

# Re-imagining Marketing Scholarship in the era of the UN Sustainable Development Goals

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## Abstract

The pandemic, rising inequalities, climate change, consumer mistrust of brands, organizations and their intentions, pose important questions relating to marketing's relevance and impact in the real world. Additionally, there are growing calls by global bodies, such as the UN, national governments, consumers, students, suppliers, and leading practitioners to re-imagine and broaden the role of business and marketing to consider benefits to stakeholders (consumers, suppliers, employees, community, as well as shareholders). In this editorial, we contend that the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) framework has the potential to address the myriad of challenges identified by marketing scholars and practitioners. With the assistance of quotes from marketing scholars, non-marketing scholars, marketing students and practitioners, we offer a rationale for a proactive and considered engagement by marketing scholarship, with the UN SDGs. We then introduce the six papers included in this special issue. We conclude by calling for further critical inquiry at the marketing-SDGs interface including: 1) Re-imagining the philosophy of marketing and marketing education; 2) Marketing capabilities and the SDGs; 3) Understanding consumer behavior, and 4) Learning across contexts.

## Keywords

SDGs, marketing scholarship, re-imagining marketing

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*SDGs. Prof. Hari Bapuji, Management Scholar, University of Melbourne*

## Introduction

Increasing corporate scandals, business malpractices, societal inequalities, and environmental challenges emphasize the need for Better Marketing for Better World (BMBW) approach (Chandy et al., 2021). In the past few years, we have witnessed serious ethical as well as legal lapses of the world's best-known and respected brands—Apple, Best Buy, Chipotle, Facebook, Volkswagen, United Airlines, and FIFA (Laczniak & Murphy, 2019). These scandals not only demonstrate a lack of moral grounding, but have shaken consumer trust with serious economic, social, and environmental implications affecting sustainable development. Furthermore, there is increasing pressure on businesses and marketers to embed

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sustainability (e.g. Business Round Table, 2019; de Ruyter et al., 2022). Within this dynamic context, we argue that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) launched by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 provide a blueprint and represent a way forward in addressing the multifaceted socio, economic and environmental challenges for BMBW, and a sustainable future for all. The SDGs provide businesses with the opportunity to rethink their purpose and marketing strategy to contribute toward the SDG agenda by building and maintaining sustainable relationships with consumers and other important stakeholders to improve the social and natural environments (e.g. Bolton, 2022; Rosenbloom, 2022; Scott et al., 2022). Specifically, marketing is about creating value such that the short-term goals are not attained at the cost of harming the long term, meaning combining both profits (short term) while keeping in mind the purpose of its existence (long term). This means that the definition of the customer must be broadened, from creating value for the end customer to implementing marketing strategies that benefit the ecosystems (e.g. suppliers, environment, stakeholders, society, consumers). Once the focus of the organization changes from end customers to stakeholders, so will the strategies of organizations.

This editorial aims to consolidate and disseminate knowledge on how businesses are engaging with the SDGs as a core part of their marketing strategy and the role of marketing scholarship in addressing the SDGs. We recognized the need for engaging with practitioners in understanding the SDGs, therefore, we are delighted to have Kylie Porter, the executive director of the UN Global Compact Network Australia, as a co-editor of this special issue. We also include original quotes from eminent marketing scholars, non-marketing scholars (i.e. Management, Organizational Behavior and International Business), business practitioners, and marketing students to enhance our arguments. Specifically, we discuss the interface between SDGs and Marketing scholarship, between SDGs and practice, and between SDGs and the Business school. We conclude by introducing the two invited commentaries and four research papers that are included in this special issue, followed by four research themes that provide a foundation for critical research inquiry at the SDG-Marketing interface.

## What are the SDGs?

For many, sustainability can be an incredibly complex ideology. However, if stripped down to its purest form, it means “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987). This is exactly what the UN SDGs are preparing us for. The SDGs, agreed by all 193 member states of the UN in 2015, provide us with a powerful agenda for sustainable development - one that tackles deeply entrenched economic, social and environmental challenges (see Figure 1). The distillation of these intractable issues into 17 goals not only makes it easier for business, academia, civil society, and policymakers to interpret and implement but also provides a framework from which marketing professionals can assess how entities are integrating inclusive growth into their business strategy.

However, SDGs are not perfect. Scholars have criticized SDGs as ambitious, “being inconsistent, difficult to quantify, implement and monitor” (Swain, 2018, p. 1). There are also inherent contradictions within the SDGs, particularly between socio-economic development and environmental sustainability goals. Despite these limitations, the SDGs have emerged as a framework that all stakeholders—governments, businesses, universities, civil societies—are starting to adopt. Furthermore, the SDGs have provided a mechanism to unite various stakeholders by providing shared sustainability ethos and language.

These goals provide a development lens that is all-encompassing, broad, flexible, future-oriented, and can be contextualized to consider regional nuances, where everyone—individuals, businesses, governments, countries, civil societies—have a role to play.

## SDGs and marketing scholarship

Marketing scholars have had a long history of questioning the discipline’s relevance and impact (e.g. Dawson, 1971; Kelley, 1971). More recently, the calls for critical self-examination have reached a crescendo (e.g. Chandy et al., 2021; Conduit et al., 2021; Harrigan et al., 2021; Jedidi et al., 2021; Schmitt et al., 2022). The primary concerns of scholars have been the lack of urgency to embrace societal purpose (Chandy et al., 2021; Haenlein et al., 2022; Lindgreen et al., 2021a) and the relevance of marketing scholarship to practice (Jedidi et al., 2021; Wieland et al., 2021). Various scholars have strongly argued for a scholarship approach that has a societal purpose as well as an impact at various levels (e.g. firm practice; societal challenges) by addressing important marketing concepts (Kohli & Haenlein, 2021; Lindgreen et al., 2021b; Schmitt et al., 2022; van Heerde et al., 2021). This re-imagining of marketing is critical because key stakeholders, including customers, employees, marketing students, perceive this approach to be valuable. Furthermore, corporate social performance continues to increase in its importance as a key performance outcome for firms (Janani et al., 2022). Moreover, with the launch of the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and Responsible Research in Business and Management (RBBM) initiatives, coupled with global league tables such as the Times Higher Education impact ranking which assesses university impact via the SDGs, are providing an impetus for universities to encourage scholars in strategically engaging with the SDGs.

The SDGs continue to garner increasing support within marketing scholarship as a vehicle to engage with societal issues, as well as a mechanism to be relevant and have an impact (Bolton, 2022; Conduit et al., 2021; de Ruyter et al., 2022; Rosenbloom, 2022; Scott et al., 2022; Voola, Bandyopadhyay, Voola et al., 2022). For example, Scott et al. (2022, p. 1) state that the SDG framework allows scholarship to have “consistent . . . increased future impact and relevant. . .for marketing and business scholarship, more generally.” Whilst Voola, Bandyopadhyay, Voola et al. (2022) call for an explicit link between marketing sustainability scholarship with the SDGs so that the impact is easily communicable to practitioners and other stakeholders. de Ruyter et al. (2022, p. 20) call for the “facilitation of better marketing strategy that will boldly address society’s grand challenges, and contribute to tackling the UN SDGs through responsible, resilient, and respectful research collaborations with stakeholders.” Bolton (2022, p. 107) goes further and suggests that “all work in marketing should be considered in light of the SDGs.”

To obtain more insights into the relevance of the SDGs to marketing scholarship, we requested several marketing scholars to comment on what role marketing scholarship has in the context of the SDGs.

“What is the purpose of academia, if not to address the most challenging problems of our time? Academics are arguably among the most intelligent citizens on the planet and have the privilege – ‘academic freedom’ - to pursue research unencumbered by a political or organizational agenda. If not us, then who?” **Prof. Jodie Conduit, University of Adelaide**

“As marketing evolves in line with fundamental marketplace shifts, social issues of sustainability and equity are attracting more community, government, and business attention. The United



**Figure 1.** UN Sustainable Development Goals. Source: Global Compact Network, Australia. <https://unglobalcompact.org.au/call-on-federal-government-to-use-the-sdgs-as-a-framework-for-economic-recovery/>.

Nations' Sustainable Development Goals represent perhaps the most ambitious and far-reaching attempt to understand and address issues of equity and effectiveness. As researchers in marketing, we have the chance to influence critical societal decisions, and collectively we have the skill sets with which to provide insight and focus action. I can't imagine a more exciting time to be a scholar in the field." **Prof John Roberts, University of New South Wales**

"Marketing is amoral – the SDGs give marketing academics the prerogative to tackle the issues that actually matter – not how to get more people to buy (more) things they don't need! We have too long treated environmental action as a choice, as an 'add-on', rather than a necessity for humanity's very survival, and social justice as a 'nice to have', as opposed to it being crucial to happiness and prosperity. The SDGs allow marketing academics to conduct transdisciplinary research in order to challenge current production and consumption practices for the betterment of society." **Dr. Joya Kemper, University of Canterbury**

"Sustainable development goals are an important consideration that needs to be integrated into marketing practice and marketing education, as well as all business and government policies. Ensuring that we limit the negative impacts on the environment is critical for the long-term survival of humanity and thus is not an optional action. Like all changes, this creates challenges but creates more opportunities for marketing and businesses. Thus, as marketing researchers and educators we can assist in shaping the future we will face rather than

reacting to a changing business and natural environment. As marketing academics, we need to continue to be agents for positive change and encourage this change within the business and our students. We are part of the natural system, and we are more dependent on it than it is on us. The sooner we recognize this the better for us all." **Prof. Michael Polonsky, Deakin University**

These quotes urge marketing scholars to reflect on the purpose of their roles, as teachers and researchers, call for marketing scholars to recognize and grasp the opportunities. Further, they call for leveraging strengths inherent in marketing to engage with the SDGs, which then leads to marketing scholarship that is relevant and impactful. Jodie Conduit, for example, asks the question "What is the purpose of academia, if not to address the most challenging problems of our time?" The 17 SDGs provide the most comprehensive and accepted framework for addressing the greatest challenges of our time. Michael Polonsky calls for marketing scholars to adopt a proactive approach coupled with a realistic perspective toward SDGs and to acknowledge our dependence on the natural system. His quote also highlights the potential for marketing scholars to be agents of change (i.e. assist firms in securing their short-term goals such as profit, for long-term prosperity).

In fact, marketing does not exist in a vacuum; it is surrounded by human challenges and opportunities, therefore, existing assumptions around the role and purpose of marketing should be questioned. Joya Kemper argues that the SDGs provide a framework that captures challenges that matter to society and facilitates marketing scholars to engage in transdisciplinary research. Overall, the tone of the quotes is optimistic and encourages marketing scholars to embrace the SDGs.

This sentiment is well captured by John Roberts's reflection that he "can't imagine a more exciting time to be a scholar in the field."

To obtain an outside-in perspective, we approached three non-marketing scholars, Hari Bapuji, a management scholar, Daniel Nyberg from organizational studies and Betina Szkudlarek from International Business, to suggest what the role of marketing may be in the context of the SDGs. Hari Bapuji's quote highlights a key advantage of marketing scholarship in engaging with the SDGs, the focus on the consumer and its potential direct relevance to practice. He also hints at a leading role that marketing scholarship can play in engaging with the SDGs. Similarly, Betina Szkudlarek focuses on another key advantage of the marketing discipline, communication, and suggests that through communication, marketing can play a critical role in shaping opinion about sustainability and SDGs as well as engaging in authentic communication in the context of polarizing issues.

"Given its close engagement with consumers and direct relevance to practice, marketing is in an enviable position to realize the SDGs. I see two primary paths to that end: contextualizing SDGs to local realities to shed light on structural inequalities (e.g., caste, class, gender, race, and religion) that hinder the realization of SDGs; using products, services, and more importantly advertising, to tackle the inequalities that prevent vast majorities of people around the world from participating in markets and equitably benefitting from such participation." **Prof. Hari Bapuji, Management, University of Melbourne**

"As an increasing number of organizations embrace the triple bottom line principle (profit, people and the planet), there is a tremendous opportunity for the marketing discipline to be a vehicle of change. Marketing is uniquely positioned to create impact through its fundamental focus on outreach and communication. Information and shaping of public opinion around all aspects of sustainability, including the SDGs, should be high on the discipline's agenda. Against the backdrop of anti-migrant populism, anti-vaxxing sentiment, and denial of climate change, marketing can and should play an active role in transforming attitudes, beliefs and actions of people across the globe". **Assoc Prof. Betina Szkudlarek, International Business, The University of Sydney**

Daniel Nyberg's quote below suggests a more radical shift for Business Schools, including the marketing discipline, in moving away from a narrow profit motive and the expansion of consumer capitalism and, instead, using the developed skills set to address current global challenges.

"While perhaps amoral, current marketing scholarship and teaching are not neutral or unbiased. There is nothing neutral with supporting business-as-usual – the expansion of consumer capitalism – considering the ever-increasing greenhouse gas emissions with current destructive impacts on communities and habitats. There is no objective position or sideline on a burning planet. Facing the threats of climate change, whether we like it or not, we, as scholars, are all agents of change. The question is whether that change is more of the same or supporting a transition towards sustaining a habitable planet. Prioritizing the social and ecological well-being associated with many of the SDGs is a good start". **Prof. Daniel Nyberg, Organizational Studies, University of Newcastle**

## SDGs and practice

Economically, investing in the SDGs is estimated to provide US\$12 trillion in opportunities and savings (Business & Sustainable Development Commission, 2017). If we overlay the impact of the global pandemic on achieving the SDGs, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has stated that to ensure a strong economic recovery from the pandemic we need over US\$20 trillion in investment over the next 20 years to reduce the impact of climate change and progress toward the SDGs. Businesses can play a key role in financing this funding gap by directing capital and investments into sustainable products and services. For example, Tesla's *raison d'être* is to accelerate the transition to sustainable energy (SDG 7). Their fleet of vehicles has saved more than 3.5 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> and their solar products have produced more than 10 billion kilowatt-hours of energy around the globe. Tesla is also one of the world's most valuable companies with a market capitalization of over USD1 trillion (Matthews, 2021).

The same is true of many small to medium enterprises (SMEs). SMEs like Calix have developed their business model around the SDGs by innovating the kiln process to enable environmentally friendly solutions for batteries, biotech, wastewater, and carbon mitigation for lime and cement, thus positively impacting SDGs 9 to 12, and 13. Further, Planex designs and manufactures products in Australia using sustainable, locally sourced materials, purchase machinery from ethical suppliers, and have implemented a circularity model that has enabled them to achieve solutions for 98% of their waste material (SDGs 8–9, and 12).

The SDGs, therefore, provide the blueprint for businesses that strive to create long-term value and become more resilient and robust in a constantly changing global environment. The SDGs also create value by providing risk management to businesses UN Global Compact Network Australia (2020). These goals provide an avenue for businesses to move beyond traditional concepts of financial risk to also consider issues such as the impact of climate regulation, the scarcity of water and other resources, community resistance or protest business activities or plans, and litigation over poor labor practices. This includes more sophisticated companies using Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures to report on their climate risk disclosure and companies reporting on their impact on the SDGs. This is, however, acknowledging that SDG reporting continues to be relatively murky. There is no singular framework that all businesses do, or should, report against, nor is there a global benchmarking tool for the SDGs. Globally, there are initiatives underway to assist in improving reporting. These include the UN Global Compact's SDG Ambition program (UNDP, 2022) which aims to mobilize companies globally to raise their ambition and integrate the SDGs into the core business and the UN Development Programme's SDG Impact program (UN Global Compact Network Australia, 2022) which includes the development of SDG Impact Standards for business.

For businesses to ensure that they avoid being labeled as "greenwashing" or "bluwashing" (i.e. overstate a company's commitment to responsible social practices), marketing and corporate affairs professionals should work together to communicate and disclose information in a clear and authentic manner about how the business is tracking toward their SDG initiatives. Information provided by other departments will also need to be translated in a manner that demonstrates how the business' actions are leading to tangible outcomes for the SDGs. This is also a necessity for businesses that are accountable to investors. In 2021, despite the pandemic, there were huge increases in ESG investments, including US\$130 trillion via the Global Financial Alliance for Net Zero (GFANZ) is committed

to using science-based guidelines to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. Bloomberg predicts that by 2025 over US\$53 trillion could be invested globally in sustainable funds and portfolios. (Bloomberg Intelligence, 2001)

For a marketer, it is important to understand the difference between B2B and B2C marketing. In B2C marketing, individual consumers are less likely to understand what the SDGs are and how a business can appropriately appeal to them that is aligned to the SDGs. In this sense, marketers need to appeal to their sense of altruism and social betterment in an authentic manner. For instance, in a McKinsey survey, 63% of surveyed consumers consider a brand's promotion of sustainability an important purchasing factor, and, in the fashion sector in Europe, around 50% of Gen-Zers and Millennials expect to purchase more second-hand items because of the pandemic (Granskog et al., 2020). Hence, there are many factors that marketers should consider if the business wants to be a proponent of transformational social change, capture new market opportunities that have the potential for scalable impact, and position themselves for long-term sustainability.

Alternatively, B2B marketing will need to consider the value of "purpose" in a company's purchasing decisions. Marketers will need to work closely with departments within the business to incorporate stories of product innovation and development, to understand how the brand is managing its approach to human rights (including modern slavery) and how the brand reduces its impact on the environment. These stories will need to be translated into B2B advertising and communicated effectively to frontline sales staff so that they too can clearly articulate what SDGs the business is focused on and how the business' approach enables them to meet the SDGs, its purpose, and strategy. For example, 98% of Yarra Valley Water's staff understand how their role aligns to their purpose, a purpose that is directly linked to their commitment to a sustainable future and to providing water services that contribute to the health and wellbeing of a community.

Finally, meeting and realizing SDGs by 2030 will require unprecedented efforts and collaboration by all sectors of society. Whilst the private sector plays a critical role in allocating and investing in innovative solutions, we need multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize shared knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources to achieve this 2030 Agenda. For example, the UN Global Compact Network, Australia, is the host organization for a public-private partnership called the Bribery Prevention Network. This partnership includes the Australian Federal Police, the Attorney General's Department, corporates, a business association, and another civil society organization. The Bribery Prevention Network contributes directly to SDG 16 and 17 and has demonstrated how effective collaboration between sectors to prevent, detect and address local and global bribery and corruption can have a positive impact. Overarchingly, the responsibility of solving the world's problems cannot be left to the government alone. Principled businesses can, and should, work alongside government, civil society, academia, and other stakeholders to achieve the Global Goals.

To obtain further insights into the relevance of the SDGs to practice, with the assistance of the UN Global Compact Network Australia, we obtained four quotes from Australian businesses, presented below.

"Treasury Wine Estates recently announced the transition of \$1.4 billion of financial loans into Sustainability Linked Loans – the largest in Asia-Pacific and the first for a wine company in the region. This initiative will provide even further incentive to progress a number of our sustainability targets including

gender diversity, reducing our emissions, and improved water stewardship. Integrating sustainability within our financial framework is a key step to keeping us accountable, helps embed sustainability across our business, and is an important part of the equation when it comes to delivering the Sustainable Development Goals." **Kirsten Gray, Chief Sustainability and External Affairs Officer, Treasury Wine Estates.**

"The SDGs are a strong link to Evolution's values and give us an overview of the different ways we can contribute to our local communities. The Goals have created a common language for describing key challenges that need to be solved holistically and give us long-term direction for areas we believe are important. They layout a comprehensive road map for tackling global challenges and, in so doing, identify the biggest business opportunities ahead." **Fiona Murfitt, VP Sustainability, Evolution Mining**

"Ramsay's core business contributes to the SDG 3 goal of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all. But more broadly, we use the SDGs to help guide the way we do business and what practical initiatives are embedded in our strategy to support sustainability for our people, communities and the planet." **Colleen Harris, Group Chief People Officer, Ramsay Health Care**

"As an Indigenous business, it has been important for us to support the SDGs as an integral part of our Ethical business model. Winya has authentically engaged with the SDGs from our beginning, and I think this is something that sets us apart hugely from our competitors". **Greg Welsh, General Manager & Co-Founder, Winya Indigenous Furniture**

These quotes reinforce the increasing importance of the SDGs in business and marketing strategy, including in gaining a competitive advantage. Specifically, the SDGs allow for accountability in engaging with sustainability issues, provide a common language that unites business and marketing strategy, as a roadmap for strategy, and highlight the importance of being authentic in engaging with the SDGs.

## SDGs and the business school

Inevitably, the SDGs cannot be realized without the participation of business schools, the incubators of future business leaders. The changing nature of business purpose toward the SDGs has created challenges inherent in the goals such as which goals to pursue, duration of targets, reallocation of resources, how to make the global SDGs local. As important stakeholders, business schools are obliged to step in and facilitate the embrace of the SDGs for three main reasons. First, the generation and dissemination of new knowledge and insights related to how to incorporate the SDGs into businesses and make progress on the goals are of critical importance because delivering on the targets specified in the SDGs require new knowledge, mindsets, skills, practices, and even transformation of businesses (Wersun et al., 2020). This gives rise to a need for business and marketing scholars to embrace research about SDGs and their modus operandi, devise innovative ways of achieving the SDGs in practice, and advance the sustainable development agenda. This is expected to help businesses to overcome uncertainty about what strategies to follow to execute the SDGs.

Second, business schools enable the dissemination of SDGs knowledge to the next generation of business leaders by providing

them with the necessary knowledge and skills that help accelerate the implementation of the SDGs. The central role of Education for Sustainable Development (EDS) in the realization of the SDGs has been documented in a stand-alone goal (SDG4) and linked with other goals (Shiel et al., 2020). Recent movements by major global rankings such as Times Higher Education and Financial Times have incorporated social impact measures into the business school rankings assessing higher education institutions against their contribution to the SDGs (Wersun et al., 2020).

Third, being considered neutral and trusted partners, business schools play an important role in delivering the core messages and values of the SDGs to the public, helping to build public awareness of the SDGs. Business schools are also focal points for research collaboration and knowledge transfer on SDGs to businesses.

In the specific context of marketing, perhaps one of the biggest opportunities to ensure that future marketers can manage brands authentically is to tie the SDGs into business-related degrees. Many of the graduate qualities from critical thinking and problem solving, inventiveness, interdisciplinary effectiveness, influence, and professional ethical and personal identity are at the heart of the SDGs. However, the alignment of the university curriculum to the SDGs in business-related degrees is not common practice. To prepare graduates for their responsibility to raise awareness and understanding of a business' approach to sustainability, there will need to be more opportunities for graduates (and post-graduates) to engage in the SDGs—be it through course content, internships, young innovator challenges, and/or combined research. Potential partnerships with PRME and the UN Global Compact Network should enhance this opportunity.

We requested four Bachelor students who undertook a unit titled 'Marketing and Sustainable Development', at the University of Sydney in 2021, that explicitly operationalizes sustainability as the SDGs, for their thoughts on the marketing-SDGs interface. They are presented below.

"Understanding the SDGs provides unique value for marketing students as it reimagines the role of businesses, allowing us to appreciate that the responsibility of businesses is beyond generating revenue. A sustainability focus that is evidenced through long-term initiatives increases authenticity and ensures stakeholders are aware of the impact that businesses can have in tackling the SDGs." **Nashwa Chowdhury**

"The political, social and economic shift to long-term thinking has been reflected in marketing through an increased focus on the lifetime value of the consumer. Investing in consumer/market health ensures long-term profitability. Students benefit from understanding stakeholder - or societal - wellbeing as marketers become advocates for the consumer in the business environment. The UN SDGs provide a credible and universally applicable framework that help marketers evolve business practice for the long term, enabling sustainable brand profitability." **Maddison Hemphill-Kingston**

"As a student, the SDGs provide a valuable blueprint into how we make a change in the world. As a marketer, they provide a moral compass assisting us in producing ethical marketing messages that make a difference. Overall, the SDGs work as a guiding hand in working towards a better future." **Ayden Marzinotto**

"As marketing students, realizing the great potential of incorporating SDGs into marketing strategies, unlocks the

potential for future marketing professionals to strive for achievable societal changes that will have long-lasting impacts. Ultimately, the significant value SDGs can provide great rewards for better businesses, communities and most importantly, livelihoods."

**Nikki Ma**

These quotes highlight that the SDGs provide an opportunity to question traditional assumptions of marketing taught in university courses and allow for developing new narratives of marketing. This narrative includes recognizing the importance of both generating revenues for the business as well as tackling societal challenges by incorporating SDGs into marketing strategies and tactics. They also highlight the need for marketers to focus on both short-term and long-term impacts. We argue that marketing students who question the purpose of business and marketing and reflect on how firms can engage authentically with the societal challenges encapsulated by the SDGs, whilst not losing sight of traditional outcomes, are likely to have the qualities and the capabilities to be effective and efficient marketing practitioners.

## Overview of the special issue

The review process resulted in two invited commentaries and four research articles being included in this special issue. To provide an illustration of the themes covered by the six papers in the special issue, text mining was used to translate a textual corpus into a structured overview of themes to present a content-driven and objective review of the papers (Wilden et al., 2017). The text mining approach based on Leximancer software Release 4.5 was adopted that uses a clustering machine learning algorithm, which seeks to identify common concepts and their relationships (Mahr et al., 2019). Leximancer is an advanced text analytics visualization software that shows concepts, the relative importance of the concepts, and connections between concepts (Aghdaei et al., 2021). Figure 2 presents a visual representation of the concepts employed in this special issue. As illustrated, the major themes (referred to as macro concepts) are "Marketing," "SDGs," and "System" represented by the large circles. Whereas the micro concepts are denoted by the small circles and how these concepts are interconnected.

We provide an overview of articles included in the special issue below. In the lead article, the invited commentary by Professor Ruth Bolton focuses on the convergence of sustainability and marketing and how marketing needs to transform itself to respond to a new world. The paper contends that all work in marketing should be considered in light of the SDGs and that marketers can create high-impact research that furthers the SDGs by following the principles of Responsible Research in Business and Management (rrbm.network). It considers sustainability trends, the evolution of the marketing discipline, and the gap between SDGs and marketers' knowledge about how to achieve them. Importantly, it outlines current research priorities and progress made by marketing scholars on sustainability issues and describes ways for marketing scholars to engage in responsible research.

In the second invited commentary by Professor Al Rosenbloom, the focus is placed on how marketing scholarship can be more relevant as it tackles the human development challenges presented by the SDGs. The commentary argues that as businesses are transforming themselves into purpose-driven organizations, marketing needs to be a part of that transformation. SDG 1 No Poverty and SDG 12 Sustainable Consumption and Production are discussed within the article. The commentary also addresses the institutional barriers that work against pioneering SDG marketing scholarship: normative



**Figure 2.** Visual representation of concepts in the special issue.

promotion and publication expectations along with the practitioner-academic research divide. All of which need to be transformed to reward original, boundary-spanning SDG marketing scholarship.

In the first research paper in the special issue, Voola, Bandyopadhyay, Azmat et al. (2022) take stock of how consumer behavior and marketing strategy scholars engaged with the SDG framework. They undertake a systematic literature review of marketing literature and identify 41 papers published between 2015 and 2021 that explicitly engage with the SDGs. The review identifies several gaps in the marketing literature that provide a basis for identifying future research opportunities for marketing scholars to positively impact society.

In the second research paper, Wyllie et al. (2022) investigate the concept of value co-creation of health and social outcomes in an eHealth digital eco-system context that is critical in addressing sustainable development goal (SDG) three—good health and well-being. They conceptualize a theoretical framework of the value co-creation process of eHealth services that consider the influences of all involved actors from an activity theory and dialogic engagement perspectives. A Mental Health, Alcohol and other drug use eHealth service (eCLiPSE) assists as a case study to illustrate the framework where three overarching propositions are advanced. This framework highlights the importance of improving specific dialogic engagement processes with clients during both synchronous and asynchronous interactions over time as value creation pathways. Through the introduction of this holistic framework, eHealth services can be better delivered to citizens, particularly in vulnerable communities, and scaled to increase the capacity of care and achieve health outcomes pivotal to the success of SDG3.

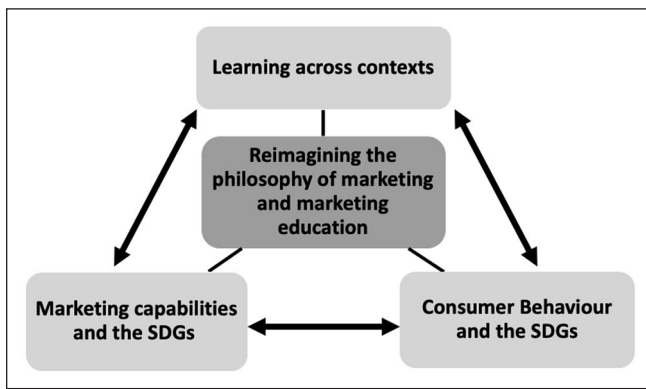
The third research paper by Lim (2022), argues for reconsidering current approaches to managing sustainable consumption and production (SDG12). A hierarchical approach is conceptualized in a pyramid structure that proposes that marketing efforts should prioritize

economic (prosperity), social (people), and environmental (planet) sustainability. This priority is targeted at persuading desired behavioral change in the mainstream consumer, who is “the elephant in the room” for sustainability and are more likely to act on considerations that resonate with him/her more closely rather than distantly. The pyramid contends that marketing messages that prioritize environmental and social before economic considerations are unappealing to consumers at large. Instead, most consumers must be convinced about the economic value of consuming sustainably before they can be expected to demand more socially and environmentally benign offerings.

In the final paper, Ramirez and Tajdini (2022) provide a conceptual essay that introduces Disciplined Vision Casting (DVC) as a new method for exploring alternative futures by reconciling marketing and sustainability, assisting companies and policymakers in their attempts to pursue the SDGs. Drawing on scenario planning, introspection, and creative writing, the authors cast a set of eight future scenarios, based on a combination of guiding uncertainties found in the broader marketing and strategic management literature. The authors then provide marketing managers and policymakers with insights on how to better position themselves in a changing world and minimize the risks associated with the implementation of their sustainability strategies.

### Where Next? Emerging Research Priorities for SDGs and Marketing Scholarship

Given the challenges associated with integrating SDG-related research across domains and disciplines, it is helpful to identify specific priorities for future inquiries for marketing scholarship. Rather than developing a list of detailed research questions, we believe that identifying broader research priorities will more effectively serve AMJ readers interested in conducting work on the SDGs. Based on the articles in this special issue, we recognized four pressing needs for marketing researchers in the domain of SDGs to address and thus further our collective understanding in this domain. We conceptualize these interconnected needs in the form of a framework as shown in Figure 3. These include (1) Reimagining the philosophy of marketing, and marketing education as the underlying core that calls for *developing a sustainability mindset* of academics, scholars, practitioners as well as students to view marketing as a tool to advance the SDGs, (2) Marketing capabilities and SDGs that emphasize the need to develop the necessary *capabilities* of academics, students, and businesses to use marketing for advancing SDGs, (3) Understanding consumer behaviors and SDGs that focus on *aligning the sustainability mindset and capabilities to understand consumer* behavior and devise appropriate marketing strategies, and (4) Learning across contexts that highlights the need for *two way-learning between developed and developing countries* to advance the SDG agenda and facilitate sustainable marketing. We argue that the need for developing a “sustainability mindset” for reimagining marketing education is the first crucial step that lays the foundations for developing other needs. For each of these four research needs, we identify some exemplar research questions, linking them to the articles in this special issue. Consistent with all papers in the special issue, we further note that while specific marketing theory development is needed, research pursuits should consider multidisciplinary collaborations including with non-marketing scholars given the SDGs’ broad scope and participation of other stakeholders. Such a multidisciplinary mindset, as Ramirez and Tajdini (2022) note, will increase the marketing discipline’s perceived value in the intellectual community.



**Figure 3.** A framework for research priorities for SDGs and marketing scholarship.

### Research Need 1: Reimagining the philosophy of marketing, and marketing education

As noted in the invited commentaries by Bolton (2022) and Rosenbloom (2022), marketing is amid a paradigm change where they acknowledge that all work in marketing should be considering the SDGs. Whilst entities have emerged in support of making responsibility the cornerstone for all organizational actors and actions, (e.g. RRBM network, PRME, and initiatives such as the Global Responsible Leadership Initiative) greater progress is needed by marketing scholars to directly engage in sustainable development. However, the central issue arises on how can the SDGs stimulate innovative, boundary-spanning marketing research so that marketing scholarship contributes meaningfully to a more equitable, humane, and flourishing world?

This calls for marketing research to develop a sustainability mindset and take a much broader, stakeholder view that considers the well-being of the firm, intermediate stakeholders, society as well as the planet to reflect a parallel movement away from profit maximization as the dominant theory of the firm. We argue that developing a sustainability mindset of all stakeholders—academics, students, businesses, and consumers—is the first crucial foundation step for reimagining marketing philosophy and education (See Figure 3). As we point out in our editorial, while the alignment of the university curriculum to the SDGs in business-related degrees has started to emerge, it is still not common practice, and more progress is needed. Such focus is needed to prepare graduates for their responsibility to raise awareness and understanding of a business' approach to sustainability and calls for more opportunities for graduates (and post-graduates) to engage in the SDGs.

Against the backdrop of the SDG framework, exemplary research questions might be:

- How can marketing scholars facilitate the development of a sustainability mindset to reconceptualize marketing's role in purpose-driven businesses?
- How can marketing scholars develop a theory that is not abstract from practice, but which emerges from practice?
- How can marketing scholars develop the concept of responsible marketing management learning within the SDG framework? What structural changes are needed to modify marketing in the curriculum? For example, course content, internships, young innovator challenges and/or combined research?

- What institutional research incentives need to be implemented to encourage academics to shift current research expectations on short-term, empirically driven, fragmented (journal article sized) chunks of research to long-term, integrative, extensive theory building and testing work of purpose-driven research?

### Research Need 2: Marketing capabilities and the SDGs

As shown in Figure 3, we propose that in line with developing a sustainability mindset, there is the need to develop necessary marketing capabilities to advance the SDGs. Both Voola, Bandyopadhyay, Azmat et al. (2022) and Lim (2022) argue that more needs to be known on understanding the role of marketing capabilities in the pursuit of the SDGs. This includes rigorous work that allows for specific uncovering of what are the necessary marketing capabilities needed by firms to effectively engage with the SDGs as well identification of the differences that may exist across each of the SDGs. As Lim (2022) notes, this has become even more challenging with the advent of new-age technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain, cloud computing, internet of things, machine learning, mobile applications), more needs to be known how technology can better facilitate organizational engagement with the SDGs. Exemplary research questions might be:

- What marketing capabilities are necessary for firms to engage effectively with the SDGs?
- Do different SDGs require different marketing capabilities?
- How can Disciplined Vision Casting be used as a method for exploring possible futures that inform the development of marketing capabilities in pursuit of SDGs?
- How can technological advancements contribute to, and shape, marketing capabilities in pursuit of SDGs?
- How can dynamic marketing capabilities that specifically focus on the consumer, be applied in the context of the SDGs?

### Research Need 3: Understanding consumer Behavior and SDGs

As noted in our editorial, invited commentaries, and research papers, consumers are developing their understanding of what the SDGs are, whereas organizations too are learning about the SDGs and how best to align their operations and initiatives to them. The challenge for many marketers focuses on the need to better understand how best to appeal to consumers' sense of altruism in the pursuit of SDG initiatives but importantly done so in an authentic and credible manner. As our framework in Figure 3 shows, we argue that there is a need to understand consumer behaviors from the lens of a sustainability mindset. This will enable the application of marketing capabilities to better align sustainable marketing strategies with consumer needs and behaviors.

In terms of technology's relevance for consumers and the SDGs, both Lim (2022) and Wyllie et al. (2022) argue that the use of technology affords opportunities and new possibilities for organizations and consumers to efficiently deliver products and services that improve access and engagement in achievement of SDG initiatives. Specifically, Wyllie et al. (2022) in relation to SDG3 (Better Health) highlight more needs to be known on how to design, optimize and scale eHealth interventions that operate within complex service systems involving many actors at all levels. Taken collectively, exemplary research questions might be:



- How is the consumer-organization relationship affected by the companies' adoption of SDGs in their strategies?
- How can marketers employ the SDG framework to understand consumer behavior, and how consumers are increasingly basing their purchasing decisions on their perception of a company's sustainability performance?
- How should sustainability-driven initiatives be reflected in positioning and marketing communication?
- What are the characteristics of efficient and effective marketing communications in the context of SDGs? How can firms engaging in the SDGs reduce the perception of green/blue/woke washing and build authentic brands?
- What technology and customer characteristics act as critical enabling mechanisms for consumers (including vulnerable communities) to better access and adopt products and services aligned to SDG initiatives?

#### Research Need 4: Learning across contexts

As Voola, Bandyopadhyay, Azmat et al. (2022) identify, the extant literature is focused on high and middle-income countries, whereas the SDG challenges are most acute in the least developed or poor countries. For example, due to resource constraints, many frugal innovations are taking place in these countries that address the SDGs (Azmat & Voola, 2020) and that have important marketing implications but are not necessarily or adequately reported. There remains a gap in the marketing literature regarding how marketing can help these vulnerable geographies achieve the relevant SDGs, how businesses are using marketing to address the challenges, and whether any of these learnings can be applied in a developed country context. Scholarly work needs to engage with emerging market populations, where each possesses its unique characteristics and challenges and explores the potential for learning to be transferred from developing countries to the developed economies and vice versa with customized adjustments. Exemplary research questions might be:

- How can marketing engage with vulnerable populations in implementing the SDGs?
- What lessons can we learn from the experiences of emerging economies in implementing SDG initiatives?
- Can the lessons learned from the experiences of emerging economies in implementing SDG initiatives be transferred to the developed economies? What are the potential challenges and opportunities?
- How can the lessons learned from the experiences of developed economies in implementing SDG initiatives be transferred to the developing economies? What adjustments are needed?

#### Concluding remarks

The SDGs highlight the biggest societal challenges facing humanity today. Alleviating these challenges requires all parts of society (e.g. UN, national governments, firms, and marketers) to work in partnership. Incorporating the SDGs into business purposes brings in significant new opportunities for growing business and building markets. Making progress on the SDGs is changing how firms do business and reshaping the work of every organizational function including research and development, marketing, sales, customer support and operations.

However, alleviating these societal challenges is a daunting task and requires firms and marketers to reimagine their purpose and their

reason for being. Why do firms exist? Why do marketers exist? Why can't firms engage with alleviating societal issues whilst achieving traditional economic outcomes? Are we as marketers, leveraging our strengths (e.g. understanding the consumer, shaping the market, formulating authentic communications), to position ourselves as experts in implementing an SDG-led business strategy?

Marketing scholars have faced an onslaught of critiques of marketing scholarship's relevance and impact, both from within the discipline and from outside. In this special issue, we suggest that the SDG framework provides one viable mechanism for marketing scholars to address these critiques. We challenge marketing scholars to position their scholarship—in any marketing topic—within the SDG framework (see Bolton, 2022) and to be courageous in their approach toward linking their scholarship with the SDGs (Lindgreen et al., 2021b). We can either take the easier route and do what we have always done or fundamentally question assumptions relating to our role as marketing academics, and based on the inherent strengths of our discipline, to lead scholarship that engages with the SDGs within business schools. Furthermore, although the SDGs end in 2030, it is certain that a new UN framework with many similar societal challenges (e.g. poverty and climate change), will take its place. By engaging with the SDGs now as a frame of reference, we would have developed key capabilities and be in a good position to lead scholarship on the new framework beyond 2030.

As marketing scholars, we are aware that consumer resistance to innovation is one of the main reasons for failure of innovations. Perhaps, due to the relative newness of the SDG framework in marketing scholarship, it may be more challenging to publish in leading scholarly journals, marketing students may not take subjects relating to the SDGs, and some managers may not see the value of SDGs and may inhibit engagement with them. As marketing scholars, we also know that although being market-driven is important, driving the market is sometimes necessary. Perhaps in the context of the SDGs, we must “drive the market.”

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