Can marketing make environmentally sustainable behaviours 'cool' and/or the norm?

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Podcast Episode Description

Stella and Xu boldly argue one side, that marketing can make environmentally sustainable behaviours cool and/or the norm. Victoria and Ross will argue for the latter, claiming that marketing poses limitations for making environmentally sustainable behaviours 'cool' and/or the norm.
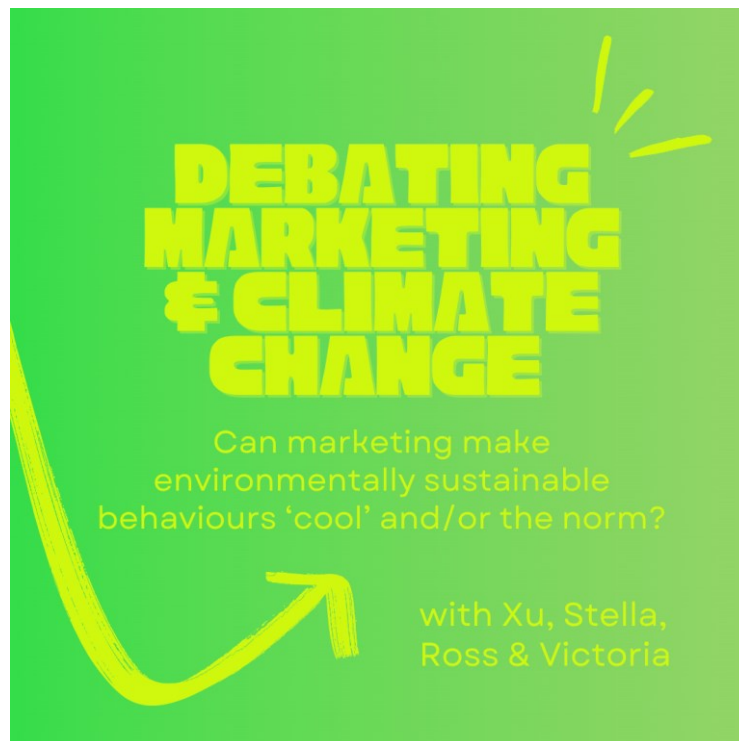

Figure 1: Podcast Cover, created using a template by Akmatova (2024) .

Introduction

Hello and welcome back to another episode of "Debating Marketing & Climate Change." Today's episode is brought to you by Stella, Xu, Victoria, and Ross, and we're all very excited to have an in-depth debate and explore the tensions revolving around something really interesting today. But first, let's take a moment to reflect; you can pause the audio if you would like. I want you to think about the last time you adopted a sustainable practice; what inspired you to do so? Was it from anything you saw in an advertisement? Or something else? With 85% of consumers globally believing they are thinking and acting greener, there's ripe ground for marketers to leverage this widespread sentiment to promote sustainable behaviours in a desirable way (Simon-Kurcher, 2021). On the other hand, with only 24% of companies perceiving sustainability as a competitive advantage, we must consider how the responsibility of marketers alone may not be enough to incite meaningful and long-term behavioural

change (Haanaes, 2022). In light of these fascinating facts, we will debate whether marketing can make environmentally sustainable behaviours 'cool' and/or the norm and bring it to life using real examples and concepts like the attitude-behaviour gap, theory of planned behaviour, and social identity theory. Please don't worry if you're unfamiliar with these terms; this podcast is intended to be accessible, so we'll explain these key concepts as we go. We hope by the end you'll have a greater grasp of the role marketing plays or does not play in inciting sustainable behaviours, as well as an appreciation towards climate-related issues and challenges faced by marketers and consumers.

Side 1

Stella:

Marketing can influence social norms and elevate environmentally sustainable behaviours to the level of being trendy and desirable. Many brands demonstrate through their marketing campaigns that eco-friendly choices can be positioned as both the 'cool' thing to do and the norm to follow. The shift depends on how marketing appeals to consumer behaviour, including the impact of behavioural patterns, social norms, and consumers' desire to fit in.

One of the key drivers of behaviour is descriptive norms; people tend to follow what they see others doing because they want to act in a socially appropriate way (Cialdini et al., 1991). This is where marketing plays a crucial role: by making sustainable practices highly visible and desirable, brands can create a ripple effect where consumers imitate behaviours they perceive as popular. A UK-based brand, Who Gives A Crap, exemplifies this by building a community of consumers sharing their purchases of 100% recycled and biodegradable toilet paper online or with friends, fostering a brand community aligned with Maffesoli's concept of 'tribes' (Maffesoli, 1995). The marketing campaigns use humour and engaging storytelling to establish a personal connection with consumers, and their colourful packaging designs turn ordinary products into something entertaining and attractive. Their subscription model encourages brand loyalty and repeat purchases, embedding sustainable choices into consumers' routines (Iyengar et al., 2022). Moreover, their premium bamboo toilet paper, which has received a 4.9-star rating and over 24,000 sales, showcases high consumer engagement, satisfaction and highlights the attraction of environmentally friendly products (Who Gives A Crap, 2024). By normalising sustainable activity, such marketing visibility encourages consumers to align their behaviour with popular, eco-friendly options and ultimately contribute to environmental initiatives (White et al., 2019).

By influencing consumers' attitudes and beliefs based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour, marketing also aids in bridging the gap between intention and action. Although consumers may already have positive attitudes towards sustainability, without proper encouragement, those attitudes might not translate into action. This is where marketing becomes vital in transforming sustainable goals into routines (Ajzen, 1991). As a certified B Corp (B Lab Global, 2024), Ben & Jerry's attracts consumers with their dedication to reducing their carbon footprint and their claim that "if it's melted, it's ruined" - using their ice cream to symbolise the planet's health to raise awareness of the climate crisis (Ben & Jerry's, 2023). Aligning with the factor 'attitudes' in the theory, their marketing promotes a favourable view of sustainability by presenting eco-friendly practices as beneficial and consistent with contemporary values.

Additionally, their marketing also reinforces subjective norms by framing environmentally sustainable options as 'cool' and socially acceptable, encouraging consumers to fit in with perceived societal expectations. By being transparent about their carbon footprint and setting the goal of reducing carbon emissions by 80% by 2050, Ben & Jerry's can improve the perceived behavioural control of their consumers, empowering them to impact the environment through their purchases when they are shown as feasible and practicable (Freese, 2007). By aligning their brand with global environmental goals, Ben & Jerry's makes sustainability ethically desirable and part of a modern, approachable lifestyle. The

comprehensive marketing strategy simplifies the process for consumers, making it easier to turn their ethical values into everyday actions, bridging the gap between sustainable intentions and actual, planned behaviour and making environmentally sustainable decisions 'cool' and/or the norm.

Xu:

So, Following on from what Stella has argued, marketing has previously demonstrated its power to create monumental shifts in public perception; for example, with the reduction of smoking, in the context of sustainability, this can also be witnessed (Stead et al., 2007). Let's look at electric vehicles; they're increasingly becoming part of social norms and also a great way for consumers to reduce their environmental impact (Costa et al., 2021). However, EVs previously existed as a more niche market and were perceived as less comfortable and trusted compared to traditional cars (Ziefle et al., 2014). A pioneer in this industry was Tesla, who disrupted the status quo by reframed this sustainable behaviour as trendy, aspirational, and luxurious with its sleek design and playful technology—my favourite is the 'Caraoke', perfect for sing-a-longs on a trip (Stringham et al. 2015; Tesla, 2024). Tesla has also significantly improved general consumer perceptions of EVs by addressing key consumer concerns, particularly range anxiety and charging infrastructure. (Maradin et al., 2022). These attributes have positioned Tesla's consumer perception in the functional-symbolic-societal framework as a desirable vehicle that is high-performing (*functional*), representative of the future and innovation (*symbolic*), and appealing to the descriptive norm of acting sustainably by using zero-emission vehicle (*societal*) (Long et al., 2019).

Moreover, by applying the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we may better understand the effectiveness of Tesla's marketing strategy. This theory explores how people's social identity influences their attitudes and behaviours based on their affiliation with the in-group and the out-group and becomes especially important when people have a deep emotional connection with a group (Leaper, 2011). Tesla has successfully leveraged this psychological concept by creating a unique in-group identity for its consumers, who see themselves as part of an innovative eco-conscious community (Maradin et al., 2022). Their marketing strategy creates an engaging story where owning a Tesla symbolises a forward-thinking lifestyle (Long et al., 2019). The impressive quantitative figures showed how well Tesla achieved this strategic identity positioning—research found that Tesla is the top car brand for brand loyalty. According to the survey, 74.7% of respondents indicated they would choose to repurchase a Tesla vehicle (Henry, 2020), and in 2023, Tesla's Model Y became the world's best-selling electric car (Pontes, 2024). Consequently, this integrated marketing strategy Tesla has used to align individual consumer goals with environmental responsibility by combining a prestigious brand identity with practical sustainability solutions highlights marketing as a critical and effective tool in positioning consumer perceptions of environmentally friendly behaviours as 'cool' and/or the norm (Axsen & Long, 2022; Long et al., 2019).

Side 2

Victoria:

Thank you, Xu and Stella; those were some great points. Now, let's look at the other side of this debate of why marketing alone can't make environmentally sustainable behaviours 'cool' and/or the norm? Firstly, let's look at a phenomenon known as the attitude-behaviour gap that's highly discussed in the field of sustainability and do so through the lens of organic food (Eckhardt et al., 2010). Consumers possess positive attitudes and purchase intentions towards organic food due to its positive sustainable impact; however, consumers don't actually purchase the good due to the economic barriers associated with its higher price point, so through the consumers own economic rationalisation, their values don't end up matching their behaviour (Schäufele & Janssen, 2021; Aschemann-Witzel & Zielke, 2017). This higher pricing often makes organic food inaccessible as it would make weekly shopping totals push

beyond what can be reasonably afforded for most, especially in the context of the current cost of living crisis and as it's not just a one-off purchase or investment, like a reusable cup (Eckhardt et al., 2010). This is referred to as the 'lifestyle sacrifice threshold'—the point at which people's desire to make sustainable choices is overshadowed by the sacrifices that must be made in their quality of life (Emery, 2012); consequently, demand remains low, with organically farmed area representing only 3% of the total agricultural farmed area in the UK (GOV UK, 2022). Additionally, research has observed that consumer responses to green marketing efforts mostly occur among more affluent consumers, highlighting that if sustainable behaviours aren't affordable and accessible, they will remain niche no matter how trendy or well marketed they are (Gilg et al., 2005; Thogersen, 2014).

Another barrier marketing faces is the dependency consumers have on institutions like governments and NGOs (Eckhardt et al., 2010). These institutions, not marketers, can create systemic change through policies and regulations and shape new social norms. The impact of this can be seen in the humble 10p plastic bag charge, which recently celebrated its 10 year anniversary in Scotland; the charge has resulted in a huge decrease of 524% from 2016 in single-use plastic bags purchased this past year (BBC, 2024; GOV UK, 2024). This charge arguably repositioned the economic barrier regularly faced by consumers trying to act sustainably, as one imposed on the consumer when they acted unsustainably by not bringing their own bag, to incite a new sustainable social norm—no marketing necessary.

Another way we can look at the limitations of marketing is through its history of greenwashing, which has resulted in distrust and scepticism among consumers towards eco-marketing (Akturan & Tezcan, 2019; Chen & Chang, 2012). With consumers growing concerns over sustainability and the environment over the past few decades, many companies have reacted to this by imposing green strategies, like Coca-Cola and fashion brands H&M and Zara; however, there has been much criticism surrounding these companies for greenwashing (Mahecha & Punia, 2023). Notably, H&M's 'Conscious Campaign', which conceptually leans on the fact that it was constructed from sustainably sourced materials, however, used more synthetics than in its main collection, with 1 in 5 items found to be 100% fossil-fuel derived (Changing Markets, 2021). Consequently, consumers that were trying to act sustainably by purchasing from the collection were met with false marketing claims. Incidents such as these act to discourage consumers and result in scepticism, as well as a reduction in perceived consumer effectiveness, a theory that highlights how individuals perceive that their actions have a meaningful and positive impact on the environment (Casalengo et al., 2022). All of these factors undermine marketing as a tool towards making genuine shifts towards making sustainable behaviours 'cool' and/or the norm, and again highlighting consumers' institutional dependency (Eckhardt et al., 2010).

Ross:

In addition to what Victoria said, I can also see why Marketing alone cannot make environmentally responsible behaviour 'cool' or the norm due to marketing usually being the culprit of short-lived trends that make unsustainable, as opposed to sustainable behaviours, 'cool'. Mass consumerism, a consequence of these trends, generates hazardous waste, higher emissions, and abuses natural resources (Lee, 2022). This trend-centric culture that marketing propels frequently begins with a product going viral on social media, usually through marketing strategies such as celebrity endorsement, with Christiano Ronaldo receiving over $80 million for sponsored posts last year (Shepard, 2024). The use of influencer and celebrity marketing on social media is a popular and effective approach due to the confidence, authenticity, and trustworthiness that they convey to their followers, with 69% of users trusting what influencers advocate (Erwin et al., 2022; Shepard, 2024). However, this type of marketing is not often sustainable, causing brief periods of time in which a product, whether sustainable or not, becomes 'trendy,' resulting in a high number of sales that rapidly decline in as little as days and result in large amounts of waste in landfills (Wagner, 2022; Mullen & Huun, 2024). This is well encapsulated in the staggering statistic that the average person wears a piece of clothing just 7 - 10 times before discarding it (Kenney, 2024). Organisations tend to follow the dominant social paradigm, the prevailing societal belief that economic growth should be prioritised over environmental concerns, and this is done so by capitalising on the existing and prevalent societal attitudes towards a trend-centric culture and

promoting unsustainable behaviours by inciting overconsumption by positioning products as 'cool' and desirable (Gollnhofer & Schouten, 2017). This also relates to perceived behavioural control, denoted as an individual's belief in their self-efficacy to carry out certain behaviours, whilst often underestimating their subjection to external or internal influences (Azjen, 1991). These external influences, such as influencers, celebrities and businesses, in tandem with the dominant social paradigm, can influence consumers, consciously and unconsciously, towards a certain behaviour (Carrington et al., 2010). Consequently, consumers are steered towards unsustainable purchasing behaviours through marketing, a phenomenon which will continue to prevail as long as monetary incentives are prioritised over long term sustainability by marketers (M.D. & Akhil, 2016).

Conclusion

I think hearing from both sides together we can conclude that marketing can aid in making environmentally sustainable behaviours 'cool' and/or the norm, through positioning them as desirable, but faces an array of limitations in integrating them into norms, as well as having the ability to potentially promote unsustainable behaviours. Consequently, a holistic approach is necessitated, with institutions, marketers and consumers working in collaboration to overcome these barriers and increase the accessibility, awareness and desirability for sustainable behaviours, to make them the default as opposed to the exception.

It's also important to note that marketing is a reflection of the demands and desires of consumers, therefore, c onsumers shouldn't feel powerless, this includes you, listening to this podcast right now, possess the power to advocate for change. As consumers we can take steps, lead by example, in our consumption choices by choosing sustainable brands when possible, by staying critical and researching products to make informed purchase decisions, pressurise and lobby institutions and businesses for change. These small steps can trigger conversations and actions that can lead to a wider ripple effect to achieve a sustainable future.

Thank you for listening and we hope that you enjoyed today's episode of "Debating Marketing & Climate Change".

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List of Figures

Figure 1: Akmatova, N. (2024) *Social Media Marketing Plan Template*. [Template] Available at: https://www.canva.com/templates/EAFxYgpPO9M-pink-neon-green-bold-playful-minimalist-talk-show-podcast-cover/ (Accessed: 7th November 2024).

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