

The Convergence of Sustainability and Marketing: Transforming Marketing to Respond to a New World

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Abstract

This commentary offers reflections on how scholars can advance the marketing discipline and contribute to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It contributes to an *Australasian Marketing Journal* special issue that examines the SDGs from the perspective of a for-profit organization—an important and under-researched topic. It is organized around three strategic planning questions: What is the current situation with respect to sustainability and marketing? Where is the marketing discipline going vis-à-vis the SDGs? How can it help achieve these goals? This commentary contends all work in marketing should be considered in light of the SDGs and that marketers can create high-impact research that furthers the SDGs by following the principles of Responsible Research in Business and Management (rrbm.network). It considers sustainability trends, the evolution of the marketing discipline, and the gap between SDGs and marketers' knowledge about how to achieve them. It briefly outlines current research priorities and progress made by marketing scholars on sustainability issues. Last, it describes ways for marketing scholars to engage in responsible research—that is, research that is useful to society and is credible—thereby contributing to achieving the SDGs and improving individual, organizational, societal, and environmental well-being.

Keywords

sustainability, responsible research, marketing strategy, corporate social responsibility, social marketing, environment

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Nevertheless, paradigm changes do cause scientists to see the world of their research engagements differently. Insofar as their only recourse to that world is through what they see and do, we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world.

—Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), p. 110

Introduction

This special issue assembles papers that examine the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the perspective of a for-profit organization—an important and under-researched topic. In my commentary, I offer my reflections on how scholars can advance the marketing discipline, contribute to the achievement of the SDGs, and thereby improve individual, organizational, societal, and environmental well-being. Echoing Kuhn's (1962) observation, I describe how marketing scholars are beginning to see their research engagements differently and respond to a different world. My commentary is organized around three strategic planning questions: What is the current situation with respect to sustainability and the role of marketing? Where is the marketing discipline going vis-à-vis the SDGs? How will it help achieve these goals? I conclude by recommending ways that *all* marketers can engage in high-impact research and foster the SDGs by following the principles of Responsible Research in Business and Management (rrbm.network).

Where Are We Now? Sustainability and Marketing in 2020

This section begins by considering sustainability trends and describes how the evolution in marketing thought offers new opportunities to address the SDGs.

The SDGs: a burning platform for change

Due to work within and across many disciplines, the accumulation of scientific knowledge regarding sustainability is turning into an avalanche (e.g., Kube et al., 2018; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014). For example, there is an important and well-established stream of research on corporate social responsibility. See, for example, review articles by Aguinis and Glavas (2012) and Hildebrand et al. (2011). A comprehensive discussion of sustainability trends and the SDGs is beyond the scope of my commentary (United Nations, 2020). However, it is useful to summarize key trends using the triple bottom line of *Environmental, Equity and Economic* stewardship (Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008).

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Environmental. SDGs are concerned with issues such as protecting the long-term health of the ecological/environmental system and the long-term productivity and health of resources to meet future economic and social needs. Today, the world's people have experienced the warmest decade (2010–2019) ever recorded. Climate change and extreme weather events are affecting every country, disrupting national economies and affecting lives. These phenomena are key drivers of rising global hunger and internal displacements of people (World Meteorological Association, 2019), as well as damaging business operations and profitability (Plumer, 2019).

Equity. SDGs encompass individual, communal, and societal well-being. Today, global progress is not on track to meet the SDGs by 2030 (Salvia et al., 2019; United Nations, 2020). For example, although access to safely managed drinking water has improved, inequality persists for women, refugees and migrants, indigenous peoples, older persons, people with disabilities, and children around the world. COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities by increasing global unemployment and dramatically lowering workers' incomes. Hence, the achievement of diversity, inclusion, and equality of SDGs has become even more challenging.

Economic. SDGs include sustained economic growth through higher levels of productivity and technological innovation, as well as full and productive employment for all people. Organizations with embedded sustainability efforts have experienced improved business performance, obtained by driving competitive advantage, increased stakeholder engagement, improving risk management, facilitating innovation, improving financial performance, building customer loyalty, and attracting and engaging employees (George, 2019; Jones et al., 2018, 2018; Whelan & Fink, 2016). Global opportunities for decent jobs and secure livelihoods remain scant, especially in some sectors (Orbeck, 2018; World Bank, 2020). Automation has reduced the demand for labor and depressed workers' wages rather than increasing productivity (Autor & Salomon, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic is responsible for setbacks on economic SDGs, such as growth and decent work (e.g., McGraw et al., 2020).

In sum, although the governments of 193 countries committed to the SDGs in 2015, it has become clear that the world's challenges cannot be addressed solely through government and regulation. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2002), the world's largest transnational for-profit organizations contribute more value-added to the world economy than many countries! Hence, there is a pressing need to understand marketing's role within for-profit organizations in addressing sustainability and the SDGs.

Evolving views on marketing

Let us now consider whether the marketing community is prepared to respond to these world challenges. Scholarly conceptualizations of the marketing discipline have fluctuated over time (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014; Wilkie & Moore, 2003). The scholarly work in the marketing discipline is generally considered to encompass the (aggregate) marketing system, but many thought leaders have expressed concern that "today's views of marketing scholarship are overly constraining" (Wilkie, 2005).

Purpose. Increasingly, marketing thought leaders have challenged (narrow) conventional perspectives on the purpose of marketing. In the *Journal of Marketing*, Reibstein et al. (2009) asked "Is marketing academia losing its way?" and called on scholars to work on *relevant* business problems (*italics mine*). This cry was taken up by scholars

around the world (e.g., Sweeney, 2010). In the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Hult (2011) argued that marketers must shift their focus from managing relationships with customers to achieving market-based sustainability, by aligning the interests of multiple stakeholders concerned about economic, environmental, and social (equity) outcomes. Subsequently, Achrol and Kotler (2012) predicted that the third millennium will be characterized by sustainable marketing, entailing the development of new patterns of consumption and production. Calls for marketing to widen its boundaries have continued to this day (Bolton, 2020b; Key et al., 2020; Patel et al., 2019). There are some encouraging signs that the marketing community is becoming more engaged in a broader research agenda. For example, the first nine winners of the *AMA-EBSCO Annual Award for Responsible Research in Marketing* (co-sponsored by the Sheth Foundation and presented in cooperation with RRBM) were announced in February 2020.

Emerging research streams. Conceptual work in areas such as the service-dominant logic of marketing and resource advantage theory has provided a secure foundation for an expanded conceptualization of marketing that can address sustainability issues (Connelly et al., 2011; Hunt, 2020; Lusch & Vargo, 2014). Research streams that emphasize sustainable marketing topics include transformative consumer research (Mick, 2006), service research (Anderson et al., 2013; Bolton, 2020a), macromarketing (Polonsky, 2011), and social marketing (Andreasen, 2002). At present, many studies focus on a single dimension of sustainability—which can sometimes be suboptimal. For example, a current retailing study might focus on zero-waste product design (environmental stewardship) or transparent and ethical sourcing (equity stewardship) without considering their interaction. Or, a current study might consider sustainable practices that are infeasible in the informal economy that often operates at the base of the pyramid. Some marketing scholars are studying the role of sustainable marketing strategies in for-profit organizations (e.g., Tolin & Christensen, 2019). However, Kemper et al. (2019, pp. 1–2) dispiritingly conclude that "the extent to which the growth of apparent interest in the environment and sustainability among marketing researchers has either transformed the field of marketing, or actually contributed to improved sustainability at the global scale appears highly debatable."

In sum, many marketing scholars are aware of sustainability issues—if not the 17 specific SDGs. They are exploring ways for marketing to guide actors in an ecosystem toward strategies that are efficient, effective, and beneficial from an individual, organizational, societal, and environmental perspective. Unfortunately, the growing complexity and fragmentation in the marketing discipline have not yielded high-impact, boundary-spanning work (Bolton, 2020a; Brown et al., 2005; Key et al., 2020; Lehmann et al., 2011; Reibstein et al., 2009). Arguably, the marketing discipline is undergoing a paradigm shift or a change in worldview that has not—as yet—fulfilled its potential to address real-world challenges (Kemper et al., 2019; Key et al., 2020).

Where Are We Going? The SDGs, Consumption, and Marketing

In 2012, the United Nations developed the 17 SDGs as a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for everyone—addressing global challenges such as poverty, hunger, health, education, inequality, and environmental degradation. This section considers how marketers are responding to these global challenges and (specifically) to the SDGs. Building on prior work (e.g., Kilbourne &

Beckmann, 1998; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014), it describes current research priorities concerning sustainable consumption and sustainability marketing.

Toward sustainable consumption

Marketing thought leaders have emphasized that demand stimulation can increase resource utilization and lead to unfavorable outcomes for many stakeholders. Hence, a substantial stream of research has investigated the role of marketing in fostering sustainable consumption (Kemper et al., 2019; Pomeroy, 2017).

Perspectives on consumption. This stream of research focuses on consumer preferences, attitudes, and behavior related to sustainable consumption, such as the green consumer, recycling, and voluntary simplicity. Transformative consumer research has refocused marketers on the well-being of consumers and employees—both individually and collectively—within communities and the broader ecosystem (Mick et al., 2012). Researchers often study well-being outcomes in specific sectors such as finance, health, and education (e.g., Anderson & Ostrom, 2015). Organizations also tend to focus on certain well-being outcomes, such as commitments to 100% renewable energy (United Nations Global Compact, 2018, 2020), but not others.

Sustainable consumption can be seen as an oxymoron, so—not surprisingly—marketing scholars have defined it in different ways. Notably, Lim (2017) has developed an integrated conceptual framework for sustainable consumption that synthesizes theoretical and empirical work. Over time, new contextualized and systemic perspectives on sustainable consumption have emerged (Lim, 2016). Today, marketing thought leaders define sustainable consumption as consumption that supports the ability of current and future generations to meet their needs without causing irreversible damage to the environment or to the functioning of ecological and social systems while improving stakeholder well-being and efficiency (Belz & Peattie, 2009; Jackson & Michaelis 2003; Lim, 2017). Although sustainability is extensively studied in the social sciences literature, this definition of sustainable consumption is not (yet) widely evident in the marketing literature.

Consumption and well-being. In real-world contexts, the SDGs have encouraged decision-makers to consider a broad set of well-being outcomes, rather than measuring progress in purely economic terms. Metrics are a key challenge for all decision-makers. Some countries are actively managing their progress toward multiple measures of well-being. For example, New Zealand is developing the Living Standards Framework (LSF) to place sustainable intergenerational well-being at the center of policy-making and resource management (see New Zealand Voluntary National Review, 2019). The LSF measures the dynamics of well-being, as well as risk and resilience across a broad range of economic, social, and environmental domains. In addition, Statistics New Zealand has developed a new set of metrics, Indicators Aotearoa New Zealand (IANZ), that go beyond traditional economic measures, such as income and gross domestic product (GDP), and include well-being and sustainable development. IANZ will support the LSF, as well as monitoring and reporting against the SDGs. Despite similar efforts in other countries and regions, such as the European Union's Green Deal (European Commission, 2020), global progress on the SDGs has been slow. Moreover, as this special issue recognizes, the SDGs are not embedded in (most) for-profit organizations—thereby posing substantial barriers to progress.

Toward sustainability marketing

University presidents, deans, professional societies, accrediting associations, funding agencies, and the public have become increasingly concerned that business research has failed to fulfill its potential to offer solutions to real-world challenges (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business [AACSB], 2012). Most business research does not directly tackle sustainability or the SDGs. Nevertheless, marketing research on sustainability topics has been increasing over the past four decades. Literature reviews have grouped research on sustainability marketing into five categories: sustainability strategies (e.g., new product development), institutional, societal, and systems perspectives, and environmental policies (including social marketing), as well as sustainable consumption (Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014).

Marketing scholarship and the SDGs. Research has typically studied specific sustainability topics (e.g., recycling) within marketing rather than integrating marketing and sustainability. In a study of 36 marketing-related journals over 51 years (1958–2008), Chabowski et al. (2011) analyzed 1,320 sustainability-focused articles and identified four integral sustainability research topics: citizenship behavior, stakeholder theory, corporate performance, and the triple bottom line. Encouragingly, scholarly interest has migrated to the classroom (Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008; Martin & Schouten, 2011; Painter-Morland, 2016). Belz and Peattie (2009, p. 31) have advocated the (broader) term “sustainability marketing” (rather than sustainable marketing) defined as “building and maintaining sustainable relationships with customers, the social environment and the natural environment.” As the SDGs are relatively recent, there are not (as yet) many studies that specifically address them—with some notable exceptions (e.g., Jones et al., 2018).

For-profit organizations and the SDGs. Increasingly, organizations are recognizing sustainability as an integral to their business strategies and operations (Business Roundtable, 2019; George, 2019; Winston, 2019). Well-known, for-profit organizations that are deeply engaged in all three dimensions of sustainability include IKEA, Patagonia, Seventh Generation, and Unilever. Sustainability marketing offers organizations a potential win-win situation by increasing productivity, developing human capital, improving access to markets, and reducing risk through engagement with stakeholders (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Lim, 2016). Australasia is especially vulnerable to climate change, and organizations there have begun to tackle sustainability challenges (Australian Climate Roundtable, 2020; Australia Voluntary National Review, 2018; New Zealand Voluntary National Review, 2019). Some organizations primarily focus on environmental stewardship, whereas others consider the triple bottom line. These efforts are consistent with scholarly conceptualization of marketing as value cocreation over time (Lusch et al., 2010; Lusch & Vargo, 2014) and the role of marketing management within the organization (Webster, 2005).

In sum, public policy makers, marketing scholars, and practitioners are beginning to integrate the SDGs into their work. As this work advances, the marketing discipline will be better able to address research priorities based on the SDGs.

How Will We Get There? Responsible Research Principles

Many leading business scholars believe that the principles of RRBM provide a compelling and systemic framework to guide marketing

scholars toward high-impact contributions that address the SDGs (Berry et al., 2021). Its founding partners were the AACSB, The Aspen Institute Business and Society Program, European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD), and Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), and it is supported by many leading schools, institutes, and associations around the world. These organizations are already taking action. For example, new AACSB Standards 8 and 9—Impact of Scholarship and Engagement and Societal Impact—will require schools to demonstrate that they are engaging in activities for the betterment of wider society.

RRBM is a virtual network of business scholars that calls for researchers to engage with the SDGs. Its key ideas originated in philosophy of science; it advocates that science should be socially responsible or “useful” and credible (Community for Responsible Research in Business and Management, 2017; Tsui, 2016). Responsible research principles do not identify or prioritize specific research topics, theories, or methods—rather, they offer a comprehensive vision for how business research should be designed, conducted, and used. As such, it is primarily a social movement. RRBM principles can be followed by all marketing scholars who seek to reconcile marketing and sustainability, increase the impact of their work, and create a better world through the SDGs. This article emphasizes three RRBM principles, as follows.

1. *Service to society*: Development of knowledge that benefits business and the broader society, locally and globally, for the ultimate purpose of creating a better world.
2. *Stakeholder involvement*: Research that engages different stakeholders in the research process, without compromising the independence of inquiry.
3. *Impact on stakeholders*: Research that has an impact on diverse stakeholders, especially research that contributes to better business and a better world.

In the remainder of this commentary, I offer some practical suggestions on the best way for the marketing community to tackle the SDGs using these principles.

A systems approach to the SDGs

A systems approach is one of the major building blocks of sustainable problem-solving; it requires an awareness of the complex interactions within and beyond an organization (Nakamura et al., 2019; SDG Compass, 2020). These interactions have become painfully evident during the current global pandemic. Marketing scholars typically seek to advance the SDGs by tackling specific research priorities or topics. Instead, RRBM focuses on principles that are consistent with a systems approach and can be applied to *all* business research to ensure that is useful and credible.

Principle 1: service to society. The first principle emphasizes that research must benefit society—whether a study is basic or applied, strategic or tactical, theoretical or empirical. When a researcher is designing a study, he or she should begin with an assessment of the research problem and its potential outcomes to ensure maximal impact and benefit to society. Le Blanc’s (2015) empirical study has shown that some thematic areas covered by the SDGs are well connected with one another, whereas others have weaker connections with the rest of the system. His findings indicate that attempts at policy prescription must be based on studies of the environmental, social (equity), and economic systems at appropriate scales. Hence, *the design of each research study must begin with a careful consideration of all dimensions of the research problem—ensuring that the*

environmental, equity, and economic dimensions are adequately represented for the problem at hand. Elsewhere, I have provided examples in different research contexts (Bolton, 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

Principle 2: stakeholder involvement. This principle requires that the researcher ensure that relevant stakeholders are adequately represented in the research process. Stakeholders might include consumers, managers and employees, organizations, communities, indigenous peoples, governments or nations, and the bioenvironment. Two studies illustrate this important point by deriving otherwise counterintuitive findings. First, Huang and Rust (2011) develop a conceptual framework built on the three pillars of sustainability that helps reconcile goals that might otherwise seem to conflict. They show that societal consumption patterns should be sensitive to environmental impact and social justice, even if altruistic motivations are absent. Second, Hunt (2011) analyzes two major, radically different, theories of economic growth—neoclassical, static-equilibrium growth theory and dynamic competition growth theory—that make different, testable predictions. He concludes that the cause of sustainable development can be addressed by poor nations pursuing economic growth because dynamic resource advantage competition promotes efficiency, effectiveness, and innovations that drive economic growth. Hence, *the design and execution of each study should engage all relevant stakeholders.* Bolton (2020a, p. 282) provides an example of how considerations of stakeholder involvement can broaden and deepen a scholar’s approach to a marketing problem.

Principle 3: impact. RRBM’s third principle emphasizes that the ultimate goal of business research is to produce knowledge that has an impact and contributes to society. Organizations will require a broader set of metrics than capture the impact of their decisions on environmental, equality, and economic outcomes. This principle will soon be applied at business schools around the world. RRBM’s partners include AACSB, the EFMD, PRME, and the Aspen Institute, as well as many universities. New accreditation standards are being developed and business schools around the world are already changing their faculty hiring, evaluation, promotion, and tenure decisions. Within a few years, there will be a new understanding of what constitutes high-impact business research. Hence, marketers (and organizations) must consider new metrics that go beyond conventional measures such as consumer preferences, productivity, employee satisfaction, and profitability to assess the impact of their research. *Marketing scholars should begin today to engage in research that is designed and executed to maximize impact and contribution to society.* Bolton (2020b) offers a self-assessment tool that incorporates two RRBM criteria regarding high-impact research that are applicable to any business topic, as well as some recommendations for professional development.

The SDGs and the future of marketing

As previously recounted, the SDGs are already influencing the actions of government, for-profit organizations, and researchers worldwide. How will marketing science and practice change?

Marketing practice. Developments in artificial intelligence, big data, networks, the Internet of Things, and biology (e.g., gene editing) are creating a fourth industrial revolution (World Economic Forum, 2017). Today, business innovations cut across traditional boundaries. For example, automation and artificial intelligence operate at the interface of engineering, computing, and social sciences. At the same time, as encapsulated in the SDGs, the world is experiencing environmental,

equality, and economic change ranging from labor rights to geopolitical threats. This situation creates both challenges and opportunities for marketers. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has a policy approach, entitled “Extended Producer Responsibility,” under which producers are given financial and/or physical responsibility for the treatment or disposal of post-consumer products, yet this policy may restrict low-income consumers from accessing these products. How should this issue be resolved? Decision-makers need useful and credible research by marketing scholars to address these immense and complex changes.

Marketing scholarship. Sustainability provides a framework for integrating these different dimensions of change and paths to develop high-impact work. For example, in for-profit settings, Varadarajan (2017) has developed a conceptual framework that identifies potential avenues for sustainable innovations, as well as organization and industry-related antecedents and consequences. Similarly, in a public policy setting, Sachs et al. (2019) have identified six SDG transformations and associated priorities. Both studies recognize the strong interdependencies across the 17 SDGs (e.g., Vassallo et al., 2019). As marketing scholars embrace RRBM principles, their work can further progress on the SDGs.

Concluding Remarks

I began my commentary by suggesting that we may be in the midst of a paradigm change. Yes, marketing scholars are beginning to see their research engagements differently and respond to a different world. I contend that all work in marketing should be considered in light of the SDGs. It will require both individual and collective action to achieve them (Bolton, 2020b). Each of us can choose to contribute useful knowledge that is useful to society and credible by

- Endorsing RRBM principles, becoming a signatory on its website, and engaging in its activities;
- Increasing the impact of your own research through self-assessment and continuous improvement; and
- Leveraging your professional roles (e.g., reviewer, conference track organizer, department chair) to transform the marketing community and its priorities.

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