

# **Echoes of Tomorrow: Who has greater power to positively impact on climate change: marketers or consumers?**

*By Yaojia Ma, Kimberly Frahm, Jiayu Meng, and Nadia Pajkowski*

## **Podcast Episode description**

Welcome to Echoes of Tomorrow, where we explore the future of time travel and its impact on human life. In this episode, we investigate the implications of time travel on the environment through an alternate reality in which one person can be sent back in time to stop climate change. Who is best suited for the task?

## **Podcast Introduction**

Welcome everyone, to this week's episode of Echoes of Tomorrow!

Today we find ourselves in a time when environmental concerns are growing more urgent than ever. With every choice we make having direct consequences on our planet. But what if we could hear directly from the future, a time when the consequences of our actions are fully realised? Our story today takes us to the year 2124 ...

## **Introduction – Narrator**

The year is 2124, and Earth stands on the brink of collapse. Rivers have run dry, the air is toxic, crops have withered, and food has become a luxury. Humanity, in its unwavering belief that technology and growth would solve all problems, allowed our relentless need for consumption to push the planet past its breaking point.

In a last-ditch effort, scientists have created a time machine. It can only be used once and can send just one person back to the year 2024—giving them the chance to correct the course of the future before it's too late.

Now, four candidates stand before this machine: two marketers and two consumers, each arguing that they hold the key to a sustainable future. Only one will be selected to make the journey back. And so, the debate begins: who truly has the power to positively impact climate change — marketers or consumers?

## **Consumer Side Introduction**

We're Yaojia and Nadia, and we represent the average consumer. In 2006, economist Nicholas Stern (2006) warned us that human activities — especially our consumption and energy use — are major drivers of climate change. Today, as the world faces this crisis, we as consumers are

deeply intertwined with its roots. If we're part of the problem, then we must also be part of the solution!

## **Consumer Point 1: Consumer demand**

Our main point as consumers is that marketers often get too much credit for their role in fighting climate change. While it's true that marketers have helped proliferate overconsumption and the rise of the Dominant Social Paradigm, or DSP (Kotler, 2011), their primary role is to anticipate and respond to consumer wants and needs (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2020).

This is especially true today, when consumers are now more informed and discerning than ever before, which has come with higher expectations (Deloitte, 2014). Just look at the rise of green marketing, which has been largely driven by consumer demand for more eco-friendly products creating a space in the market for marketers to fill (Branstad & Solem, 2020). This same process is replicated in the growth of sustainable packaging. A 2021 meta-analysis by Afif et al. of studies related to sustainable packaging showed that consumer demand was a key driver behind the shift to more sustainable packaging (Afif et al., 2022). It was found that marketers, motivated by financial and reputational gains, promoted sustainable packaging to positively differentiate themselves from competitors in the eyes of environmentally conscious consumers.

But here's the thing - switching to sustainable packaging isn't cheap. It takes significant investments of time and money, meaning that there would be little incentive to market sustainable packaging if costs exceeded returns, at least under the current DSP (Afif et al., 2022; Kotler, 2011). Therefore, marketers only pushed for sustainable packaging when consumer demand was high enough to generate returns (Afif et al., 2022).

## **Consumer Point 2: Post-purchase journey**

Let's look at another angle, now imagine a long and complex life- journey of a lamp: from its raw materials, to packaging, manufacturing, transportation, and finally, its end-of-life disposal (Lou, 2018). This journey doesn't just happen in one day, it touches many hands and takes on different environmental impacts at every stage.

Our choices have far-reaching power, and we will influence our community to follow the flow strategies (Konietzko et al, 2020) earlier, to go green, use less, use longer and use again. As consumers, our environmental consciousness is not only responsible for green consumption but also crucial in post-environmental purchase (Nittala et al, 2021). Our decisions matter in how we reuse (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2022), maintain, and dispose of the products (Nittala et al, 2021). For example, an energy-efficient IKEA lamp. A marketer might promote its long life and energy savings, but once we purchase it, the product ownership and real environmental impact depends on us (Cruz-Cardenas et al., 2016). How do we maintain, repair, or recycle it? Or will we throw it away when it is broken?

While marketers play an important role at the starting stage, with eco-friendly packaging and informative green product promotions (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981), it's our hands that hold the ultimate power once we own the product. Our daily choices can reduce waste, conserve energy, and protect our planet's resources.

### **Consumer Point 3: UGC**

Another point we'd like to raise is the power of user-generated content, or UGC. With social media, it is now far easier for consumers to connect and share advice, recommendations, and opinions, which means we're all shaping each other's choices more than ever (Yildirim, 2021). As a result, social media content creators have become some of the most trusted voices online (Yildirim, 2021). In fact, studies like one from Kapoor et al. show that content creators are often more effective at promoting lifestyles than brands or marketers because we value the opinions of other consumers more (Kapoor et al., 2022). One potential reason is that influencers are seen as less biased and more authentic (Kapoor et al., 2022). From this emergence of UGC, a niche of sustainable lifestyle content creators and activists has formed, a community of consumers that share content about sustainable fashion, climate-friendly eating, conscious choices, and zero waste lifestyles (Yalcin et al., 2021). Unlike typical influencers, these creators aren't trying to sell you anything. Their main goal is to educate and share knowledge, rather than promote consumption (Yalcin et al., 2021).

A great example of this is Lauren Singer, the woman behind the blog "Trash is for Tossers," which she started in 2014 to document her zero-waste journey as a consumer. The blog serves as a place to empower people with practical tools to reduce waste and live more sustainably, based on Lauren's own experiences (Trash is for Tossers, n.d.). In 2017, Lauren went viral after sharing a video showing that the trash she had collected over four years fit into just one mason jar (Singer, 2015). This sparked a "trash jar" trend online (Hadden, 2022). Through her blog, Lauren amassed a huge following and became a prominent zero-waste activist, giving TED talks and interviews which exposed millions of consumers to the zero-waste movement and got people interested in reducing their waste (East, 2016).

### **Consumer Side Conclusion**

In conclusion, our choices and preferences are the foundation driving sustainable market trends. Even during the middle and end stage of the product life cycle, consumers' decisions like recycle, repair and responsibly dispose all have direct environmental consequences that go beyond marketers' reach. We are continuously evolving, our eco-consciousness growing through peer influence and social media. Sustainable outcomes largely depend on consumer engagement and responsible behaviours, as their actions enhance or diminish a product's environmental benefits over time. By allowing us to go back in time, you enable us to convince our peers to demand better from marketers and businesses.

### **Marketer Side Introduction**

You've just heard the consumer argument, claiming individual choices can drive the change we need for the environment. But let's be honest—real change demands more than just individual actions.

I'm Kimberly, a marketer, and I'm here to show you that marketers hold the power to shape a sustainable world. Imagine a world where eco-friendly options aren't just the "right choice" but the irresistible one.

Today, my colleague Jasmine and I will make the case that marketers are the true catalysts for positive environmental impact. We're not just promoting sustainable products—we're making them the products everyone wants. And that's exactly why marketers should be the ones sent back to 2024. With our influence, we have the tools to reshape consumer habits on a huge scale

### **Marketer Point 1: Removing demotivators**

I want to raise a different view regarding Yaojia's point about "consumers holding ultimate power after purchasing products." Bardhi and Eckhardt once proposed a viewpoint: "Instead of buying and owning things, consumers want access to goods and prefer to pay for the experience of temporarily accessing them" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Philips is a very successful example of practicing this idea: instead of following the traditional "take, make, waste" model (Knight, 2023), the company created a "lighting as a service" program where, by retaining control over the handling of lighting fixtures, Philips commits to taking 100% responsibility for recycling after customer use and aims to prevent 15% of lighting fixtures in Western Europe from entering landfills (Philips, 2018). This project successfully shifted business model from a linear economy to a circular economy (Phipps, 2018), helping consumers reduce the inconvenience of burnt-out bulbs replacing and disposing, and protecting the environment through material recovery. This innovative approach shows how marketers can take control of what happens after a product is sold, while also creating environmental benefits that go far beyond what individual consumers could achieve on their own.

Also, marketers can improve the accessibility and convenience of sustainable products, making it easier for consumers to use them. Take Tesla, a well-known brand as our example, Surveys from McKinsey show that many consumers interested in electric vehicles were initially hesitant because of their limited range (Fischer et al., 2024). However, as Tesla established a widespread charging network in cities — sometimes with chargers even easier to find than gas stations — driving an electric car became just as convenient, or, even more convenient and cost effective, than a traditional vehicle (Darbari, 2024). This shift greatly influenced consumers' travel choices, encouraging more environmentally friendly transportation options.

So, to bring it all together: these examples really show how marketers have more power on climate change. Sure, consumers care about making sustainable choices, but marketers are the ones who can really tackle the barriers to sustainability in ways that consumers simply can't on their own.

### **Marketer Point 2: Influence over Consumers**

Marketing plays a key role in helping companies, as well as consumers, operate in a more sustainable manner" (Borin & Metcalf, 2010). Why? Because marketers have something no one else does: the ability to influence beliefs, habits, and values at a massive scale. We work within what's called the "dominant social paradigm," or DSP—a fancy term for the social norms and values we all accept without question (Kotler, 2011). Traditionally, DSP pushes us toward growth and consumption—a 'more is better' mindset that fuels consumerism. But marketers today don't have to stick to old ways. Now more than ever we have the unique power to enable consumers to act sustainably (Emery, 2020), by acting as change agents—and even to lead by example (Belz & Peattie, 2012; p.279)."

Take it from social critic Paul Stiles, who described the market as a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He said, “If the market is surrounded by good values, it can become a good physician, but when it’s not, it can become a predator.” When marketers harness positive values, we become agents of change. But if we neglect that responsibility, the market—and our influence—can take a dark turn, especially as individuals today often accept market values over social values without much critical thinking (Stiles, 2005).

And this isn’t just theory; it’s happening. Let me give you a real example. Take Quorn’s campaign, “Helping the Planet One Bite at a Time.” They encouraged meat eaters—yes, hardcore meat lovers—to try plant-based products, and in doing so, they managed to cut 3.8 million kilograms of emissions (Kite & Vanduynslager, 2022). That’s huge. This shows how marketers can turn slogans like “less is more” into actionable behaviours, shaping what consumers want and need in a way that benefits the planet (Kotler, 2022)

### **Marketer Point 3: Intention-behavior gap**

Adding on Kimberly, even when people genuinely care about the environment, there’s often a big gap between their intentions and their actions, known as the “green gap” (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Despite having good intentions, a lot of consumers find it tough to turn their environmental concerns into real changes in their habits.

Studies have shown that consumers’ willingness to adopt sustainable products is heavily influenced by their awareness of the product, the benefits they see, and the value they perceive (Shantha, 2019). Also, when people get clear, reliable information about a product’s performance, they’re more likely to see the benefits of green products and use them effectively (Luchs et al., 2010; Lin and Chang, 2012). This is where our marketers can step in. For instance, when Unilever introduced concentrated laundry detergents, marketers provided clear dosing instructions and redesigned packaging with measurement caps, helping consumers easily understand that they could use less product and still get the same results – and help the environment at the same time (Unilever, 2022). Similarly, Patagonia provides detailed care instructions and repair guides, to teach consumers how to extend their clothes’ life rather than just replace them (Patagonia, 2024). These examples clearly show how marketers can help consumers bridge the green gap and make a positive impact on the environment.

### **Marketer Side Conclusion**

So, here’s the bottom line: marketers hold a unique power to make real change on climate. We don’t just respond to trends; we shape them. By making sustainable choices affordable, convenient, and appealing, we transform eco-friendly decisions from “maybe” to “must.” Imagine a world where choosing green isn’t the exception but the rule. We can make that happen.

### **Conclusion - Narrator**

As this debate draws to a close, our panel of judges have found that marketers hold the key to driving lasting change toward a sustainable future. While consumer choices do play a part, it’s marketers who have the power to create widespread, systemic transformation. Marketers shape consumer perceptions, influence consumer behaviour, and, most importantly, can make

sustainable products more affordable, convenient, and appealing—empowering consumers to see green choices as the default.

The Judges have found that marketers have a unique ability to spark large-scale shifts. By making sustainability mainstream through smart product design, effective messaging, and powerful campaigns, they can transform consumer habits. Companies like Quorn and Patagonia show us how marketers can lead the way, making sustainable living not just a fantasy, but an accessible, desirable reality.

In the end, if we're to build a truly sustainable future, marketers are the ones who have the tools and influence to make sustainability the new normal, shaping the world for generations to come.

Kimberly, please step forward, and enter the time machine...

#### \*Additional Ending Notes:

If you notice, the voice of the time traveler and the podcast host is the same person. We created this loop to encourage our listeners to reflect: The person who return from 2124 maybe someone we know? Or could it be us?

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