



Commentary

Where Are We Now in Our Sustainability Journey?

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ABSTRACT

Despite notable gains in the movement to bring sustainability into the mainstream of marketing and business, much more needs to be done. This essay explains why sustainability is not mainstream, yet, and what it would take to move sustainability to the mainstream. Importantly, each sector of society (business, government, NGOs and education) need to be smarter about how each contributes to developing a sustainable society. Sustainable marketing scholars can play an important role in moving sustainability to the mainstream now and in the future.

KEYWORDS

sustainability challenges, sustainability opportunities, sustainable marketing

ARTICLE HISTORY

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I have taught some type of sustainable marketing course since 2009. In September 2022, a very bright student in my current undergraduate course titled Sustainable Business Practices at the University of Wyoming's College of Business came to my office during office hours. Earnestly, she posed the following question to me as someone convinced about the standing of sustainability in the world: "When did sustainability become mainstream?"

Honestly, this question took me by surprise. I had not heard it before from a student or a scholar, nor had I read about it in print. Could it be true that sustainability had become mainstream?

Could the mainstreaming of sustainability be similar to the arrival of globalization in the 1990s? Globalization as we know it had been occurring since the collapse of the Former Soviet Union in 1991. However, it was not until the 2000 publication of New York Times syndicated columnist Thomas Friedman's book about globalization *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* that many in the private, public sector and civil sectors actually grasped the phenomenon of globalization (Fried-

man, 2000). The evidence for globalization surrounded those in developed countries, such as the US (with the number of products on the shelves of the local Walmart stores sourced from China gradually rising to 70 per cent by 2011 over a period of only a few years (Chan, 2011, p. 4)). However, no one had explained what was occurring around them as the effects of "globalization". Might we be in another moment of history when evidence for the mainstreaming of the sustainability phenomenon had gradually increased over the last several years, but we missed it because of distractions caused by the coronavirus pandemic?

1. Signs of Sustainability Becoming Mainstream.

As students of sustainability learn, an important milestone in the development of the sustainability movement was the UN's Brundtland Report published in 1987, which presented the idea of sustainable development (Brundtland, 1987). In 1996, the International Standards Organization (ISO) introduced ISO 14001—the standard for an environmental management system (Jiang & Bansal, 2003). The following year



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saw the founding of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)—an independent international organization providing firms and organizations with standards for sustainability reporting, such as in the realm of non-financial reporting on firm environmental and social performance (GRI, 2022).

In the 21st century, paths toward sustainability for firms developed further in important ways, such as the ISO's 2010 publication of guidelines (not for certification) for social responsibility (Hales, 2021). Jean Rogers founded the independent Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) in 2011. The SASB sets standards for firms to use when disclosing Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) information to investors. Notably, only 20 per cent of firms in the S&P 500 Index published a sustainability report in 2011, but this number dramatically improved to 86 per cent publishing such a report in 2018. In sum, the development of standards for firms to pursue sustainability reporting has led to the vast majority of major corporations doing so today.

In 2019, the Business Roundtable announced the release of a new statement on the purpose of a corporation (Business Roundtable, 2019). It was signed by 181 CEOs of the largest firms in the US. The new statement overturned the Business Roundtable's endorsement of shareholder primacy and instead endorsed a commitment to all stakeholders of these firms including 1) customers, 2) employees, 3) suppliers, and 4) local communities.

Among financiers on Wall Street, sustainability now appears to have unprecedented respect. For example, BlackRock—the world's largest investment management firm with more than \$10 trillion under management (Wigglesworth & Agnew, 2022)—now focuses on firms that concentrate on the implementation of sustainability. In his 2020 letter to CEOs of firms in which BlackRock invests, BlackRock's CEO stated "...we will be increasingly disposed to vote against management and board directors when companies are not making sufficient progress on sustainability-related disclosures and the business practices and plan underlying them" (Fink, 2020).

Looking back to 1987 when business became linked to sustainable development through the Brundtland Report, sustainability has shown remarkable growth in many ways. This can be seen in NGOs fielding meaningful instructions and standards for achieving sustainable business operations, and a titan of Wall Street broadcasting to the world about his firm's sustainability focus. Still do such achievements represent a mainstreaming of sustainability?

2. Signs of Sustainability Still Not Mainstream.

While sustainability might be a mega-trend (Mittelstaedt et al., 2014), some have described it as an emerging mega-trend (Lubin & Esty, 2010). If sustainability is a mega-trend that is emerging, human activity on the planet might have only turned a faint shade of green at this point in its emergence. A look at progress in moving to a new type of economy and in curbing CO₂ emissions shows how much more needs to be done in these important realms of sustainability.

For example, despite much discussion in recent years about moving away from a linear economy characterized by a take-make-disposal consumption culture to a circular economy characterized by access-based solutions and recycling (Peterson, 2022), less than 10 per cent of plastics today are recycled in countries around the world (Li et al., 2022). A primary reason for this is the low cost of creating plastic. In short, recycling programs frequently are more expensive to implement than simply making new plastic.

Turning to a second example, this time in the realm of climate change, China became the largest emitter of CO₂ in 2006 (Zhong et al., 2022). By 2017, China emitted 27 per cent of the world's CO₂—more than the combined amounts of the US (15 per cent) and the EU countries (9.8 per cent) (Ritchie & Roser, 2020). This century through 2018, fossil fuels have increased in China's energy mix, while they have declined in the energy mixes of the US, the EU and Japan (Ortega-Ruiz et al., 2022). However, a recent bibliographic analysis of Chinese social-science journals discloses that climate change is rarely discussed in these journals, because this topic is viewed as controversial by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Zhong et al., 2022).

While many national dialogues across countries of the world include nationalism, such dialogues are undergirded in most countries by a free press. However, freedom of the press is very low in China (Uzar, 2022). So, the near void of dialogue in China about climate change combined with state-guided nationalism (Zeng & Sparks, 2020) suggests that China—the CO₂ giant of the world—will likely pursue its own path regarding CO₂ emissions in the future. Currently, the CCP promotes “ecological civilization”—a utopian vision of future harmony brought by socialism. However, eco-civilization remains imaginary and there is no meaningful movement toward such a future at this time in China (Hansen et al., 2018).

3. Some Marketing Scholars’ Thoughts about Sustainability as Mainstream

At the recent Association for Consumer Research Conference in Denver, Colorado in October 2022, the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* (JACR) held a workshop featuring scholarship published in JACR’s special issue on climate change. Angela Lee and Karen Page Winterich chaired the workshop. In response to the question “Is sustainability mainstream?”, Winterich replied quickly by saying “It’s not” (K. P. Winterich, Personal Communication, October 20, 2022). No one challenged her assertion.

I agree with Winterich. While outright hostility has subsided toward sustainability in business in recent years, much more needs to be done for moving sustainability into the mainstream of business. It is as if the sustainability in business movement has gone from crawling to standing upright and walking as a two-year-old child would. While parents and kin express excitement when their child stands and begins walking, much more development needs to occur before full development into adulthood.

If sustainability is not mainstream, two questions follow: 1) why is it not, yet mainstream? and 2) what would it take to move sustainability to the mainstream? These questions will now be considered.

4. Why Isn’t Sustainability Mainstream?

First, achieving more sustainable business practices is a complex undertaking at the micro level of a busi-

ness. An established business already has its sourcing, employee culture, and operational systems functioning. To pursue sustainability requires changing these while competing in a marketplace with formidable rivals. By comparison, a start-up venture can create its own sourcing, employee culture, and operational systems. But the start-up still confronts the double jeopardy in the marketplace of being new (with fewer buyers) and having less brand loyalty from its buyers (Ehrenberg et al., 1990). While some acorns do grow into shady oak trees, most do not.

Second, pursuing sustainability typically implies adopting a stakeholder approach to the business (Barney & Harrison, 2020). Accordingly, serving multiple stakeholders (rather than just the owners of the firm) means reconciling stakeholders’ divergent perspectives (Zimmermann et al., 2022). Not only is this more complex, but it will also require much more effort to understand the mental frames of stakeholders including their values and timelines for seeing better outcomes from the firm. Then, a firm needs to resolve the lack of alignment across these stakeholder views. This can take a monumental effort to accomplish—if it ever is fully accomplished. Then, in the course of things, stakeholder views change. More effort is required to address new misalignment across stakeholder views.

Third, similar to the previous point, pursuing a triple-bottom-line (TBL) of economic, environmental and social results means additional complexity for leaders of firms (Fischer et al., 2020). Accomplishing a balance across these three performance dimensions would likely be a delicate undertaking due to the possible trade-offs among these dimensions.

Opposition to pursuing sustainability often arises within the firm itself. For example, the structure of corporate governance tends to influence the degree to which firms harmonize their activities with the interests of stakeholders (Tibiletti et al., 2021). Firms with more board members are less likely to involve stakeholders in firm activity. In a similar way, firms are more likely to have higher ESG performance when they have more internal directors (Crifo et al., 2019). As an example of this phenomenon, the voting shares

for Ray Anderson's carpet-tile manufacturing-firm Interface, Inc. (one of the first industrial firms to pursue sustainable business practices) were closely held by Anderson and a few others (Anderson & White, 2011). This allowed the leaders of Interface to take a long-term view of pursuing sustainability (which Anderson later credited with saving his firm from being inefficient and non-competitive in the marketplace). An interpretation could be that external directors tend to advocate for traditional ways of doing business for the firm in the near term, as opposed to deferring profitability as firms learn how to successfully develop sustainable business practices.

Fourth, private regulation is often opposed by market activity. Market forces exert a gravity-like force on businesses thereby making it difficult to implement sustainable business practices that would be in line with voluntary sustainability standards. This is due primarily to competitive forces in markets. Dietz and Grabs (2022) capture this phenomenon in a study of 659 Honduran coffee producers using different standards for fair-trade designations (4C, Fairtrade, Fairtrade/organic, and UTZ). Results suggest that commercially-successful standards have little impact on the living standards of struggling coffee-growers, while stricter schemes create high entry barriers for these coffee-growers.

Fifth, private regulation can be opposed by government regulators. While the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) has developed reporting standards to merge sustainability and accounting information, the US Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) has publicly denounced attempts by "third parties", such as SASB, to influence the financial-reporting regime (Jebe, 2019). Traditionally, the government has controlled the concept of materiality (what matters) in reporting. With financial disclosure and environmental/social/governance (ESG) reporting occupying different domains, the mainstreaming of sustainability becomes problem-ridden as ESG factors remain separate from business operations. Encouragingly, mainstream investors increasingly want ESG integrated into the reporting for firms in order to better understand how the ESG factors impact

financial performance. Without aligning investor interests and sustainability, it is hard to see sustainability powering forward as it should. Currently, SASB frames materiality in the context of mainstream investor concerns and serves as "soft law".

Sixth, government regulation or support for sustainability might actually be counter to sustainability aims. For example, EU countries quickly encouraged vehicles with diesel engines after the Kyoto Protocol was signed in 1987 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions because diesels emit 15 per cent less CO₂ than gasoline engines (Peterson, 2021, p. 3-5). While only 10 per cent of the vehicle fleet in 1998, with government incentives, diesels accounted for more than half of the car fleet in Europe by 2015 (compared to 3 per cent of the fleet in the US in 2015). Unfortunately, government officials ignored the adverse effects of diesels, such as emitting 22 times more particulates and four times more nitrogen dioxide (both of which damage the lungs, brains, and hearts of mammals, such as human beings). Today, 24 EU cities will impose bans on diesel engines by 2030. The saga of diesels' rise and fall in the EU countries should give pause to those in the sustainability movement who perceive government as the societal institution to force businesses to adopt more sustainable business practices (Prothero & Mcdonagh, 2021).

5. What Would It Take to Move Sustainability to the Mainstream?

First, societies around the world need to consume smarter. Critical marketers have skewered the Dominant Social Paradigm of "more is better" for decades (Kilbourne et al., 1997). According to critical marketers, a principal solution to sustainability challenges is a reduction in consumption. Not surprisingly, this is not a pleasing message to most consumers—especially, those in developing countries who are counting on economic growth to allow them to attain the consumption levels of those in developed countries. Accordingly, a shift to smarter consumption by consumers is needed. Adopting access-based models of consumption, such as practices in the sharing economy (cars, tools, and homes for lodging) are examples of such smarter consumption.

Second, societies around the world need to nurture ecosystems like never before. Paul Hawken, a longtime influencer in the sustainability movement perceives individual humans as capable of this. In his 2021 book *Regeneration*, Hawken (2021) sees that the broad participation of humans across countries of the world in doing meaningful tasks for nurturing ecosystems will result in ending the climate crisis by 2050—in one generation. Hawken proposes a worldwide collective effort of individuals. “Collectives do not emerge from the tops of institutions,” (Hawken, 2021, p. 11) said: “They begin with one person and then another, the invisible social space where commitment and action join and come together to become a dyad, a group, a team, a movement. To put it simply: no one is coming to help.”

“Only two per cent of the world’s population do anything about climate change,” Hawken said (Net Impact, 2021). “So, this issue—which is the biggest humanity has faced—is ignored by humans. Regeneration is trying to open up conversation and avoid traps which turn off common people. The book is a neurotransmitter to the website (regeneration.org)—a world of action-oriented endeavors.”

Third, governments need to govern smarter. For example, governments could assist circular economies form and develop (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). Providing incentives to innovate in plastic recycling, as well as subsidizing new ways to process recycled materials could result in a marked improvement in recycling rates for plastic. The Dutch government has set a goal to have the Dutch economy become completely circular by 2050 (Dutch Government, 2022). Towards this goal, raw material consumption in the Netherlands should be reduced by half by 2030. The Dutch government seeks to have more efficient processes developed so that there is less need for raw materials, such as biomass. While this stated objective for a circular economy might be regarded by some as cheap talk, the Dutch have employed government action and long-term planning to reclaim 17 per cent of its current land mass from the sea and lakes (Hoeksema, 2007). Systems thinking is also an undeniable part of the Dutch culture as one-third of its land lies below sea level.

Without an extensive system developed by humans (dunes, dikes and pumps), 65 per cent of Dutch land would be under water at high tide. The Dutch appear poised to show other countries how a circular economy could be boosted by national and local governments.

Fourth, businesses need to do business smarter by 1) moving from viewing sustainable business practices as merely saving money (Dyllick & Muff, 2016) to 2) increasingly adopting stakeholder approaches, and 3) eventually identifying one of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a target for doing good in the world (Filho et al., 2019).

Why would firms do this? Developing a reputation for sustainability attracts employees with enthusiasm for the sustainability-related purpose of the firm who then work with more autonomy to see the firm fulfill its purpose (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). Such a sustainability reputation for the firm leads consumers to be markedly more receptive to new products from the firm promoted as being sustainable. Research using extensive data about 883 new product introductions in the Dutch marketplace from 2008-2011 suggests that there is a strong positive interaction between a firm’s sustainability reputation and the sales success of its new sustainable products compared to a new conventional product (1,268 per cent higher) (Van Doorn et al., 2021). By comparison, firms viewed to not have a sustainability reputation have a negative interaction with sales of sustainable products (94 per cent lower). This suggests that firms that have invested in developing their sustainability reputation (such as consumer packaged-goods firm Unilever) would encounter much more success in introducing new sustainable products into the marketplace than a rival, such as Kraft Heinz, that has not invested in developing a sustainability reputation.

Fifth, educators need to serve smarter. The just discussed results from the study by Van Doorn et al. (2021) give an example of how extensive and excellent academic research can clarify important issues for leaders of firms committed to sustainability, as well as those considering committing to sustainability. It is hard to imagine a firm, a government agency or a

NGO designing and executing such a study about consumer response to new-product introductions across 14 different product categories as van Doorn's team did. However, business academic researchers did this. Studies like this illuminate a path toward sustainability for firms and reinforce sustainability initiatives by leaders of firms and sustainability-minded employees.

Importantly for educators, the next generation of business leaders are now in classrooms in which educators now do their teaching. In a 2018 six-country study of MBA students from Latin America (Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay) three clusters emerged among the students (Murcia & Acosta, 2022). Student attitudes toward the natural environment and economic growth characterized the three clusters in the following way: 1) the “consumption-reduction minded” who regard the natural environment as extremely important (31 per cent), 2) the “dual-minded” who regard both the environment and economic growth as important, but the latter might not be needed to achieve prosperity (54 per cent), and 3) the “business-case minded” who prioritize economic growth and are least concerned about the environment (15 per cent).

Hoffman (2018) reported that 88 per cent of business school students in North America viewed learning about social and environmental issues in business as a priority. This means that 12 per cent do not view sustainability learning as a priority—about the same amount as the 15 per cent in the 2018 six-country Latin America study. So an important insight for educators here is understanding that the vast majority of business-school students express a genuine interest in learning about market-based sustainability. When considering entire MBA cohorts at business schools (rather than those who would voluntarily take elective courses—if they were offered at business schools), these results should lead readers of the *Journal of Sustainable Marketing* to redouble their efforts to engage those with interests and sentiments for sustainability—the majority of business students.

An important step for educators would be teaching a course in sustainable marketing, which might entail proposing that such a course be taught. Peterson

(2022) presents a macromarketing approach to developing such a course that could include textbooks, such as Dahlstrom and Crosno (2022) *Sustainable Marketing, 3rd edition*, or Peterson's (2021) *Sustainable Marketing: A Holistic Approach, 2nd edition*.

6. Conclusion

Sustainability has moved from the crawling stage of development to the walking stage of development. Much more needs to be done to enable sustainability to hit a running speed in the years to come.

One of the research endeavors of social-science researchers is developing theoretical explanations that enable others to do their work in building a better society. There is a current need for theoretical clarity in different realms of sustainability research. For example, Kirchherr et al. (2017) found no less than 114 definitions of the circular economy in the literature. Their analysis identified 17 dimensions for these definitions including the following: 1) refuse, 2) rethink, 3) reduce, 4) reuse, 5) repair, 6) refurbish, 7) remanufacture, 8) repurpose, 9) recycle, and 10) recover. Clearly, thematic reduction among these definitions is in order and sustainable marketing researchers should bring their theorizing abilities to this undertaking.

In line with this need for an intense theorizing effort to bring a convergent understanding of sustainability phenomena, such as the definition of a circular economy, there is an acute need for developing theory-based sustainability metrics. Such metrics are needed for major industry sectors, such as food/agriculture, energy, transportation and manufacturing, as well as for different aspects of the system of business, such as supply-chain operations (Hendiani et al., 2022). In a comprehensive review of the sustainability measurement literature, researchers noted a lack of standardization in measurement practices, but also the importance of connecting indicators to firm strategy (Mura et al., 2018).

Given marketing scholars' orientation to external stakeholders (such as customers) and how the firm actually earns profits (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021), marketing scholars can contribute to the development of sustainability metrics that would likely connect to firm

strategy.

In the realm of firm strategy and public policy, much needs to be explained about how governmental agencies can and should be involved in firms' marketing practices related to sustainability (Chisam et al., 2022). Again, marketing scholars can play important parts in the development of theory about the role of governments and governmental agencies in the move toward market-based sustainability (Hult, 2011).

In sum, the future is bright for scholars researching sustainability phenomena. Scientific knowledge of the type marketing researchers know how to produce in journals, such as the *Journal of Sustainable Marketing*, is needed now and the years to come. There is much work to be done in theorizing about sustainability-related phenomena and developing meaningful metrics that business practitioners, policy makers, and scholars can use to develop a more sustainable future for societies of the world.

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