among consumers and sustainable internal marketing within organizations and then to exploring the transformative marketing actions fostering sustainable society and stimulating



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institutional change (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019). In spite of diverse research topics, extant research on sustainability marketing is relatively scarce and fragmented, requiring further studies to develop knowledge on marketing phenomena in relation to sustainability and sustainable development (Davies *et al.*, 2020; Voola *et al.*, 2022). To advance the current state of research, previous studies suggest shifting from the dominant profit-centric approach, which maximizes financial well-being, to the alternative sustain-centric approach, which optimizes social and ecological well-being (Dyck *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, prior research proposes to extend the current boundaries of research on sustainability marketing focusing on sustainable development, for example, by considering a de-growth perspective, indicating possibilities for more radical transformations (Lloveras *et al.*, 2022). Overall, extant research on sustainability marketing acknowledges the need to reconsider the core marketing assumptions and increase the relevance of marketing research by developing more impactful insights for addressing global challenges (Chandy *et al.*, 2021; Madan *et al.*, 2023; White *et al.*, 2019).

Within management and organization studies, prior research on sustainability has evolved since the 1970s from assessing the effects of organizations on the natural environment to examining corporate sustainability and sustainable organizations and then to exploring socio-ecological wellbeing, the nature–human ecosystem and organizing for sustainability (Ergene *et al.*, 2021). Previous studies highlight the need to further develop the knowledge on responsible management, integrating sustainability, responsibility and ethics (Gherardi and Laasch, 2022; Laasch *et al.*, 2022), as well as the transformational actions, required for addressing the global sustainability challenges (Ferns and Amaeshi, 2021). Furthermore, recent research proposes to explore the conditions of a steady-state economy, apply degrowth thinking and focus on post-growth organizations (Banerjee *et al.*, 2021). To address the existing research gaps, future studies are advised to incorporate new analytical and theoretical perspectives (e.g. gender analysis and feminist theories) as well as challenge mainstream scholarship by applying critical and unorthodox perspectives (e.g. radical feminist organization theory) (Benschop, 2021; Grosser and Moon, 2019). Acknowledging the existing sustainability challenges and noting the insufficient contributions by extant research, previous studies highlight the need to shift the research foci by revising the existing assumptions and developing novel theoretical perspectives on sustainability management (Nyberg and Wright, 2022).

The main purpose of this special issue is to explore new perspectives on sustainable development by focusing on sustainability-related topics in marketing and management, as well as encouraging interdisciplinary research in these areas. The special issue advances the current state of research on sustainability marketing and sustainability management by presenting novel insights on sustainability and sustainable development. Among the large number of papers submitted to this special issue, we have selected those works that have strong conceptual and methodological rigor and make strong theoretical and practical contributions. After a double anonymous peer review, we have chosen the six papers included in this special issue, all of which share unique and important insights on different marketing and management topics of relevance for accelerating sustainable development.

Overview of the papers in the special issue

The first paper by Sandra Simas Graça and Virginie Pioche Kharé examines the effects of three sustainability drivers (i.e. perceived quality, social influences and online education) and three transformative mediators (i.e. price value, attitude and environmental knowledge) on green buying behavior, comparing differences between a developed country versus a developing country. The study integrates the perspectives of the theory of buyer behavior, the theory of planned behavior and the action competence approach. By using an online

survey, the authors collected 195 responses in the United States of America and 209 responses in Brazil. The authors used structural equation modeling and multi-group analysis for testing the hypothesized effects. The findings demonstrate the significant impact of the analyzed sustainability drivers and transformative mediators on green buying behavior, with affordable prices and social influences having stronger effects in Brazil. The study advances the understanding about the core factors and socio-ecological issues influencing green buying behavior.

The second paper by **Tobias Otterbring** investigates differences between male consumers and female consumers in green consumption values and tests the mediating effect of intrasexual competition. As the theoretical foundation, the study uses theories on sustainable consumption, competitiveness and gender stereotypes. The author conducted a cross-sectional survey involving 1,382 participants from countries with English as the official language, who were members of a crowdsourced online panel platform. The data were analyzed by using a series of Mann–Whitney U tests and multiple linear regressions. The findings show significant differences between male versus female participants in green consumption values and intrasexual competition, with male participants having lower levels of green consumption values and higher levels of intrasexual competition in general and on the two subdimensions, superiority striving and inferiority irritation, in particular. The results demonstrate that the sex difference in green consumption values is mediated by intrasexual competition and its dimension of inferiority irritation but not by the dimension of superiority striving. The study advances the current state of research by providing insights about a psychological mechanism explaining the sex difference in green consumption values, including the mediating role of intrasexual competition.

The third paper by **Belem Barbosa, Alireza Shabani Shojaei and Hugo Miranda** analyzes the impact of packaging-free practices on customer loyalty in food retail. The theoretical foundation for this study is composed of theories on sustainable consumer behavior, sustainable practices and corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies. The authors conducted an online survey involving 447 consumers who regularly purchase food products at supermarkets in Portugal. The conceptual model was tested using PLS-SEM. The findings show the positive effects of packaging-free practices on brand image, brand trust, satisfaction and customer loyalty, as well as the positive effects of brand image and satisfaction on customer loyalty. The study advances knowledge on the role of sustainable practices, such as offering packaging-free products at supermarkets, in influencing customer loyalty and consequently motivating more sustainable consumer behavior.

The fourth paper by **Birgit Teufer, Martin Waiguny and Sonja Grabner-Kräuter** explores the impact of different sustainability labels on consumer perceptions and assessments of alternative food networks (AFNs). The study analyzes sustainability labels, which have various sustainability dimensions (i.e. ecological, economic or social dimensions), graphical quality (i.e. a professionally designed label or an amateurishly designed label) and awarding bodies (i.e. an official body or self-awarded). As the theoretical basis, the study uses theories on sustainable consumption, sustainability labels and perceptions of AFNs. The authors conducted three online experiments involving participants who were recruited using a microworking platform in Austria. The data collection resulted in 76, 105 and 132 valid responses for experiments 1, 2 and 3 respectively. The data were analyzed using a MANCOVA analysis, a correlation analysis, a chi-square test and other techniques. The findings show that there are no differences in consumer perceptions regarding various sustainability dimensions and in relation to various awarding bodies. However, professionally designed labels can positively influence the perceived authenticity of AFNs, and when professionally designed labels are also self-awarded, they can have a stronger positive effect on purchase intentions. This study advances our understanding of the influence of sustainability labels on consumer perceptions of AFNs.

The fifth paper by **Katarzyna Piwowar-Sulej, Agata Austen and Qaisar Iqbal** examines the impact of green human resource management (GHRM) on three types of employee green behavior (EGB), which are green in-role, innovative and extra-role EGBs, considering a conditional factor of environmental managerial support (EMS). The study is based on social exchange theory (SET) and self-determination theory (SDT). The data were collected by distributing a web-based questionnaire among employees of companies operating in the energy sector in Poland, resulting in 419 completed forms. The authors used PLS-SEM for conducting the analysis. The findings demonstrate that GHRM has positive effects on all three types of EGB, while EMS positively moderates the relationships between GHRM and two types of EGB, which are green extra-role behaviors and innovative work behaviors. The study advances our understanding of the micro-foundations of GHRM and the role of EMS in influencing the relationship between GHRM practices and EGBs.

The sixth paper by **Hajar Fatemi, Ulrika Leijerholt, Zeinab Rezvani and Oliver Schnittka** synthesizes the research on sustainable product branding activities and their impact on consumer responses and proposes the future research agenda. The authors conducted a domain-based literature review using a semi-systematic approach. The sample included 37 selected papers. The literature review identifies the four themes representing sustainable product branding strategies: building (green) brand equity, brand communication, brand/product development and extension and third-party labels and ratings. The positive consumer responses include positive attitudes toward brands, willingness to pay a premium price and positive word-of-mouth intentions, while the negative consumer responses include perceived greenwashing, negative brand evaluations and resistance to sustainable products with unfamiliar third-party labels. The literature review advances the current state of research by synthesizing previous studies on consumer responses to sustainable product branding strategies and proposing the agenda for future studies.

Concluding remarks on future research

The papers included in this special issue provide relevant insights on sustainable development by exploring various topics within the research streams on sustainability marketing and sustainability management. To develop further new perspectives on sustainability and sustainable development, future studies can have an interdisciplinary nature, integrating theoretical foundations and methodological approaches from different disciplines and use a longitudinal design for exploring sustainability-related phenomena from a long-term perspective. Considering the research topics, the papers in the special issue provide numerous propositions and detailed recommendations for future studies. To contribute with additional suggestions, the guest editors would like to share a list of potential topics that were included in the call for papers for this special issue and that are still relevant for developing further the knowledge on sustainable development. While the papers included in the special issue address some of these topics within the scope of their studies, all of these research topics can serve as valuable starting points for future studies aiming to contribute to research on sustainability marketing and sustainability management. The list of research topics includes various examples of issues at individual, organizational and societal levels that have the potential to accelerate sustainable development.

Individual level

- (1) Anti-consumption
- (2) Consumer citizenship
- (3) Consumer communities and sustainability

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- (4) Consumer movements for sustainable development
 - (5) Consumer perceptions and purchasing of sustainable brands
 - (6) Green, responsible and sustainable consumer behavior
 - (7) Individual values, attitudes and norms in relation to sustainable consumption
 - (8) Sustainable lifestyles

Organizational level

- (1) Brand activism for sustainable development
- (2) Conscientious corporate branding
- (3) Corporate sustainability and marketing/management
- (4) CSR and marketing/management
- (5) Green recovery strategies and practices in organizations
- (6) HRM and leadership for sustainability
- (7) Purpose-driven marketing/management
- (8) Strategies and practices of sustainability marketing/management
- (9) Sustainability management and sustainability accounting and reporting
- (10) Sustainability performance and marketing/management
- (11) Sustainable supply/value chain management

Societal level

- (1) Circular economy and the role of marketing/management
- (2) Critical perspectives on sustainability marketing/management
- (3) Digitalization and sustainability marketing/management
- (4) Gender equality and the role of marketing/management
- (5) Green recovery and the role of marketing/management
- (6) Marketing/management of artificial intelligence (AI) and technological innovations for sustainability
- (7) Marketing/management of social innovation
- (8) Sharing economy and the role of marketing/management
- (9) Social justice and the role of marketing/management
- (10) Social-ecological networks/systems and the role of marketing/management
- (11) Socio-ecological well-being and the role marketing/management
- (12) Sustainable development goals (SDG) and the role of marketing/management

The guest editors would like to thank all authors of the submitted papers and reviewers for their efforts in contributing to this special issue. We hope that this special issue and the

papers included in it will serve as inspiration for researchers conducting research on sustainability marketing and sustainability management, as well as practitioners and policymakers making decisions on sustainability-related issues in practice. The findings of the papers included in the special issue are also relevant for other stakeholders interested in developing their understanding of sustainability and advancing sustainable development.

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