Towards a Theoretical Vocabulary For Consumer Research on Sustainability

David Crockett, University of South Carolina, USA
Diane Martin, University of Portland, USA
Guliz Ger, Bilkent University, Turkey

The purpose of this session is to bring together new and veteran ACR participants who are conducting, or interested in conducting, research in the broad areas of intersection between sustainability, consumer behavior and marketing. Discussion will focus on how to develop a theoretical vocabulary for sustainability research that transcends the specific contexts that we currently associate with “sustainability,” such as subsistence consumers, disaster mitigation, quality of life, equitable development, voluntary simplicity, and above all “green marketing,” and the role for consumer researchers in sustainability research.

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**Towards a Theoretical Vocabulary for Consumer Research on Sustainability**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this session is to bring together individuals who are conducting, or interested in conducting, research in the broad areas of intersection between sustainability, consumer behavior and marketing. Discussion will focus on how to develop a theoretical vocabulary for sustainability research that transcends the specific contexts that we currently associate with “sustainability,” such as subsistence consumers, disaster mitigation, quality of life, equitable development, voluntary simplicity, and above all “green marketing.”

**Rationale**

Consumer research is glaringly absent from conversations and writing about sustainability, even though there is a long tradition of interest in the so-called green consumer segment, consumer resistance, and quality of life issues. Research on sustainable business practice in the private sector has been lead by systems engineers, architects, economists, and CEOs. Consumer research scholars can enrich the discussion of consumer issues in all areas of sustainability, including natural resource consumption (energy, water, etc.), purchasing and lifestyle choices, co-creation and assessment of value, and community health and development. Contributions from consumer researchers to the emerging sustainability paradigm would increase the viability of current and future sustainability initiatives.

Approaches to consumer behaviors associated with sustainability tend to focus on change through information processing or social marketing models, and presume that unsustainable consumer behavior may be changed significantly through such approaches. However, these tactics have not been successful, as evidenced by the fact that exactly 40 years since the founding of Earth Day, and 35 years since the first oil shocks, and despite efforts to promote various “green” practices, we live in an economy that is ever more ecologically unsustainable. And the average consumer if s/he thinks of sustainable consumption at all, probably thinks that shopping at Whole Foods is contributing to sustainability. Unfortunately, the normal habitus of consumer culture, that is, the mundane practices of everyday consumption, build in unsustainability. Perhaps we need to think about approaches to changing consumption that despectacularizes sustainable consumption activities, such as engaging in voluntary simplicity, local food systems, off-grid green homes, and “alternative” practices in general. The effort to provide more information, or “educate” has not resulted in behavior changes that lead to or signal a more sustainable society. We need to address our absence in the sustainability conversation and the weaknesses of our current tools to address the sustainability challenge.

What is the emerging sustainability paradigm? From a marketing perspective, sustainable business practice entails developing strategic thinking that positively impacts firms’ long-term economic sustainability in an increasingly volatile and resource constrained world; firms’ environmental footprint; and the firms’ long-term relationships with stakeholder communities. It also requires not only full, but far more efficient use of company resources. It places innovation at the heart of attempts to move toward clean technology, and resource efficient, climate- and ecology-friendly products and services. It strives to balance the need to develop economically with the need to maintain social and environmental consideration.

Sustainable business practice also involves consumer-centered thinking, approaches that view customers as people with needs beyond material consumption and temporary gratifications. It also includes issues that affect customers’ fundamental quality of life, access to air, water, health, markets, and so on. It incorporates a long-term perspective to consider the needs of stakeholders, not just of the present but of future generations. Finally, sustainable business practice also involves the extension of consumer and market-based solutions to under-served local, regional and global populations.

We could look outside consumer research to find research that calls for systems approaches to sustainability problems. Rudolf Steiner’s deep belief in the connection between the spiritual and natural world led to a focus on systems, rather than individual parts of...
people, society, and activities. His lectures and writings influenced medicine (anthroposophical extended medicine), education (Waldorf schools), and agriculture (Biodynamic farming). In each of these areas he proposed that issues be examined from a whole systems perspective. For example, biodynamic agriculture looks at the farm as an organism. The farm is then seen as a complex organism that can nourish itself. Challenges of growing food and treating disease are approached from the systemic level; that is, as an issue of the entire organism, not an individual piece.

Edward Abbey, a nature writer, pushed the preservation of wilderness through his many works of fiction and non-fiction. His meditations on nature, self-hood, and consumer culture provide a moral foundation for rethinking relationships among the person, civilization, and nature. He points to understanding the limits of ecological constraints, which is seen with growing urgency as we move more deeply into the 21st Century.

Elinor Ostrom, a prolific political scientist, calls for intensely interdisciplinary approaches to addressing the ecological and governance issues we face today. She pulls in experience from medicine to illustrate that simple solutions often lead to unanticipated problems, and suggests that a smart approach to a viable solution to our unsustainable economy is to build strong interdisciplinary research that addresses issues at multiple levels, taking into account the social sciences and ecological constraints. She looks at social and scientific solutions to complex problems facing our world.

Each of these three examples highlights the need for systems thinking and interdisciplinary research, pushing the necessity of breaking down silos to accomplish our goal of sustainable lives, societies, and ecosystems.

Some people are recognizing that “sustainability” has become a more complex and comprehensive consumer research topic than is captured in the traditional “green consumer” framing. Linkages between new consumer practices responding to a host of corporate initiatives new and old, such as green marketing, corporate social responsibility, fair trade, and social entrepreneurship, within an environment of perceived global risk and global Commons crises (global warming, environmental strain, global unrest) offer the potential for renewed research trajectories in consumer research.

Preconference discussions will be facilitated by the organizers. It will happen in two parts. First, we will give participants different ideas and statements to respond to, compile the information, and email it back to them. Then, we will bring participants together with postings on the ACR Knowledge Exchange Forum, and through email. Pre-conference idea exchange is very important for the success of this roundtable, because it may be hard to stay on-topic discussing sustainability from a theoretical perspective.

Diversity is an important part of discussions about sustainability, and this session brings together new and veteran ACR-goers, as well as people with different methodological orientations. Different points of view are important in working through this topic.

Key questions the roundtable will address include

1. What is sustainability as it pertains to consumer research?
2. What role can consumer researchers play in guiding this conversation?
3. How can we use ecological theories of sustainability to build theory in consumer research?
4. Are we poised to lead interdisciplinary research in this area? What would that look like?