

In Search of Sustainable and Responsible Consumption

Sustainability entails meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (WCED, 1987). It has become a major norm of behaviour of various societal groups in recent years, and it is an increasingly prominent topic of academic research (Cervellon and Carey, 2014), public policy-making (European Commission, 2016) and marketing practice (Skroupa, 2017). The core idea of sustainability is based on the rethinking of consumption (Hofmeister-Tóth *et al.*, 2011). Numerous researchers have emphasized that consumption patterns are seen as a major contributor to the current environmental and social problems (Peattie and Collins, 2009). On the one hand, companies recognize stakeholders' expectations and respond to them by committing to more sustainable activities, while, on the other hand, consumers are also expected to behave sustainably and in doing so contribute to sustainable development. This expectation has led to seeing consumers as "agents of social change" (Balderjahn *et al.*, 2013, p. 181).

Sustainability involves sustainable consumption as the key concern in modern society, joining the problem triad of population, environment and development (Liu *et al.*, 2017). The prevailing definition cited in the literature states that sustainable consumption is "the use of goods, and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations" (Ministry of the Environment Norway, 1994). In addition, responsible consumption has been specified as "a set of voluntary acts, situated in the sphere of consumption, achieved from the awareness of consequences judged as the negatives of consumption on the outside world to oneself, these consequences arising therefore not from the functionality of the purchases nor from immediate personal interest" (Lim, 2017).

Despite increasing consumer interest in sustainable products (Cotte and Trudel, 2009), consumers experience some difficulties in shifting their behaviour towards a more sustainable and responsible consumption. To understand the sustainability of any form of consumption, cognisance of various social and environmental impacts that occur throughout the entire production and consumption cycle of a product is required (Peattie and Collins, 2009). Therefore, calls have been voiced for further studies on sustainable consumption to develop an understanding of how the individual becomes committed and which factors can support or hinder this process (Hofmeister-Tóth *et al.*, 2011).

As a result, several special issues on aspects of sustainability have been presented in recent years. For example, the *International Journal of Consumer Studies* brought together studies with a range of different perspectives on sustainable consumption (Peattie and Collins, 2009). One of the focal topics in the *Journal of Consumer Policy* has been understanding the reasons for the "knowledge-to-action gap" and finding strategies to close this gap (Thøgersen and Schrader, 2012). The *Sustainability* journal focussed on the psychological and behavioural aspects of sustainability (Kroger, 2013), as well as on



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With regard to the large number of papers submitted to this special issue, we have heavily relied on the support of a large number of reviewers, who contributed their time and expertise. They deserve our sincere gratitude, and we would like to credit them for their part in helping us to achieve the high quality of papers finally selected for this special issue.

production and consumption in the context of sustainability (Oates *et al.*, 2016). The *Sustainable Production and Consumption* journal addressed sustainability issues in the food–energy–water nexus (Azapagic, 2015), while the *Australasian Marketing Journal* presented a special issue on marketing approaches to sustainability (Sullivan-Mort *et al.*, 2017).

However, sustainability-related concerns remain unanswered, as progress towards sustainability goals has been disappointingly slow. In this respect, progress towards the goal of responsible consumption (and production) has been weak. At the same time, this goal has been evaluated as one of the top three goals with the biggest impact on the overall sustainable development progress (GlobeScan/SustainAbility, 2017). Further, Lim (2017) contends that a large majority of the population continues to ignore or chooses not to engage in sustainable consumption practices. One of the reasons is that consumption behaviours are largely shaped by routines and habits (Schäfer *et al.*, 2012), as well as embedded in socially, institutionally and technologically defined practices (Davies, 2014). As a result, the question of sustainable and responsible consumption continues to pervade research and further attract researcher's attention (Liu *et al.*, 2017; Luchs and Miller, 2015).

More than 80 manuscripts were submitted to our call for papers on sustainable and responsible consumption. Whilst it is evident from the response that a vibrant and extensive community of scholars is researching sustainable consumption in the marketing field, it has meant that we had to make some very difficult decisions about which papers to put into the review process. We were looking for papers that would advance the conceptualisation and deliver substantial advancement to existing theories in the field. Our aim was to advance our understanding of sustainable, responsible consumption and widen the frontiers regarding sustainable marketing strategies.

The topics submitted included key drivers and/or outcomes of sustainable and responsible behaviour, interactions between businesses and consumers to become co-creators of sustainable consumption, gaps between intentions and sustainable behaviour and investigations on how companies develop sustainable growth with regard to sustainable responsible consumption, among others. In addition, diverse methodological approaches were applied (experiments, content analysis, microeconomic models, econometric analysis and confirmatory factor analysis). Overall, the selected papers provide a valuable insight into the diversity of research in the field in terms of their focus on selected aspects of consumption, methodologies and regions (countries).

The first paper in the special issue sits squarely within the sustainable and responsible behaviour discussed above. Eisingerich *et al.* (2018) argue that business transparency leads to better consumer willingness to engage in sustainable and responsible consumption. A key question, therefore, arises concerning how and when such business transparency influences consumer engagement with sustainable and responsible consumption. The main research question addresses the extent to which transparency leads to enhanced customer willingness to engage in sustainable and responsible consumption. Sustainable and responsible consumption behaviour is defined by the authors as “customers’ willingness to consider the long-term consequences and the impact of their consumption on society, as well as their consideration for ethical issues when making a consumption decision”. While this definition reflects similar definitions in the extant literature, the paper elegantly evaluates the effects of business transparency on consumers and organisations, identifying in the process areas of less clarity and arguing for the need to understand the boundary conditions to the impact of business transparency. The paper developed a conceptual model that examines the relationship between business transparency and customer willingness to engage in sustainable and responsible consumption. Their model also tests two-way and

three-way interactions involving an interaction effect between transparency and future orientation, as well as transparency, corporate social responsibility and the level of customer involvement. The empirical approach involved two studies. The first collected 223 surveys from consumers of smartphones and was used to test the relationship business transparency and sustainable and responsible consumption by consumers. The second study collected 327 surveys from graduate students to test the moderating effects of future orientation and corporate social responsibility on the relationship between transparency and sustainable and responsible consumption. The results show positive benefits of business transparency that vary according to a business' future orientation, corporate social responsibility and levels of customer involvement. The authors conclude that a "business should not be expected to focus on transparency in isolation but rather also needs to consider levels of perceived future orientation, corporate social responsibility and levels of customer involvement to strengthen sustainable and responsible behaviour effectively".

The second paper in the special issue considers customer attitudes towards electric cars; [Bennett and Vijaygopal \(2018\)](#) investigate the effects of gamification on connections between a consumer's self-image congruence in relation to the purchase of an environment-friendly product and stereotype formation. The authors developed a conceptual model based on three theories, namely, the theory of self-image congruence, the theory of stereotype change and the theory of gamification. The conceptual model examines the attitude-willingness to purchase in relation to electric cars by testing hypotheses where two moderators were used – self-image congruence with owners of EVs and by non-EV owners holding a certain kind of stereotype of EV drivers. Hence, an implicit association test was used to measure consumers' stereotypes regarding users of an environment-friendly product to minimise social responsibility bias among the study participants. Based on a computer game, participants took the identity of drivers of electrical vehicles. Then the authors used structural equation modelling to predict respondents' attitudes towards electrical vehicles. The findings show that playing the game improves respondents' stereotype favourability, attitude, knowledge and self-congruency in relation to electrical vehicles. However, the study found that respondents' willingness to purchase an electronic vehicle was not significantly affected. In fact, the authors found that the relationship between attitude and willingness to purchase an electrical vehicle was weak, but it was significantly moderated by stereotype favourability and self-image congruence. The paper provides in-depth discussion on the theoretical contributions, especially to theories of gamification and theories of stereotyping. It concludes with a discussion of its limitations and provides guidance for future research using the theories used in this study.

The third paper in the special issue looks at how consumers evaluate prosocial actions as part of a mental portfolio of purchases and behaviours. [Spencer and Kapitan \(2018\)](#) aimed to predict prosocial consumption choices through individuals' balancing self-interests and collective interests in marketplace exchange, allowing for segmentation by consumer equity sensitivity and explaining why prosocial consumption might occur. The theoretical design of the study uses equity theory, social comparison theory and prosocial consumption decisions. The conceptual framework produces three key hypotheses, focussing on the level of scoring by individuals on the equity sensitivity index. Each hypothesis focuses on a specific segment, including entitled individuals, benevolent individuals and equity sensitive individuals. These segments are hypothesised to the likelihood of making a collective interest consumption decision. The authors conducted two studies, validating and segmenting consumers through their equity sensitivity. Using 375 participants from the USA, the first study examines how participants' perceptions of equity can explain their decisions in response to socially responsible corporate actions. The second study focuses on business-to-business managers and tested whether considerations of the marketplace

balance of self-interest versus collective interest extend to broader stakeholder contexts involving prosocial decisions. The second study above recruited 311 managers from the USA using Cint Panel Management Company. The results from the study show that there is greater willingness by decision-makers to exchange collective interest for self-interest. The findings also show that decision-makers engage more with choices that maximise lower prices for consumers or better profits for firms instead of prosocial outcomes; further, benevolent decision-makers are more willing to exchange self-interest for collective interest and support prosocial outcomes. The key theoretical contribution, but not the only one, from this paper relates to its demonstration that “segmenting the market according to how consumers balance gains and losses provides an alternate approach to studying prosocial consumption, as well as a practical approach to developing targeted marketing strategies”.

The fourth paper in the special issue looks at the customer experience of distress in sustainable consumption. The authors [Valor et al. \(2018\)](#) provide a comprehensive account of how consumers cope with stressful sustainable consumption. Using stress theory, the authors successfully position the paper to go beyond current understanding on barriers to sustainable consumption by arguing that “individuals might fight back, resist or adjust when confronted by such barriers”. Providing a full account regarding the coping strategies consumers tend to use is a valuable contribution to current understanding. In addition, the authors provide an understanding of how consumers’ coping strategies influence the practices and appraisals of sustainable consumption. To do this, the authors adopt a hermeneutic perspective using 25 in-depth interviews. The analysis identifies two different coping strategies that consumers implement during stressful sustainability, namely, adjustment or episodic coping and structural coping or deradicalization. Within episodic coping, the authors identify four types of episodic coping strategies, which include action coping, distancing, social support and emotional work. Under deradicalization the authors identify the cognitive and behavioural dimensions of deradicalization. Importantly, the authors argue that while episodic coping strategies may ease the tension, they do not suppress distress. They further argue that consumers adopt deradicalization “when other coping strategies are not effective to appease distress”. The authors conclude that sustainable consumption can be stressful because of structural and social constraints, although consumers are able to retain their commitment to sustainable consumption to varying degrees. They further add that consumers do not only rely on emotional work to appease their consciences; sustainable consumers use positive emotions to strategically act to energise and maintain motivation or suppress feelings of stress.

By offering these contributions, we hope to bring attention to insightful and inspiring ideas and motivate further fruitful discussions and actions that advance our understanding of sustainable and responsible consumption.

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