



Commentary

Connecting Sustainable Marketing and International Marketing Strategy Standardization/Adaptation: Research Opportunities

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The study of sustainability has long been a central focus of scholarship in the field of marketing (e.g., [van Dam and Apeldoorn, 1996](#); [Varadarajan, 2014](#)). Multiple reviews of the marketing literature have been conducted on the topic (e.g., [Chabowski et al., 2011](#); [White et al., 2019](#)) and commentaries published (e.g., [Bolton, 2021](#); [Davies et al., 2020](#); [Peattie and Collins, 2009](#)). Given the more than five decades of scholarly inquiry into the area, it is not surprising that the literature is quite diverse.

There are high-level frameworks and theorizations as to the role of sustainability within marketing ([Gordon et al., 2011](#); [Hunt, 2012](#)), as well as significant works on areas such as innovation and new product development (e.g., [Leonidou et al., 2013](#); [Varadarajan, 2017](#); [Varadarajan et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, one can find focused efforts on sustainable consumption ([White et al., 2019](#)) as well as specific elements of consumer behaviors, such as energy conservation ([Allen et al., 1982](#)). All of these efforts provide new and important insights into what many would call the most important topic area in the field of marketing today, i.e., sustainable marketing, even if there is continued contention on specifically what “sustainable marketing” means ([Kemper & Ballantine, 2019](#)).

While there are tremendous opportunities for the study of sustainable marketing, here I would like to

focus on issues related to international marketing strategy, and more specifically to the field’s central discussion for almost a century, that of standardization/adaptation. The theoretical foundations of the standardization/adaptation debate have historically focused on the perception of and/or the movement toward cross-market consumer segment homogeneity ([Griffith, 2010](#); [Ozturk et al., 2021](#); [Ryans et al., 2003](#); [Szymanski et al., 1993](#); [Cavusgil & Zou, 1994](#)). Researchers who view markets, or consumer segment wants and needs, as being homogeneous argue that standardization is more “effective” as it allows for the lowering of costs, via economies of scale, and thus increasing margins for a firm. Alternatively, those who view markets as being heterogeneous, and therefore containing consumers with differing consumer wants and needs, perceive profit advantages through adaptations. Underlying this approach has been the fundamental focus on financial performance ([Mandler et al., 2021](#); [Ryans et al., 2003](#)).

The literature in this area has advanced beyond the primary emphasis on consumer segment heterogeneity over the years, taking into consideration institutional environmental differences. For instance, the literature has seen an increased emphasis on the importance of international marketing strategy-environment “fit” related to both marketing mix ([Katsikeas et al., 2006](#); [Cavusgil & Zou, 1994](#)) and process elements ([Griffith](#)



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& Myers, 2005; Griffith et al., 2000), whether focused on a single export venture or the multinational corporation. A nuanced aspect of the “fit” literature has been a deepened understanding of discretionary versus mandatory adaptations (Griffith et al., 2003; Westjohn & Magnusson, 2017), and more recently, with the movement toward increasing customer participation across global markets, scholars have advanced the study of adaptation and standardization through the inclusion of customer interactivity (Lee & Griffith, 2019). Efforts in these areas, as well as many more, have expanded on understanding of how international marketing standardization and adaptation can advance firm goals. However, as the complexities of our models have increased, in both the contexts of export ventures and multinational companies, the primary focus of this literature has remained on operational and financial performance (Mandler et al., 2021).

This is not to suggest the consistent attention of the international marketing standardization/adaptation literature on firm performance is inappropriate. Effective execution of international marketing strategy aimed to increase firm operational and financial performance is clearly good for the firm and its employees. It can also be said to be good for customers as it reflects the firm’s ability to continually satisfy customer wants and needs. Further, by extension it can be argued to be good for society, as firm performance helps to stimulate economic development and growth. However, such a focus can be limiting as well.

I ponder whether this relatively narrow focus on operational and financial performance limits our understanding of not only sustainable marketing within a firm, but also how via international marketing strategy development and execution, firms in the aggregate can lead society toward greater sustainability. To engage these perspectives means broadening our underlying premise of the role of international marketing standardization/adaptation within firms, as well as the role of firms within society, and hence, reconsidering what opportunities for scholarship in this area could offer, both in terms of a positive and normative perspective on international marketing strategy standardization/adaptation. The following may serve as a starting

point for international marketing strategy researchers to consider in their scholarly endeavors:

- Should the triple bottom line serve as the fundamental underlying principle of the standardization/adaptation discussion in international marketing strategy? How should a stakeholder perspective fundamentally change the inherent theoretical decision calculus underlying the standardization/adaptation debate from our current focus on operational and financial performance? What stakeholders should be considered and how should each be weighted in relation to international marketing strategy development and implementation? Would such a focus require adaptations by market, given the complexity of diversity of institutional environments within which a firm operates?

- Can multinationals, through standardized international marketing programs and processes, lead the world to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainability goals, such as clean and affordable energy, sustainable cities global warming goals, the UN Goals on human rights, etc.? Does the focus on such goals apply equally to managers in public versus private firms? Does it depend on the institutional environment that the firm is headquartered in, of the markets of the firm’s operations? Should a multinational be expected to advance economic growth in emerging markets more than developed markets, thus stimulating international marketing strategy adaptation?

- How can global corporations with headquarters and business transactions in Europe, North America, and East Asia advance international marketing strategy so as to lead in the achievement of climate goals? Can an international marketing standardization approach rest upon fundamental tenets such as achieve climate goals laid out under the Paris Accord, and still provide appropriate operational and financial performance? Would the incorporation of climate goals within the firm’s international marketing strategy decision calculus allow for competitive advantage, or would it stimulate disadvantage? Would it require adaptation given each country’s climate challenges?

- Should international marketing scholars recon-

sider the focus on mandatory and discretionary marketing mix adaptations based upon country regulations, and instead place at the center of the debate how firms can reorient their international marketing strategies to standardize based upon global sustainability goals?

- What would an international marketing strategy model look like that incorporates a central focus on doing “good,” for example, in terms of developing fair trade global supply chains? Given the inherent differences in societal ills across a firm’s markets, what elements of the environment would drive international marketing strategy adaptations? How would such adaptations also influence sourcing, production, and distribution decisions?

- Should firms consider their marketing offerings based upon responsible consumption? How should the role of consumer agency be integrated into international marketing strategy models? Should responsible consumption goals guide firm offerings in each market, or across all markets? What considerations are necessary for fostering corporate agency in advancing responsible consumption offerings?

- How should international marketing strategy be developed to fulfill the promise of the triple bottom line (i.e., economic, environmental and social sustainability)? What trade-offs are made across the triple bottom line across the firm’s global markets? Can activities in one market subsidize activities another market?

Sustainable marketing and international marketing strategy standardization/adaptation both have substantive literature foundations and abundant future research directions (Bolton, 2021; Chabowski et al., 2011; Davies et al., 2020; Mandler et al., 2021; Ryans et al., 2003). It is hoped that the ideas laid out here, and most specifically what should be the underlying goal of the international marketing strategy standardization/adaptation literature - operational and financial performance or the triple bottom line - may serve as a starting point for scholars to consider in their research endeavors. Ample opportunities await scholars wishing to delve more deeply into the connection of sustainable marketing and international marketing strategy in an increasingly complex and fragile world to advance firm goals and the betterment

of society.

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LUMINOUS INSIGHTS

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