

A Paradigm Shift in Green to Sustainable Marketing

Komal Yadav¹, Dr. Ashish Mathur²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Management Studies, Central University of Haryana, Haryana

²Professor, Department of Management Studies, Central University of Haryana, Haryana

Abstract

Growth of environmentally sensitive marketing strategies has created a huge terminological disorientation in the scholarly work as well as in the business practice. The current paper logically analyzes the conceptual differences between the green marketing and the sustainable marketing, and follows their historical development since the 1970s. Based on the extensive analysis of 62 articles published in 1997-2024, this study suggests that green marketing and sustainable marketing have much in common in terms of their origin in the ecological issues, but they are essentially different strategies. Green marketing emphasizes environmentally-friendly products and consumer-oriented messages, whereas sustainable marketing consists of a three-part commitment to environmental integrity, social equity and economic viability of whole value chains. The article summarizes the results of recent systematic reviews, pinpoints research gaps such as lack of standardized definitions and unidimensional measurement methods, and suggests a unified framework to be used in future research and practice. The analysis concludes that the development of green to sustainable marketing is not just a question of semantic choice but a shift of paradigm of marketing relations to the society and the natural environment.

Keywords: Green marketing, sustainable marketing, ecological marketing, sustainability, conceptual framework, systematic review

1. Introduction

The growing world sustainability crisis has put a fundamental shift in the contemporary marketing landscape. Only some of the unprecedented stressors on business to balance profit motives with planetary constraints and social demands are resource depletion and climate change, social inequality and ethical consumption problems (Peattie, 2025; White et al., 2025). Marketing, which has been charged as a cause of over-consumption and destruction of the environment, is now taking up both the functions of a cause and, possibly a solution (Kotler, 2011). Some of the terminologies that have been spread over this controversial field include green marketing, ecological marketing, environmental marketing and sustainable marketing, which are practically synonymous but conceptually different. This theoretical vagueness is very problematic to theory building, empirical studies and managerial decision making. One important fact found out in a systematic review of 62 articles by Bradbury and Cronin (2025) is that a general definition of what constitutes a green strategy in the marketing field has yet to be adopted by all the literature, which negatively impacts the development of the theory and practice of marketing. This gap is filled in this paper, as it systematically explores the following question: What are

the conceptual differences between green marketing and sustainable marketing, and how did the constructs change over time? This analysis is done in four sections. One, it is chronologically based on how ecological transformed into green and sustainable marketing. Second, it introduces distinct conceptual lines between these approaches. Third, it summarizes the research findings in effectiveness and implementation. Finally, it demonstrates the future research directions and implications in practice.

2. Historical Evolution

Marketing has been connected to socio-environmental issues in three phases that can be identified as the evolution of the issues and the scholarly priorities of the society (Peattie, 2025; Katrandjiev, 2016).

2.1. Phase one : *Ecological Marketing (1970s)*

Ecological marketing was brought into existence by the modern environmental movement of the 1970s, which was sparked by events like the first Earth Day (1970) and the UN Conference on the Human Environment (1972). The reactive response to the emerging environmental crisis was one of the main features of this initial period with the main focus on the control of pollution, preservation of resources and compliance with regulations (Fuller, 1999). One of the first theoretical frameworks was offered by Fisk (1973), who postulated a theory of responsible consumption which acknowledged the ecological consequences of marketing choices- a radical break with the dominant assumption of unlimited resources. Ecological marketing of this era was mainly tactical and compliance-oriented. Companies worked on minimizing the environmental impact of their business, usually as a reaction to new regulations on the environment. The task of marketing was mainly defensive: not to be negatively publicized, comply with regulations, and sometimes be perceived as an expression of the environmental friendliness of the product. Nevertheless, according to Katrandjiev (2016), this stage was not integrated strategically, and the environmental concerns were still marginal towards the main marketing activities.

2.2. Phase Two: *Green Marketing (1980s-1990s)*

Green marketing is a strategic orientation that developed in the 1980s and 1990s. This development was motivated by several factors: increasing consumer environmental awareness, popularization of the concept of sustainable development by the Brundtland Commission (1987) and high-profiled environmental disasters (e.g., Exxon Valdez, Bhopal) which increased public concern (Peattie and Crane, 2005). Green marketing aimed at achieving a competitive edge by using socially and environmentally responsible approaches unlike the compliance orientation of ecological marketing. American Marketing Association defined green marketing as marketing of products that are assumed to be environmentally safe, including product modification, change in production processes, packaging innovations, and advertising modifications (Cholifah, 2025). This was the period of the spread of eco-labels, green products range, and green advertising. Nevertheless, the 1990s were the years of criticism and doubt. Claims of greenwashing - deception of consumers on environmental practices- undermined credibility. Peattie and Crane (2005) critically analyzed whether green marketing was a legend, myth, farce or prophesy and concluded that although there were some genuine innovations, a lot of green marketing was superficial and tactical but not strategically transformative.

2.3. Sustainable Marketing (2000s-Present)

With the new millennium, a shift was made towards sustainable marketing, a conceptualization of sustainability that has been broadened in its understanding to include environmental, social, and economic aspects- the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997). Peattie (2025) describes this stage as entailing more organization changes to corporate strategies, business models, consumer lifestyles and market systems towards a higher level of sustainability. Sustainable marketing is not in any way similar to its predecessors in scope and ambition. Instead of being focused on products that are environmentally friendly, sustainable marketing considers the whole product lifecycle, the relationships of the supply chain, the consumer behaviour trends, and the good well-being of the society (White et al., 2025). It integrates social justice issues and environmental conservation awareness that sustainability is impossible to attain without dealing with equity, labour rights, and community development issues.

Such a trajectory is traced in a 2025 systematic review by White et al. in the Journal of Business Research, which reveals how sustainability marketing has developed over the years, with the main issue of resource conservation and green marketing giving way to a much more expanded scope of issues, including the concept of a circular economy as well as anti-consumption, carbon management, and social and ethical aspects (White et al., 2025).

3. Conceptual Distinctions: Beyond Semantic Difference

Although green marketing and sustainable marketing have similar beginning, they are two different strategic paradigms that have different goals, scope, time-horizons and stakeholder orientations.

3.1 Definitional Boundaries

Green marketing can best be interpreted as a subset of sustainable marketing, but with a greater emphasis on environmental characteristics of products and communications directed at consumers. Based on their systematic review, Bradbury and Cronin (2025) suggest a common definition: green initiatives are any efforts (i.e., marketing strategies) by providers of goods and services that lead to believe that a product has an environmental advantage as a product attribute. This definition focuses on the communicative aspect of green marketing-communicating environmental benefits to consumers. In contrast, sustainable marketing takes a broader view. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2018), it is marketing that creates value to customers and takes into account social and environmental effects, which is oriented towards both short-term and long-term sustainable development. Of utmost importance, sustainable marketing does not only focus on consumer communications but also product design, supply chain management, business model innovation and stakeholder engagement (Belz, 2006

3.2. Comparative Framework

Table 1 synthesizes the key distinctions between green marketing and sustainable marketing across multiple dimensions.

| Dimension | Green Marketing | Sustainable Marketing |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Primary Focus | Environmental product | Environmental, social, economic |
| Time Horizon | Short to medium term | Long term |
| Strategic Orientation | Product -centric | System-centric |
| Stakeholder scope | Primarily consumers | Multiple stakeholders |
| Key Activities | Eco-Labels, green advertising, recycled packaging | Circular economy models, life cycle and anti consumption initiatives |
| Success Metrics | Market share, sales of green product, brand perception | Carbon footprint reduction, social equity indicators, societal well-being |

Source: Adapted from White et al. (2025); Peattie (2025); Bradbury & Cronin (2025)

3.3 The Evolution as Theoretical Progression:

Katrandjiev (2016) raises a very critical question: are ecological marketing, green marketing, and sustainable marketing really synonyms or the development of the ideas? The thesis of evolution has the weight of evidence. Every stage was a reaction to the constraints of the earlier phase. Ecological marketing was accused of being reactive and compliance based. Green marketing was more strategic but was criticised as being very narrow as far as the environment is concerned, it was also prone to greenwashing as well as its focus on consumers which overlooked wider systemic problems (Peattie and Crane, 2005). To overcome these constraints, sustainable marketing arose, integrating social equity issues, adopting longer periods, and acknowledging that marketing needs to change and not simply to optimize current marketing practices. Sustainability needs a shift of the underlying questions of the purposes and practices of marketing, as Peattie (2025) suggests, not simply greening current marketing mixes.

4. Current state of Research:

4.1. Evidences of Effectiveness

The effectiveness of green and sustainable marketing strategies has been studied by recent empirical studies on a variety of outcomes. In a study of 283 respondents structural equation modelling revealed that, successful green marketing enhances brand green image in addition to positively impacting consumer purchase intention in regards to eco-friendly products (Devi & Anitha Kumari, 2024). On the same note, Gupta and Bhavsar (2024) present strong evidence to follow the effectiveness of green marketing practices in the digital era and discover an overlap between scholarly works and actual corporate behavior. The effectiveness of green marketing is all about consumer perceptions. Studies have shown that the majority of modern consumers are green conscious and favor packaged goods that are sustainable and half of the brands currently use green marketing techniques (Bradbury and Cronin, 2025). Nonetheless, the effectiveness differs greatly depending on the appeals of advertisements, the participation of consumers, and the types of products. Green products comparative advertising proved to support purchase intention especially when it is done with egoistic appeals (focusing on personal gains)

and not altruistic appeals (focusing on environmental gains) (Frontiers in Psychology, 2022).

4.2. Critical research Gaps

Although there is a high level of research activity, the systematic review by Bradbury and Cronin (2025) reveals four major gaps in the literature: To begin with, there is the issue of definitional ambiguity. The fact that the definition of green marketing strategies is not a common concept does not help in developing cumulative knowledge. Green marketing is operationalized differently by researchers in separate studies and this poses a problem of synthesis and comparison. Second, measurement approaches are unidimensional. The existing scales of green perceptions do not reflect the multidimensional characteristics of sustainability, which usually whittle complex constructs into one dimension. This narrows down both theoretical growth and practical understanding. Third, less research is done on behavioral outcomes. The studies have been imbalanced towards attitudes (psychological response by consumers) and intentions (Consumer response) instead of actual behaviors (purchase, disposal, advocacy). The difference between the attitude of green and the behaviour itself- the so called green gap- is only explained inadequately.

Fourth, the heterogeneity of responses is not well comprehended. The literature does not provide much information about the way consumers can react to various forms of green initiatives, and the concept of green consumers is viewed as a homogenous group where there is a lot of difference.

4.3 Greenwashing Challenges

One of the major issues that green and sustainable marketing have been facing is the gap of credibility that has been brought about by greenwashing. Torelli, Balluchi, and Lazzini (2020) focus on greenwashing and sustainability communication, stating that the area of digital marketing is a major risk factor in which unsubstantiated information may propagate in a short period of time. There has been an increase in skepticism by consumers regarding environmental claims and this requires more transparency, independent verification and that the action is illustrated as opposed to symbolic messages (Cholifah, 2025).

5. Future Direction

5.1 Emerging Themes

Recent literature has found a few themes that are likely to outline the future of sustainability marketing. The systematic review of digital sustainability marketing by Cholifah (2025) reveals five major themes of digital green stimuli, green trust and credibility signals, perceived green value and consumer experience, behavioural outcomes, and sustainability features in the marketplace. Digital technologies and sustainability marketing are associated with both opportunities (personalization, transparency, traceability) and threats (algorithmic greenwashing, data privacy issues). The circular economy represents another critical frontier. Marketing that is sustainable is increasingly focusing on product life extension, repair, reuse, and recycling as opposed to linear products consumption models. This transformation is ultimately an undermining of the marketing traditional growth-seeking goal as new measures of success have to be obtained not just by volume of sales (White et al., 2025).

5.2. Drivers of change

According to White et al. (2025), there are three forces that influence the transformation to sustainability marketing: System-driven change is where policy and governance systems establish new standards of operation. The competitive environment is being transformed by carbon taxation, the expansion of the producer responsibility regulations and an obligatory sustainability reporting requirement. Change led by the business includes voluntary corporate programs such as investing in clean technology, sustainable supply chain management, and innovation of a circular business model. Sustainability leadership is becoming a more rewarded feature of competitive dynamics. The concept of consumer-driven change is a manifestation of changing tastes, where today's consumers do not only consider quality and price but also pay attention to the environmental and social effects, ready to pay a premium mid-sustainable goods (White et al., 2025)

5.3. Research Agenda

Future studies should address the need to fill the following gaps and emerging themes identified:

1. Development of constructs and measurement: Multi-dimensional scales that would cover the entire range of sustainability marketing (environmental, social, economic) are urgently required.
2. Longitudinal outcome studies: Studies of real-life behavior outcomes over long durations, as opposed to cross-sectional attitude surveys.
3. Detection and prevention of the greenwashing: Empirical research of the effective credibility-building strategies, such as the certification by third parties, blockchain traceability, and transparent impact reporting.
4. Transformative consumer research: How marketing can be used to help people make sustainable lifestyle choices, as opposed to encouraging sustainable use of green products within unsustainable lifestyles.
5. Cross-cultural comparative study: The research on the extent to which sustainability marketing is effective in different cultural settings based on the environmental preferences, regulatory frameworks, and consumption behaviors.

6. Conclusion

This difference between the green marketing and the sustainable marketing is not just hair-splitting of the academic nature but the essential difference in the perception of the role of marketing in society and relations to the natural environment. Green marketing which emphasizes on the quality of the products with regards to environmental friendliness and consumer communications is a significant yet a narrow practice. Sustainable marketing including environmental integrity, social equity and economic viability of whole chains of value and time frames, is a more all-encompassing vision and transformative. The evolutionary process of ecological-green-sustainable marketing proves the ability of this field to develop reflexively with regard to the limitations identified. Nevertheless, the continued issues of definitional ambiguity, measurement problems, and the attitude-behaviour gap still limit development. To sum up, Bradbury and Cronin (2025) suggest that the field needs a consensus definition of green initiatives and closer consideration of behavioral outcomes. For practitioners, the implication is clear: sustainability marketing cannot be reduced to eco-labels and green advertising claims. Sustainable marketing is

credible when there is a basic encompassment of sustainability principles into the business models, supply chains, and business purpose. To scholars, the research agenda still abounds with questions yet to be answered on how marketing could be used to help as opposed to hurting sustainable futures. The development of the green into sustainable marketing is not only the change of semantic taste but a new way of comprehending the functions of marketing and its opportunities. The only question of whether this change will be transformative (and not aspirational) is the continued conceptual refinement, empirical research in the area, and a shared (and persistent) action by researchers and practitioners.

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