



Commentary

Where to Next? How Marketing Needs to Take a Lead in the Circular Economy

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While the study of sustainability within the marketing discipline has gone more “mainstream” – case in point special issues in journals such as the *Journal of Consumer Research* and *Journal of Marketing* – there is still much more progress to be made (Peterson, 2022). Since our original paper outlined the discourses around sustainability marketing in 2019 (which we started back in 2017) (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019), we have found the conversation has started to shift; not only in our (Marketing) discipline but also in interdisciplinary journals. Nevertheless, as a discipline we have many more hard questions and home truths to face.

In terms of climate, these hard questions become even more critical to address given that 2022 was the sixth-warmest year on record; that the 2022 surface temperature was 1.55 °F (0.86 °C) warmer than the 20th-century average; and that the ten warmest years (based upon historical records) have all occurred since 2010 (Lindsey & Luann, 2023). On top of that, society is dealing with increasing polarization (Boxell et al., 2022) and populism (O’shaughnessy, 2022), as well as battling with inflation and the rising cost of living (World Economic Forum, 2022). At the same time, it is estimated that 71 million people were pushed back into extreme poverty in 2020, rising for the first time since 1998 (United Nations, 2020). Yet, Oxfam (2022) found that billionaires’ wealth had risen more in the first 24 months of COVID-19 than in the previous 23 years

combined. These environmental, social, and economic issues are becoming more difficult, and simultaneously, urgent to address.

One thing that hasn’t changed, is the ambiguity of sustainability – it means everything to everybody. Reflecting on the changes within the sustainability field, one startling change since 2017 has been a shift in discourse from sustainability (or sustainable development) towards the circular economy. The circular economy proposes a change from the linear, take-create-waste model to one which is circular by design, where materials flow is designed to mimic (cyclical) natural systems (Fehrer et al., 2023). Rather than operating with our eyes and ears closed, that is, a consumption-production (and economic) system that operates as if resources are limitless, a circular economy acknowledges the limits to growth. The circular economy takes a systems perspective as it suggests a fundamental shift in current practices (Kirchherr et al., 2017) across micro, meso, and macro levels. A challenge which we believe marketing scholars are up for but have yet to address.

1. Impact (in the top journals)

It is a pity that the top marketing journals have barely mentioned the circular economy. Using a keyword search of the “circular economy” in the top marketing journals there is very little published. For example,



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Journal of Retailing has two articles, where it is mentioned in a review article on the future of retailing and a piece on sustainable retailing. While the *Journal of Marketing* has one article – on recycling – the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Marketing Science* have no mention of the circular economy. If we look a little further outside these top journals, *Industrial Marketing Management* is one of the only marketing journals to buck the trend with 40 results. In some respects, this observation sets a challenge to top marketing journals, in that greater attention to circular economy research is one of the most profound current impacts researchers in marketing could make to knowledge, society, and the environment. Moreover, this also leads to our continued discussions on impact – what do we mean by impact? Is it our connections to real world problems and/or the adoption of our theoretical models in the ‘real world’ (e.g., industry, public policy)? Linked to this, should we rely on the top journals to pave the way on impact? Why do we continue to look, aspire to, or admire the ‘top’ journals – should we be more focused on interdisciplinary journals, even though our institutions rarely incorporate these within academics’ promotions criteria or key performance indicators?

2. Marketing and the Circular Economy

The marketing discipline has a lot to offer the Circular Economy. We can help contribute to some knowledge gaps – especially around consumers, shaping markets, product and service design, to name just a few. For example, in their analysis of 114 different definitions of the circular economy, (Kirchherr et al., 2017) found only 19% of definitions considered consumers or consumption activities (versus waste hierarchy, systems, and economic prosperity with around 40%), while a similar review by Camacho-Otero et al. (2018) found 10% of articles focused on consumption in the circular economy. Thus, this short communication piece hopes to provide inspiration and direction for marketers to contribute to the circular economy discourse.

When we examine the ten strategies which can be adopted for the circular economy, marketing has a role to play in each and every one of them. We have bro-

ken down each of these strategies as they relate to our previously developed Sustainability Marketing Framework (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019)¹.

2.1. Transformative Sustainable Marketing

The most circular strategies are Refuse, Rethink, and Reduce, which all fall into Transformative Sustainable Marketing. Many marketing, particularly critical, humanistic, and macromarketing, scholars have dared to question the ideology of consumption (Kilbourne et al., 2018). The most circular strategy in Potting et al.’s (2017) classification is Refusal of consumption. Refuse, Rethink, and Reduce get to the heart of what we know about marketing myopia and service-dominant logic. It is a call to question the need for ‘stuff’ when we are after the benefits and services provided. Other related concepts of anti-consumption, especially reclamation behaviors (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013), mindful consumption (Bahl et al., 2016), voluntary simplicity (Ballantine & Creery, 2010), and wider societal shifts towards sharing (Belk, 2010) should provide a wealth of insight into consumer lifestyles and the shifts needed. Consumption has embedded cultural, social, and historical meanings, intertwined with the habitual everyday practices of ordinary citizens, thus social practice theory will also provide insight into system change (Shove et al., 2012). At the same time, we must also consider the social implications of circular lifestyles – who wins? Do some individuals lose? We see serious considerations about the impact of Airbnb on the hotel industry (Zervas et al., 2017), Uber on the taxi sector (Skok & Baker, 2019), and are starting to question what type of (meaningful) work is available in the circular economy (Corvellec et al., 2022).

Hobson (2022) urges scholars to consider the impacts on the everyday, “our [citizen-consumer] roles are being framed and played out; what is illuminated and what is hidden by such framings; and who gains what, how, and to what ends is a central” (p.173). So, let’s question the framings and the roles of the transition. Given that “the dynamics of prevailing

¹ We have shifted from the term ‘Sustainability Marketing’ to ‘Sustainable Marketing’ to adhere to more recent shifts in its usage

Table 1. Circular Economy Strategies

Strategy	Description	Sustainability Marketing Type
Refuse	Make product redundant by abandoning its function or offer the same function from a radically different product	TSM
Rethink	Make product use more intensive (i.e., share, lease)	TSM
Reduce	Increase efficiency in product manufacturing or use by consuming fewer natural resources and materials	TSM
Reuse	Reuse by another consumer of discarded product which is still in good condition and fulfils its original purpose	RSM
Repair	Repair and maintain defective products so its original function can be maintained	RSM
Refurbish	Restore an old product and bring it up to date	RSM
Remanufacture	Use parts of a discarded product in a new product with the same function	ASM - RSM
Repurpose	Use discarded product or its parts in a new product with a different function	ASM - RSM
Recycle	Process materials to obtain the same or lower quality	ASM
Recover	Incineration of material with energy recovery	ASM

Source: [Potting et al. \(2017\)](#)

Key: ASM: Auxiliary Sustainable Marketing RSM: Reformative Sustainable Marketing, TSM: Transformative Sustainable Marketing

economic systems are apparently not up for grabs in the CE” ([Hobson, 2022](#), p.167), let’s see how the Top 3 circular strategies of Refuse, Rethink, and Reduce can provide starting points for a rethink of the capitalist, neoliberal economic system. COVID-19 forced individuals to consume less and differently, and spend more time ‘experiencing’ (walking, baking, cooking, knitting), and forced production to halt completely, slow or diversify their offerings. Questions around how we can shape markets to ensure circularity are slowly emerging ([Fehrer et al., 2023](#); [Mattsson & Junker, 2023](#)) and more reflection is needed to understand and influence institutional change.

2.2. Reformative Sustainable Marketing

Next, is Reformative Sustainable Marketing which includes the strategies of Reuse, Repair, Refurbish, Remanufacture, and Repurpose. While product and service design are still embedded in our first-year

undergraduate marketing courses, in most universities it has become a separate department and discipline. So, let’s take back some ownership of product and service design. Here, marketers can influence how products are made. We should be teaching our students about the biological and technical flows to ensure product and service design is circular. We can do this through making it the new ‘normal’ - that cradle-to-cradle design ([Braungart et al., 2007](#)) is ‘standard’ and how we should be designing all products. Movements such as the ‘right to repair’ (including repair cafes), the rise of plastic-free or zero-waste grocery stores, and regulatory changes towards regulated product stewardship will only make Reuse, Repair, Refurbish, Remanufacture, and Repurpose more important (and sometimes mandatory) for marketers to integrate within their strategy and practices ([Kemper et al., 2023](#)).

Most research on the circular economy tends to consider the consumer as an afterthought. A true product orientation – if you build it, they will come – has taken shape of some circular economy literature, and while others acknowledge the need for consumer behavior, rarely is it discussed how we get there. So, this is a call for marketers to conduct research on consumer perceptions, behaviors, and more importantly – practices, towards Reuse, Repair, Refurbish, Remanufacture, and Repurpose. We know that there are several factors that influence consumer acceptability of circular economy initiatives, such as knowledge, beliefs, product experiences, aversion of risk, and product characteristics (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2017; Wang & Hazen, 2016). For example, environmentally conscious (Grasso & Asioli, 2020; Mccarthy et al., 2020), status seeking, convenience oriented, and price conscious consumers (Mccarthy et al., 2020) were more likely to buy waste-to-value products. Related to the five strategies within Reformative Sustainability Marketing, when consumers buy refurbished, remanufactured, or repurposed products, there are well known disgust reactions and concerns about contamination (Meng & Leary, 2021). How can we alleviate these reactions and concerns? Equally, how might we reconsider the concept of disposition (Jacoby et al., 1977) to understand how consumers deal with products that are at the end of their useful life, but that could be refurbished or repurposed for future use?

It is also important to consider the terminology of reused, repaired, refurbished, remanufactured, and repurposed products and their marketing communication. Let's use our knowledge of message framing and advertising to provide information to consumers about circular economy products. For example, perceived contamination negatively influences consumers' opinions of circular products and decreases willingness to pay (Baxter et al., 2017). Consumers are more likely to purchase a T-shirt made of unused recycled plastic bottles than used bottles (Meng & Leary, 2021). We need to manage these perceptions and it should be our job to improve attitudes and increase their acceptability. Research shows communications can make a dif-

ference, for example, providing consumers information about the health and environmental benefits of waste-to-value food can improve attitudes (Cattaneo et al., 2019). There is a critical role for sustainable marketers to consider upcycled foods (Ye, 2023) and in general, for social marketers to play in communicating the circular economy.

Even more importantly, how can we shape the environment to ensure circular product and service choices are the most convenient, cost-effective, and desired? This includes questions around reverse logistics. Here, there is a major call to arms to supply chain management (Kotabe, 2023). How can we, through services and infrastructure, make it convenient to reuse, repair and bring back our products to the manufacturer?

2.3. Auxiliary Sustainable Marketing

The circular economy is not a magic bullet that will save the planet or humankind. Many strategies of companies still also fall into the most linear strategies, Recycle and Recover; which fall under the umbrella of Auxiliary Sustainable Marketing. Here, collection, sorting and infrastructure are required. While we 'cannot recycle our way out of the problem' (as stated by many newspaper articles), there are industries, for hygiene or safety reasons, that cannot adopt a reuse model. Moreover, life-cycle assessments (LCA) also paint a picture which isn't black or white – for example an LCA conducted for New Zealand Post demonstrated that recycled plastic courier bags imported from China were the most environmentally friendly option (Riordan & Vickers, 2021). An LCA doesn't tell us everything, but it will lead companies to choose between alternatives. Future research should consider environmental and social dimensions of sustainability when considering recycling and recovery, for example the location of composting plants can impact local communities (Edwards, 2023). The circular economy of plastics is still an understudied research topic – plastic for single-use (e.g., food, medical) and other applications (e.g., piping) are still needed, so how can we create circularity in the system?

3. Last Thoughts

What we have outlined above is, somewhat, a simplification of the roles marketing can play. There are many limitations to the circular economy's theoretical (e.g., often the neglect of social dimensions) and practical underpinnings (Korhonen et al., 2018); and the rhetoric is very much in the hands of industry – one need not look any further than the hijacking of sustainability (Welford, 2013) and the bioeconomy (Vivien et al., 2019) by corporate elites. However, change will not happen without industry leading the charge – and indeed, many businesses are adopting new circular business models (e.g., leasing, sharing, repairing) and pledging to change practices (e.g., The New Plastics Economy Global Commitment). We also see cities (sometimes more than government) take responsibility for climate change mitigation (Reckien et al., 2018) and a transition to a circular economy (Fratini et al., 2019). But, many questions remain about ways that marketers within business and municipalities can become change agents. There is much internal marketing work to be done too – cultural change needs to occur within organizations.

So, while this is a call to arms, it does not come without cautions. The circular economy should not become another means to greenwash sustainability – not another way for 'business as usual' – nor for us to continue to consume our way out of the environmental (and social) crisis. Instead, the circular economy and its current widespread use in government and industry documents should be seen as an advantage. Let's use this as an opportunity to 'get in the door' and start a real discussion about waste, about overconsumption, and about 'enoughness'. Why not start to be part of the conversation so we can help lead and direct it?

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LUMINOUS
INSIGHTS

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