Marketers VS Consumers: Who can do the most to steer us in a more sustainable direction before it's too late?

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Podcast Episode Description

In this first-ever edition of "Debating Marketing and Climate Change", we go head-to-head on a vital topic: climate responsibility! Dynamics between marketers and consumers continue to shift, but one question remains relevant. Who can change the world? And what must they do to *take* this immense responsibility by the reins?

Introduction

Gustav: Hello and welcome to the first installment of Debating Marketing and Climate Change! As the world tightens and stretches under the new strain of new environmental pressures, what role do we play as consumers and marketers? And critically, who can do the most to steer us in a more sustainable direction before it's too late?

I'm your host, Gustav, and with me today are two consumer specialists Yuri *[Hi]*, and Anna *[Hi]*, as well as my fellow marketing consultant David *[Hello]*, and today we're discussing the ever-changing and ever-disputed roles and responsibilities of marketers and consumers. Who can affect more change? Who shoulders more blame? Marketers, as David and I think? Or consumers, as is the opinion held by Yuri and Anna? David, why don't you start us off?

Argument 1 (M)

Marketers are best positioned to counteract misinformation and so can enact more positive change.

David: Well, we take the position that marketers are definitionally more responsible than consumers for enacting positive change in their respective industries for a couple of reasons. Firstly, – and this is the issue I would place the most emphasis on, especially as the discipline moves into an uncertain future – is the notion that the strength and resilience of communicated ideas in the face of adversity is an essential factor in changing consumer habits (Wong-Parodi & Feygina, 2020).

This is a responsibility that we feel falls directly to marketers as individual consumers have a much more difficult time creating significant change than a marketer with a dedicated budget and a pre-built base audience. Even then, what social influence individual consumers can exert can be guided and harnessed effectively by marketers. Take, for example, a community or culture that has built, over time, a dislike and disapproval of smoking. All a marketer has to do to formulate an effective strategy against smoking within that community is point out the fact that the majority are already against it (Burchell et al., 2012). Recent events the world over have seen a massive increase in political polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), which obviously will have a huge impact on the uptake of climate-conscious consumer habits – as climate change is one of the key topics that has been both politicized and weaponised for political gain (Tam & Chan, 2023).

Gustav: Right but what would you say has been the effect of this political polarization?

David: This polarization, which has been particularly extreme in countries like the US, has created 'alternative' social groups which are able, through constant positive reinforcement of their own ideas and beliefs, to blithely reject any marketing campaigns that pertain to issues that they are at odds with (Tam & Chan, 2023). The emergence of these groups can be seen as a failure of marketing, as bad actors have leveraged many techniques associated with social marketing (CISA, 2024), such as the introduction of alternative social proofs and norms to these groups, to steal these consumers against positive climate action and CSR initiatives with much greater urgency than is shown by good-faith marketers. With the US election having just happened…

Yuri: Oh yeah, that was crazy.

David: I think we'd be remiss if we didn't mention Donald Trump, a man able to diminish institutional trust and the power of societal norms to devastating effect, even after the damage done *to* the institutions themselves has been repaired (Bomberg, 2021). This comes from Elizabeth Bomberg's paper, where she also finds figures like Joe Biden, who here stands in for the [quote-unquote] good-faith marketer, unable to fully erase the lasting legacy of Trump's denialist stance in the same way that regulatory and legislative trends left by Trump have been rectified.

If the government can't legislate its way to new attitudes, the main force capable of 'recapturing' these consumers affected by disinformation is marketers both within and without the government. When ahead of the curve, marketers are clearly capable of exerting huge influence through the same methods used against climate activism. Just look at the strides made with non-climate issues, such as the UK Govt's organ donation campaigns, which levied social norms and proofs on top of messaging like "be part of the conversation", as well as presenting the opt-out organ donation as a moral movement to assuage those with a religious objection that opting in was the responsible thing to do (NHS, 2024). This campaign proved so successful that, as well as a substantial increase in registrations, the resulting societal shift towards a view of organ donation as a default arguably influenced the 2020 switch to an 'opt-out' organ donation system, as an evaluation of a similar campaign in Northern Ireland found a marked increase in several metrics related to awareness and favorability (Iaobucci, 2020; HSC Public Health Agency, 2015). In an ideal world, we could apply these findings pretty seamlessly to climate change.

Yuri: Well, yeah, but we don't live in a perfect world. Are we sure marketers can still play this role effectively?

David: Well, yes and no. We believe that marketers must take much more responsibility for their role in manoeuvering consumer habits, which would now include a more active stance in combating the spread of misinformation. Whilst correction on the individual level - that is the spread of anger through social media correction - is a noted phenomenon (Freiling and Matthes, 2023), the difficulty found in reversing negative attitudes towards climate solutions from (or by appealing to) an *above* position (i.e. authority figures, government, etc.) (Ibid.; Bomberg, 2021), pre-emptive debunking - or 'prebunking' as Christner et al. (2022) term it - would be an effective and *necessary* step in the combating of misinformation, especially if employed alongside strong, stern, and consistent debunking. Complimentary 'prebunking', then, should take a *complimentary* form, with marketers and advertisers using the latest false claims to predict and pre-empt what, naturally, would be the next target - be it a phenomenon, event, person, or organization.

No matter the solution chosen, it falls - in our view - to the marketers to implement these changes to guide an increasingly divided consumer-base: one side of which continues to progress from indifference to outright hostility. There are some major examples of companies already moving to more actively combat misinformation surrounding climate change. Both the WWF and Greenpeace have designed and executed successful campaigns against the myths promoted by the fossil fuel industry, but unfortunately these environmental organizations have also been subject to misinformation about their agenda and transparency, leading to a loss of trust within the groups that we now need to reach (Tam &

Chan, 2023). This leaves conventional company marketers within established, well-known companies to take up the task. Change can only be possible when the people are willing and informed, and the longer conventional marketers sit on the sidelines as bad actors outflank them, the more difficult it will be to bring these mis- and dis-informed consumers back to the table.'

Argument 2 (C)

Consumers Shape the Market; Marketers Amplify It.

Anna: You've made some really interesting points about the influence marketers can wield in shaping consumer behavior on critical issues like climate change. But here's where I think that idea breaks down. It's essential to understand that, ultimately, consumers—not marketers—are the ones shaping the marketplace. Marketers respond to consumer demand, not the other way around. Sure, they're skilled at amplifying messages and making things a trend, but without consumer interest driving those trends, even the most creative marketing campaigns wouldn't have the traction to change habits in a lasting way.

Let's look at some of the claims you've made. You mention how marketers have a unique responsibility to harness social norms and create change—citing smoking campaigns and even organ donation drives as evidence that effective marketing can shift public attitudes. That's a fair point, and I'll agree that good marketing can definitely reinforce social change that's already taking root (White et. al., 2019). But notice how, in each of those examples, these campaigns found success because they were in tune with the public's growing awareness and need for change. It wasn't marketing that first made people care about the harms of smoking or the importance of organ donation. Instead, those values emerged within society, and then marketers capitalized on them to accelerate the shift.

In today's climate crisis, we're seeing something very similar. The demand for eco-friendly products, for example, didn't start because a company told us to care about sustainability. It started with concerned consumers who wanted products that matched their values (Habib et. al., 2021). Take the sustainable fashion or plant-based food revolution. A decade ago, this market was tiny.

Yuri: True, I don't remember any sustainability-related buzzes when I was like 10.

Anna: Exactly. But as consumers became more aware of the environmental and ethical issues surrounding animal agriculture and ethical sourcing, they began seeking out alternatives on their own. It was only once that demand became noticeable that brands like Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods started to emerge in the mainstream. The marketing that followed amplified this shift but didn't create it.

And while it's true that some groups have used marketing techniques to distort issues like climate change, the answer can't be that marketers now shoulder all the responsibility for reversing these effects. It's a shared effort. You mentioned that it's up to marketers to counter the misinformation surrounding climate change. And yes, they can play a role in amplifying fact-based messages, but they can't dictate the marketplace alone. Social media is actually proof of this. In recent studies (Bode & Vraga, 2021; Freilings & Matthes, 2023), researchers found that individual voices correcting misinformation on social platforms often sparked more productive conversations than just brand statements alone. Why? Because people listen to other people—and if the demand is there, marketers will reflect it.

At the end of the day if consumers don't choose eco-friendly products, then companies won't prioritize sustainability. It's consumers who have the most influence on the market. When millions of people make small, conscious decisions—like opting for reusable bags, electric cars, or renewable energy sources—it signals to companies that they need to adapt, and that's when you see real change.

So yes, marketers have a role to play in communicating and amplifying these messages, but without consumer demand as the true engine of change, even the most persuasive marketing campaigns can't drive lasting transformation in the marketplace.

Argument 3 (C)

Only Consumers Can Control Their Behavior.

Yuri: I agree with Anna on this. Consumers essentially make the final purchase decisions, regardless of whatever marketing they are exposed to, since they are the *only ones* who can control *their* behaviors. I'd say right now because environmental education is not a mandatory curriculum in schools (although becoming very common), consumers are still very vulnerable to marketing tactics, giving marketers more power in impacting climate change. But if schools consistently incorporate environmental education into their curriculums, *consumers* will ultimately have greater power to influence climate change. As Anna says, consumers shape the demand, so if consumers' environmental literacy increases, businesses will be compelled to operate sustainably.

I came across the Theory of Planned Behavior (Aizen, 1985) while thinking about this. Have you guys heard of it?

David: Yeah I think so.

Yuri: Yeah? Well, this theory suggests that three types of beliefs affect an individual's intention to perform a specific behavior. First are *behavioral beliefs*—your evaluation of the behavior. So, if you believe recycling is good for the environment, you will likely have a positive attitude toward it. Then there are *normative beliefs*, which involve social pressures or expectations from others. So, if you feel that most of your peers expect you to recycle, it might influence you to do so. Finally, there are *control beliefs*, or how difficult you think it is to perform a behavior. If you think recycling requires minimal effort, you're more likely to recycle because you feel you can control this behavior.

Gustav: Okay, so how does that theory apply to your point?

Yuri: Right, so;
1. For behavioral belief, environmental education shapes individuals to evaluate a product based on its sustainability, because it teaches individuals sustainability as positive.
2. For normative belief, environmental education encourages sustainable practices, increasing the number of people who practice sustainability, and setting it as a societal norm. This would create social pressure to make sustainable choices because "everyone is doing it."
3. For control belief, environmental education offers practical ways to adopt sustainable practices, making sustainable practices feel more achievable.

Gustav: Okay, I see where you're going.

Yuri: Yeah, you see it? To mention some studies that support this application, there is one, exploring the relationship between undergraduate disciplines and attitudes toward sustainable transportation, where Civil Engineering students displayed greater environmental awareness and favored public transportation far more than Economics majors (Kim, Schmöcker and Fujii, 2014). A similar instance in another study, but this time with political decisions, found that students studying Geography or Biology showed a stronger commitment to sustainability in their political decisions compared to Business or Law students (Goldman et al., 2015).

I also thought that for *behavioral beliefs*, because environmental education could make consumers highly informed about environmental issues, it would encourage them to research products before

purchasing. This knowledge builds confidence in their environmental literacy, leading them to make more autonomous purchasing decisions. This autonomy would then give consumers more power to impact climate change, as they would rather make purchase decisions based on their evaluations than someone else's persuasions. There was actually research comparing consumers from Taiwan and Indonesia (Lee and Hung, 2024), which exactly proved my point.

Anna: Interesting.

Yuri: So schools providing environmental education help consumers *recognize* that their choices impact climate change. They shape the market *because* they're the only ones who can control their behaviors.

Argument 4 (M)

Counter argument to theory of planned behavior, there is a gap between intention and action.

Gustav: I love that you've brought up the Theory of Planned behavior as it really does provide a deep insight into how consumers can form beliefs, particularly around sustainability in this case, and help create a social norm that makes them able to consume more sustainably as well help shape and contribute to much larger consumer demand for sustainable practices and products from the market. However, I believe you may have overlooked the gap between consumer intention and consumer behavior (Carrington et al., 2010). A study by Shaw and Clarke in 1999 illustrated this gap by showing how external factors such as price, availability, and convenience influenced ethical consumers' purchasing decisions (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). Ultimately, numerous studies have shown that consumers don't have as much agency as you have attributed to them, considering their buying behavior isn't consistent with their intentions toward sustainable products (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). It is important to factor in that there may not be a sustainable alternative always available to consumers and barriers such as high costs limit consumers' ability to act sustainably. Then there is the issue of greenwashing, where consumers may believe they are making ethical purchases by falling for exaggerated or misleading marketing campaigns that the product they are consuming is sustainable (Schmuck et al., 2018).

Anna: Well, doesn't this malicious practice start with marketers?

Gustav: Well, yeah, practices like greenwashing do stem from marketers, but they also have the ability to counteract the negative effects of greenwashing by spreading informative campaigns that can better inform consumer decisions. Anna mentioned earlier the effective use of social media to correct misinformation and be a platform for productive conversations. That's great, but I would like to argue that this cycle of correcting misinformation can initially start with marketers. Surely with the better advantage point that marketers tend to start off with, they can reach a much larger initial group of consumers, which will increase the amount of reciprocity present in the grassroots 'activist' response. Therefore, marketers have a fantastic power to positively impact climate change by engaging with a wider audience to foster informed consumer decisions from the outset.

Conclusion

David: Well, I think we've raised a lot of good points today, and I'm leaning towards the answer being a shared effort between the marketers and consumers.

Anna: "Absolutely. The example of 'alternative' social groups rejecting climate-positive campaigns due to reinforced beliefs highlights how significant the influence of misinformation can be. This really

emphasizes the unique role marketers can play, especially since, as you noted, legislation alone often falls short in changing attitudes. It's a compelling argument.

David: I mean, yeah, and I can see where you're coming from now with the idea that marketers *need* consumer movement to capitalize on. I guess my response to that is *how much do they need?* I'm still not sure I'm convinced that the low-lying sentiments whipped up by marketers can be laid at the feet of consumers.

Gustav: And Yuri, at the end of the day, although I may not agree fully with your behavioral theory, I do think your mention of education does have a strong potential to help bridge the gap between consumer behavior and intention. Ultimately, weaving sustainable and ethical principles into school curriculums does have the potential to give consumers more autonomy over their purchasing decisions and help shape a more sustainable society.

Yuri: Fair enough. The Theory of Planned Behavior has gaps, such as its lack of consideration of external factors like high pricing limiting consumers from making sustainable purchases. It is difficult to claim that the three beliefs in the theory will perfectly translate consumers into becoming sustainable as well.

Gustav: And, that unfortunately is all we have time for today guys! This debate has - hopefully - revealed a more nuanced perspective on the influence of marketers versus consumers in shaping climate-conscious behavior. Lastly, this is our call to action: We urge marketers to adopt transparency and accountability in their climate messaging and for consumers to prioritize sustainable choices and advocate for environmental education to empower future generations. Together, we can bridge the gap between intention and action, promoting a market that aligns more closely with sustainable values. That's all from us.

Everyone: Bye!

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