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# Sustainability marketing beyond sustainable development: towards a degrowth agenda

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on ecological economics, post-development studies, and political ecology, this paper argues that sustainable development notions have run their course within sustainability marketing debates and proposes degrowth as an alternative framework to steer disciplinary debates in new directions. We chart unexplored territory, offering sustainability marketing scholars tools to navigate degrowth-minded policies, transformative frameworks, and business models. In doing so, our work contributes to existing sustainability marketing debates in three ways: first, we respond to the paucity of studies engaging with the political economy of sustainability marketing. Second, we make visible the tensions and contradictions that arise as marketers seek to reconcile imperatives of economic growth and sustainability. Finally, we foreground degrowth as an emerging sustainability proposition, with potential for inspiring the radical set of transformations required to avert catastrophic climate change and keep global temperatures well below +2°C (relative to pre-industrial levels), as pledged in the Paris Agreement.

**KEYWORDS:** Sustainability marketing; sustainable marketing; degrowth; post-growth; sustainable development

## Introduction

“Beyond the limits to affluence lies an affluence that only limits can reveal to us. Limits are the gateway to the limitless”. (Jackson, 2021, p. 134)

Last year marked the 50th anniversary of the first marketing article that explicitly engaged with environmental issues Kassarian (1971). In the fifty years that ensued, we have witnessed the rise – and fall – of *ecological marketing* (e.g. Henion & Kinnear, 1976), *green marketing* (e.g. Peattie, 1992), *environmental marketing* (e.g. Polonsky et al., 1995), *enviropreneurial marketing* (e.g. Menon & Menon, 1997), and more recently, *sustainability marketing – defined as efforts to align marketing theory and praxis with sustainable development principles* (e.g. Peattie & Belz, 2010; Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021). Of course, no reasonable scholar ever expected marketing to save the planet alone. Nevertheless, the expectation was that ‘the closer we get to sustainable marketing, the more time we will buy for ourselves in which to understand, protect, and repair the environment’ (Peattie, 1992, p. 335). In hindsight, even such a modest ambition has proven to be overly optimistic, if not downright naive. Practical attempts to revert, or even decelerate, marketing’s ecological excesses have yielded little success. In fact, the opposite is true, and while the task of ‘greening’ our discipline has consumed vast amounts of intellectual energy during the last fifty years, environmental damage inflicted by the relentless expansion of markets has continued unabated (Wiedmann et al., 2020).

Consider the climate emergency, which is one aspect of the wider socio-ecological crisis. CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have risen by 60% since 1990 (Stoddard et al., 2021) and, assuming a continuation of current trends, the probability of meeting the Paris Climate Agreement’s pledge of keeping global warming well below 2°C (relative to pre-industrial levels) has been estimated at 5% (Liu & Raftery, 2021; Raftery et al., 2017). While it might be tempting to downplay the severity of these projections, this would be unwise: 1.5°C of global warming is widely regarded as humanity’s safety threshold, a point beyond which risks of rapid climatic destabilisation increase dramatically (IPCC, 2018). The window of opportunity to avert catastrophic climate change is closing rapidly. The broad consensus among climate scientists is that we have between 15 and 30 years to radically transform our production and consumption systems on a scale without historical precedent (Liu & Raftery, 2021). And while, admittedly, environmentalists have been too quick to cry wolf in the past, the best available scientific evidence suggests that this time is different (IPCC, 2022).

This ominous warning should be received as a potent wake-up call by all marketing scholars, but especially those involved in sustainability research and education. As the global economy continues to sleepwalk into an impending ecological collapse of its own making, we are compelled to turn to McDonagh and Prothero, whose critical questions about sustainability marketing have hitherto been widely neglected:

Is this radical enough? Do we need to be radical within marketing to help achieve a sustainable society? What are the alternatives? How can we develop sustainability marketing theories which build on a critical assessment of marketing's relationship with the natural environment? (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014, p. 1202)

Our paper confronts these difficult questions head-on by providing a critique of the overarching ideological framework upon which the emergence of sustainability marketing has been legitimised, namely sustainable development. Alongside this critique, we introduce degrowth as an alternative perspective to ground future marketing responses to the climate and wider ecological emergency. Examining this ideological nexus requires drawing on critical strands of literature outside marketing, including ecological economics (e.g. Hickel, 2019), post-development (e.g. Sachs, 2015) and political ecology (e.g. Gorz, 1980). Therefore, in line with recent critical marketing inquiries into sustainability issues (e.g. Arnould, 2022; Coffin & Egan-Wyer, 2022), interdisciplinarity is crucial in the context of our work. In this regard, we contend that any critique of sustainability marketing would remain partial unless it is deployed in relation to the broader political economy of sustainable development and its fixation with economic growth (Chertkovskaya et al., 2019; Hickel, 2019). Such a political-economic level of critique, however, remains largely absent from sustainability marketing literature (Prothero & McDonagh, 2021), where the prevalence of a micromarketing focus, combined with a managerial orientation, have erected significant barriers to undertake politically-minded inquiries (Davies et al., 2020; Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014).

In this paper, not only do we argue that the notion of sustainable development has run its course, but also we propose the notion of degrowth as an alternative framework to steer our discipline in a more radical direction. By doing this, our work contributes to existing debates in three ways: first, we respond to the paucity of studies engaging with the political dimension of sustainability marketing (e.g. Prothero & McDonagh, 2021). Second, we contribute to recent calls for conceptual marketing frameworks 'envisioning alternative theories and modes of practice, capable of advocating a better set of interventions allowing for a sustainable change in our society' (Davies et al., 2020, p. 2929). Finally, we make visible the tensions and contradictions that arise as marketers seek to reconcile imperatives of economic growth and sustainability (Lloveras & Quinn, 2017), and foreground the value of degrowth as an alternative proposition to address the latter.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first, we provide an overview of sustainability marketing literature and introduce the ways it has developed in articulation with sustainable development notions. Then we critically review the political economy of sustainability, highlighting the limitations of current responses to the climate emergency based on sustainable development and green growth. Next, we introduce degrowth and explore a series of key degrowth themes, including *policies*, *frameworks*, and *business models*, which hold relevance to marketing debates. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications of our paper and sketching a broad research agenda for sustainability marketing.

## **A historical overview of marketing's environmental agenda**

The historical trajectory of marketing's environmental agenda is often depicted as a linear journey through a series of distinct epochs, which are chronologically ordered as: *ecological marketing* in the 1970s; *environmental/green marketing* during the 1980s and mid 1990s, and *sustainability marketing* from the mid-1990s onwards (Peattie, 2001a). Below, we briefly discuss these changes, showing how sustainable development ideas gradually made their way into the marketing-environment literature.

### ***Ecological marketing (1970s)***

Ecological marketing was established in the 1970s, when scholarly work specifically concerned with ecological issues began to be published in specialised marketing journals (e.g. Henion, 1972; Kassarian, 1971) and the American Marketing Association organised the first workshop dedicated to the marketing-environment subject (Henion & Kinnear, 1976). Prior to this, during the 1960s, the marketing discipline had introduced a series of variations of the marketing concept – e.g. the broadened marketing concept, the societal marketing orientation etc. - in response to growing social and environmental criticism (Arnold & Fisher, 1996). The emergence of ecological marketing as a field represented not only an increasing recognition of the interdependency between marketing activities and the natural environment (Fisk, 1973, 1974), but also an interest in pre-empting environmental regulations by encouraging businesses to engage with environmental concerns from a marketing perspective (Henion, 1981). Whilst ecological marketing remained a niche area, these developments laid the foundations for the subsequent expansion of the field, which privileged managerially-oriented approaches to ecological issues typically focused at the micromarketing level (Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998).

### *Environmental/green marketing (1980s and mid-1990s)*

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the managerialist agenda set out in the previous decade continued in the form of environmental/green marketing. Peattie (1992, p. 11) defined green marketing as ‘the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying the requirements of customers and society, in a profitable and sustainable way’. Unlike ecological marketing, environmental/green marketing was developed under the assumption that green consumerism was growing into a mainstream phenomenon (Elkington & Hailes, 1988). As a result, a so-called ‘green marketing revolution’ was predicated on the belief that demand for greener products and services was an untapped source of competitive advantage across industries and sectors (Vandermerwe & Oliff, 1990).

These assumptions were challenged before the turn of the century by factors such as, *inter alia*, the widely reported attitude-behaviour gap and the underperformance of many green products in the marketplace (Peattie, 2001b). Furthermore, researchers identified a wave of consumer scepticism and cynicism towards environmental/green marketing practices caused by the proliferation of greenwashing scandals, as well as the dubious and opportunistic ways in which businesses sought to exploit environmental concerns (Crane, 2000; Peattie & Crane, 2005).

### *Sustainability marketing (from the late 1990s onwards)*

As argued above, ‘the rise and stumble of green marketing’ (Peattie & Crane, 2005, p. 138) left the field in clear need of a reassessment (Crane, 2000). It was in this context that marketing scholars turned to sustainable development in their quest for new conceptual foundations upon which marketing’s environmental agenda could be reconstructed (Peattie, 2001a). These efforts crystallised into the first articulations of sustainable/sustainability marketing in the literature (e.g. Fuller, 1999; van Dam & Apeldoorn, 1996), which marked an attempt to move beyond the limitations of environmental/green marketing by adopting sustainable development as a new guiding principle.

While the notion of sustainable development had already been in use since the 1980s (Caradonna, 2014), this term entered the marketing lexicon during the second half of the 1990s. For example, in one of the earliest attempts at demarcating the scope of sustainability marketing, Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) stated that:

marketing’s critical role in development will be appreciated only when, through sustainable marketing, it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (. . .) Clearly, marketing has to assume a more responsible role for sustainable development. (pp. 5–6)

Similarly, van Dam and Apeldoorn (1996, p. 46) introduced sustainable marketing as ‘marketing within, and supportive of, sustainable economic development’, and Fuller (1999, p. 44) argued that ‘sustainable marketing is a component of the broader concept of sustainable development, an approach for promoting intergenerational equity in the use of resources (. . .) that seeks to harmonise economy and ecology’. Along similar lines, Peattie argued that sustainable development offered a coherent framework to resolve the tensions between marketing’s traditional orientation towards profits and consumption, on the one hand, and the need to protect the environment on the other:

*The concept of sustainable development represents the path by which this apparent paradox can be resolved [emphasis added]. It can accommodate managerial aspirations of further growth in material consumption, provided that growth satisfies the environmentalists’ priority of not impoverishing the environment or the material standard of living which future generations will enjoy (Peattie, 1999, p. 133)*

More recently, Peattie and Belz (2010) highlight that:

[s]ustainable marketing seeks to blend the mainstream economic and technical perspectives with the emerging concept of relationships marketing *and the social, ethical, environmental and intergenerational perspectives of the sustainable development agenda* [emphasis added]. (p. 14)

In addition, there seems to be a growing interest in aligning corporate marketing strategies with the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g. Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021; Lopez, 2020; Jones et al., 2018). In this regard, Thomas (2018) concludes that ‘SM’s [sustainability marketing’s] broad focus *explicitly addresses sustainable development goals* [emphasis added] and it helps to distinguish SM from being perceived as solely a managerialist concern’ (p. 1531).

These examples serve to illustrate how sustainable development notions are invoked to overcome the limitations and shortcomings of green marketing, thus becoming a centrepiece of sustainability marketing debates. However, considering the enthusiasm with which marketers have been exhorted to embrace the agenda of sustainable development, the treatment of this concept within the marketing literature has been surprisingly formulaic and clichéd, rather than critically informed. Typically, authors would begin with some cursory definitions of sustainability, most often linked with passing references to the Brundtland Report<sup>1</sup> (WCED, 1987) - which are then used to sketch out a vaguely defined marketing proposition aimed at reconciling social, economic, and environmental objectives. In this process, seldom any attention is paid to the ideological roots of the sustainable development concept. Equally, conflict and power issues are generally glossed over, as are any critical considerations of the potential tensions and contradictions underpinning the sustainable development discourse.

Insofar that the literature on sustainability marketing has discounted any serious criticism of sustainable development, it is hardly surprising that this void has been filled by various forms of ambiguity and conceptual gerrymandering. Indeed, despite efforts to disambiguate the concept (Gordon et al., 2011; Martin & Schouten, 2014; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014; Peattie & Belz, 2010), the meaning, scope and orientation of sustainability marketing have remained contested and elusive. More recently, Kemper and Ballantine (2019) conducted an extensive literature review to foreground three main conceptualisations of sustainability marketing, namely: *Auxiliary Sustainability Marketing* (which focuses on the production of sustainable products); *Reformative Sustainability Marketing* (which extends the auxiliary approach through the promotion of sustainable lifestyles and behavioural changes); and *Transformative Sustainability Marketing* (which further extends the auxiliary and reformative approaches through the need for transformation of current institutions and norms, and for critical reflection).

Kemper and Ballantine's (2019) categorisation offers a valuable entry point into the nuances and complexities of sustainability marketing literature, and, in principle, enables us to position our work within the Transformative Sustainability Marketing tradition (Polonsky, 2011). We say 'in principle' because, although we share with these authors an emphasis on critical reflection and institutional reform, we depart from the Transformative Sustainability Marketing approach in that we take issue with the 'sustain-ability' element in the label. In other words, we posit that Transformative Sustainable Marketing is an oxymoron. This is because no meaningful transformation of marketing can take place insofar as these efforts remain framed within the broader political economy of sustainable development and green economic growth. We turn to these points in the next section.

## From limits to growth to sustainable development

Understanding the contested nature of sustainable development is a necessary step to illuminate some of the tensions and contradictions lying beneath the surface of sustainability marketing literature. Here, we must draw attention to how sustainable development ideas have been shaped by an ongoing ideological battle that intersects questions regarding the environmental limits to growth and the nature of development. Indeed, the foundations of this debate were laid in the 1960s and 1970s, when obvious signs of ecological degradation began to cast shadows over the post-1945 consensus wherein the pursuit of unfettered economic growth, fuelled by the expansion of mass consumption, was understood as a positive-sum game - one whose benefits would by far outweigh all the burdens accumulated in the process (Caradonna, 2014; Sachs, 2015).

The 1970s, in particular, were marked by a questioning of the viability of compound economic growth in the face of scarce natural resources and an expanding population. Albeit these questions were most forcefully brought to the forefront of public debate by the publication of *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972), public perceptions about the existence of ecological limits to economic growth at the time were reinforced by events such as the Oil Crisis (Sachs, 2015). At the same time, however, policymakers began to turn their attention to the role of global poverty as a driver of ecological destruction, which led to the gradual realisation that international efforts to protect the environment would not work without enrolling the countries of the Global South with their own right to pursue economic growth and development. On this last point, critics concluded:

The comet-like rise of the concept of 'sustainable development' is to be understood against that background. It promises nothing less than to square the circle: to identify a type of development that promotes both ecological sustainability and international justice. (Sachs, 2015, p. 76)

Changing views on the relationship between international development and the environment crystallised at the institutional level, especially through the work of the United Nations (Caradonna, 2014). In this regard, it was in 1980 that the term 'sustainable development' appeared for the first time in the *World Conservation Strategy* report.

By linking ‘sustainable’ to ‘development’, the new concept shifted the locus of sustainability away from nature and placed it on development. This marked a turning point because while ‘sustainable’ previously referred to natural yields, it now began to refer to development, which itself was used as a synonym for economic growth (Caradonna, 2014; Robinson, 2004; Sachs, 2015). From then on, Robinson (2004, p. 370) notes, ‘development is seen as synonymous with growth, and therefore [. . .] sustainable development means ameliorating, but not challenging, continued economic growth’.

Although the term ‘sustainable development’ had already been coined in 1980, it began to circulate more widely when the *World Commission on the Environment and Development* (WCED), chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, published *Our Common Future* in 1987. In this report, the WCED (1987, p. 43) defined sustainable development as: ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. The Brundtland Report led directly to the term ‘sustainable development’ passing not only into policy discourse but also into everyday language; and *the limits to growth* question, which had been central to environmental debates during the 1970s, was pushed to the sidelines by the consolidation of sustainable development as a new institutional consensus (Caradonna, 2014).

Whilst environmental concerns continued to rise during the 1990s (Vandermerwe & Oliff, 1990), the neoliberal zeitgeist, with its focus on deregulation, globalisation, and consumerism, pushed away from the limits to growth argument, which gradually fell by the wayside of sustainable development debates (Caradonna, 2014). Instead, sustainable development became primarily an affair between green consumers and green businesses, with market-based mechanisms and technological innovation occupying the centre of environmental policy (Porter & Van der Linde, 1995). This change was well-received within progressive corporate and business circles, which saw sustainable development as a means of reconciling emerging consumer sensitivities and aspirations for environmental protection and social progress, with the pursuit of corporate goals and competitive advantage. The conversion of multinational corporations into legitimate agents of sustainable development was formalised in 1992 when the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro led to the foundation of *The World Business Council for Sustainable Development*. Gradually, sustainable development became embedded into Corporate Social Responsibility formulations such as the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997), stakeholder theory (Hörisch et al., 2014), and, of course, sustainability marketing (Peattie, 2001a).

### **Contemporary articulations of sustainable development: the sustainable development goals**

From the year 2000, there was a noticeable shift towards the articulation of specific goals and targets against which the progress of sustainable development could be checked (Sachs, 2015). The first move in this direction took place when the UN member states agreed on the so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved in the period 2000–2015. Currently, the most comprehensive global political effort towards achieving sustainable development is the UN agenda 2030 with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs, adopted in 2015, replaced the MDGs, expanding them in thematic and geographic scope (Eisenmenger et al., 2020). What differentiates the SDGs from the MDGs is the prominence given to (i) environmental sustainability, (ii) economic development, with a focus on inclusive growth, (iii) proposed universal application to all countries and (iv) an increasing concern with non-material aspects of development (Scheyvens et al., 2016).

Although the participation of businesses in sustainable development had been *in crescendo* since the 1980s, this trend was accelerated in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, when foreign aid and international development budgets dwindled across the developed world (Scheyvens et al., 2016). Therefore, it is worthwhile noting that industry leaders played a significant part in the design of the UN agenda 2030 (Koehler, 2015), with a predominance of multinational corporations from the resource extraction, technology, chemical or pharmaceutical, and food and beverage sectors (Scheyvens et al., 2016). In this regard, Pingeot (2014) analysis of corporate views during the SDGs consultations reveals that industry leaders foregrounded four key messages/policy recommendations: (i) a focus on growth and technology; (ii) an emphasis on corporate sustainability as the main vector of sustainable development; (iii) the key role of governments in creating ‘enabling environments’ for businesses; (iv) the need for multi-stakeholder governance.

As in any *realpolitik* negotiation, where the uneven distribution of wealth and power among the negotiating parties shapes policy choices, it was obvious from the beginning that the interests of large multinational corporations would overshadow those of civil society representatives (Koehler, 2015; Scheyvens et al., 2016). This imbalance eventually transpired, and corporate actors impressed their views on the redaction of the UN agenda 2030 in two ways. First, they made a strong business case for legitimating the private sector’s role as a key development actor, with a focus on business innovation, resources, capabilities, and leadership (Scheyvens et al., 2016). Second, but

most important for this paper, corporate views were largely reflected in the SDGs through the strong emphasis on economic growth (Eisenmenger et al., 2020; Hickel, 2019). On this point, Eisenmenger et al. (2020, p. 1108) concluded that ‘based on an analysis of [SDGs] targets and indicators, we identify a prioritisation of economic growth over ecological integrity and a focus on efficiency improvements rather than absolute reductions in resource use’.

Therefore, at the heart of the SDGs lies the presumption that technological change and substitution allow an absolute decoupling of GDP growth from resource use and carbon emissions (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Hickel, 2019). This may take place, for example, by ‘dematerialising’ (e.g. shifting demand from goods to services), building a circular economy with minimal waste, or scaling up the adoption of greener technologies (e.g. renewable energies, smart infrastructures, etc.). Historical evidence, however, casts serious doubts on these claims (Jackson, 2016). For example, despite technological change and industrial transformations having enabled remarkable energy/material efficiency gains in the past, these achievements have been offset by further consumption (Wiedmann et al., 2020). There is also a significant amount of empirical evidence indicating so-called rebound effects, whereby energy efficiency improvements backfire by lowering the price of energy services, thereby encouraging consumers, somewhat unintendedly, to use *more* rather than fewer energy resources (Sorrell et al., 2009; Zink & Geyer, 2017).

More recently, ecological economists have shown that empirical projections do not support the expectation of absolute decoupling, even under highly optimistic conditions (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). To stay within the carbon budget for 2°C (as per SDG 13) in the context of an economy growing at 3% per year (as suggested in SDG 8) would require nothing less than achieving efficiency improvements six times greater than those achieved to date (Hickel, 2019). Given the best available evidence, this pathway has been described as ‘at best highly unlikely’ (Hickel & Kallis, 2020, p. 483). This point is recognised by Weber and Weber (2020), whose analysis concludes that ‘the SDG agenda is conceived on the basis of reinforcing a highly contradictory and problematic ideological paradigm’ (p. 9). When considering the practical implications of these critiques of sustainable development, and considering ways of moving forward, Hickel (2021) argues that:

In order to ensure that the SDGs’ sustainability objectives are not violated, any call for GDP growth in poorer nations would have to come along with an acknowledgement that rich nations need to make dramatic reductions to material throughput, which may require post-growth or degrowth strategies. (p. 881)

Extending this insight, the following section elaborates the notion of degrowth as an alternative framework wherein the enduring contradictions of sustainable development can be more meaningfully apprehended – and addressed – by sustainability marketing scholars.

### **The degrowth alternative**

The search for alternatives to the growth paradigm is gaining momentum among the social sciences, with degrowth, in particular, spanning conversations in ecological economics (e.g. Kallis, 2011), anthropology (e.g. Demmer & Hummel, 2017), sociology (e.g. Fournier, 2008), innovation studies (e.g. Pansera & Fressoli, 2021), and political economy (e.g. Chertkovskaya et al., 2019). More recently, scholars contributing to organisation and management studies (OMS) have turned to degrowth for purposes of critique and exploration of counter-hegemonic organisational practices (e.g. Banerjee et al., 2021). Degrowth has also made some inroads into the marketing literature (Chatzidakis et al., 2014; Cherrier et al., 2012; Lloveras & Quinn, 2017; Lloveras et al., 2018), albeit the specific links between degrowth and sustainability marketing literature remain largely under-explored and undertheorised.

The origins of degrowth lie at the intersection of various intellectual and political debates (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010). An early foundation for contemporary degrowth can be located in the cultural critiques of modernity by authors such as Cornelius Castoriadis, Ivan Illich, or Jacques Ellul, who denounced the unquestionable faith in technology, science and productivism, which pervaded dominant imaginaries of social progress (Latouche, 2009). At the same time, degrowth arguments have been directly influenced by Andre Gorz and the French tradition of political ecology, which incorporated ecological concerns into socialist critiques of capitalism (Gorz, 1980). Degrowth also adopted the criticism of economic growth posed by ecological economists during the 1970s, especially Georgescu-Roegen (1975). Contemporary degrowth articulations also owe significantly to the influence of Serge Latouche, especially during the late 1990s and the 2000s. Not only was Latouche central to the emergence of the *Décroissance* movement in France, but also his perspective – as an established post-development scholar – was instrumental in the subsequent framing of degrowth as a radical alternative to the

notion of sustainable development. As Latouche (2009, p. 75) put it: ‘The farce of sustainable development in fact concerns both the North and the South, and growth now poses a global threat. Hence the degrowth proposal’.

There are multiple definitions of the term, a plurality that reflects the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary degrowth literature (Vandeventer & Lloveras, 2021). For example, Schneider et al. (2010, p. 511) define degrowth as ‘an equitable downscaling of economic production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions’. Similarly, Kallis (2011, p. 874) has argued that degrowth entails ‘a socially sustainable and equitable reduction (and eventual stabilisation) of society’s throughput’; and more recently, Hickel (2021, p. 1) defines degrowth as ‘a planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human wellbeing’. Whilst the above definitions condense the key aspects of degrowth, additional clarification is necessary to avoid caricatures and misrepresentations of the concept. To this end, we follow Hickel (2021), who identifies three common misunderstandings of degrowth.

First, the purpose of degrowth is *not* to reduce Gross Domestic Product (GDP) *per se*, but rather degrowth seeks to reduce the economy’s material throughput and energy demand, *with* the understanding that this will inevitably cause a GDP decline. Of course, degrowth advocates understand that a GDP figure simply represents the monetary value of all the goods and services produced and consumed within a given economy, and as such, it is only an accounting mechanism. However, to date, GDP growth requires using more materials and energy, even in the case of so-called service economies, where the ecological impacts of manufacturing and extractivism have been shifted elsewhere – but have not disappeared (Hickel, 2021). For example, it is estimated that the heavy computing power required to sustain Bitcoins and other cryptocurrencies currently demands more energy per year than entire nations such as Argentina or Sweden (Criddle, 2021). This observation is consistent with extensive empirical evidence showing that although the scaling up of green technologies *might* eventually decouple GDP from greenhouse gas emissions (in absolute terms), this cannot be done quickly enough to meet climate targets in the Paris Agreement and avert climate destabilisation so long as the economy continues to grow (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). Therefore, calls for radically reducing material and energy flows under the aegis of degrowth are cognisant of the fact that this endeavour is incompatible with that of increasing global GDP, at least for the foreseeable future.

Second, degrowth is *not* akin to an economic recession. Whilst recessions occur when economies designed for growth stagnate, degrowth argues in favour of a planned economic contraction where the transition towards a stationary economy is compatible with enhanced wellbeing. Here, ‘planned’ means supported with a coherent set of policies and institutional frameworks that lead to enhanced environmental conditions, lower inequality, and well-being improvements. In contrast, recessions are unplanned economic contractions, where policy responses and institutional adjustments are geared towards reactivating economic growth rather than initiating ‘a prosperous way down’ (Odum & Odum, 2008). Moreover, degrowth has a discriminating approach to reducing economic activity, seeking to curb production/consumption in areas that are not essential to improve wellbeing (e.g. SUVs, meat consumption, fast-fashion, overtourism), while simultaneously maintaining, or even expanding, important sectors like healthcare, education, or renewable energies. In contrast, recessions are not so wisely discerning. Given the above, degrowth is often depicted as a ‘soft landing’, as opposed to a ‘crash’, a view which is consistent with empirical observations that, beyond a threshold, further GDP growth generates marginal improvements in terms of human development (e.g. Büchs & Koch, 2019).

Third, the scope of degrowth is confined to affluent consumer societies in the Global North. Indeed, degrowth is predicated on the existence of immense global inequalities in both wealth distribution and ecological footprints that must be reduced. Existing evidence suggests that ‘the world’s top 10% of income earners are responsible for between 25% and 43% of environmental impact. In contrast, the world’s bottom 10% income earners exert only around 3 to 5% of environmental impact’ (Wiedmann et al., 2020, p. 3). Nevertheless, narrowly focusing on improving the material standards of living in the Global South, without simultaneously reducing the disproportionately large ecological footprint of the Global North, is a recipe for disaster. Consequently, degrowth has been conceived as a downshifting programme for affluent societies, precisely to allow economic growth in parts of the world where it is most needed. Some critics have pointed out that degrowth in the North might negatively impact the economies in the South, as the latter rely heavily on exports of raw materials and manufactured products to the former. Degrowth advocates object to this criticism. They highlight that poverty alleviation requires establishing fair trade relationships between the Global North and Global South, rather than supporting a deeply unjust development model based on a constant displacement of social/ecological costs (Martínez-Alier, 2012).

## **Towards a degrowth agenda for sustainability marketing**

Arguably, some of the most critical and transformative approaches to sustainability marketing coincide with degrowth-minded propositions, particularly the recognition that any notional transition towards sustainability must involve profound and far-reaching changes in consumer lifestyles supported by the scaling up of green technological advancements and eco-innovations (e.g. Gordon et al., 2011; Polonsky, 2011). However, even within the most progressive formulations of sustainability marketing, there is often a palpable resistance to forgoing the pursuit of further economic growth, typically by insisting on the assumption that ‘another growth’ (redressed as ‘equitable’, ‘sustainable’, ‘green’ or ‘inclusive’) is possible. Illustrative of this, a recent sustainability marketing contribution describes the remit of sustainability goals as:

Inclusive and equitable economic growth with more significant opportunities for all, fostering equitable social development, gender equality, women’s empowerment, human rights, democracy, freedom, right to a standard of living, and sustained management of natural resources and ecosystems that support sustainable development. (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2021, p. 152) 12 J. LLOVERAS ET AL.

In contrast, degrowth’s position is the following:

The sole function of the ‘sustainable development’ that is ritually invoked in all political programmes is to ‘maintain levels of profit and to avoid changing our habits by making an imperceptible change of direction’. Talk of ‘different’ development or ‘different’ growth is either very naïve or quite duplicitous. (Latouche, 2009, p. 12)

As we have argued, degrowth starts from the premise that the socio-ecological transformations forcefully advocated by sustainability marketing scholars are ultimately inhibited by the growth imperative and the broader political economy in which the latter sits.

Naturally, the degrowth proposal entails changes across multiple levels and scales, with different implications for marketing debates. At the macromarketing level, sustainability marketing scholarship has hitherto focused on endorsing market-friendly environmental policies and regulations based on the ‘polluter pays principle’- e.g. cap and trade, carbon offsetting mechanisms – with minimal additional state intervention (e.g. van Dam & Apeldoorn, 1996). Whilst regulating markets is a step in the right direction, current degrowth-minded policies are being discussed in the context of a so-called *Green New Deal* (GND) (Kallis et al., 2020; Mastini et al., 2021). The GND is an emergent industrial policy approach, increasingly influential across the US and the EU, which departs from the prevalent market-driven responses to climate change. Instead, the GND is predicated on the advantages of implementing a higher degree of central planning and state intervention, especially large public investments in green sectors, technologies and infrastructures, which might enable rapid decarbonisation of the economy (Mastini et al., 2021).

Degrowth critics have been quick to argue that the scale of decarbonisation required by the Paris Agreement entails changes that will slow down economic activity, and, consequently, any GND designed under the expectation of continuing growth is likely to become unattainable (Mastini et al., 2021). In this regard, Hirvilammi (2020, p. 15) argues that ‘as long as welfare state funding is not decoupled from a growth paradigm, rapid decarbonisation might remain merely a distant goal’. A pressing challenge, then, is to maintain equal and democratic societies when transitioning to welfare states without growth (Hirvilammi, 2020). To this end, degrowth authors suggest that the GND must incorporate additional policies that would gradually enable economies to manage without growth, including work-time reductions to facilitate work-sharing (Kallis et al., 2020); universal access to essential public services – e.g. healthcare, housing, education (Jackson, 2016); caps on extreme-wealth and incomes to reduce social inequalities (Buch-Hansen & Koch, 2019); progressive tax reforms and selective taxation on environmentally/socially harmful activities – e.g. fast-food, financial speculation, short-haul flights (Cattaneo & Vansintjan, 2016); and more stringent caps on resource use and extraction (Rijnhout & Mastini, 2018). This is what Mastini et al. (2021) refer to as a GND without growth, which is a key degrowth policy position.

These policies are meant to facilitate a ‘virtuous cycle of quiet contraction’, which Latouche (2009, p. 33) crystallises into eight interdependent changes, known as the 8-Rs of degrowth: *re-evaluate*; *reconceptualise*; *restructure*; *redistribute*; *relocalise*; *reduce*; *reuse*; *recycle*. To *re-evaluate* means shifting cultural values so that free-time and leisure replace the obsession with work/productivism, while foregrounding the pleasure of slow living and simplicity over materialism and fast-paced consumerism. These values enable us to *reconceptualise* key notions such as wealth, poverty, value, scarcity and abundance, and consider them in light of existing ecological limits. Of course, degrowth requires *restructuring* the dominant relations of ownership, production and consumption through a combination of new business models, new forms of property, and a reformed welfare

system that fit these new values. Inevitably, this restructuring entails a major *redistribution* of wealth and access to natural resources not only between social classes, but also between the North and the South, as well as between present and future generations. Degrowth also aims at *relocalising* the economy as much as possible by applying ecological criteria, which are typically overshadowed by a focus on widening consumer choice, increasing convenience, and lowering production costs. Consumption should be *reduced*, especially for goods and services with high social/ ecological costs (e.g. fast food; short-haul flights), while *reusing* and *recycling* maximise the lifecycle of products and reduce waste. These transformative notions are, at times, narrowly dealt with in isolation within sustainability marketing debates; but further work is needed to grapple with the implications for marketing of the interrelated changes implied by the 8-Rs of degrowth.

As far as discerning what degrowth means for businesses, some authors have argued that degrowth is largely implementable within conventional for-profit business structures and processes (e.g. Roulet & Bothello, 2020), although the vast majority of degrowth scholars are critical of this view (e.g. Hinton, 2021; Robra et al., 2021). In this regard, it is argued that whilst there is certainly a role for entrepreneurship in a degrowth society, the latter should look radically different from conventional business models in the for-profit sector. This is not necessarily because degrowth is antithetical to the profit motive *per se*. However, many commercial organisations can generate profits only because their business models require them to constantly shift the ecological and social costs of their operations onto others, and this is something that degrowth seeks to pre-empt.

One corollary to this is that appeals to the profit motive become much more difficult to justify from a degrowth perspective, although extant discussions of degrowth-oriented businesses encroach further than the profit question. In her synthesis of the literature, Hinton (2021) has recently argued that post-growth businesses must be considered alongside five interrelated dimensions:

1. (1) *Size and geographical scope* - favouring small, local companies that either do not want or do not need to grow (e.g. ‘rightsize business’, ‘small giants’, etc.).
2. (2) *Strategy* - incorporating unconventional objectives like sufficiency; societal needs and wellbeing; consideration of non-human life; other-than-profit goals; and inclusive, collaborative, or shared value creation.
3. (3) *Governance* - Oriented towards democratic, inclusive, collaborative, decentralised, networked, and adaptive governance models.
4. (4) *Structures* - Moving away from the publicly traded shareholder company, and towards cooperative legal structures.
5. (5) *Relationship with the profit motive* - preference for not-for-profit business models due to the latter’s requirement to have a social purpose, with a focus on viability rather than profitability.

Complementing Hinton’s list, we can add a sixth dimension for degrowth-minded business models, namely that of being consistent with reducing, and eventually stabilising, the material/energy throughput associated with its operations. In view of these arguments, it is not surprising that the type of business models conceived for a degrowth society have much in common with so-called third sector organisations, such as worker cooperatives and social enterprises (Johanisova et al., 2013), non-profit business model innovations (McDonald et al., 2021), as well as alternative economic practices and mutualist networks (Lloveras et al., 2020). Finally, it is important to be mindful that these alternative types of businesses cannot prosper within institutional settings where growth continues to be the main policy objective.

Finally, the lifestyles that would be consistent with a degrowth agenda are supportive of minimalist and frugal forms of consumption such as *voluntary simplicity*, whereby individuals are ‘no longer worried so much about acquisition and possession, yet are free to develop hobbies, skills, and interests that make them happy’ (Pangarkar et al., 2021, p. 161). Degrowth is also coherent with the promotion of *mindful consumption*, specifically with regards to the temperance in public/private consumption practices that arise as individuals increase their ‘receptivity to the present moment, including a sense of care towards the self, community, and nature’ (Lim, 2017, p. 75). *Decelerated consumer experiences* might require marketing efforts to support consumers in skilfully adapting, and gradually aligning themselves, to a slowed-down temporal logic that allows them to perceive time as slow and abundant (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019). Finally, a degrowth agenda for marketing must retain an element of *anti-consumption*, for it must cultivate among consumers a political understanding of the reasons against – not only for – consumption (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013). That is, in order to be consistent with a degrowth agenda, the challenge of reformulating both consumer lifestyles and the role of marketing in society must necessarily be accompanied by a conscious effort to scale them back considerably.

## Implications for sustainability marketing scholarship and associated debates

Sustainability marketing literature remains captive of an oversimplified view of sustainable development; one which, somewhat bizarrely, insists on portraying sustainable development in overtly benign and uncontroversial terms despite the significant amount of criticism that has been levelled at the concept (e.g. Hickel, 2019; Robinson, 2004; Sachs, 1992). By seeking to attain an impossible balance between the pursuit of endless economic growth and the observance of ecological limits, sustainable development has been compared with ‘the problem of squaring the circle’ (Robinson, 2004, p. 382). Therefore, not denying the conditions that led environmentally progressive marketing scholars to turn to sustainable development during the 1990s (Peattie, 2001b), we have shown that a focus on sustainable development is no longer consistent with the mounting empirical evidence that further growth of the global economy is incompatible with the Paris Climate Agreement (IPCC, 2022).

Of course, this critique impinges upon the discipline of marketing more widely, where the seductive appeal of sustainable development has hitherto been based on the fact that it allows for weak interpretations of the concept, wherein reducing global inequalities and meeting ambitious climate targets are portrayed as compatible with maintaining the material living standards and consumerist ethos of the global middle and upper classes (Lloveras & Quinn, 2017). Even in the case of transformative companies and sustainability champions such as Patagonia or Riversimple, the purpose of marketing ecologically and socially sustainable products is ultimately defeated by a broader political economy committed to endless expansion. In hindsight, sustainability marketing has been unable to inspire the radical institutional changes required to avert the possibility of a systemic ecological collapse. Looking ahead, it is increasingly unlikely that the high hopes and expectations pinned on ‘sustainable development’ will ever materialise, at least not before rising global temperatures reach a point of no return.

These arguments motivate a host of critical questions: if sustainable development ideas have already run their course within marketing, where do we go from here? What comes after sustainable development? Is this the end of the road for marketing’s environmental agenda or can we still contribute to envisage a future beyond growth? In this paper, we have argued that degrowth offers an alternative programme to address the contradictions of sustainable development, specifically within affluent capitalist economies of the Global North where the rewards of moving towards a post-growth economy are likely to be significant – and not only in an ecological sense. A less materialistic and more equal society can be a less anxious and happier one, wherein greater attention is paid to values such as community, conviviality and care (Jackson, 2016, 2021). In this regard, degrowth might expand what Husemann and Eckhardt (2019, p. 1161) refer to as ‘oases of consumer deceleration’, creating ‘oceans’ wherein the psychological and social benefits of decelerated consumption experiences could be democratised and shared more widely – rather than being a privilege for the few.

If the proverbial road to hell is paved with good intentions, then, arguably, few roads have been paved with more skill and mastery than environmental marketing. Over the last fifty years, marketing has sought to accommodate environmental concerns by working with the grain of the market. Faced with the stark realities of the climate emergency, however, compels us to accept that this approach has failed. We do not have another fifty years to wait for environmentally aware consumers to pull the levers that might steer marketing in a different direction. Here, we concur with macromarketing scholars who have repeatedly argued that sustainability is first and foremost a political rather than a managerial problem (e.g. Fisk, 1974; Kilbourne, 1998; Varey, 2010; Prothero & McDonagh, 2021). In the words of Varey (2010):

(sustainability) is resolutely a political problem, specifically a problem of governance – about how we decide what use to make of limited resources and finite sinks for waste and pollution; how we conegotiate valuations of people, nature, community, intellectual, and cultural accomplishment (p. 123)

Therefore, our call for embracing a degrowth agenda within marketing should not be reduced to another attempt at fixing marketing-sustainability tensions by adopting a new [degrowth] marketing approach, while the broader political-economy remains committed to endless expansion. Instead, our call for degrowth is an invitation for sustainability marketing academics to become more overtly political in their roles as researchers and educators. Specifically, we echo the views of Pirgmaier and Steinberger (2019, p. 14): engaged sustainability marketing scholarship must be able ‘to speak up, point to uncomfortable realities, proactively engage with interest groups, and steer political decisions’ in more radical ways. At this critical time, the existential threat posed by runaway climate change (IPCC, 2022) should compel sustainability marketing scholars to be less like Elon Musk and more like Extinction Rebellion or Greta Thunberg in order to bring a radical sustainability agenda to the core of the marketing discipline.

We are mindful that presenting the facts and appealing to reason, important though these things are, is unlikely to be sufficient. Indeed, mounting scientific evidence of an unfolding socio-ecological collapse – not to mention the increasingly exasperated appeals of scientists to take this evidence seriously – has yet to result in meaningful collective action (Stoddard et al., 2021). Similarly, degrowth faces significant barriers to its realisation. Such barriers concern multiple layers of power and vested interests that are interwoven with other factors, including culture and human psychology. For example, while powerful interests in the oil and gas industry have long been working to thwart any effective action on climate change, the desire to maintain business as usual is far from being the exclusive preserve of the ruling class. Complex cultural and psychological dynamics are also an important factor to reckon with. Many consumers are culturally and materially invested in lifestyles that are antithetical to degrowth (Böhm & Batta, 2010; Cluley & Dunne, 2012). And finally, as one of our reviewers cautioned, we cannot discount the possibility that much consumption is animated by dystopian imaginaries and destructive drives – embedded deep within the human psyche – which serve to accelerate rather than impede the advent of a civilisational collapse (e.g. Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016; Cluley & Dunne, 2012; Hietanen et al., 2020).

Therefore, a key question remains: where is the political will for all this? To be certain, the field of marketing does not hold the key to solving the socio-ecological crisis, and perhaps, we are not even placed in the easiest position to catalyse the radical transformations required to do so. However, starting from this position of humility is not an excuse for inaction, but rather a necessary first step to gain a broader political-economic understanding of the problem. Whilst recognising that marketing scholars are unlikely candidates to ‘lead the degrowth revolution’, we see opportunities to adopt a more politically strategic approach once the managerial project of sustainable development – with its promises of sustainable/green/inclusive economic growth – is abandoned. Only then can sustainability marketing scholarship seriously begin to engage with recent mass mobilisations such as the Fridays for Future, Climate Strikes, and other emerging social movements (Lloveras et al., 2021). These movements represent a collective sense of urgency to act now – an urgency which is defined by a rapidly closing window of opportunity. Most importantly though, these emerging social movements recognise that, within the current institutional setting, where the pursuit of economic growth continues to be prioritised, the drastic changes required to avert runaway climate change are unlikely to be implemented at the pace or scale that this challenge demands. We posit that only through engagements within these new political spaces can a more radical approach to sustainability marketing emerge. In this regard, sustainability marketing scholars have much to learn from feminist colleagues and their successful engagement with the #MeToo Movement as a means of repoliticising conversations around gender within our discipline (e.g. Prothero & Tadjewski, 2021).

## Conclusions and further research

To conclude, prior research has argued that the uncritical adherence to development discourses and ideologies has hindered progress towards a truly transformative consumer research agenda (Tadjewski et al., 2014). Our work extends this critical insight within the specific context of sustainability marketing. More specifically, we have problematised the ideological positioning of sustainable development as the overarching framework and unquestioned guiding principle for sustainability marketing in the context of the current ecological emergency. Based on this critique, we foregrounded degrowth as an alternative proposition with potential for inspiring the radical set of transformations required to avert catastrophic climate change and keep global temperatures well below +2°C (relative to pre-industrial levels), as pledged in the Paris Agreement.

Historically, modern marketing thrived in a world dominated by expansive capitalism and its promises of boundless consumption. In such a world, considerations of ecological limits to growth have been an afterthought at best, and, at worst, were simply absent. Nevertheless, in the 21st century, environmental sustainability is contingent upon the implementation of a coherent set of degrowth-minded policies and broad institutional changes in the Global North. These changes would enable the necessary reductions of material/energy throughput in a socially sustainable and equitable manner, while we gain time to build the foundations of a post-growth political economy. In this regard, one logical corollary of the degrowth transition would be to make ‘sustainability marketing’ redundant as a particular approach to marketing. As the environmental and social justice principles associated with degrowth become integral to the functioning of new system configurations, then those same principles should automatically be enshrined at the core of any marketing practices that remain.

During these critical times, it is more important than ever to draw attention to the root causes of the problem rather than its symptoms. All marketing activities - ‘green’ or otherwise – are ultimately maintained by metabolic flows of matter-energy; and whilst promoting greener technologies and eco-innovation is still important, unbridled faith in our ability to decouple endless economic expansion from these metabolic flows is not only empirically unfounded (Hickel & Kallis, 2020), but also constitutes a dangerous form of limits denial (Jackson, 2021).

Engaged marketing scholars should thus work towards a future in which the only type of marketing possible is one that is coherent with the deep, radical transformations outlined above.

Building a socially just and ecologically resilient post-growth society is one of the most complex and pressing challenges facing humanity. Whilst we have sketched out some of the essential aspects that define this nascent approach, further work is urgently needed to put this agenda at the centre of marketing thought and praxis, so that marketers can begin to contribute towards this paradigm shift both within and beyond academia.

## Notes

1. The Brundtland Report was published by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (WCED, 1987). This report framed sustainability concerns as compatible with the pursuit of economic growth, enabling institutional actors to do so as well. This move ushered the concept of sustainable development into mainstream business and political thought. The Brundtland Report also included the most widely cited definition of sustainable development, namely: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987, p. 8). A further discussion on the role of the Brundtland Report is provided below.

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