
Guest editorial: Integrating sustainability into the marketing of food services and food and beverage retail merchandising

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have foregrounded sustainability as one of the most pressing challenges confronting contemporary food systems. Climate change, population growth and increasing pressure on natural resources demand not only changes in production but also fundamental shifts in consumption patterns. Within this context, marketing – particularly in food services and food and beverage retail – occupies a critical position. Marketing shapes consumer choices, structures the consumption environment and mediates the relationship between sustainability claims and consumer decisions. This Special Issue responds to these challenges by examining how sustainability can be meaningfully integrated into food service and retail marketing practices.

The call for papers for this Special Issue emphasized the need to move beyond narrow interpretations of sustainability marketing that focus solely on product attributes or informational appeals. Instead, it encouraged research aligned with reformative and transformative sustainability marketing perspectives, recognizing marketing's dual role as both a contributor to unsustainable consumption and a powerful driver of behavioral change. The articles included in this Special Issue collectively address this challenge by demonstrating that sustainable food consumption is shaped not only by awareness but also by trust, identity, emotions, social norms and structural constraints embedded within food systems.

Trust, transparency, and credibility in sustainable food marketing

One article in this Special Issue deepens our understanding of the role of trust, transparency and credibility in sustainable food marketing. Research examining supply chain transparency and traceability demonstrates that ethical disclosure and reliable information act as important signals that reduce consumer uncertainty and foster trust in food systems. However, these findings also highlight that transparency alone is insufficient. Credibility, verification and

the perceived accuracy of information are essential conditions for trust to translate into actual purchasing behavior. These insights are particularly relevant in a marketplace increasingly characterized by consumer skepticism toward sustainability claims and concerns regarding greenwashing [How do transparency and traceability enhance purchasing behaviors via consumer trust? Insights for food supply chain, Nguyen, Minh and Nguyen, Duy]. Complementing this perspective, another study investigates consumers' behavioral intentions toward purchasing organic milk in India by extending the Theory of Planned Behavior with functional value quality, organic labeling, health benefits and trust. The findings demonstrate that health benefits are the strongest driver of favorable attitudes toward organic milk, while organic labeling, functional value quality and trust also play significant roles in shaping consumer intentions. By highlighting the importance of credible labeling and consumer trust alongside perceived product benefits, the study reinforces the critical role of trustworthy sustainability signals in encouraging organic food consumption in developing countries [What determines consumers' behavioral intention toward buying organic milk in developing Country? Manisha, Saini; Pankaj, Kumar; Pardeep, Ahlawat; Anil Khurana and Parveen Kumar].

Consumer heterogeneity and psychological drivers

Another stream of research in this issue highlights the importance of consumer heterogeneity and psychological drivers in shaping sustainable food consumption. One study shows that pro-environmental customer behavior is influenced by moral obligation and perceived consumer effectiveness, while also revealing meaningful gender-based differences in how these motivations translate into sustainable actions [Investigating the antecedents of pro-environmental customer behavior: the role of gender in the food industry, Lee, Yong-Ki; Lee, Debora and Iyer, Rajesh]. Complementing this perspective, research exploring generational differences demonstrates that sustainable food purchases are strongly influenced by self-concept enhancement processes. In particular, sustainable consumption can fulfill higher-order identity needs, with distinct motivational pathways emerging for Chinese Baby Boomers and Generation Z consumers [From attitude to purchase: a self-concept enhancement perspective on sustainable food purchase among Chinese baby boomers and generation z, Wang, Weihua].

Symbolic and informational dimensions of sustainability communication

Beyond identity-based motivations, other contributions examine the symbolic and perceptual dimensions of sustainable food marketing. Research on organic food communication highlights the growing importance of aesthetic cues, suggesting that the visual appeal of food products can sometimes outweigh traditional sustainability appeals such as health or environmental benefits [Disadvantages of the food beauty premium: New marketing communication for organic food, Kato, Takumi; Yoshimura, Wakako; Shinozaki, Yusuke; Hayami, Katsuya; Ikeda,

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Ryosuke and Koizumi, Masaki]. Extending this discussion of sustainability communication into the digital sphere, another study investigates how sustainable foods are promoted on Instagram. By examining the effects of message source and message appeals, the study shows that both source credibility and the framing of sustainability messages significantly influence consumer responses to sustainable food promotions on social media platforms. These findings highlight the growing importance of influencer marketing and digital communication strategies in encouraging sustainable consumption behaviors [Promoting Sustainable Foods on Instagram: Impact of Message Source and Appeal, Lemmens, Francesca; Willems, Kim and Brengman, Malaika].

Encouraging dietary transitions and sustainable alternatives

A third cluster of articles addresses the challenge of encouraging dietary transitions toward more sustainable food alternatives. Research on insect-based foods demonstrates that the effectiveness of communication strategies depends strongly on consumers' existing dietary patterns. The findings indicate that communication strategies should be adapted to consumers' existing dietary identities, as different message appeals resonate differently across dietary segments. These findings suggest that standardized sustainability messaging may be less effective than targeted communication strategies tailored to specific dietary segments [How can communication content be adapted depending on consumers' diet to encourage consumption of insect-based foods? Gallen, Céline; Brunel, Olivier and Masson, Estelle]. Complementing this work, another study explores the promotion of millet consumption among Generation Z consumers. Through vignette-based focus group research, the study reveals that awareness, perceived taste, accessibility and social norms represent key barriers to the adoption of alternative grains [Promoting millet mainstreaming among Gen Z consumers – a vignette based focus group study, Suresh, Rajani; Saha, Poulami and Ryall, Diya]. Together, these findings highlight the complex interplay between cultural meanings, convenience and social influence in shaping sustainable food choices.

Reducing waste and challenging aesthetic norms

In addition to promoting new food products, several contributions in this Special Issue examine how marketing interventions can address food waste and aesthetic norms in food retail and service contexts. A systematic review of marketing interventions designed to reduce consumer plate waste finds that purely informational approaches rarely lead to sustained behavioral change. Instead, interventions that

modify portion sizes, choice architecture and service design appear more effective in reducing food waste [A Systematic Review of Marketing Interventions in Reducing Consumer Plate Waste, LEUNG, Tiffany Cheng Han; Lee, Daisy; Wan, Calvin and Rundle-Thiele, Sharyn]. Similarly, research on misshapen or imperfect produce demonstrates how emotional responses, such as awe, can reshape consumer perceptions and increase acceptance of aesthetically imperfect foods [Enhancing consumer responses to misshapen produce: leveraging awe to promote sustainability Kaplan, Begum; Benoit, Ilgin and Miller, Elizabeth G.]. By challenging dominant aesthetic standards, these studies illustrate how marketing strategies can play an important role in reducing food waste and improving the sustainability of food systems.

Conclusion

Taken together, the articles in this Special Issue illustrate that integrating sustainability into food service and retail marketing requires more than promoting green attributes. Effective sustainability marketing should engage with consumers' lived realities, address structural and contextual barriers and acknowledge the social and psychological processes that shape food choices. The findings presented here support a shift away from purely auxiliary sustainability marketing toward more reformative approaches that encourage sustainable lifestyles and, in some cases, challenge existing norms and institutional practices.

This Special Issue contributes to ongoing scholarly dialogue by offering empirically grounded insights into how sustainability can be operationalized within food marketing without relying on simplistic assumptions about consumer rationality or moral consistency. For practitioners, the research highlights the importance of credibility, segmentation and context-sensitive design in promoting sustainable food choices. For scholars, it opens avenues for future research on trust, social influence and the role of marketing in transforming food systems in line with the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

We hope this collection stimulates further inquiry into how marketing can move beyond incremental change and contribute meaningfully to more sustainable, equitable and resilient food systems.

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