

SUSTAINABLE MARKETING: INTEGRATING STRATEGY, THE MARKETING MIX AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SDGS

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ABSTRACT: *Sustainable marketing is conceptualized as an integrative paradigm situated at the intersection of marketing theory, ecological economics, and stakeholder theory. It reflects a fundamental shift from short-term profit maximization toward long-term value creation across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The analysis highlights the role of sustainable marketing as a key operational mechanism for aligning business strategies with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By reinterpreting the marketing mix through a sustainability lens, the study demonstrates how product, price, place, and promotion can be leveraged to embed sustainability into core organizational processes. Recent empirical evidence indicates an increasing alignment between sustainability and consumer behavior, while also revealing persistent tensions, including the attitude–behavior gap and the impact of economic constraints. Furthermore, the rise of greenwashing underscores the importance of transparency and credibility in sustainability communication. Sustainable marketing is thus positioned as a central element in the transition toward a more responsible and resilient economic system.*

Keywords: *Sustainable marketing; SDGs; Consumer behavior; Greenwashing; Marketing strategy*

JEL Classification: *M31; Q56; D12; L21*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past five decades, the imperatives of sustainable development have profoundly redefined the logic of business strategy, shifting the focus from short-term profit maximization toward long-term value creation across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. What was once a peripheral concern — largely confined to environmental advocacy and regulatory discourse — has evolved into a central organizing principle of contemporary business practice. Within this transformation, marketing occupies a critical and paradoxical position. As the primary interface between organizations and markets, marketing not only reflects but actively shapes consumption patterns, value systems, and societal expectations. Consequently, it has

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become one of the most contested and consequential domains in which the tensions between economic growth and ecological limits are negotiated. The concept of sustainable marketing emerges at the intersection of multiple intellectual traditions—including classical marketing theory, ecological economics, stakeholder theory, and the broader sustainable development paradigm — seeking to reconcile value creation with the preservation of natural and social capital.

Despite its growing prominence, sustainable marketing remains conceptually fragmented and operationally inconsistent, with significant variation in how organizations interpret and implement sustainability-oriented strategies. This fragmentation is further complicated by the global policy architecture established through the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which call upon the private sector to align business strategies with objectives such as poverty reduction, climate action, and social equity (United Nations, 2015). Within this context, marketing assumes a dual role: it acts as a powerful mechanism for advancing sustainable consumption and legitimizing corporate sustainability efforts, while simultaneously carrying the risk of reinforcing unsustainable consumption patterns through superficial or misleading practices. This duality underscores the need for a more integrated and theoretically grounded understanding of sustainable marketing as both a driver of and a constraint on sustainable development.

2. CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION AND DELIMITATION OF SUSTAINABLE MARKETING

The concept of sustainable marketing is characterized by plurality. Researchers have approached this concept from divergent disciplinary perspectives. Thus, Belz and Peattie (2010, pp. 9) define **sustainable marketing** as “the building and maintaining of sustainable relationships with customers, the social environment, and the natural environment.”

An important distinction must be drawn between sustainable marketing and the adjacent constructs with which it is sometimes confused. Green marketing, as conceptualized by Polonsky (1994, p. 2), refers to “all activities designed to generate and facilitate any exchanges intended to satisfy human needs or wants, such that the satisfaction of these needs and wants occurs with minimal detrimental impact on the natural environment.” **Green marketing and societal marketing** each capture certain dimensions of the sustainable marketing domain, but neither encompasses the full scope of the concept (Kotler et al., 2010). Therefore, sustainable marketing is best understood as an umbrella concept that integrates environmental responsibility, social equity, and long-term economic viability into a unified strategic orientation (Fuller, 1999).

Fuller (1999, p. 4) provides one of the earliest comprehensive definitions, characterizing sustainable marketing as “the process of planning, implementing, and controlling the development, pricing, promotion, and distribution of products in a manner that satisfies the following three criteria: (1) **customer needs are met**, (2) **organizational objectives are achieved**, and (3) **the process is compatible with ecosystems**.” This three-criteria formulation reflects the triple bottom line framework advanced by Elkington (1997), which argues that corporate performance must be evaluated simultaneously across economic, social, and environmental dimensions—the so-called “**people, planet, profit**” triad.

Furthermore, the American Marketing Association (AMA) has incorporated sustainability into its foundational definition of marketing, recognizing that marketing activities “benefit not only the organization and its customers, but society at large.” This institutional endorsement reflects the extent to which sustainable marketing has migrated from the academic periphery to the mainstream of the discipline.

3. ROLE AND KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Sustainable marketing performs a **multi-dimensional role** both within organizations and in the broader society. At **the organizational level**, it functions as a strategic orientation that guides product development, pricing, distribution, and communication in ways that are compatible with long-term environmental and social objectives. At **the societal level**, it serves as a mechanism for shaping consumer preferences and behaviors in directions consistent with sustainable development. At **the systemic level**, it contributes to the transformation of market structures by creating incentives for sustainable innovation and by rewarding responsible corporate behavior (Peattie & Belz, 2010).

The main characteristics of sustainable marketing are as follows:

- it adopts a long-term time horizon, prioritizing value creation over extended periods rather than short-term financial performance (Fuller, 1999);
- is stakeholder-inclusive, recognizing the legitimate interests of consumers, communities, governments, and non-governmental organizations, in addition to shareholders (Freeman, 1984);
- it exhibits a systems orientation, acknowledging the interdependence of economic, social, and ecological systems (Belz & Peattie, 2012);
- it requires transparency, demanding that organizations communicate their sustainability performance in an honest and credible manner (Laufer, 2003);
- it acts as a driver of innovation, as the challenge of meeting consumer needs within ecological limits stimulates new forms of product design, business models, and service delivery (Nidumolu et al., 2009);
- is equity-sensitive, paying attention to the distributive implications of marketing decisions across income groups, geographic regions, and generations (United Nations, 2015).

4. SUSTAINABLE MARKETING AND THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 marked a significant milestone in the global governance of sustainability. The Agenda's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), encompassing 169 specific targets and 231 unique indicators, represent the most comprehensive and universally agreed framework for sustainable development in human history (United Nations, 2015). For marketing scholars and practitioners, the SDGs provide a practical reference point for sustainability strategy.

The relationship between sustainable marketing and the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be characterized through a simple cause-and-effect logic; rather, it should be understood as a relationship of mutual interdependence and reciprocal reinforcement. On the one hand, sustainable marketing functions as a privileged operational mechanism through which organizations can translate their commitments to the SDGs into concrete, measurable, and value-chain-integrated actions. On the other hand, the normative framework of the SDGs provides sustainable marketing with a coherent conceptual architecture, offering a globally recognized common language, a standardized system of indicators and quantifiable targets, as well as a legitimizing framework for engagement with a multiplicity of stakeholders—elements which, taken together, strengthen both the external credibility and the internal strategic coherence of sustainability-oriented marketing initiatives.

Figure 1. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – United Nations



Source: United Nations. (2015). Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

A detailed analysis reveals specific channels through which sustainable marketing contributes to each of the 17 Goals. **SDG 1 (No Poverty)** and **SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)** are addressed through inclusive marketing strategies that expand market access for underserved populations, including through bottom-of-the-pyramid business models (Prahalad, 2004). **SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)** and **SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being)** are advanced through the marketing of nutritious, affordable, and safely produced food and health products, as well as through the adoption of responsible advertising standards that avoid promoting the overconsumption of harmful products (WHO, 2010).

SDG 4 (Quality Education) intersects with marketing through the ethical communication of educational products and through corporate social investments in community learning programs. **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** is relevant to marketing through the elimination of gender stereotypes in advertising and the promotion of inclusive representations of identity (Grau & Zotos, 2016). **SDG 6 (Clean Water)** and **SDG 14 (Life Below Water)** are addressed within sustainable marketing through the responsible management of water use in production processes and the elimination of plastic packaging pollution within supply chains.

The most direct and comprehensive linkages exist between sustainable marketing and the cluster of goals related to sustainable consumption and production. **SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production)** represents the central pillar of the sustainable marketing agenda. Target 12.6 explicitly calls on companies to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycles; Target 12.8 calls for ensuring that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). Sustainable marketing — through education, transparent labeling, and responsible communication — constitutes a primary mechanism for achieving these targets.

SDG 13 (Climate Action) is addressed through the marketing of low-carbon products and services, the integration of carbon reduction targets into brand positioning, and advocacy marketing that supports climate policy. Major organizations such as Unilever, Patagonia, and IKEA have explicitly incorporated SDG 13 targets into their sustainability marketing communications, using science-based emission targets as anchors of credibility (Unilever, 2024; IKEA Group, 2024; Patagonia, 2024).

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) captures the collaborative dimension of sustainable marketing, recognizing that no single organization can achieve systemic

transformation in isolation. Sustainable marketing increasingly operates through multi-stakeholder partnerships—among corporations, non-governmental organizations, governments, and international institutions—which amplify impact and distribute risk. GlobeScan’s annual research program on Healthy and Sustainable Living, whose 2025 partners include Danone, IKEA, L’Oréal Group, Mastercard, Mondelēz International, Procter & Gamble, and WWF International, exemplifies this collaborative model (GlobeScan, 2025).

However, it is important to acknowledge the inherent tensions and limitations in the relationship between the SDGs and sustainable marketing. Critics have noted that the voluntary and self-regulatory nature of most corporate SDG commitments makes them vulnerable to “SDG-washing” — a form of strategic communication that appropriates the symbolic capital of the Goals without substantially advancing their objectives (Horan, 2020). Therefore, effective sustainable marketing must be grounded in measurable and externally verified performance data, rather than in aspirational rhetoric (Laufer, 2003). Initiatives such as the Science-Based Targets initiative (SBTi), the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) provide institutional frameworks for the type of accountability required by sustainable marketing that is authentically aligned with the SDGs.

5. THE MARKETING MIX FROM A SUSTAINABILITY PERSPECTIVE

The 4P marketing mix, introduced by McCarthy (1960) and later popularized by Kotler and Keller (2016), provides a persistently useful framework for organizing marketing decisions. Although the framework has been subject to extensive criticism and extensions, the marketing mix retains its pedagogical and analytical utility as a structure for examining how sustainability considerations can be incorporated into each dimension of the marketing offering.

Product

From a sustainability perspective, the product dimension encompasses decisions related to design, material sourcing, manufacturing processes, packaging, product lifespan, and end-of-life management. A sustainable product strategy requires organizations to adopt a life-cycle approach, paying attention to the environmental and social consequences of products from raw material extraction to disposal or recovery (Ottman, 2011).

Key sustainability practices at the product level include the adoption of eco-design principles, which integrate environmental performance criteria into the product development process from the outset; the use of recycled, recyclable, or biodegradable materials; the elimination of hazardous substances; and the design of products for durability, reparability, and recyclability at the end of their life cycle. The circular economy paradigm — which aims to eliminate waste and keep products, materials, and resources in use for as long as possible (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013) — has become an increasingly influential framework for sustainable product strategy.

A prominent corporate example is provided by Patagonia, the American outdoor apparel company, whose product strategy is explicitly organized around principles of environmental responsibility and radical transparency. Patagonia’s “Worn Wear” program encourages customers to repair rather than replace their clothing, and the company publishes detailed data on the environmental impact of its products through the Footprint Chronicles initiative (Patagonia, 2024). Similarly, Unilever’s sustainability goals have committed the company to developing products whose life-cycle environmental footprint is continuously reduced, leading to the reformulation of hundreds of product lines (Unilever, 2024). Apple has pursued an ambitious product sustainability program, committing to manufacturing all

products from recycled materials and achieving carbon neutrality across its entire value chain by 2030 (Apple, 2024).

Price

The pricing dimension of sustainable marketing involves complex trade-offs between the additional costs associated with sustainable production, the price sensitivity of target consumer segments, and the strategic objective of making sustainable alternatives accessible to the widest possible population. Research consistently demonstrates that consumers express a willingness to pay a premium for sustainable products, yet this stated preference often fails to translate into actual purchasing behavior — a phenomenon commonly referred to as the “attitude–behavior gap” or the “say – do gap” (Belk et al., 2005; Carrington et al., 2010).

Sustainable pricing strategies must therefore navigate between two imperatives: ensuring that the higher costs of responsible production are adequately reflected in prices, while also ensuring that sustainable products do not become the exclusive privilege of affluent consumers. Solutions to this tension include economies of scale achieved through the widespread adoption of sustainable technologies; cross-subsidization strategies in which premium sustainable products subsidize more affordable basic offerings; and the internalization of environmental externalities through carbon pricing and extended producer responsibility schemes (Kotler et al., 2010).

IKEA provides an instructive example. The company’s sustainability strategy explicitly commits to making sustainable products accessible to the many, not the few, on the premise that environmental impact can only be significantly reduced through scale and affordability (IKEA Group, 2024). IKEA’s “People & Planet Positive” strategy commits that by 2030 all products will be circular by design and that sustainable alternatives will always be the most accessible and affordable option within each product category (IKEA Group, 2020). Tesla, by contrast, has followed a premium-to-mainstream pricing trajectory — initially positioning electric vehicles as luxury products for early adopters, before gradually lowering prices to expand market penetration (Tesla, 2023). Unilever has experimented with small-size packaging (sachets) in emerging markets to ensure that sustainable personal care products are financially accessible to low-income consumers (Unilever, 2024).

Place (Distribution)

The distribution dimension of sustainable marketing encompasses decisions related to supply chain design, logistics, retail channel selection, and last-mile delivery management. From a sustainability perspective, distribution constitutes a major source of **environmental impact** — through transport-related emissions, energy consumption in warehousing, and packaging waste — as well as **social impact**, through labor conditions within supply chains and the geographical accessibility of sustainable products for different population groups.

Sustainable distribution strategies include the transition to zero-emission logistics fleets, the optimization of supply chain routes to minimize transport distances, the adoption of renewable energy in warehousing and retail operations, the integration of reverse logistics systems for product recovery and recycling, and the selection of distribution partners that meet minimum social and environmental standards (Seuring & Müller, 2008).

Schneider Electric — one of the most sustainable companies in the world — has developed a comprehensive sustainable supply chain program under which its top suppliers are required to commit to science-based emission reduction targets. As a result of this program, Schneider Electric’s top suppliers have collectively reduced their own emissions by 27% (Schneider Electric, 2024). Amazon has committed to operating a net-zero carbon delivery network by 2040, investing in electric delivery vehicles, sustainable aviation fuel, and renewable energy for its fulfillment centers (Amazon, 2024). IKEA has substantially shifted

its logistics operations toward renewable energy and is developing urban distribution hubs served by zero-emission vehicles in order to reduce the environmental impact of last-mile delivery in densely populated metropolitan areas (IKEA Group, 2024).

Promotion

The promotion dimension of sustainable marketing encompasses decisions related to advertising, public relations, social media communications, labeling, and corporate reputation management. It is simultaneously the most visible and the most contested dimension of sustainable marketing, as it constitutes the primary arena in which **the risks of greenwashing** — the deliberate misrepresentation or exaggeration of environmental performance in communications — are most acute (Laufer, 2003; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011).

The credibility of sustainable marketing communications depends on three interdependent conditions: **authenticity** (the communicator's genuine commitment to sustainability), **accuracy** (the truthfulness and completeness of specific sustainability claims), and **consistency** (the alignment between communications and observable behavior) (Ottman, 2011). Regulatory bodies in the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States have significantly tightened standards for environmental claims in advertising, in response to widespread evidence of greenwashing across multiple product categories (European Commission, 2023).

Patagonia's promotion strategy is widely regarded as a benchmark for authentic sustainable marketing communication. Its 2011 "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign — a full-page advertisement in The New York Times encouraging consumers not to purchase new products unnecessarily — exemplified the principle of radical transparency and challenged the consumerist assumptions of conventional advertising (Chouinard, 2016). Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign, launched in 2004 and sustained over two decades, demonstrates the commercial viability of values-based promotion that challenges industry norms and resonates with consumers' social concerns (Dove, 2004). L'Oréal Group, one of the partners in the GlobeScan Healthy and Sustainable Living program, has integrated sustainability claims into product communications across its portfolio, with a focus on scientifically validated "green science" formulations (L'Oréal Group, 2024).

6. SUSTAINABILITY AND MARKETING: KEY FINDINGS FROM RECENT RESEARCH

The most comprehensive recent evidence regarding consumers' willingness to pay for sustainability comes from PwC's 2024 survey, which gathered insights from over 20,000 consumers across 31 countries (PwC, 2024). The study found that more than **80% of respondents expressed a willingness to pay, on average, 9.7% more for sustainably produced goods, despite ongoing cost-of-living and inflationary pressures**. Nearly 85% of respondents reported having directly experienced the disruptive effects of climate change, a factor associated with increased interest in sustainability-oriented consumption.

Complementing this evidence, the NYU Stern Sustainable Market Share Index indicated that **eco-friendly products accounted for 41% of the growth in the consumer packaged goods (CPG) market in 2024**, across 36 product categories, while the U.S. eco-retail segment expanded at a rate 1.73 times faster than conventional retail (NYU Stern Center for Sustainable Business, 2024). Planned consumer expenditure on eco-friendly products in the United States is estimated at approximately USD 230 billion for 2025, representing around 24.8% of total retail spending.

The Simon-Kucher Global Sustainability Study (2024) further found that **64% of consumers rank sustainability among their top three purchasing decision factors**,

although a decline of six percentage points compared to 2022 was observed, primarily attributed to inflationary pressures.

Greenwashing — defined as the fabrication or exaggeration of environmental claims to project an unjustified green image — has emerged as one of the most extensively studied threats to the effectiveness of sustainable marketing. Simon-Kucher & Partners (2024) reported that **approximately 70% of consumers now conduct independent research before trusting a brand's sustainability claims**, while 57% believe that the brands they use engage in exaggerated or misleading environmental communication. Data from GlobeScan and the Reynolds Center (2025) confirm that transparency and verified claims have replaced product features as the primary determinants of brand loyalty in sustainability-sensitive categories.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This article has provided a comprehensive academic examination of sustainable marketing, encompassing its conceptual foundations, its relationship with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), its implications for the marketing mix, and its empirical dimensions. The findings position sustainable marketing as a complex and integrative paradigm that bridges theoretical development and managerial practice across diverse organizational contexts.

The conceptual analysis confirms that sustainable marketing has evolved from a marginal sub-discipline into a central strategic orientation for organizations across sectors and geographic regions. Drawing upon intellectual traditions including marketing theory, ecological economics, and stakeholder theory, sustainable marketing offers a coherent framework for creating, communicating, and delivering value in ways that satisfy present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own.

The mapping of the SDGs demonstrates that sustainable marketing is not only compatible with the United Nations' global development agenda, but also represents one of its most important operational vehicles. Across all 17 Goals, identifiable and actionable channels exist through which marketing strategy can contribute to sustainability targets—from the design of inclusive pricing strategies that expand market access for underserved populations to the promotion of transparent environmental communication that empowers informed consumer choice.

The reconceptualization of the marketing mix through a sustainability lens further reveals that each of the 4Ps — product, price, place, and promotion—offers specific and actionable levers for embedding sustainability into the core of the marketing offering. The corporate examples examined in this study, including Patagonia, Unilever, IKEA, Schneider Electric, and Apple, illustrate that leading organizations have moved beyond symbolic commitments to integrate sustainability into the operational substance of their marketing strategies. Empirical evidence also highlights a clear and growing alignment between sustainability and consumer behavior, positioning sustainability as a significant driver of market growth and purchasing decisions, even in the context of economic constraints.

At the same time, the rise of greenwashing and the erosion of consumer trust represent critical challenges for sustainable marketing. The increasing tendency of consumers to verify sustainability claims, coupled with growing skepticism toward brand communications, underscores the central importance of transparency, credibility, and accountability. Overall, the findings suggest that, while sustainability offers substantial commercial opportunities, its effectiveness as a marketing driver depends on organizations' ability to translate sustainability commitments into authentic, verifiable, and consumer-relevant value propositions. Sustainable marketing should therefore be understood not as a transient trend or a peripheral concern, but as a fundamental reorientation of the marketing discipline—one that will play a decisive role

in addressing the most pressing challenges of the twenty-first century and in shaping the sustainable economy of the future.

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