

Can marketing be the hero in our quest for sustainability, or does it wear a villain's mask?

By Ravi Vignesh

PODCAST EPISODE DESCRIPTION:

Join us for a deep dive into marketing's role within sustainable consumption on today's episode of 'Debating Marketing & Climate Change'. Can marketing be the hero in our quest for sustainability, or does it wear a villain's mask? Don't miss out on an engaging mix of inspiration, controversy, and eco-activism!

SCRIPT:

Welcome back to 'Debating Marketing & Climate Change', the podcast that shines a light on the important role of marketing in directing our world towards sustainability. This is Ravi Vignesh, the biggest advocate for eco-friendly consumption out there hopefully? But in today's episode, we are going to be covering a very important question that lies at the heart of our ecoconscious journey. Can marketing help reduce the barriers to environmentally sustainable consumption? Sounds like a heated debate, doesn't it? With a mix of insights, analysis, and real-world examples, we will examine the two sides of marketing in our quest for a greener planet. So, grab your eco-friendly gear, and let us dive right in.

To kick things off, let's explore the idea of environmentally sustainable consumption. I would like you all to picture this for a second: a world where we consume not out of sheer desire but from necessity, where the emphasis is on enriching our quality of life rather than accumulating material wealth. This is the vision put forward by Quoquab and Mohammad (2020), who promote a mindful approach to consumption that prioritizes the preservation of our natural resources and ensures a prosperous planet for future generations. But, as with any vision, there are hurdles. Barriers to sustainable consumption include a widespread misconception that our personal actions have little effect on the ecosystem, the daunting price tag on green products that seems to whisper, "This is not for you", the societal badge of honor that comes with sustainable consumption, and a widespread unawareness of green products unless they are being advertised (Sheoran & Kumar, 2022).

On the brighter side however, marketing has a powerful role to play in reducing some of these barriers to achieve environmentally sound consumption. First up, let's talk about Green Marketing along with its educational and influential powers. Imagine a marketplace where

every purchase is a step towards environmental responsibility? Sounds like heaven, doesn't it? That's the promise of Green Marketing, a strategy that is not just about manufacturing and promotion, but also the consumption and disposal of goods and services in a manner which reduces the negative environmental impacts (Mishra & Sharma, 2014). But what really makes Green Marketing stand out? It is the power to illuminate the path for consumers, helping them, well technically us, understand the ripple effects of our choices. Key factors like eco-labeling, premium-priced green products, environmental concerns, and beliefs influence the attitude of consumers towards the environment in a positive and influential manner (Shabbir et al., 2020). Companies like IKEA for instance, run educational initiatives to spread knowledge about sustainable living by providing ideas, advice, and information to assist customers in making more environmentally friendly decisions in their homes through catalogs, e-commerce, and instore displays (Mahalakshmi et al., 2024). The brand's initiatives additionally encourage consumers to embrace energy-saving and recycling behaviors, which has a favorable impact on their consumption patterns and way of life.

This brings us to our next point where innovative marketing strategies meet sustainability, where green is not just a color, but a commitment to the planet. According to Cronin et al. (2011), there are three main types of green strategies namely green innovation, greening the organization, and green alliances. Firstly, green innovation is not just about creating eco-friendly products; it is a marketing strategy that revolves around reducing waste, a meaningful way of packaging, and a smarter, kinder way of delivering goods in an environmentally friendly manner (Cronin et al. 2011; Mirvis 1994). Take Elopak's Pure-Pak cartons, for instance. These pioneers have reimaged packaging with their biodegradable cartons primarily made of wood fibers from responsibly managed forests, therefore setting a new gold standard in the packing industry and urging others to follow the steps to become sustainable (Elopak, 2024).

But the journey does not stop at innovation. It is equally crucial to turn the organizational gears towards sustainability. This means re-evaluating every aspect of a company's operations, from how they light up their offices to the way they dispose of waste, ensuring every bit aligns with the grand vision of environmental sustainability (Cronin et al., 2011).

And then, there is the power of unity through green alliances. When companies join forces, they do not just share resources; they work on joint projects and share a commitment to a greener future (Cronin et al., 2011). Look at Adidas and Allbirds, who have teamed up to create a sneaker with a very small carbon footprint emitting only 2.94 kgs of CO₂ each pair, proving that collaborations can lead to industry-wide revolutions (Maoui, 2022). Thus, collaboration among industries can accelerate progress and distribute the load of innovation, thereby dismantling barriers to sustainability and promoting a structural change (Gomez, 2023).

While there is a positive wave of innovative green marketing strategies aiming to promote sustainability, there is a darker side to this narrative that we cannot ignore - the issue of greenwashing and its resultant consumer skepticism. Greenwashing is essentially a facade, where businesses engage in a clever tactic of promoting their products or services as environmentally friendly through deceptive marketing and PR tactics (Aji & Sutikno, 2015).

This dishonest practice does not just mislead thoughtful consumers, but also makes it complicated for genuinely sustainable enterprises striving for positive environmental impact. There is also no denying the suspicion this gives customers (Aji & Sutikno, 2015). For example, when consumers, who are already aware of their knowledge gaps regarding greenwashing, encounter the widespread green colored labels on product packages or sustainability marketing messages, their skepticism only deepens (Jakubczak & Gotowska, 2020). Take the case of Keurig Canada, for instance, which faced a hefty \$3 million fine for misleadingly advertising its K-Cup pods as recyclable (Ecojustice, 2022). This shines a spotlight on the overall issue of greenwashing, where companies essentially trick consumers into believing their products are eco-friendly, when they are anything but this.

Now I know that at first glance, marketing seems like it could be a hero in the narrative of sustainable consumption, displaying its influential power to influence behavior towards greener consumption (Correia et al., 2023). Yet, this is where things become complicated and start to steer away from sustainability and towards overconsumption. Imagine the force of marketing, not as a gentle nudge towards eco-conscious choices, but as a relentless engine driving the desire for more products, more updates, more everything. This excessive consumption, driven by relentless marketing, is not just filling our homes with things we barely use; it is depleting our resources, polluting our oceans, and contributing to a global crisis. The article I came across recently, titled "Blame it on marketing: consumers' views on unsustainable consumption" by Pereira Heath and Chatzidakis (2012) digs deep into this issue. It sheds light on how consumers perceive excessive consumption and its environmental consequences, pointing out a harsh reality: that while many acknowledge the role of marketing in driving consumption, very few connect the dots back to their own environmental footprint. However, there is a light at the end of this consumerism storm due to brands like Patagonia. Their "Buy Less, Demand More" campaign is not just a slogan; it urges us to reduce our consumption due to the diminishing natural resources (Lowitt, 2011).

As we conclude today's episode of 'Debating Marketing & Climate Change', it is clear that marketing has the potential to be a good force by educating consumers and promoting sustainable choices. Yet, the challenges of greenwashing and overconsumption remind us that marketing within sustainable consumption is not all black and white. As consumers, it is crucial to remain informed, critical, and support brands that are genuinely committed to sustainability.

The debate does not end here, nonetheless. We want to hear from you: How do you think marketing can contribute to a more sustainable future? Be sure to share your thoughts with us on our social media platforms. A massive thanks to you all for tuning in and just a quick heads up to stay safe, stay awesome, and most importantly, stay green. This is Ravi Vignesh signing off for now, goodbye!

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