Commentary

Environmental and Social Sustainability: A Consumer Cultural Identity Perspective in the Global-Local Marketplace

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ABSTRACT

With the 2023 The Sustainable Development Goals Report confirming that the world is far from reaching the established sustainability goals for 2030, we focus this commentary on environmental and social sustainability from the perspective of consumer cultural identity and branding within a global-local marketplace. Our attention is on the firm (multinational and local) and its brand (global or local) as a viable business entity with economic sustainability, that is also engaged with environmental sustainability and social sustainability. We offer substantive questions to guide research around the complexities of corporate sustainability, global and local company/brand actions, and consumer cultural identity.

1. Introduction

Environmental, social, and economic sustainability serve as the foundations of corporate sustainability, and the interdependence between these three foundations is increasingly evident in the global-local marketplace. Economic development and sustainability have been credited with launching new production facilities, creating jobs and income, and improving social welfare, yet at the same time, been criticized for compromising environmental sustainability, often increasing pollution and deforestation with a loss of biodiversity (Liu et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022), and similarly, negatively impacting social sustainability around human rights issues for forced labor and forced relocation (Cullet, 2021). Singh et al. (2019)

proposed that the three foundations of sustainability are fundamentally cultural. According to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Report 2023: Special Edition, Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet (UN DESA, 2023), culture is defined as a "global public good and a critical enabler and driver of progress towards the Goals" (p. 49). The report goes on to state that:

"*Culture serves as a source of knowledge, values and communication, as a contributor to environmental sustainability and as a generator of economic activity and jobs. Respect for cultural diversity and the diversity of religions and beliefs, as well as intercultural dialogue and understanding, are also crucial for strengthening social cohesion and sustaining peace. Culture and respect for cultural diver-*

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sity, however, remain undervalued and underutilized in the push for Goals-related progress. Greater consideration of culture's role in supporting the achievement of the Goals – including within relevant indicators – would generate an important boost for implementation of the Goals between now and 2030" (pp. 49-50).

Herein, we explore culture with attention to globalization and localization ideologies, global, local, and glocal cultural identity, and global and local companies/brands. Research in marketing has asserted that globalization and localization as ideologies co-exist in intertwined ways (Strizhakova et al., 2012; Strizhakova & Coulter, 2019a). Indeed, what is global is ultimately defined and contingent upon what is known as local in a given country, and vice versa (Akaka & Alden, 2010). The socio-cultural-historical context and political environment of each country contributes and shapes the dynamic of globalization and localization processes and cultural perspectives (Strizhakova & Coulter, 2019b). Moreover, global and local consumer cultures are dynamic, because of the co-dependence of globalization and localization. Over the past four decades, local cultures have increasingly co-existed with global consumer culture as global technologies, media, travel, and multinationals have broken down geographic borders. Yet, rather than creating a universal homogenization across countries, globalization has fueled localization and nationalistic and protectionist tendencies. Within this global marketplace, both multinational and local firms and both global and local brands are key players.

Relatedly, consumer cultural identity is defined as the broad range of beliefs and behaviors that an individual shares with other members of one's community (Strizhakova et al., 2012). Within this global consumer culture marketplace, consumer cultural identity is at the core of consumer cultural expressions, and research has distinguished between consumers with a strong local cultural identity, those with a strong global cultural identity, as well as those with a strong glocal cultural identity (straddling the local and global cultures), and those who are not engaged with consumer culture (Strizhakova et al., 2012; Zhang & Khare, 2009). Consumers with a strong local identity (as well

as with stronger expressions of this identity, including consumer ethnocentrism, nationalism, and patriotism) relate to values, beliefs and customs of their geographically proximal cultural community. Alternatively, consumers with a strong global identity have a better understanding of the global marketplace, and identify with global values, traditions, and trends, and characteristics associated with global consumer culture, including innovativeness, cultural openness, fresh start mindset, and materialism.

In this commentary, we draw upon work on global consumer culture and branding (Askegaard, 2006), cultural identity (Arnett, 2002), and primarily on environmental sustainability (as relatively little work has focused on social sustainability) as the basis for offering research questions that serve to consider scholarly endeavors more broadly in terms of environmental sustainability and social sustainability within the context of global-local cultural identity and company/brand considerations.

2. Firm Consciousness of the Local and Global Marketplace

Firm consciousness of the local and global marketplace is critical to MNCs looking to establish business in foreign lands (Griffith, 2021), and firm consciousness of the local and global brandscape within which a local or global firm operates is critical. The intricacies of operating internationally and understanding the local marketplace from a multinational firm perspective are equally relevant to a firm operating locally but competing with national and global brands. Firm consciousness around supply chain issues, product design and components, and packaging are also important facets of business that are increasingly drawing attention from consumers and watchdog groups. With regard to local versus global issues of the environment, poverty, education, and health, it is important to consider the broader issues of culture and ideology. From a practical perspective, successful business operations that have a positive social impact require local engagement. Research questions of interest include:

- For consumers with global and local cultural identity, to what extent do social, cultural, political,

and historical factors of individual countries/markets impact their responses to efforts around environmental and social sustainability? What are the local "resistances" to environmental sustainability and social sustainability by global and local brands?

- What strategies should multinationals, holding portfolios of global and local brands, use in signaling environmental and social commitments to consumers with various cultural identities?
- How can global and local firms build relationships with academia, foundations, NGOs, local/regional/-national governments to support local and global causes?
- How can partnering with global and local competitors within the industry, industry-based organizations, and/or Global Compact Local Networks help firms to understand local markets, language, learning, to facilitate collective action to address local and global challenges, and human rights issues?

3. Firm Messaging around Environmental Sustainability and Social Sustainability

Companies and brands are increasingly having a voice in issues of environmental and social sustainability. Specifically, the vast majority of multinational firms and their global brands make explicit commitments to environmental sustainability in their mission statements, whereas local regional brands are hesitant to make strong statements about environmental sustainability even when they have business initiatives focused on the circular economy (Salnikova et al., 2022). One possible explanation is growing anti-globalization sentiment. Consumers of local brands have a strong local identity, often coupled with stronger expressions of this identity, including consumer ethnocentrism and nationalism. Yet, in recent work in South Africa (Quaye et al., 2023), we find that when local brands signal environmental sustainability commitments, prestige perceptions of these brands increase among locally-minded ethnocentric consumers. Consistent with other work (Grinstein & Riefler, 2015; Ng & Basu, 2019; Strizhakova & Coulter, 2013; Salnikova et al., 2022), however, we also find that environmental signaling by both global and local brands increases prestige perceptions for both global

and local brands among consumers with a strong global identity.

In the face of environmental and social sustainability issues, firms and organizations often use doomsday scenarios to gain the attention of consumers. Although these negative fear and guilt appeals are successful in getting attention, once these appeals become "too" threatening or negative, they increase consumer anxiety, stress, and apathy toward taking actions (Coulter & Pinto, 1995; Keller & Block, 1996). Recent work establishes that consumers with a strong global/glocal identity tend to be more optimistic and action-oriented, and hence positive message frames, such as promotion focus, distant spatial construal with reference to the global world, and more actionable temporally proximal frames lead to greater engagement by consumers with a global/glocal identity (White et al., 2011; Salnikova et al., 2022).

With the global-local ideological discourse, particularly around protectionism versus globalism, becoming increasingly salient and tense, several areas of research focused on firm strategies and messaging are worthy of investigation, including:

- How can negative and positive messaging tactics be effectively combined for global and for local companies/brands to engage with issues of environmental sustainability and social sustainability to signal their commitments to consumers with local/global/glocal identity expressions?
- How can firms de-couple the anti-globalization and anti-environmental linkage in public discourse, particularly when the latter is embedded within a nationalistic agenda?
- Can optimistic, storied messaging (vs. doomsday appeals) about global environmental challenges (e.g., deforestation, plastic ocean pollution, land and water life preservation) be more effective in persuading individuals with a strong global/glocal versus local identity or non-believers that they have an important role to play in reducing their environmental footprint, as well as sustaining life and the planet?
- What messaging triggers a personal call-to-action

related to global issues and global crises with local and long-term consequences (refugee infusion from war or environmental crises, such as flooding, earthquakes), particularly for consumers with a strong local cultural identity or those who lack awareness of the "close to home" implications?

4. Greenwashing and Bluewashing: Consumer and Firm Perspectives

Firms and brands are increasingly directly or tangentially engaged with politically-charged social activities (e.g., COVID-19, wars in and refugees from Ukraine and Middle East), and environmental issues (e.g., prolonged draughts, devastating fire storms, and torrential rains), and as such Swaminathan et al. (2020, p. 32) refer to brands as "arbiters of controversy". Moreover, the messaging around social and environmental topics has been under intense scrutiny, and the discrepancy between firm messages and actions has led to consumer perceptions of greenwashing and bluewashing (Rajan, 2002; McClimon, 2022). These respective "washings" reflect discrepancies between company/brand positioning and their minimal or absence of action on environmental and social issues, escalating consumer skepticism and negatively impacting company/brand image and other outcomes (Amawate & Deb, 2021; Magee, 2022). Research questions of interest include:

- Are watchdog roles related to "washing" engaged by consumers with local/global cultural identities, by consumers with strong attachments to the specific environmental/social issues, or by consumers with particular political ideologies?
- How does consumer cultural identity impact perceptions of "washing" and consumer skepticism in relation to global and local brands? What effect does "washing" by local and global firms have on consumer anxiety about these environmental and social issues? How does consumer anxiety help or obstruct efforts by global and local firms?
- What effect does the call out of greenwashing and bluewashing have on company profits, stock prices, and company/brand image? How can global and local companies ensure the accuracy (vs. puffery) of

their environmental and social sustainability claims?
- What strategies can local and global brands follow to build authenticity and trust in their commitments to environmental and social sustainability among consumers with global, glocal, and local identities?

5. Consumption Practices and Environmental/Social Sustainability

Academic work has linked environmentally conscious consumers (Haws et al., 2014) and consumer minimalism (Wilson & Bellezza, 2022) to being frugal in their consumption, being price and value conscious, and engaging in environmentally conscious consumption practices. Interestingly, Strizhakova and Coulter (2013) find, in both developed and emerging markets, that materialistic consumer tendencies (which appear to paradoxically conflict with environmentally conscious and minimalistic tendencies) are predictive of consumer concern for the environment, willingness to pay for environmentally friendly products, perceptions of global companies as environmentally friendly, and likelihood to engage in environmentally friendly behaviors, and that these relationships are moderated by the global/glocal cultural identity. Additionally, Strizhakova et al. (2021) link global cultural identity to the fresh start mindset and an interest in environmentally friendly global brands. Research questions of interest include:

- Why are consumers buying upcycled products from thrift shops and e-retailers (e.g., Etsy)? To what extent are consumer motivations to purchase these products grounded in local and/or global cultural identity and/or environmental sustainability and social sustainability?
- How do consumers view the engagement of local and global firms in local versus global environmental and social sustainability issues from an authenticity perspective versus a profit motivation perspective?
- To what extent are consumers' reactions to local and global brand commitment to environmentalism and social issues impacted by cultural identity versus gender identity, religion, nationalism, and eth-

nicity? Does having a global cultural identity elevate attention to global and local social issues?

- To what extent do consumers with varying levels of cultural identity understand and care about their consumption of natural resources and their environmental footprint? How does this vary by country (https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/ecological-footprint-by-country)?
- To what extent can non-material goods in the digital space and digital/VR experiences substitute for and decrease consumption of material goods for consumers with a strong global, glocal, and local identity?

6. Disposition Practices and Environmental/Social Sustainability

Over the past decade, consumer researchers have increased attention to disposition of material goods as an important topic of inquiry (Winterich et al., 2017). Particularly in the realm of environmental sustainability around the effects on land use, landfills, and polluting our oceans and waterways, consistent with SDGs 13, 14, and 15, research has discussed environmentally friendly disposition – reuse, recycle, repurpose. Despite some improvements in these environmentally friendly disposition practices, the following questions remain:

- What are similar/unique motivations for those with a strong local versus global identity to engage in reusing, recycling, and repurposing of used material goods? To what extent are those motivations linked to providing these used goods to other consumers, extending the lives of material goods, and avoiding adding waste to landfills and/or oceans and waterways?
- Disposition of goods (particularly large consumer durables) to another individual, a resale shop, a recycling center requires time and effort. How committed to engaging in these disposition practices (vs. trashing) are consumers with a strong global versus local cultural identity? Does this level of commitment differ depending on the type of

brand and/or the relationship with the product?
- What is the importance of participation in the disposition practices of reuse, recycle, and repurpose (versus reduced consumption and consumer minimalism) for individuals with a strong global versus strong local culture identity?
- What expectations do consumers with a strong global (vs. local) culture identity have for disposition as related to giving these goods to charities and people in need versus selling material goods?

7. Conclusion

With "The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition, Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet" reporting that we are far from meeting the established sustainable development goals around environmental and social responsibility by 2030, we have framed this commentary around consumer cultural identity and branding within a global-local marketplace. Our attention to the firm as a viable business entity with economic sustainability, that is also engaged with its consumers around environmental sustainability and social sustainability. We explore firm strategies and messaging practices, consumer perceptions of greenwashing and bluewashing, and consumer practices of consumption and disposition and offer substantive questions to guide research endeavors around the complexities of corporate sustainability, global and local company/brand actions, and consumer cultural identity. Our research questions also call for an integrated approach to sustainability, with global and local companies/brands partnering with one another, industry organizations, NGOs, governments, the UN to further these important agendas around the environment and social issues.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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