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To cite this article: Steven J. Greenland, Ninh Nguyen & Carolyn Strong (28 Jun 2023): Irresponsible marketing and the need to support pro-sustainable production and consumption, Journal of Strategic Marketing, DOI: [10.1080/0965254X.2023.2230487](https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2023.2230487)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2023.2230487>



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Published online: 28 Jun 2023.



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Irresponsible marketing and the need to support pro-sustainable production and consumption

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ABSTRACT

Globally, organisations and consumers face an array of economic, environmental, and social sustainability challenges. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) assist by providing guidance for appreciating and responding to these challenges. Marketers also have an important role to play in promoting positive sustainable attitudes and behaviour in both consumer and corporate contexts. Increasingly sophisticated marketing capabilities, combined with enhanced understanding of consumer psychology, mean that marketers have unprecedented ability to positively influence public opinion and promote positive social and environmental behaviours. However, this capability is frequently used irresponsibly in the pursuit of profit and political goals, with disregard for sustainable outcomes. Irresponsible marketing, including sustainability washing, misleads consumers and governments about the sustainability credentials of these organisations' products or services. This undermines SDG 12 sustainable consumption and production, as well as the other SDGs. This paper discusses the need for marketers to be more proactive in promoting sustainability and informing irresponsible marketing regulation. Critical avenues for future research are also identified.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 June 2023
Accepted 24 June 2023

KEYWORDS

Irresponsible marketing; marketing for sustainable development; pro-sustainable marketing; pillars of sustainable development

Introduction

Proliferating digital technologies, deeper data analytics, enhanced understanding of consumer psychology and more sophisticated media all mean the modern-day marketer has unprecedented ability to influence markets. This includes promoting more sustainable production and consumption behaviours.

Yet such influential marketing has often been used to maximise corporate profits, with scant regard for society or the environment. It has also resulted in an explosion of irresponsible marketing practices such as the unethical use of consumer data and the manipulation of public opinion with targeted misinformation.

The 193 Member States of the United Nations have unanimously adopted the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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that tackle a range of urgent global environmental, social and economic challenges (United Nations, 2022). Despite many governments requesting organisations to demonstrate their contributions to the Agenda, the global sustainability crisis has worsened (United Nations, 2022). Irresponsible marketing has continued to drive unsustainable production and consumption, which has further fuelled the non-communicable disease crisis, escalated pollution and climate change, and heightened social and political tensions.

Many organisations, particularly multinationals engaged in more controversial activities such as mining or the manufacture of harmful products like tobacco, have repurposed the SDGs as strategic tools applied within sustainability reports and other PR initiatives to distract attention from negative social or environmental impacts (Lužar et al., 2021). The inability to prosecute such unethical corporate behaviour has further encouraged multinationals and their marketers to operate irresponsibly.

The sustainability challenges of the 21st century require urgent attention from marketing academia, to help expose irresponsible corporate activities, and drive pro-sustainable marketing best practices (Anderson & Anderson, 2020). Marketers can then fulfil their critical role in supporting (rather than undermining) more sustainable production and consumption (Prendergast & Tsang, 2019), as well as an array of positive sustainability outcomes (e.g. see Figure 1).

The strategic logic for responsible, pro-sustainable marketing is robust, and will help overcome the misconception that it always comes at a higher cost. First, healthier and more harmonious societies are essential for maintaining and growing consumer market demand. Second, rising global consumer movements geared towards accountability and public vilification of perpetrators of perceived injustices present significant risks for corporations engaged in irresponsible marketing (e.g. Chatzidakis et al., 2021). Third, a growing body of research has demonstrated increased loyalty towards organisations and brands that behave responsibly, and that are genuine in their marketing efforts and communications (e.g. T'Hart & Phau, 2023). Pro-sustainable marketing can therefore help organisations achieve bottom-line objectives, while supporting sustainable development.

Irresponsible marketing research and regulation

There has been much debate about irresponsible marketing and its negative impact on sustainability. However, while an established literature has related the mechanisms of marketing design, comparatively little contemporary research has appeared in marketing journals covering the impact of irresponsible marketing on production and consumption behaviours. For example, few of this century's literature reviews on unhealthy food and beverage price promotions have involved marketing journals; most have been from the medicine, nutrition, public health and food science domains (e.g. Bennett et al., 2020). As current public health policy and marketing regulations are guided by such research, this may explain why regulation has tended to focus on broad marketing mix elements rather than on more sophisticated measures that restrict specific marketing design mechanisms that increase consumption, such as price-volume promotion (Greenland et al., 2023b). This may also be why little harmful product marketing regulation to date has specifically impeded brands and brand ranges, which are the primary vehicle for FMCG segmentation and promotion.

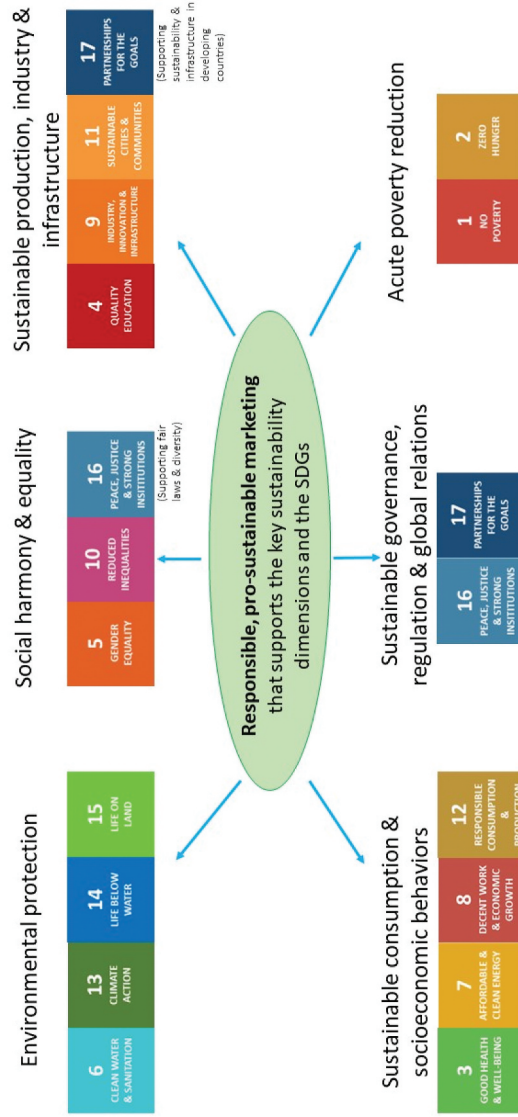


Figure 1. Pro-sustainable marketing to support key sustainability dimensions and the SDGs. Source: Adaptation of Greenland et al. (2023a) empirical SDG framework

It is 10 years since Phipps et al. (2013) observed that marketing academia risked marginalization from critical debates due to a preoccupation with theoretical contribution, and lack of engagement with practical research to address the key sustainability and consumer welfare challenges. However, this disconnect has continued to exclude many marketers from engaging with some of the most significant contemporary consumer protection and sustainability debates. This is despite marketers being best placed to interpret irresponsible industry strategy and to guide effective marketing regulation, as well as to help shape future pro-sustainable production and consumption behaviours.

Some marketing scholars perhaps assume that extensive works relating to the impact of harmful product marketing on production and consumption already exist, which may explain why corresponding contemporary research features more prominently in non-marketing journals. Such studies that expose contemporary marketing design mechanisms are leading irresponsible marketing regulation, as well as broader debates around sustainable production and consumption challenges. It is therefore essential for marketers and mainstream marketing journals to engage more fully in research that improves understanding of irresponsible marketing practices. This will also facilitate improved understanding of the strategic importance of responsible and pro-sustainable marketing. In this regard there is a wide range of critical avenues for future irresponsible marketing research, such as:

- marketing that reduces rather than encourages harmful consumer behaviour (e.g. Greenland et al., 2023b)
- maximizing the benefits of targeted digital advertising while minimizing consumer risks and harm (e.g. Borenstein & Taylor, 2023)
- regulating sophisticated and deceptive online marketing to children (e.g. Smith et al., 2023)
- unethical capture and use of consumer data on social media platforms (e.g. Hanlon & Jones, 2023)
- encouraging genuine advertisements as opposed to ads based on deception and exaggeration (e.g. T'Hart & Phau, 2023)
- exposing and regulating marketing that promotes misinformation (e.g. Burton et al., 2023).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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