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Advances in sustainability marketing: a systematic literature review

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Abstract

More than ever before sustainability has emerged as central to organization in the European Union and worldwide, due both to the 2030 Agenda goals for sustainable development (ONU, 2015) and the Next Generation EU funds program (European commission, 2020).

Similarly, the sustainability challenge has also been treated in marketing literature for several years, yet confusion remains regarding the role of sustainability in marketing as well as the impact of marketing on the sustainability cause (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019; Peattie, 2015; McDonagh and Prothero, 2014; Peattie and Belz, 2010).

As a first step, the main goals of this study are to:

- clarify the state of the art of the sustainability marketing concept in academic literature.
- outline the main trends in sustainability marketing strategies.

Purpose

Over the past decade, interest in sustainability and its relationships to marketing has steadily grown. Principally, because of recent changes in the lives related to the actual (fresh) search for a “new-normal” (the Covid-19 pandemic is just the tip of the iceberg representing consumer concerns), sustainability has emerged as central to organizations. This mindset shift is detectable in various reports and studies that highlight very significant macro-trends, such as the “rethinking orientation to market” – a renewed consumer consciousness and a more sustainable buying approach – as explained in a recent Gfk report (2021) or indeed as already outlined in the World Economic Forum study (2020), which disclosed how much consumers are changing the market by being more conscious about their consumption and also the leading power of younger generations in building a more sustainable society. Furthermore, some years earlier, the 193 member countries of ONU had already set up the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under the framework of the 2030 Agenda (ONU, 2015).

Thus, since in the new millennium “A growing phenomenon within marketing practice has been the intersection between societal concerns about sustainability, consumer behavior and the marketing of products and services across a range of key markets” as Peattie (2015) affirmed, we do consider as sustainability marketing, only marketing strategies in which a multidimensional approach on sustainability is applied.

Subsequently, this topic has become the most important theme of the current era, also

considering its relevance to both governments and private enterprise as well its impact on future generations, especially in terms of social and environmental conditions.

As mentioned, consumers are increasingly inclined to follow this lead. As a recent KPMG survey (2020) shows, year on year companies are placing greater emphasis on involving consumers in facing the so called “sustainability challenge” together. Moreover, as laid out in the recent past, sustainable practices should not be seen as an obstacle to company profitability but as a source of competitive advantage (Sołoducho-Pelc and Sulich, 2020; Gandy, 2015; Kramer and Porter, 2011; Sneirson, 2008).

First, topics relevant to sustainability marketing can be traced back to a number of studies from the early 1970s (Anderson and Cunningham, 1972; Feldman, 1971). Over the past decade, several studies have investigated the impact of green marketing and sustainability marketing strategies on corporate performance and more specifically on brand performance, highlighting several effects on brand equity, brand value and brand trust (Huang and Guo, 2021; El Zein and Ali, 2019; Montoro-Rios et al., 2008). Furthermore, awareness of a connection between this branch of marketing and branding strategies increased, with many studies introducing the concept of green brand equity and green branding as well as investigating connections among brand strategies in marketing and communication in relation to sustainability (Ali et Al., 2018; Butt et. Al., 2017; Chen, 2010). As a matter of interest, previous years saw sustained investigation into environmental marketing, societal marketing and other fields that are no longer at the forefront, since sustainability analysis was not multi-dimensional as it is today; for instance, as found in both green marketing and sustainability marketing (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019; McDonagh and Prothero, 2014).

In contrast to sustainability marketing, green marketing arose in the 1980s with the concept of the green consumer, its aim being to identify and corner new markets through meeting the expectations of targeted consumer niches (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019; Peattie, 2001; Van Dam and Apeldoorn, 1996). For this reason, it is considered a mainly product-oriented stream and, when it refers to sustainability issues, is mostly focused on environmental concerns (Peattie, 2001; Peattie & Crane, 2005). The more notable difference between green marketing and sustainability marketing emerges out of the conceptualization of sustainability marketing as the merging of the relationship between social, green, and ethical marketing. This merging goes beyond a commercial and product-oriented marketing to reach a broader point of view that also involves the impact on economy and society, and which focuses on building long-term relationships with the units of both a general and a specific environment (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019; Gordon et al., 2011; Belz & Peattie, 2009).

From the literature study [carried out here], 2009 clearly emerges as a breakthrough year, since in that year work from Belz and Peattie (2009) contributed significantly to an acceleration in sustainability marketing. Then authors want to premise that the span of time considered is 2009-2021. Furthermore, in our view corporate social responsibility and corporate social responsibility marketing are different from sustainability marketing. It is further worth noting that these concepts also have some elements in common. For example, CSR is also considered by several authors as a set of actions that involve customers and the local community (Iasevoli and Massi, 2012; Moliner et al., 2009; Jones et al. 2007). Moreover, CSR has also been identified as a source of competitive advantage to businesses due to its returns in terms of creation of new markets and enhancing the company's reputation and image (Iasevoli and Massi, 2012; Kash et al., 2012). Environment still thus represents one of the most intriguing topics. In addition, environmental awareness has increased and changing customer demands have resulted in firms paying closer attention to the environmental impact of their business activities (Mohr and Price, 2016).

As result, and as many authors have pointed out (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019; Kumar et al., 2013) we are witnessing many works with a wide and variegated range of categories and topics regarding the debate in sustainability and sustainable marketing. More, note a lack of coherency regarding terms, which leads to concepts overlap. For example, frequently in the literature most authors use sustainability marketing and green marketing interchangeably. More recently, a consensus has emerged as to the difficulty of allocating sustainability marketing to a precise field of studies, due to the fact "sustainability" itself varies in the marketing literature (Lim, 2016), mostly because the meaning of this term depends on the field of study. This confusion frequently underlies the unsatisfactory alignment between what companies declare and what they do, because they fail to properly understand how to integrate sustainability into their marketing strategy (Pattuglia and Amoroso, 2019).

Consequently, from the empirical point of view, over the years, consumers became skeptical about green marketing and communication at large. Many researchers even considered marketing as the antithesis of sustainability (Lim, 2016; Pereira et al., 2012; Jones, 2008) since its goal is to boost consumer consumption and company profitability. Moreover, Mohr and Price (2016) talked about an incompatibility between the logic of marketing focused on revenue growth by selling products and driven by profitability, and the logic of nature, which is ecological and environmental. Marketing related to green issues has also been associated with the concept of manipulation and influence, as described by Palmer (2012): "Marketing encourages consumers to purchase things they do not need by presenting products in such a way as to make them desirable".

This systematic literature review aims to give an alternative and fresh view of sustainability

marketing from both a theoretical and managerial point of view, to encourage managers to consider it a useful and profitable tool, to boost the academic production in this field in support of sustainable company activities, and to improve their positive effects with the consumer's collaboration.

This can only be realized by providing a common field in which strategies and models can be built and improved over time. The span of period that has been chosen for this systematic literature review is the last 12 years (2009-2021), for several reasons: firstly, sustainability concept has changed remarkably in the last two decades, as said above. Since this, we chose not to consider works that have been written so far ago, since that would mislead the aim of the work to understand the concept of sustainability in marketing in this very contemporary times. Besides, due to the varied and large literature on the theme, it has been preferred to select the most prolific and modern period possible. Secondly, Belz and Peattie's piece (2009), as discussed before, gives an excellent example of how modern marketing strategies is supposed to integrate sustainability in marketing strategies, tactics, and operations. Moreover, it can be noted that their theory is based on the modern concept of sustainability, describing it as a multi-dimensional construct, focused on consumers' consumption and their buying attitudes. Furthermore, as emerges from the Google Scholar database, it is the most quoted work on this subject since it counts 1303 quotes.

Considering this, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main features of sustainability marketing?

RQ1a: What might be a contemporary method for considering "sustainability marketing" and why should we distinguish it from other similar or related topics?

RQ1b: How can sustainability become a permanent and defining feature of a company's marketing strategy?

Methodology

The selection process followed a step-by-step research protocol, consistent with previous research (Newbert, 2007; Thorpe et al., 2005). We chose "EBSCOhost Business Source Complete" and Scopus for their well-recognized wide coverage of journals. We looked for sustainability marketing and sustainability marketing papers by searching "sustainability marketing" and "sustainable marketing" and "green marketing" and "responsible consumption" or "consumer behavior" and "marketing strategy" or "sustainability marketing strategies". The terms sustainability, sustainable and green had to be included in the title or abstract, since there are papers mentioning sustainability without explicitly addressing it. Marketing also had to appear in the title and abstract to similarly exclude papers that do not consider marketing as their main topic, since many papers on

sustainability are related to product engineering, materials science, and environmental or social studies. Moreover, two filters were applied: the publication period (2009-2021) and document type (academic papers in English only). The first filter was applied because we wished to highlight that all significant improvements in sustainability marketing occurred over the last 10 years. We should also point out that after Belz and Peattie’s work (2009), several authors changed the way in which they looked at sustainability marketing, given that the most innovative works in the field were published after 2009. The choice to set the publication period from 2009 to the present was determined by the publication of Belz & Peattie’s work during this time, which very much influenced scientific production since it is undoubtedly the most quoted article in the field, and more than 50% of the total scientific production was published following this research; which is interesting to note if we consider that the span of time preceding this research is more than 30 years. Belz & Peattie’s publication influenced both sustainability and green marketing disciplines. On the green side, Polonsky et al. (2016) refers to it in his work on transformative green marketing, while other authors used the paper in green marketing mix (Leonidou, 2013) or even included it in systematic literature reviews of green marketing (Dangelico and Vocalelli, 2017). This also led us to consider green marketing as being very close to sustainability marketing, just as Peattie (2016) discusses in one of his works regarding green marketing.

Our search returned 655 articles, reduced to 105 when considering only articles in which abstracts were substantively relevant. Articles whose text was relevant numbered 75 and the snowballing technique provided us with a final figure of 80. The other exclusion and inclusion criteria are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

INCLUSION	EXCLUSION
Published in academic journal articles	Topic: Environmental marketing; Societal Marketing; referring a new approach to marketing practices. Articles before 2009; Articles not in English; lack of peer-review process; lack of systematic approach; one-dimensional conception of sustainability marketing; full-text document not found.
Published academic journal articles	Books, conference proceedings, editorials, viewpoints, newspaper.
Full text available	Full text unavailable

English articles	Non-English articles
Sustainability/Green/Sustainable Marketing	Studies mainly focused on Environmental/Societal Marketing or other mono-dimensional constructs; Corporate Social Responsibility.
Marketing/Business/Consumer Journals	Product engineering, materials science or environmental journals.

The process shown in Table 2 together with the snowballing technique returned 80 papers (all from 3 or 4 star rated journals).

Table 2. Summary of the results

Step	Description	%(J)
1	Articles retrieved from EBSCO, Scopus (after the elimination of duplicate papers)	655
2	All the articles where abstracts are substantively relevant	105
3	All the articles whose text was relevant	75
4	Snowballing technique	80

Findings

We can synthesize the most important advances in sustainability marketing by classifying theorizations in relation to their citations in the literature and their contribution in understanding and mapping sustainability marketing and sustainability marketing strategies, at three levels, by developing Thompson's theory and mixing it with that of Kemper and Ballantine (2019):

- a) *consumption-centered sustainability marketing strategies*, focused on the relationship with customers through the adoption of sustainability marketing drivers, with the goals of both encouraging and educating them into being more responsible;
- b) *externalities-centered sustainability marketing strategies*, which highlight the company as an engine of change through collaboration with institutions, associations, and other players to spread responsible consumption beyond the company's boundaries.
- c) *system-centered sustainability marketing strategies*, using sustainability marketing as a tool for social development, by creating strategies that involve companies, consumers, and other players, either institutional or private.

It seems very relevant to us that all the approaches found have more than one feature in

common. The following are the most important and most frequent theorizations included in the articles analyzed:

The 4Cs - Customer solution, Customer cost, Convenience and Communication (Peattie and Belz, 2010) - a new way to set the marketing mix in which every element is more firmly based on a relationship with the customer, also integrating both the concept of environmental concerns and economic transaction.

The multi-level perspective of sustainability marketing (Thomson, 2018), which looks for a systemic approach and divides sustainable marketing into three levels of perspective - micro (focused on consumer behaviors and needs); meso (focused on organization strategy); and macro (focused on collaboration and co-existence of the two levels aforementioned).

Auxiliary, Transformative e Reformativa Sustainability Marketing (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019). After providing a definition of sustainability marketing, the authors try to set a three level-strategy model, in which every step integrates, at the next level, sustainability concerns in its strategy.

Table 3. Contributions to the definition of sustainability marketing

Fuller, 1999	<i>The process of planning, implementing, and controlling the development, pricing, promotion, and distribution of products in a manner that satisfies the following three criteria: (1) customer needs are met; (2) organizational goals are attained; and (3) the process is compatible with eco-systems.</i>
Camino, 2007	<i>Companies have to resolve related issues and challenges to adopt the sustainability criteria in marketing</i>
Frank-Martin and Peattie, 2009	<i>Sustainability marketing is more explicitly related to the sustainable development agenda” and defined as the “building and maintaining of sustainable relationships with customers, the social environment, and the natural environment</i>
Belz and Peattie, 2009	<i>Sustainable marketing is a kind of marketing that builds long lasting customer relationships effectively - without any reference to sustainable development or consideration of sustainability issues</i>
Kotler, 2011	<i>There is a clear and widening gap between current marketing capabilities and the global imperative for sustainability</i>
Cherrier et al., 2012, McDonald	<i>Addressing social norms and constraints are a potential means for encouraging more sustainable behavior</i>

et al. 2015	
Lim, 2016	<i>Marketing could conceivably play a major role in moving society toward a more self-sufficient and sustainable future</i>

We wish to highlight that this process also led us to include some important publications such as that of Minton et al. (2013) and Athwall et al. (2019), since the aim of this research was to study sustainability marketing in all possible dimensions, including also advertising and luxury.

Theoretical and Practical implications

Answering the research questions mentioned earlier, this study may offer important insights for both academics and practitioners.

First, taking in consideration all the definitions above, it is possible to identify several principal features ascribable to sustainability marketing:

1. *An integrated system of marketing strategies, operations, and tools in which a brand or company consider customers as a collaborative unit.*
2. *The aim of driving consumers towards more sustainable consumption, influencing both purchase intentions and actual behavior.*
3. *A specifically designed set of products, processes and an information-based consumption environment around consumers that enables them to improve their sustainable approach.*

Proceeding with the main theoretical evidence, on the one hand it can be said that this study led us to the discovery of some fundamental contributions to the subject, especially: a) attempts to establish a discipline on sustainability marketing that go back to before 2000; b) many constructs once considered the core of company responsibility may no longer today be sufficient to build a good marketing strategy, as several aforementioned authors have pointed out; c) understanding the difference between a mono-dimensional and multi-dimensional construct in sustainability marketing.

On the other hand, the analysis of the literature and the identification of gaps highlighted the need for: a) identifying one or more suitable strategies to induce the desired change in consumption style, able to impact the Dominant Social Paradigm; b) identifying tools and know-how to implement the marketing objectives strategically defined in this perspective; c) realizing a virtuous circle - "supply-consumption-sustainability-performance" - in which marketing levers lead to sustainable profitability generated by sustainable consumption.

Finally, most of the already known constructs seem to only partially describe the concept of

sustainability integrated into a marketing strategy.

As practical and managerial implications, the three levels of sustainability marketing strategies (micro, meso and macro) provide an orientation tool to develop a company's strategies. Companies can formulate strategies that enable consumers to contribute to their sustainable shift by involving them in the consumption process, reviewing some points of the value chain, and collaborating with other companies or institutional players to build common platforms that allow consumers to find more sustainable solutions related to the company itself.

In these terms, for example, companies might change their logistics, finding new ways to package their products, changing the way their customers receive products, or even the way in which they conduct up-selling or cross-selling. Furthermore, this way of thinking is strictly connected to the traditional "Ps" of marketing (mainly product, price, promotion, place) since companies can implement sustainable packaging, sustainable materials, or even change their promotions strategy either by recycling promotional materials or by digitizing. Finally, shifting the focus to local government, these entities could build a common platform with companies, building inclusive, zero waste, upcycling, environmentally friendly networks providing a functional ecosystem able to support the sustainable development of a company.

Regarding the main features of sustainability marketing and considering its points of similarity and difference with green marketing and corporate social responsibility marketing, we arrive at one of the most important practical implications of this work: sustainability marketing could be considered a conceptual bridge between the latter two concepts. Indeed, sustainability marketing seems to have connections with green marketing due to the green marketing mix, which involves instances from the most of the company's stakeholder; and also with corporate social responsibility for the dialectic long-term strategy, which sees sustainability in marketing as a competitive advantage and undertakes sustainable initiatives that overpass product- only or service- only related concerns.

Drawing on this evidence, we can arrive at a provisional/primary understanding of where sustainability marketing stands, and thereby answer also the second research question posed by the present study, halfway between corporate strategy and communication strategy, serving firms at a strategic level, and maintaining a strong relationship with customers to influence and orientate them towards sustainable behaviors, from purchase to consumption. In this sense, we can consider sustainability marketing strategy as a facilitator for customers, as they can assume more sustainable behaviors thanks to a firm's assistance. As such, it seems central to formulate theories of transformative sustainability marketing that integrate sustainability marketing instruments.

Originality of the study

The study analyzes qualitatively all the latest and most important models, focusing on the main features that each attribute to sustainability marketing. The research contains a literature overview, through using the first example of a new conception of sustainability marketing, to develop for the first time a comprehensive analysis of all the principal strategies related to it. In this way, the study tries to highlight and indicate the way towards solving various gaps in the research. To the best of our knowledge as the authors, this is the first effort to conceptualize sustainability marketing by exploring it, to provide a common vision through considering the definitions and theories found in the literature. Furthermore, and again to the best of our knowledge, the innovative concept of sustainability marketing as a bridge between corporate sustainability and green marketing strategy seems never to have been developed till now, holding out potential to drive a new concept development and practical implementations.

Research Limitations

The present study bears some limitations, due to both the relatively few relevant works on which we could rely and the limited literature available for analysis. The limitations of the study can be summarized as follows:

1. Given the filters employed were in our opinion very strict, the dataset was too small to make certain that we analyzed all current literature on the theme.
2. The study was highly focused on strategies that involve consumers and companies, yet we are aware that sustainability marketing could also be implemented at different levels (countries, institutions, NGOs etc.). Thus, future research is needed to consider a more holistic and integrated vision of sustainability marketing implementations.
3. Research design led to exclusion of some articles. Even if not completely inherent to our goal, it may have proved interesting to consider their behavioral implications.

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