

RECONCEPTUALIZING MARKETING IN THE CLIMATE CHANGE ERA: SUSTAINABILITY VS. GREENWASHING

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Abstract

Global warming and its increasingly visible consequences (ecosystem degradation, loss of natural resources, pressure on quality of life and economic instability) require a re-evaluation of the role of marketing in relation to society and the environment. In an economy under the pressure of climate change, marketing can no longer be limited to product promotion, but becomes a strategic instrument for guiding behaviours toward long-term sustainability and responsibility. Recent research increasingly highlights the discrepancy between declarative “green” communication and the real actions of organizations, the phenomenon of greenwashing generating distrust and affecting corporate legitimacy.

While this reconceptualization seeks to align economic objectives with the need to reduce environmental impact, the growing public interest in “green” products and initiatives has also generated a spread of the greenwashing phenomenon, through which some organizations communicate exaggerated or misleading ecological performances that they do not actually support. This phenomenon fuels consumer skepticism, undermines the credibility of sustainable marketing, and limits the ability of companies with authentic practices to differentiate their efforts. As a result of these actions, contemporary marketing must move beyond the stage of superficial communication and orient itself toward transparency, measurable evidence, and real responsibility, offering a solid framework for building a relationship of trust between organizations and society.

Keywords: global warming, sustainability, green marketing, greenwashing

Classification JEL : M3, M31

1. Introduction

The acceleration of global warming and the intensification of extreme climate phenomena decisively transform the economic and social context, placing companies in front of a responsibility toward ecological limits. The traditional logic, focused on immediate profit and the rapid satisfaction of consumer demands, no longer corresponds to current challenges related to environmental degradation, pressure on resources, and growing social expectations. Approaches such as social marketing, sustainable marketing, or human marketing are becoming increasingly relevant, promoting behaviours with positive impact on the community, the protection of ecosystems, and a future-oriented perspective.

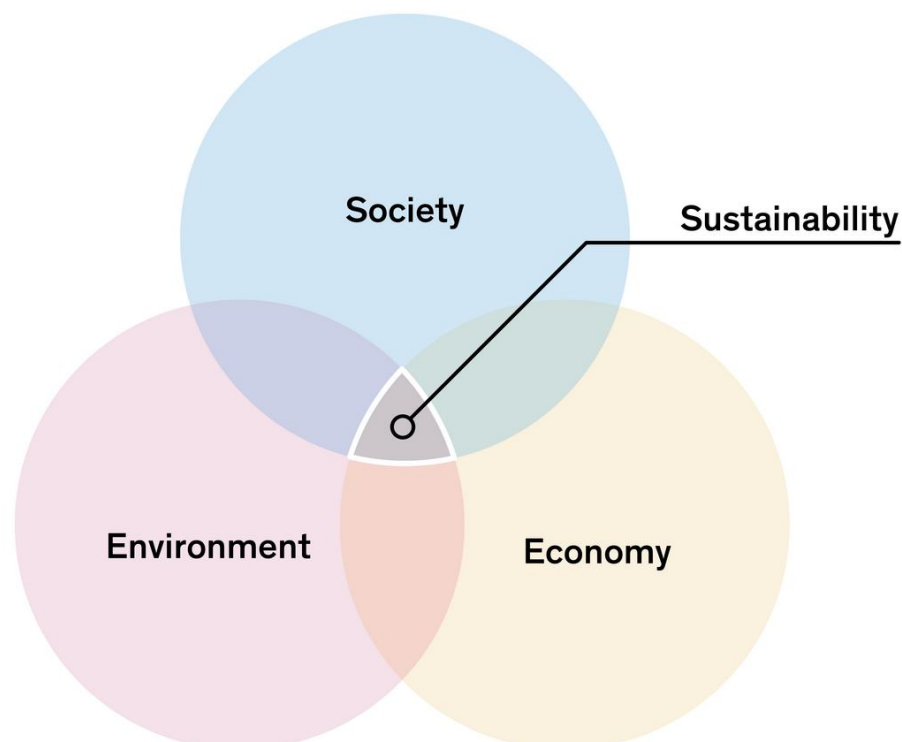
Climate change, constantly highlighted by IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) and UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) reports, goes beyond the strictly ecological dimension and is shaping up as a significant economic risk, prompting companies to assume increased responsibilities in reducing their carbon footprint, in the sustainable management of resources, and in promoting more balanced consumption models.

Climate change already has a tangible impact on economies across various regions of the world, with effects ranging from reduced agricultural productivity to population displacement and labor market destabilization. In Ethiopia, for example, it is projected that in the coming decades declining agricultural yields will lead to a significant reduction in average incomes, estimated at approximately 30% over a 50-year period. In Nigeria, climate change exacerbates food insecurity

and generates conflicts over resources, directly affecting sustainable development. Women in communities such as Augie and Zumba have experienced the consequences of deforestation and flooding, but often interpret these phenomena through traditional beliefs, highlighting the need for awareness and education campaigns. In the southeastern part of the country, landslides and tornadoes have destroyed homes, roads, and crops, further intensifying economic losses. In Sri Lanka, increased precipitation has proven beneficial for certain crops, while higher temperatures have caused losses of up to 50% in agricultural productivity. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, changes in temperature and rainfall directly affect agricultural output, widening the economic gap compared to other developing regions. [1]

2. Sustainability

Sustainability can be understood as a framework for organizing human activities aimed at maintaining a balance between present societal needs and the long-term capacity of ecosystems to support life. From a conceptual perspective, sustainability emerges at the intersection of three fundamental dimensions: environmental, economic, and social, each playing its own unique role in preserving this balance.



Graph: myclimate

Image No. 1. Fundamental dimensions of Sustainability

Source: <https://www.myclimate.org/en/information/faq/faq-detail/what-is-sustainability/>

The environmental dimension focuses on protecting the natural environment and maintaining ecosystem integrity through the reduction of pollutant emissions, responsible resource use, and the conservation of biodiversity. The economic dimension is associated with sustainable development, referring to economic growth that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their

own needs. The social dimension emphasizes equity, inclusion, and collective well-being by ensuring fair access to resources, opportunities, and acceptable living conditions.

This integrative approach was established as early as the 1987 Brundtland Report, which defines sustainability as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In recent decades, sustainability has gained increasing importance, extending beyond public policies and international regulations to influence corporate strategies, educational systems, and consumer behavior.

Within the business context, integrating sustainability involves more than reducing negative environmental impacts; it also entails creating long-term value for all stakeholders, including customers, employees, local communities, and the natural environment. [2] [3]

Within this framework, sustainable marketing represents a broader approach that incorporates environmental, social, and economic considerations into marketing strategies, aiming to meet current consumer needs while preserving the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. [4]

A new paradigm is emerging in which society becomes the top priority, followed by customer needs and, subsequently, profit. This approach, known as “humanistic marketing” or “enlightened marketing”, promotes social responsibility and sustainability as central elements of marketing strategies.

The concept of “enlightened marketing” is grounded in five fundamental principles:

- consumer orientation;
- innovation;
- value creation;
- organizational mission;
- social responsibility.

These principles go beyond the limited objective of satisfying immediate consumer needs and involve anticipating and responsibly addressing long-term social and environmental challenges. In this approach, companies adopt a holistic perspective on their activities, where economic performance is closely linked to generating a positive and sustainable impact on both society and the natural environment. [5]

Green marketing focuses on the promotion of products and services that are environmentally friendly and respectful of natural ecosystems, aiming to encourage sustainable and responsible practices throughout the entire value chain. It involves the use of recyclable, reusable, and biodegradable materials in product packaging, the promotion of organic or sustainably produced goods, as well as the development and communication of services designed to minimize environmental impact. At the same time, green marketing emphasizes transparent communication regarding environmental attributes, supporting businesses in reducing their ecological footprint and in adopting production and distribution processes aligned with sustainability principles. Through these actions, green marketing seeks not only to differentiate products on the market, but also to attract and engage environmentally conscious consumers, fostering more responsible consumption patterns and long-term environmental awareness. [6]

Social marketing represented the starting point in directing marketing activities toward objectives of public relevance, such as population health, pollution reduction, social inclusion, or environmental protection. This perspective subsequently evolved into sustainable marketing, which, as mentioned before, brings together three essential dimensions: the ecological component, oriented toward reducing environmental impact; the economic component, focused on creating durable value; and the social component, centred on responsibility, equity, and collective well-being. Contemporary literature also introduces the concept of “enlightened marketing” formulated by Kotler, through which organizations are encouraged to align themselves with the broader interests of society and provide authentic value, transparently assuming the consequences of their own activities. [7]

Table No. 1 differences and similarities among the three types of marketing
Authors' own elaboration based on [8] [9] [10]

Criteria	Social Marketing	Green Marketing	Sustainable Marketing
Main objective	Behavioural change for the benefit of society	Promotion of environmentally friendly products	Integration of sustainability into marketing strategies
Environmental focus	Indirect	Direct	Direct and integrated
Main beneficiaries	Society as a whole	Environmentally conscious consumers	All stakeholders
Strategic approach	Awareness and education campaigns	Product and promotion adjustments	Comprehensive organizational transformation
Example of application	Anti-smoking campaigns	Biodegradable products	Circular business strategies

The table highlights both the differences and similarities among the three types of marketing. Social marketing focuses on behavioural change for the benefit of society, without necessarily emphasizing environmental aspects. Green marketing directly targets environmental protection through the promotion of eco-friendly products. Sustainable marketing integrates social, environmental, and economic dimensions, adopting a holistic approach within marketing strategies.

3. Greenwashing

With the transformation of sustainability into an increasingly used commercial argument, the phenomenon of greenwashing has intensified globally. Open-access research such as MDPI (Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute), *Frontiers in Psychology*, OECD (Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute), highlights multiple forms of this phenomenon, from the use of imprecise ecological claims such as “eco-friendly” or “natural,” to the selective presentation of minor actions, the use of visual elements that falsely suggest environmental responsibility, the introduction of unclear or invented certifications, and the omission of information that could affect the company’s image. The impact of these actions that seem minor is considerable: erosion of consumer trust, market distortion, increasingly strict legislative sanctions, and deterioration of the reputation of the organizations involved. The specialized literature outlines the need for a transition toward a “post-greenwashing era,” characterized by increased requirements regarding transparency, traceability of information, the existence of verifiable evidence, standardized reporting, and the definition of measurable climate objectives. [11] [12]

Companies often engage in greenwashing due to the growing economic value associated with being perceived as ethical and environmentally responsible. Empirical evidence shows that a significant share of consumers, particularly younger generations such as Millennials and Generation Z, are more inclined to support brands that communicate sustainability commitments. This creates a financial incentive for companies to emphasize environmental responsibility in their marketing messages, sometimes without fully supporting these claims through concrete actions.

In addition to deliberate strategic motivations, greenwashing may also occur unintentionally, as a result of limited expertise or insufficient understanding of what constitutes genuinely sustainable

practices. Some organizations adopt materials or processes they believe to be environmentally friendly, without fully considering the conditions required for their effectiveness. In such cases, misleading claims may arise not from intentional deception, but from inadequate research or misunderstanding of sustainability standards, leading to regulatory intervention and reputational damage.

Numerous high-profile cases illustrate the consequences of greenwashing. The Volkswagen emissions scandal revealed a significant discrepancy between environmental marketing claims and actual performance, as vehicles were promoted as low-emission while emitting pollutants far above legal limits. Similarly, companies such as BP and Nestlé have faced criticism for promoting sustainability narratives that were not supported by clear targets, measurable actions, or substantial reductions in environmental impact. These examples demonstrate how greenwashing can undermine corporate credibility, erode consumer trust, and attract regulatory sanctions.

Overall, the persistence of greenwashing highlights the importance of moving beyond symbolic environmental communication toward evidence-based, transparent, and verifiable sustainability practices integrated across all stages of organizational activity. [13]

Greenwashing strategies employed by companies are increasingly diverse and complex, making it difficult for consumers and investors to distinguish genuine sustainability initiatives from misleading practices. A common tactic involves the use of vague or ambiguous environmental claims, such as “eco-friendly” or “natural,” without providing verifiable evidence or recognized certifications. Other strategies include emphasizing marginal environmental improvements while ignoring the broader negative impact of products or production processes, or selectively highlighting minor initiatives to divert attention from environmentally harmful core activities. In the financial sector, greenwashing may occur through the misrepresentation of the environmental benefits of investment products, such as green bonds or ESG-labelled portfolios, where funds are partially or insufficiently allocated to projects with real environmental value. High-profile cases across industries—including energy, fashion, food and beverage, and consumer goods—illustrate how companies use sustainability narratives to enhance legitimacy while maintaining practices that significantly contribute to environmental degradation. Academic research suggests that such strategies are often motivated by the desire to protect corporate reputation, respond to stakeholder pressure, and maintain market competitiveness. These findings underline the need for greater transparency, standardized sustainability reporting, and rigorous verification mechanisms to limit the spread of greenwashing and support authentic sustainable transformation. [14]

5. Conclusions

Marketing is undergoing a structural transformation, influenced by the intensification of the climate crisis and the amplification of social expectations regarding corporate responsibility. The transition from the traditional paradigm to sustainable marketing and “enlightened marketing” approaches highlights an important strategic shift: the orientation from obtaining rapid profit toward generating durable value, both socially and ecologically. However, the greenwashing phenomenon continues to constitute a major obstacle, affecting public trust and diminishing the impact of authentic initiatives. To respond effectively to current challenges and to adapt to a society sensitive to climate risks, organizations must integrate transparency, verifiability, and responsibility in a real way into their marketing strategies.

Greenwashing erodes consumer trust, distorts market mechanisms, and weakens the differentiation capacity of organizations that genuinely invest in sustainable practices. Moreover, the persistence of ambiguous claims, selective disclosure, and insufficiently substantiated environmental narratives demonstrates that sustainability communication alone is not sufficient to support meaningful transformation. In this context, marketing must evolve beyond superficial “green” messaging and adopt transparent, evidence-based, and verifiable approaches aligned with measurable environmental and social objectives. Addressing greenwashing is therefore essential

not only for restoring corporate legitimacy but also for ensuring that marketing contributes effectively to the broader transition toward sustainable development in an economy increasingly shaped by climate-related risks.

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