



## Consumer behavior on sustainable issues

### *Comportamiento del consumidor en relación a la sostenibilidad*

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#### ABSTRACT

This special issue of the Management Letters / Cuadernos de Gestión is dedicated to presenting those articles that are included as part of the special issue on consumer behavior and sustainable issues and that highlight marketing's important role in encouraging sustainable consumption. The first part of this editorial presents six articles that structure this special issue. The second part examines the concept of sustainable marketing and the most effective ways to change consumer behaviour to become more sustainable.

*Keywords:* Sustainability, business ethics, sharing economy, consumer behavior, branding, social networks, generations.

#### RESUMEN

Este número especial de Management Letters / Cuadernos de Gestión está dedicado a presentar aquellos artículos que se incluyen como parte del número especial sobre el comportamiento del consumidor y su vínculo con aspectos sostenibles y destaca el importante papel del marketing en el fomento del consumo sostenible. La primera parte de esta editorial presenta los seis artículos que estructuran este número especial. La segunda parte de este editorial examina el concepto de marketing sostenible y las formas más efectivas para modificar los comportamientos de los consumidores de modo que sean más sostenibles.

*Palabras clave:* Sostenibilidad, ética empresarial, economía colaborativa, comportamiento del consumidor, marca, redes sociales, generaciones.

In today's world it is vital to comprehend consumer behavior and its connection with sustainable issues. Our behavior as consumers is having unparalleled impacts on our natural and social environments. Global development is now more than ever threatened by unsustainable patterns of consumption and production (Hosta & Zabkar, 2021). In response, many organizations in different settings are recognizing the role of sustainability as an integral component of their strategy (Miralles-Quirós *et al.*, 2021; Peña-Miranda *et al.*, 2019). Several factors appear to help explain this trend. These include the need to comply with increasing environmental and social regulation, concerns about the cost and scarcity of natural resources, greater public and shareholder awareness of the importance of socially responsible financial investments, and changes in social attitudes and values within modern capitalist societies, among others (Jones *et al.*, 2008). So, we are delighted to present the special issue of "Consumer behavior on sustainable issues", whose aim is to advance an in-depth understanding of the area of sustainability and consumer behavior and to offer new possibilities for future research. Research on sustainability and consumer behavior requires a comprehensive approach that examines these aspects from various viewpoints. We are pleased to present six articles in this special issue, each of which adds value to this research field.

The paper "Exploring research on the management of business ethics", authored by Batlles-de la Fuente and Abad-Segura, provides a literature review and bibliometric analysis of business ethics. Their work delimits the concept of business ethics, understanding it as a set of arguments that improve relations between workers and external parties who are directly related to business activity; they also carry out an in-depth review of the work in this field. From this, the authors conclude that the achievement of an ethical organizational environment can lead to an improvement in economic, social, and environmental results.

In the second study of the present special section, Moreira *et al.*'s article entitled "Sustainable and Green City Brand. An Exploratory Review" analyzes the concept of sustainable (green) city (place) branding. The authors conclude that the economic, social, environmental, and local characteristics of a city (place) are linked to the willingness to integrate sustainable (green) perspectives and practices that help cities (places) evolve toward new, greener, and more sustainable perspectives. They also show that these types of practices have important implications for generating a positive and sustainable image and reputation, which will have a direct impact on the positioning of a city (place). In addition to these conclusions, from their literature review, the authors determine that the branding of sustainable cities (places) is a topic that, despite its academic interest and its economic and social relevance, is under-researched; and there are large gaps in the literature that should be addressed in future research.

Alves *et al.*'s sharing economy study, entitled "Antecedents of the Sharing Economy in a Pandemic Scenario: Prosocial Attitudes, Past Behaviour and Transformation Expectations", concludes that pre- and post-pandemic habits regarding shared assets (i.e., cars and accommodation) have changed. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected individuals' attitudes, values, and

expectations, and has led to significant changes in consumption and purchasing patterns. The study concludes that the results suggest that pro-environmental motivations positively predict the predisposition to participate in sharing activities; however, this effect does not occur during pandemic times. Likewise, there is no predisposition to share cars or accommodation during a pandemic. Both results are contrary to those obtained in the pre-pandemic period.

Based on generational and gender differences, Satinover Nichols and Holt's work, entitled "A comparison of sustainability attitudes and intentions across generations and gender: a perspective from U.S. consumers", analyzes how people think, feel, and behave when faced with sustainability initiatives. The authors conclude that attitudes toward sustainability and the degree to which consumers consider sustainability to be important are more positive for younger consumers and women. To arrive at these findings the paper analyzed 1,250 United States consumers and focused on some of the more intricate nuances of sustainable consumption of food products so that food marketers can better understand consumers' feelings and intentions. The paper also makes a deep reflection on the implications of these results for companies' advertising practices and pricing policies.

Finally, this special section on consumer behaviors on sustainable issues includes two articles that consider social networks, which is one of the most current topics in the context of marketing (Troise *et al.*, 2021). Social networks are a key element in the communication of companies today, and also in terms of sustainability, corporate social responsibility practices, or sustainable consumption habits. Thus, Cuervo-Carabel *et al.*'s article, entitled "Corporate social responsibility and its communication on Twitter: Analysis of the discourse and feelings generated in society", analyzes how the Twitter social media platform addresses companies' CSR communication processes. To this end, the authors extracted and processed 740,966 tweets containing, among others, hashtags such as #CSR, #sustainability, #green, or #corporatesocialresponsibility and used text mining techniques and a graphical network mode to process them. They conclude that successful CSR communication will allow organizations to generate a positive feeling in their stakeholders, which will increase consumers' trust and confidence in these companies; this in turn will have a positive impact on some of the companies' intangible assets. However, the authors determine that companies do not make efficient use of Twitter as a CSR communication tool. Moreover, Instagram and its influencers do have a major impact on consumer behavior. Accordingly, Barbosa and Añaña's work, entitled "The influence of Instagrammers' recommendations on healthy food purchase intention: The role of consumer involvement", analyzes Instagrammers' influence on consumers' purchase intention of healthy food products as well as their perception of brands that market these products. However, the study also shows that influencers do not have the same impact on all consumers. In this sense the authors propose that to better understand digital influencers' influence on consumers' purchase intentions, it is necessary to segment customers based on their involvement with healthy food products.

## Sustainable issues and marketing

In this context, marketing academics and professionals must consider their role in improving marketing effectiveness and in contributing to sustainable development. It might seem that marketing goals and assumptions are incompatible with sustainability goals and assumptions; nevertheless, there is growing interest in sustainable marketing within and outside the marketing academy. Sustainable marketing is defined as “the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers in such a way that both natural and human capital are preserved or enhanced throughout” (Martin & Schouten, 2014, p. 18). Sustainable marketing shares the long-term orientation of relationship marketing, as opposed to the conventional short-term transaction focus of modern marketing (Peattie & Belz, 2010). The transition to sustainable marketing involves the integration of social and environmental criteria into conventional marketing thinking and processes. It therefore requires their integration into the articulation of marketing values and the setting of marketing goals. Given the challenges that the marketing discipline currently faces in terms of a transformation toward a focus on customer relationships and a need to harmonize marketing thinking and practices with the principles of sustainable development, Belz and Peattie (2009) propose a new “4Cs” sustainability marketing mix. This model retains the simple and memorable mnemonic approach but is more customer orientated as it considers customer solutions, customer cost, convenience, and communication. Sustainable marketing recognizes that key players do have some power to influence their environment and argues that companies and consumers should take some responsibility for the social and environmental impacts of production and consumption.

One stream of sustainability marketing discourse is consumer behavior and practices (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014). This research continues to attract academics and practitioners’ interest to find the most effective ways to make consumer behaviors more sustainable. So, why is there still such a large sustainability “attitude–behavior gap”? The complexity and struggles between doing what is good for the environment and society could be the reason why consumers have difficulties achieving sustainable responsible consumption (Hosta & Zabkar, 2021). We need research that examines sustainable consumption practices as central and not peripheral to individual consumer actions (Fischer *et al.*, 2021). A focus on changing behavior is the key element. Although consumers report favorable attitudes toward sustainable behaviors, they often do not subsequently display sustainable actions. This discrepancy between what consumers say and do is arguably the biggest challenge for marketers. So, how can marketing play a role in promoting changes to individual consumption practices? The authors White *et al.* (2019) propose the SHIFT framework can help address the “attitude–behavior gap” that is commonly observed in sustainability contexts. SHIFT is an acronym of the psychological factors: social influence, habit formation, individual self, feelings and cognitions, and tangibility; the authors suggest that consumers are more inclined to engage in sustainable behaviors when a message or context influences these factors.

Given the social and environmental challenges facing policymakers and businesses, a logical question for marketing academics and professionals is: What would a sustainability-orientated vision of marketing look like? Peattie and Belz (2010) sum it up through a pseudo-mnemonic, that sustainable marketing is marketing that endures forever, delivering solutions to our needs that are: ecologically orientated (taking account of the ecological limits of the planet and seeking to satisfy our needs without compromising the health of ecosystems and their ability to continue delivering ecosystem services); viable (from a technical feasibility and economic competitiveness perspective); ethical (in promoting greater social justice and equity); and relationship-based (in moving away from viewing marketing in terms of economic exchanges, toward viewing it in terms of the management of relationships between businesses and their customers and other key stakeholders). By considering these aspects, the impact of today’s decisions on future generations of consumers, citizens, investors, and managers will not be ignored.

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