

Introduction to the special issue on marketing communications and sustainability

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Introduction to the Special issue on Marketing Communications and Sustainability

The larger idea of sustainability has undeniably captured the imagination of consumers and corporates over the past two decades. The adoption of sustainability as a theme in marketing communication is of course not a completely new phenomenon. Corporates have adopted a variety of communication platforms like communicating CSR activities, cause-related marketing, ethical consumption-based communication etc. to emphasise sustainability and related themes in their communication strategy. However, there is increasing evidence that in the last decade, sustainability communication has received far greater importance than ever before. Several factors have contributed to the mainstreaming of sustainability-based communication. With the ever-increasing evidence about climate change and popular movements that have successfully linked climate change with irresponsible consumption, consumers the world over are seeking a variety of ways to practice sustainable consumption and support movements towards sustainable consumption. As Lim (2017) observes, the international movement towards sustainable consumption is the outcome of a realisation that the ‘patterns and levels of contemporary consumption are not ecologically feasible’ (p.69). Marketing communication as a tool to promote sustainable consumption has played a vital part in bringing about greater changes in attitudes and behavioural patterns (Fischer, 2021). Accordingly, a new facet of communication – sustainability communication (Godemann and Michelsen, 2011) was developed and has received significant traction in the past decade. Sustainability communication is broadly defined by Adombent and Godemann, (2011) as communication to advance transformation processes towards more sustainable development. Sustainability communication encompasses a variety of methods and approaches. Newig et al. (2013) for instance, divides sustainability communication into two basic categories: one-way approaches or – ‘communication of sustainability’ and interactive approaches which aim to ‘communicate about sustainability’.

Further impetus to sustainability communication was provided by the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under the Agenda 2030 framework in 2015 by the United Nations. With the 17 SDGs, the concept of sustainability has been broadened to include several important issues including poverty alleviation, equity, social justice etc. These issues bring into focus the idea of sustainability as a means toward improving living standards and bringing in equity and justice. Communication practices and strategies to reflect this agenda has naturally broadened the scope of sustainability communications. Themes like inclusivity in communication (Licsandru and Cui, 2018), ethnic-diversity in communication (Myers, Richardson and Chung, 2019) etc. have thus been added to the domain of sustainability communication. Some of these themes do not directly focus on communication from a marketing perspective, rather, the larger patterns and networks related to communication formats and communication behaviour are considered. With a broadened scope and multiplicity of communication channels to consider, the domain of sustainability communication has significantly expanded.

Research on sustainable communication has therefore witnessed significant research interest with a virtual explosion in the issues and facets under investigation. While a plethora of studies that reflect the new themes on sustainability have greatly expanded the scope of

academic research, established themes related to sustainability communication like communicating CSR or advertising eco-labels have also seen a renewed interest. There is also focus on sustainability communication in different consumption contexts like tourism (Tolkes, 2018) or luxury fashion retail (Arrigo, 2018) underscoring the expansion in the practice of sustainable communication across these sectors. It is therefore vitally important to provide platforms for disseminating research studies that enhances the depth and scope of knowledge in this field.

The main aim of this special issue is to promote insightful research that meaningfully contributes to this critical and vastly expanding research domain. The papers accepted in this issue present insights relevant to both the well-established facets of marketing communication as well as present some interesting new ideas to this domain. The papers included in this special issue mostly focuses on consumer attitudes and behaviour related to sustainability communication.

Taufique's (2020) research looks at the integrated role of environmental values and emotions in building up sustainable consumption behaviour. The study highlights the need to consider the combined effect of affective factors (i.e., emotional affinity) cognitive factors (environmental knowledge) as well as environmental value in predicting green consumer behaviour. The study thus develops a framework for increasing the effectiveness of green marketing communication. Using a large-scale survey of Malaysian consumers, the authors also test the mediating effect of attitude and a moderating effect of gender. The findings suggest that consumers' emotional affinity towards nature and environmental values have string positive influence on green consumer behaviour whereas the direct impact of environmental knowledge is not significant. Gender showed no moderating effect. Applying these results, the authors suggest use of moral and emotional appeal in green communication by using more of non-verbal cues to induce green consumer behaviour.

Hesse and Runz's (2020) interesting study focuses on customer attitudes to corporate efforts to repositioning their brands by demonstrating green credentials in the hope of receiving positive brand perception from consumers. Interestingly, Hesse and Runz (2020) observe that despite these efforts, consumers are increasingly raising concerns about the pro environmental efforts of firms as nothing but an effort at 'green-washing'. In this environment of consumer scepticism, commercial advertisements that seem to discourage consumption, i.e., green demarketing is the topic of research. Extending the ongoing research stream on green demarketing, Hesse and Runz explores the ad hoc interpretation and resultant judgment of the recipients of such advertisements. The authors explore 'how consumers in the field react to this green demarketing campaign' by examining one single case study of 'Fly responsibly' ad campaign of KLM airline. Using a qualitative interpretive approach, the findings show that the respondents perceived the demarketing strategy more on category level and less on brand level, instead they scrutinized the brand and its motives. The authors offer a five-layer structure which allows to understand how consumers deal with the contradiction of green demarketing that arises from sender-message combination on brand level. Hesse and Runz concludes that consumers' environmental concerns in response to green demarketing differ depending on contextual effects. By developing the five layers framework to understand the response of consumers to green demarketing campaigns, the study makes interesting theoretical contribution.

Gangadharbatla, Vardeman, and Quichocho's (2020) study, on the other hand, investigates the effectiveness of two types of environmental CSR messaging (broad vs. specific) on consumers with low and high lifestyles of health and sustainability (LOHAS) rating. Using a fictitious fashion apparel and student sample, Study-1 found that participants with high LOHAS rating (vs. low) had favourable advertising attitudes for the specific environmental CSR message (vs. broad). However, purchase intentions were non-significant. In Study-2, a fictitious soap brand was used and M-Turk participants were recruited. Findings indicated that participants with high LOHAS rating (vs. low) exhibited favourable brand attitudes for the specific environmental CSR message (vs. broad), while ad attitude and purchase intentions were non-significant. Overall, this is to say that LOHAS rating can be useful to determine how consumers process environmental CSR advertisements. Therefore, green brands would need to provide specific claims in order to persuade consumers with high LOHAS rating.

Kang and Sung (2021)'s study present interesting insights about customer reactions to Luxury Product CSR efforts. Luxury products and CSR are perceived as mutually exclusive. Luxury products are symbols of self-enhancement, while CSR promotes altruism. To explore this dichotomy, the authors empirically investigated the interaction between message objectivity (objective vs. subjective) and benefits (environmental vs. personal), while also testing the mediating effects of perceived motive towards the CSR activity. Findings showed that advertisements of a luxury brand ('Prada'), which highlight environmental benefits in an objective manner will result in positive company evaluations. More importantly, messages embedded with environmental benefits and objectivity, help consumers perceive the CSR motive to be genuine and public-serving, which further contributes to favourable evaluations towards the luxury brand. These results show that luxury brands can facilitate both self-serving motives through their advertisements for products or services and public-serving motives by objectively communicating their green CSR initiatives.

The studies included in the special issue provide important agendas for future researchers to consider and opens up new issues to explore, while distinctly contributing towards advancing the field of marketing communications and sustainability.

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