Mobilising SDG 12: Co-creating sustainability through brands

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Abstract

Purpose – This research extends understanding of the role brand co-creation plays in encouraging ethical consumption. The paper addresses *SDG 12: ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns,* exploring how brand co-creation can be employed to advance this development goal.

Design/methodology/approach – The Customer Brand Co-creation Model is used within an embedded case design to understand the role of the brand and the consumer in promoting sustainable consumption within the fashion industry.

Findings – Initial insights suggest marketing has much to offer sustainability through the use of the brand. An extended brand co-creation framework highlights the importance of embedding sustainability and viewing the consumer as central to mobilising SDG12.

Practical implications – An important concern is to ensure sustainability is embedded within the activities and strategy of the organization and viewed as integral rather than peripheral.

Originality/value – The paper examines aspects crucial to co-creation of 'sustainability' through a focus on both the consumer and the brand. Case narratives provide a strong foundation to consider the Customer Brand Co-creation Model and implications of this framework for managerial practice. This study extends the model to encompass the umbrella of 'sustainability' and the firm's perspective.

Key words – marketing; sustainability; sustainable development goals; sustainable consumption and production; value co-creation; brand co-creation

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is a response to ecological and moral imperatives, requiring equity among present inhabitants of earth as well as intergenerational equity (Varey, 2010). With a marked shift of responsibility away from just the government we see a need to find market-based solutions to 'wicked problems' (Kennedy, 2016). The rising requirement that business respond to 'wicked problems' also places some responsibility on all stakeholders engaged with issues of sustainability, a focus driven by an intensifying recognition that the earth's resources are finite – current levels of consumption are not tenable and a fundamental re-framing of world-view and value system is needed (Varey, 2010). Sustainable development goal 12 (SDG12) calls for a transformational shift towards sustainable consumption and production patterns. Such a shift through the value chain, within production processes, and finally in consumption behaviour addresses the need to implement deep systemic change to counter the current grand challenges confronting business today (White *et al.,* 2019). What is required is a holistic approach to business that ingrains the notion of social good, a philosophical transition away from the compartmentalised treatment of alternative economic and social goals that has been dominant in the literature (Viswanathan *et al.,* 2009).

The evolution of marketing has long since been discussed and debated. We have seen the transition from a production orientation to a market orientation, to more recently a sustainable market orientation (SMO) (Mitchell *et al.,* 2010). Firms with high SMO have the potential to create long-term market performance because of their holistic approach to business (Mitchell *et al.,* 2010). Significantly, we have seen the transition from a product-based platform to a service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008). What remains lacking in the literature is a clear and consistent engagement with macro-level issues to adequately address the 'value' contribution of marketing (Lusch and Webster, 2011), recognising the value realised by consumers is grounded to the result of their market exchanges (Lusch and Webster, 2011). In line with S-D logic this paper takes the view that value, specifically value co-creation, is the "purpose of exchange and "foundational to markets and marketing" involving multiple actors participating and collaborating (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Therefore, it is critical for marketers to understand how firms (suppliers, brands etc.) and customers influence value co-creation (Pires *et al.,* 2015).

Branding too has shifted from adding value through the identification of products and services, to the value of the brand being realised or co-created through the experience of the

brand itself (Merz *et al.*, 2009). Co-creation revolves around the idea that value is not created *for* the customer, but rather *with* the customer through interaction, participation and formation of quality relationships between customer and brand (Hajli *et al.*, 2017). What is required is an understanding of whether co-creation, in particular brand co-creation, can provide a framework that addresses the 'value' contribution of marketing. This is firmly based on the premise that value exists through consumer experience, during consumption (Humphreys, 2014). Relevant to this study specifically, what needs to be explored is the role 'branding' has in promoting sustainable consumption (Lehner and Halliday, 2014; Kumar and Christodoulopoulou, 2014), and the role 'brand co-creation' (France *et al.*, 2015) plays in co-creating sustainability to deliver on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Therefore the core question this study poses is: *what is the role of marketing, in particular branding and brand co-creation, in promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns?*

Our research not only contributes to conversation on sustainable development and the implementation of the SDGs, it also builds on brand co-creation and sustainable consumption. A framework that examines how firms and consumers 'co-create sustainability' is proposed, extending the concept of brand co-creation (France et al., 2015) and building on the relationship between co-creation and sustainability (Arnold, 2017). Regarding contribution to SDG 12, firstly, the paper concurs that brands have an important role to play in delivering on SDG 12, in particular, target 12.5 - substantially reduce waste generation though prevention, reduction, recycling, and reuse, by implementing these sustainable practices themselves, and more importantly encouraging consumers to adopt these practices. Secondly, delivering on target 12.8 - ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature, by advocating and promoting sustainability through brand engagement and interactivity. Lastly, by focusing on SDG 12, brands have the ability to deliver on a number of the other SDGs, as sustainable consumption and production patterns has an important bearing on the rest (Jastrzębska, 2017).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Background

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are an ambitious attempt to address large and complex 'wicked' problems in the contemporary socio-political landscape. Wicked problems are often deep-rooted and highly complex issues such as obesity, poverty,

environmental degradation or poor working conditions. Goal 12 'Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns', focusses on waste reduction and ensuring people have information necessary for sustainable development and lifestyles that remain harmonious with nature. What we consume, how we consume, and where we consume are increasingly questions that are pertinent to environmental policy and politics (Fuchs and Boll, 2018). The focus on consumption at the heart of Goal 12, rather than a narrow examination of production-related processes, allows us to address more complex issues associated with responsibility and welfare. Efficiency of consumption and resource use is no longer sufficient to meet Goal 12, what is required is a change in consumption patterns that enables a greater transformative societal shift (Fuchs and Boll, 2018).

Jastrzębska (2017) outlines how consumer attitudes and behaviour respond to various SDG's. For instance, the attitude of a responsible consumer towards no waste impacts their own behaviour (for example, using re-useable shopping bags as opposed to single-use plastic bags) and consequently relates to both SDG 2 and 11. Alternatively, consumer attitudes towards ethical consumerism might promote the purchase of products that are the result of community-based initiatives or protecting traditional arts and crafts, responding to SDG's 1, and 11. Regarded in this way, Goal 12 has a clear impact on the achievement of other SDG's, highlighting an increased role for the consumer to act as a 'responsible consumer'. In this sense, consumption needs to be understood as a statement beyond the mere activity of purchase if truly transformational change is to be created (Peattie and Collins, 2009). The foundations of a 'responsible consumer' require awareness of social problems, a firm belief that they can make a difference, and a level of active engagement in the community (Lim, 2017).

Despite popular belief that sustainable consumption is necessary, questions remain around what values and beliefs drive consumption or limit sustainable consumption behaviour (Sharma and Jha, 2017). Research examining structural barriers to sustainable consumption and identify pathways to transformation is required (Fuchs and Boll, 2018). Marketing practitioners need to develop their marketing efforts with knowledge of consumer perceptions (Simpson and Radford, 2012).

2.2 Sustainability and marketing

The relationship between marketing and sustainability has at times been fraught, with ongoing questions as to whether marketing is in fact the antithesis of sustainability (Lim,

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2016). More than a decade ago Jones *et al.* (2008) provided a strong opinion piece on the relationship between marketing and sustainability, outlining sustainability as a competitive differentiator, and citing the need to embed sustainability into the core brand. They also ask – what can marketing offer sustainability? It is interesting to note that extant research is still trying to understand this contribution.

Lunde (2018) provides a definition of sustainable marketing aligned with recognised definitions of marketing such as that offered by the AMA:

> "Sustainable marketing is the strategic creation, communication, delivery, and exchange of offerings that produce value through consumption behaviours, business practices, and the marketplace, while lowering harm to the environment and ethically and equitably increasing the quality of life and well-being of consumers and global stakeholders, presently and for future generations" (p. 10).

A hallmark of this definition is that sustainable marketing is underpinned by an exchange of value between stakeholders that ensures lower harm to the environment for both current and future generations. This provides a positive trajectory for the relationship between marketing and sustainability.

The role of marketing in sustainability manifests in numerous ways. Marketers are instrumental lynchpins in the network of organisational stakeholders and are often at the forefront of creativity and innovation - driving growth and evolving theories (such as S-D logic) pushing marketing forward (Lim, 2016). These facets promote consumer understanding, more efficient ways of conducting business, and consequently provide a platform advancing sustainability related initiatives (Lim, 2016). The question of what marketing can offer sustainability can be understood in recognising that facilitation of sustainable production patterns and consumption (SDG 12) is inherently the responsibility of the marketing department. What is required is a move towards 'sustainable market orientation' where consumer and societal welfare is firmly placed at the heart of all business processes (Viswanathan *et al.,* 2009). Social 'good' needs to be 'ingrained' within the product, organisational culture, and related activities.

Much of the responsibility for sustainable consumption and production is balanced between the consumer and the firm (Lehner and Halliday, 2014). While ethical value chains and production processes have been discussed in the literature for some time, the heightened role of the consumer in ensuring systemic social change needs further exploration. Re-thinking the means and ends of marketing raises important questions (Varey, 2010). What

responsibility does marketing shoulder in creating a more sustainable society? What is the responsibility of the consumer? How can systemic social change be initiated? The consumer is inherent – in examining SDG12 within the context of marketing we answer the call for further investigation into the enactment of consumer agency and 'responsibilization' (Humphreys, 2014; Shamir, 2008).

2.3 Sustainability and branding

Brands play a crucial role as institutional arrangements enabling businesses to engage with sustainability and create sustainable markets (Lehner and Halliday, 2014). It is recognised that branding is a powerful marketing tool with the potential to change attitudes and behaviours towards sustainability and sustainable consumption (Jones *et al.,* 2018). Brands offer a practical approach to achieving sustainable consumption and production patterns through positive engagement (establishing trust, meaningful connections) between businesses and consumers (Lehner and Halliday, 2014; Ottman *et al.,* 2006). Whilst consumers need to be ready to act – marketers need to understand how best to create engagement with brands and brand values that promote sustainable consumption and change consumption patterns (Fuchs and Boll, 2018; Varey, 2010).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Value co-creation

As a foundational premise in marketing, value co-creation is recognised as both interactive and collaborative in nature where value is determined by consumers through activities and interactions with firms (Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Edvardsson *et al.,* 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Fundamentally, value co-creation is dynamic and experiential, extending beyond individual transactions and involving various activities, actors and stakeholders (Gummesson and Mele, 2010; Vargo and Lusch, 2012). A value co-creation strategy ultimately considers the consumer as the key value co-creator integrating firm-supplied resources to solve problems and enhance their wellbeing (Chen et al., 2017; Lusch and Webster, 2011). In this sense 'co-creation' is "an active, creative, and social process based on collaboration between organisations and participants that generates benefits for all and creates value for stakeholders" (Ind *et al.*, 2013, p.9). Given this perspective, we argue that sustainability (an aspect of conscious consumption that many consumers value) can be co-

created during the consumption experience and through consumer interactions and resource integration of a firms brand, products and/or services.

3.2 Co-creation and sustainability

Co-creation is considered a cornerstone for sustainable consumption (Voorberg *et al.,* 2015), initiating incremental changes towards more sustainability activities through shared values, knowledge and resources (Arnold, 2017). Implementing co-creation strategies around sustainability, for example, crowdsourcing sustainable product ideas, developing brand communities around sustainability, or holding innovation workshops, can enhance awareness of not only sustainable products, but sustainable consumption practice per se (Arnold, 2010; 2017). Firms can co-create sustainability by facilitating value for the consumer through sustainable products and services, and promoting sustainability by engaging consumers with the brand's core values. The consumer co-creates value around sustainability by actively engaging with sustainable business and purchasing sustainable products/services. However, it is the consumers' experience of the brand during the consumption process that can potentially create lasting change for sustainable consumption and sustainable practices related to SDG12 (Lehner and Halliday, 2014). Therefore, the relationship between co-creation and sustainability relies on 'brand co-creation' - the role of the brand is to facilitate the consumer's brand experience, creating a transformational shift towards sustainable consumption (Arnold, 2017).

3.3 Brand co-creation

Literature on 'brand co-creation' and 'brand value co-creation' reveals multiple frameworks and models that surface intricacies of how brands co-create value and the role consumers play in brand co-creation (Table 1). What is evident is the importance of 'co-creation' in the creation of brand experience and the role of multiple stakeholders, specifically the consumer and the firm, in co-creating brand value (Payne *et al.,* 2009; Iglesias *et al.,* 2013; Vallaster and Wallpach, 2013; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). At the heart of 'brand co-creation' is the role consumers play (Bange *et al*., 2019) and the varying levels of consumer engagement in which brand co-creation occurs (Guzman *et al.,* 2019). In essence, brand co-creation is an interactive process prompted through consumer involvement in the brand (Kao *et al*., 2016). The desire to participate in the co-creation of a brand stems from an alignment of shared values between the consumer and brand (Hur et al., 2011; France *et al.,* 2015). When

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consumers are committed and engaged with a brand, they identify with the brand's vision and values (Black and Veloutsou, 2017).

Engaging consumers cognitively and emotionally through the 'brand experience' has the potential to be transformative (Merrilees, 2016). Yet, very little is known about the specific components that influence co-creation behavior (France *et al.,* 2018), and how to manage quality of co-creation platforms and experiences (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). A recent study by Cheung *et al.* (2020) identified three key elements of brand interactivity on social media that influence consumer brand engagement and consequently brand co-creation. The elements include 'entertainment interactivity' where brands use entertaining content to facilitate brand interactivity; 'cognitive information-transfer interaction' which arises through consumer to consumer reviews and eWOM; and 'cognitive up-to-date- information interactivity' refers to consumers interaction with brands to gain updates and current trends. This research sheds light on the intricacies of brand interactivity and provides important insights into how practitioners can manage and facilitate brand co-creation.

TABLE 1 INSERTED HERE

In order to study SDG 12, and to consider the role that brands can play in promoting the sustainable development goals, this paper adopts France *et al's.* (2015) customer brand co-creation framework to examine the 'co-creation of sustainable consumption' within the fashion and retail fashion context. An outline of the customer brand co-creation framework and its relevance to this study on co-creating sustainability is now discussed.

3.4 Customer Brand Co-creation Framework

France *et al's* (2015) brand co-creation framework is valuable for studying how brands can be used to co-create sustainability. The framework not only provides an enriched understanding of brand co-creation, but also gives clarity on the specific components that influence co-creation behavior (France *et al.,* 2018). According to France *et al.* (2015) a brand co-creates value due to three antecedents - *brand engagement*, *self-congruity* and *category involvement*. A consumer's level of *brand engagement* impacts their behaviour towards a brand, influencing their level of value co-creation behaviour (Hollebeek, 2011). A high level of brand engagement can result in greater brand co-creation (France *et al.,* 2015). Furthermore, enhanced brand engagement via elements such as interaction, entertainment, trendy information, can help strengthen brand awareness, brand loyalty and brand knowledge

(Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, 2020; France et al., 2018; Koay *et al.,* 2020). This important relationship between brand engagement, brand co-creation and brand knowledge/awareness/loyalty, has implications for the promotion of sustainability and the SDGs via brands.

Brand self-congruity is often the driving force behind a consumer's purchase of goods and services in an attempt to express their personal self/values (Bly et al., 2015; Kressmann *et al.,* 2006). Therefore, brands that promote sustainability and incorporate sustainable practices would appeal to consumers with personal values around compassion, acceptance and universalism (Sharma and Jha, 2017). *Category involvement* presumes that a high level of interest in the brand category results in increasing consumer involvement, which in turn enhances brand co-creation (France *et al.,* 2015). Relevant to this research are consumers interested and involved in the sustainable fashion movement. These consumers have enormous power in terms of co-creating sustainability through brand co-creation by being opinion leaders in this category (Bly *et al.,* 2015).

The impact these three antecedent's have on brand co-creation is enhanced by brand communities and brand interactivity (France et al., 2015). Brand communities, especially those on-line, encourage consumers to co-create by engaging with the brand leading to a strong brand relationship (Haji *et al.,* 2015; Schau *et al.,* 2009). A sustainability-led brand community utilizing on-line forums to interact and share knowledge about sustainability could be a tool that brands implement to facilitate both brand co-creation and the co-creation of sustainability (Arnold, 2017). Brand interactivity is essentially about a brands willingness to participate in two-way communication and/or provide interactive brand experiences, for example, multi-media video interaction, entertainment, trendy content (Cheung *et al.,* 2020; France *et al.,* 2015; Merrilees, 2016). Brands that use interactive functions such multi-media, entertainment, customer support, interactive brand content, and online communities, can enhance brand co-creation (Cheung *et al.,* 2020; Merrilees, 2016). Therefore, these interactive tools would be effective for brands to promote sustainability alongside other on and off-line interactive tactics such as workshops, competitions, in-store entertainment/displays.

4. **Method**

Qualitative research methodologies form the basis of this exploratory paper. An embedded case approach enables in-depth exploration of a phenomena that is under-explored and under-researched (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2017). The nexus of sustainability and co-creation is, specifically, a nascent research field with few empirical studies (Arnold, 2017). This study adopts a detailed analysis of secondary information from two cases in the fashion industry to enable in-depth appreciation of the customer brand co-creation framework and its relevance to co-creating sustainability. Naturally occurring data aids understanding of the process through which consumers engage in context specific co-creation of sustainability through brands (Bange et al., 2019). In doing so the study builds two important narratives situated in the context of sustainable fashion to unpack layers of complexity surrounding consumption and sustainability to extend theory and uncover mechanisms that further the conversation relating to *what is the role of marketing, in particular branding and brand co-creation, in promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns?*

4.1 The context and case selection
The fashion industry has been criticised for exploitation of resources and creation of wasteful consumption patterns (Ozdamar Eretkin and Atik, 2015). As a contributor to what has been regarded as non-sustainable practices, the fashion industry is also positioned to play a major role in the wider sustainable development agenda (Henninger et al., 2016; Todeschini et al., 2017. An emphasis on market growth in the textile and clothing industry has fuelled ever increasing demand for new products. This unbridled appetite for consumption of 'disposable' fashion garments has had a detrimental impact on the environment and sustainability (Todeschini et al., 2017).

Sustainable fashion is, in contrast, underpinned by ethical conduct by all stakeholders along the value chain and upheld by conscious consumption (Henninger *et al.,* 2016). Within this framework, consumer awareness plays a role in driving sustainable alternatives in the fashion industry (Todeschini *et al.,* 2017). Sustainability principles are understood by consumers, but a disconnect continues between knowledge and action. There is a real opportunity to reposition consumption and production in the fashion industry to achieve closer alignment with SDG12.

The annual Ethical Fashion Report, funded by Baptist World Aid Australia, tracks systems that over 114 organizations have in place regarding rights of workers, supply chain

transparency and environmental performance (Nimbalker *et al.,* 2018). Organizations are grouped in bands from A-F ('A' being the highest achievable grade). The two organizations that we selected are graded within band A in the 2018 ethical fashion report. Both case studies are used to understand the potential of the brand co-creation framework and provide a platform from which insights can be derived to illustrate how managers can use such a framework contextually (Payne *et al.,* 2009).

The first case study, a large global athletic apparel organization, was chosen to understand the dynamics of brand co-creation within global firm with a known and recognisable engagement platform. In contrast, the second case considers a smaller more eclectic global organic cotton clothing brand with a very loyal customer base. Both organizations have strongly articulated brand values and a clear focus on ensuring that their practices are sustainable. An identifiable connection to SDG12 can be seen in how these brands transparently convey the impact of their production and address the inherent need to ensure integrity in their respective value chain. This 'care' is then extended to encouraging responsible and conscious consumption.

4.2 Research approach and analysis

The analysis involved a hermeneutic approach to exploring the brand co-creation process (Hatch and Rubin, 2006). Hermeneutics is an interpretive approach that enables meaning to be made from written text, art, culture (Crotty, 2003). Exploring brand-related text, cataloguing secondary material, examining social media platforms of both organizations and detailing salient aspects of their websites uncovered insights regarding aspects of brand co-creation (Vallaster and van Wallpack, 2013). Other industry sources also formed a major part of the data collection. Secondary data was progressively interpreted to facilitate increasingly complex representation of the relationship between co-creation, brands and sustainability (Vallaster and van Wallpack, 2013; Yin, 2017). In line with Vallaster and van Wallpack (2013) the two researchers independently analysed the secondary material gathered. Firstly, the researchers assessed company websites and related media to gather background details about each brand. Secondly, brand co-creation activities of each brand were assessed, and thirdly, content analysis was used to evaluate social media platforms used by each brand for sustainability messages.

5. Findings

5.1 Case 1 - Lululemon

5.1.1 Background

Case 1 is a global fashion brand specializing in athletic apparel. The Canadian company was founded in 1998 with the aim of providing consumers innovative technical athletic gear and building a community where people could learn about healthy living, mindfulness and sustainability. The company embrace social, environmental, and economic health in every part of their organization. Lululemon, from its inception, had extensive plans for incorporating sustainability into the overall strategy of the organisation (Bass, 2010). Their vision is to be working towards an elevated world that operates within nature's boundaries and provides for human needs—creating opportunities for people to lead happy and fulfilling lives. They are committed to developing leadership and aspire to be a model for community-led sustainability by inspiring and engaging leaders to imagine and achieve sustainability (Lululemon, 2018). This vision includes reaching the extended Lululemon family of ambassadors, vendors, and guests; educating, inspiring, and challenging communities to become leaders in sustainability; expanding collaborations and partnerships to include brands, suppliers, and NGOs that share their sustainability values (Lululemon, 2018).

Despite previous controversy over its sustainability practices (Bass, 2010) and consumerist ideology (Lavrence and Lozanski, 2014), Lululemon continues to take positive steps towards becoming a sustainable brand (Wolfe, 2017) and was rated highly (A- grade) in the 2018 Ethical Fashion Report (Nimbalker *et al.,* 2018). Lululemon's global expansion, continued brand loyalty, and "unmatched customer engagement" is a key reason the company is loved by both Wall Street and fans (Williams, 2018). The organisation understands that their target market value sustainability and have not only designed a transparent and sustainable supply chain to reflect this, but use brand engagement tools such as social media to listen and respond to consumers' concerns and to promote sustainable practices (Hilts, 2016).

5.1.2 Co-creating Sustainability through Brand Co-creation

An analysis of Lululemon's brand co-creation activities reveal the brand is very active in facilitating and promoting sustainability to consumers through the following engagement tactics.

Website – Lululemon has a section on their website dedicated to sustainability. The key focus of this section is to inform consumers and other stakeholders how they are achieving sustainability through a responsible supply chain and environmental footprint.

Social media – Lululemon use social media extensively to interact with their consumers. They have implemented a decentralised approach to ensure a high level of engagement, whereby each platform has its own strategy. Lululemon uses these platforms to promote social and environmental sustainability through their key messages of connection, mindfulness and gratitude, and gain feedback from their consumers about their sustainable practices (Table 2). They also use these platforms to promote the sustainability commitments and programmes they have implemented and support.

Crowdsourcing – Lululemon and BBMG at the 2017 Sustainable Brands Conference with a group of sustainability professionals explored the question – How might Lululemon authentically live its purpose such that it can grow revenue and profit, stoke customer loyalty and have positive social and environmental impact? (Hand, 2017)

Yoga classes and events – Lululemon worldwide offer free Yoga classes in most stores, creating brand communities, which spread the word on health, wellbeing, mindfulness and sustainability. They are also involved in a number of yoga and meditation retreats and festivals.

Global ambassador program – This Lululemon program supports athletes and other influencers who have a passion to enhance their communities, many who have messages on sustainability and sustainable communities.

5.2 Case 2- Kowtow

5.2.1 Background

Case 2 is an international NZ-based certified organic cotton clothing brand promoting sustainable seed-to-garment fashion. Gosia Patek, the founder of Kowtow, has been steadfast in ensuring their clothing line is both ethical and fair-trade. Humanising garments that Kowtow produce provides a contrast to the wasteful consumption perpetuated by 'fast-fashion' – putting a 'face' to the various stakeholders along the value chain ensures that good is embedded within the final product (Mullin, 2017). In this sense, the brand encompasses 'good' and the corresponding values.

"To me, sustainability is being mindful. First and foremost, it is about making and growing something in an ethical and sustainable manner, or recycling and reusing if not. I also want to make sure that everyone in the production chain is being rewarded fairly for what they do, without being exploited." Gosia Piatek, Founder and Creative Director (Kowtow, 2018).

Kowtow maintained their A grade in the 2018 Ethical Fashion Report (Nimbalker *et al.,* 2018) and are committed to ethical sourcing, manufacturing and production. Kowtow uses the brand to channel ideals about policy, human rights and environmental ethics by showing how the clothing is made (Bauck, 2018). Kowtow believes that "consumers need to be more clued up" about how and who makes the clothes they wear (Mullin, 2017), and the company encourages consumers to buy less and do their research (Pudney, 2017).

5.2.2 Co-creating Sustainability through Brand Co-creation

An analysis of Kowtow's brand co-creation activities reveal the brand is active in facilitating and promoting sustainability to consumers through the following engagement tactics.

Website – Kowtow devotes three pages on their website to sustainability. The first page outlines how they maintain ethical and sustainable practices, including Fairtrade certification, ZQ merino certification, sustainable trims, GOTS approved printing, dyeing and washing, workers' rights, sustainable packaging and ethical fashion report. The second page provides a series of short films, shot in India, showing the manufacturing process from seed to garment. The third page provides an overview of their sustainable fabrics. The key focus of these pages is to inform consumers and other stakeholders how they are achieving sustainability through a responsible supply chain.

Social media – Kowtow use social media platforms to interact with their consumers and disseminate information about sustainability and sustainable practices (Table 2).

Newsletter – Kowtow customers can sign up to a newsletter to hear about new arrivals, exclusive events and special offers.

Retail Store – Kowtow's flagship store has created a unique shopping experience by incorporating sustainable materials such as sustainably grown eucalyptus and recycled fishing nets and floor rugs. The store offers a complementary repairs programme enabling consumers to extend the life of their Kowtow garments.

TABLE 2 INSERTED HERE

6. Discussion and contribution

The case studies purposefully focussed on stories highlighting the power of brand co-creation. Brands offer a practical approach to achieving sustainable consumption and production patterns through positive engagement between businesses and consumers (Lehner and Halliday, 2014). The brand co-creation activities that both Lululemon and Kowtow use have the potential to be transformative by engaging consumers through the 'brand experience' (Merrilees, 2016).

One of the most important insights uncovered was that the power of brand co-creation is realised when sustainability is a given and firms use their brands to promote sustainability (Kumar and Chrisotoulopolou, 2014). Sustainability has to be embedded in all co-creation activities within a firm, only then can brands act as facilitators of co-creating sustainability and promoting sustainable consumption (Lehner and Halliday, 2014). For instance it was evident how sustainability was embedded within the brand engagement activities of Lululemon and through transparency of their supply chain. Sustainability was not viewed as a distinct strategy. This was also seen in Kowtow where considerable emphasis was placed on the ethical value chain and engagement with stakeholders through the production and consumption process – a clear response to SDG12 Sustainable consumption and production patterns.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

A key theoretical contribution of the paper is development of a framework examining how firms (brands) and customers co-create sustainability, highlighting the relationship between brands, customers, co-creation and sustainability (Figure 1). France *et al's.* (2015) customer brand co-creation model provided a worthwhile foundation to study how sustainable brandscan promote sustainable consumption and production patterns through brand co-creation (Lehner and Halliday, 2014). The paper extends the customer brand co-creation model to consider how sustainability is co-created, contributing to the ongoing conversation on the need to view multiple stakeholder participation (Pires *et al.,* 2015; Vallaster and Wallpach, 2013), and considers the role of online brand activities (Tajvidi *et al.,* 2018), brand interactivity (Cheung *et al.,* 2020) and digital platforms (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016) in brand co-creation.

From a firm's perspective, co-creation of sustainability is 'facilitated' by embedding sustainability and sustainable practices into marketing activities in four key ways: 1) creating and providing sustainable products; 2) ensuring a responsible and transparent supply chain; 3) actively promoting sustainable practices and consumption through websites and on social media, and 4) implementing brand engagement activities, including brand communities, social media platforms, multi-media, entertainment and events (Arnold, 2017; Merrilees, 2016). Firms that create brand identity around sustainability need to ensure they deliver sustainable products/services, adhere to strict code of ethics, monitor and maintain the integrity of their supply chains, and develop strong partnerships with their stakeholders (Vallaster, Lindergreen and Maon, 2012).

The consumer, on the other hand, co-creates sustainability three key ways: 1) engaging with the brand through experiencing and consuming (including instore and online shopping experiences, recycling and upcycling) sustainable products; 2) engaging with the brand through brand interactivity within social media including interaction (information exchange and transfer), entertainment, trendy content (Cheung *et al.,* 2020; Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, 2020); reading information on websites, attending events, participating in brand communities; plus committing to the category (in this case sustainable fashion) and becoming an opinion leader; and 3) through brand self-congruency by self-identifying with sustainable brands and becoming brand ambassadors. When customers are committed and engaged with a brand, they identify themselves with the brand's vision and value (Black and Veloutsou, 2017). Consumer desire to participate in co-creation of a brand, generally stems from an alignment of shared values between the consumer and brand (France *et al.,* 2015). Brands have the ability to connect with consumers and establish trust, enabling them to promote sustainable consumption in a meaningful way (Ottman *et al.,* 2006). Once a consumer is engaged with the brand, the brand itself becomes a powerful marketing tool that has the potential to change attitudes and behaviours towards sustainability and sustainable consumption (Jones *et al.,* 2018). As previous studies have shown brand engagement, particularly through social media, can influence brand co-creation and strengthen consumers' brand knowledge, brand loyalty and attitudes toward the brand (Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, 2020; Koay *et al.,* 2020). Similar to previous studies, this study found the use of digital platforms (such as social media sites, YouTube, websites) were particularly powerful tools in brand co-creation (Cheung *et al.,* 2020; Kamboj *et al.,* 2018; Tajvidi *et al.,* 2018).

FIGURE 1 INSERTED HERE

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6.2 Mobilising SDG12

Lehner and Halliday (2014) suggest brands can provide a strong voice for sustainability - our preliminary analysis supports this. A high level of engagement is required to move consumers from awareness of sustainability as an issue, to reframing attitudes towards sustainability, and finally motivating behavioural change in consumption patterns. What is understood through the case insights is that rather than viewing the consumer as the end piece of this production and consumption chain, the co-creation framework allows us to place the consumer (and consequently demand) at the heart of the value transformation made possible by utilising brand co-creation (Merrilees, 2016). Marketing ensures the consumer plays an active role in the changing dynamics of consumption and therefore, production patterns. The pull of the 'responsible' consumer lends further weight to both transparency and traceability issues relating to production.

Initial insights demonstrate that brand co-creation is powerful in mobilising SDG 12. The key to understanding the co-creation dynamic is that sustainability has to be ingrained if brand co-creation is going to function as a tool in achieving SDG12. As Jastrzbka (2017) suggests, by addressing SDG 12 firms are also able to address other SDG goals. The potential of this flow on effect was certainly evident in the two cases examined. Lululemon, for instance, promotes a strong focus on health and well-being – a clear link to Goal 3: Good health and well-being. Kowtow, with their emphasis on the ethical and transparent value chain, address issues of diversity and inequality – corresponding to Goal 5: Gender equality, Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth, and Goal 10: Reduced inequality.

Communication that moves consumers beyond awareness and towards action is an important structural barrier to consider in co-creating sustainability (Fuchs and Boll, 2018; Sharma and Jha, 2017). The case studies provide insights into the role of 'responsible communication' to the 'responsible consumer'. Communication regarding the products, value chain and supporting brand interactivity were considered and thoughtful. What is apparent, particularly in Kowtow, is the emotional pull of honest and transparent storytelling. Both organisations were continually engaged in information provision to increase shared awareness of brand values and create a sense that as consumers consumption choices were of significance. Of particular importance is the two-way communication that promoted greater connection and open dialogue – this was seen with strength in the Lululemon case. Increasing our understanding of how to address the gap between awareness, attitudes and behaviour of

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consumers in relation to sustainable consumption is crucial in utilising marketing effectively to achieve SDG12.

6.3 Managerial Implications

Insights from this exploratory work highlight areas of attention for marketing practitioners. First, this study provides evidence that embedding sustainability and regarding it as integral in all practices is crucial to ensuring sustainable consumption. Specifically, marketing managers need to invest resources into ensuring that their products and/or services are sustainable, or at the very least seriously look at implementing sustainable practices, including responsible and transparent supply chains. Marketing practitioners also need to actively promote sustainable practices and consumption through on their websites and social media, and by resourcing brand engagement activities, in particular, brand interactivity on social media. For example, regularly posting topical content on sustainability, providing opportunities for consumers to interact, or co-ordinating events around sustainability.

Second, practitioners need to move away from placing the consumer at the end of the value chain. The centrality of the consumer in creating transformational shifts in patterns of consumption (and thereby production) needs to be given credence. To ensure a consumer-centric approach marketing managers can involve consumers in crowdsourcing product and marketing communications ideas.

Third, proactively educating the consumer on sustainability related issues and linking these to the SDG's is vital. Creating action requires significant engagement - the power of social media can be harnessed to bring consumers to action.

7. Future research

The proposed 'co-creating sustainability' framework provides an initial platform for studying how consumers and firms co-create sustainability for the future collective good. However, further research is required to tease out and test mechanisms underlying how firms and consumers co-create sustainability. Specifically, research is required to explore the extent to which the theoretical underpinnings of the framework are aligned with what the firm and the consumer understand. From the firms' perspective, using multiple cases that include both secondary data and in-depth interviews of key marketing/brand managers with firms who have sustainability integral to their vision, would be useful to provide further evidence for how firms co-create sustainability, and the role brand/s play in the co-creation process. More

qualitative work is required to clarify what factors moderate and mediate the brand co-creation process. Once these factors are determined, then quantitative work via a survey to marketing/brand managers of firms who implement sustainable strategies can be implemented to test the framework. Likewise, both qualitative and quantitative research would be required respectively to refine and test the framework from the consumers' perspective. Qualitative research could further explore how consumers co-create sustainability by using both in-depth interviews and netnography of social media platforms that consumers engage with. Previous research has alluded to the importance of digital and social media platforms to co-create brand value, but little empirical research has been done (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). Quantitative work could then be conducted through survey research or experimental design to determine how effective brand co-creation activities, including digital platforms, are in promoting sustainability and sustainable consumption.

In addition, there is still much to be done to ensure that the SDG's are achieved. As demonstrated in this paper, marketing and specifically branding, can provide a powerful tool to mobilise SDG 12. If we can change behaviour of both firms and consumers towards sustainability to *ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns,* this can potentially impact other SDG's. A key avenue for future work with regard SDG12 lies in understanding the gap between consumer awareness and action – consumers understand sustainability and are committed to it but does purchase behaviour align? Research that focuses on the barriers to firms' commitment to sustainability is still needed. While unidimensional quantitative techniques may not be able to isolate the complex facets required to understand this disconnect, elicitation techniques might provide a more robust tool for unpacking the situational complexities that require answers to this multifaceted problem (Dodds *et al.,* 2018).

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Table 2 Brand co-creation literature

Brand co-creation concepts/frameworks	Overview	Method	Reference
Brand interactivity elements	Investigates the impacts of brand interactivity on consumer brand engagement and brand co-creation on social media.	Online survey N= 408	Cheung et al., (2020)
Brand co-creation in multichannel media	Explore how consumers participate in the social processes through which strong brands are co-created and the role consumers play in brand co-creation.	Case study Netography 20 interviews	Bange et al. (2019)
Consumer Brand Value Co-creation Typology	Typology that provides an overview of the different levels of engagement and social context in which brand co-creation occurs.	Conceptual	Guzman, Paswan and Kennedy (2019)
Customer Co-creation Value (CCCV)	Develop a Customer Co-creation Value (CCCV) measurement scale that helps firms assess the value of customers in the brand value co-creation process	Scale development 5 studies	Merz et al. (2018)
Brand co-creation model	Develop and test the concept of brand co-creation in social commerce and explain how consumers engage in online brand co-creation activities	Survey N= 207	Tajvidi et al. (2018)
Branding co-creation via social media platforms	Develop and empirically test a model for branding co-creation via customers' participation in SNS's brand communities	Survey N= 407	Kamboj et al. (2018)
Brand co-creation process	Propose and test an integrative framework for synthesizing the perceived psychological benefits associated with co-creation, brand co-creation engagement and consequent brand behaviours	Survey N= 363	Hsieh and Chang (2016)
Brand love and co-creation	Propose a synthesized model that explores the relationship between brand love and co-creating behaviour	Conceptual	Kaufmann et al. (2016)
Integrative framework of brand value co-creation	Develop an integrative framework of brand value co-creation	Conceptual, uses three cases to illustrate	Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016)
Firm-brand community value co-creation	Develop a framework to understand why brand community-firm value co-creation succeeds and fails	Netographic study	Skalen et al. (2015)

The psychological mechanism of brand co-creation engagement	Propose and test an integrative framework for synthesizing the perceived psychological benefits and distinctive motivations in the brand co-creation process	Survey N = 363	Hsieh and Chang (2016)
Integrating interactivity and brand experience	Develop a conceptual framework that integrates interactivity and brand experience with engagement and co-creation outcomes.	Conceptual	Merrilees (2016)
Customer brand co-creation model	Develop a conceptual model that considers the factors the influence customers to co-create and the impacts of customer co-creation on the brand	Conceptual	France et al. (2015)
Brand value co-creation model	Develop an integrated brand value co-creation framework relevant for various business settings that considers both the organisation and individual consumers	Qualitative 20 in-depth interviews	Iglesias et al. (2013)
Influences of co-creation on brand experience	Study the influence of customer co-creation on customers' brand experience, brand satisfaction and brand loyalty	Online survey N= 1002	Nysveen and Pedersen (2014)
Multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation	Conceptualise the process of online multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation	Case Study	Vallaster and Wallpach (2013)
Collective value creation in brand communities	Identify twelve common sets of value-creating practices in brand communities	Interviews Observation Netnogrpahic	Schau et al. (2009)
Brand value co-creation (BVCC)	Define brand value co-creation as creating brand value through network relationships and social interactions among the ecosystems of all stakeholders	Conceptual	Merz et al. (2009, p. 338)
Model for co-creating the brand relationship experience	Develop and refine a model for understanding how the brand relationship experience is co-created from both customer's and firm's perspective	Case Study	Payne et al. (2009)

Table 2: Lululemon and Kowtow's social media platforms with sustainability messages

Social Media Platform	Number of followers	Key Sustainability Messages
Lululemon		
Instagram	2.5 M	Personal development encouraging mindfulness about the social and natural environment. Promoting sustainability commitments, and messages about sustainability through various campaigns. Monitoring and responding to consumers concerns about sustainable practices
Twitter	1.06 M	Messages about mindful living, gratitude, health and well-being, and personal transformation. As above for Instagram
Facebook	2M	As above for Instagram and Twitter
Pininterest	2M	Created boards with messages about personal development, health and wellbeing, connecting with nature, to positive statements about gender and diversity.
YouTube	51,797	Created interactive YouTube clips on yoga classes, meditation and personal development. Published YouTube videos on their ambassadors, sustainability vision and supply chain practices.
Kowtow		
Instagram	55.4k	Sustainable and ethical sourced materials. Certification and Fairtrade. Recyclable packaging. Encouraging customers to use own reusable bags. Promoting ethical and sustainable fashion and consumption, and events like #EarthDay2018
Twitter	2.5k	Messages that focus on use of sustainable, ethical and Fairtrade materials
Facebook	18.9k	As above for Instagram
Pininterest	4.1k	Created boards with images of inspiring landscapes and nature

Figure 2: Co-creating sustainability framework

Brand
Facilitates co-creation by embedding sustainability into all *marketing practices*

Product/Service
Creating, producing and delivering sustainable products

Supply Chain
Ensuring a responsible and transparent supply chain

Promotion
Actively promoting sustainable practices and consumption

Engagement
Implementing brand engagement and co-creation activities online and offline

Co-creating Sustainability

Consumers
Co-creates *by engaging* with the brand

Consumption
Purchasing, consuming and disposing sustainable products

Brand Engagement
Participates in brand interactivity and interactive activities online and offline

Personal
Identifies with sustainable values and open to learning about sustainability