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**Article:**

Singh, P., Henninger, C.E., Oates, C.J. orcid.org/0000-0001-8848-9178 et al. (2 more authors) (2022) Children and young people: opportunities and tensions for sustainability marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 38 (9-10). pp. 831-843. ISSN 0267-257X

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257x.2022.2105009>

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Journal of Marketing Management* on 19 Aug 2022, available online:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2105009>.

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## **Editorial for Special Section of Journal of Marketing Management**

### **Children and young people: Opportunities and tensions for sustainability marketing**

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### **Introduction**

At the 2019 Academy of Marketing Conference, held at Regent's University London, four of the editors of this special section organised a session on the topic of children, young people, and marketing sustainability. The session acknowledged the importance of children and young people in the achievement of sustainable development goals, which has been recognised by the United Nations. Specifically, UNESCO's Global Action Plan for Education for Sustainable Development has identified children and young people as agents of change and has included the empowerment and mobilization of younger people as one of its five priority areas (UNESCO, 2018). Children have been targeted as recipients of education for sustainable development (Singh et al., 2020) and, as prospective adults, will be the decision makers for the future of the planet, possibly influenced by what they have learnt in the classroom (Walker, 2017). Children also have a role to play in environmental issues now, both as consumers in their own right and as influencers on family consumption and other behaviours (Grønhøj, 2007). A relatively recent example of a child influencing consumption behaviour that has gained a lot of momentum in the news is Greta Thunberg, who initiated the 'School Strike' to raise awareness for climate change (BBC, 2019; Bezrukova, 2019). Thus, in many

ways, critical research on children and sustainability in general is crucial to our understanding of the environment now, in the future, and the challenges posed by human activities.

In acknowledging the potential yet contested role of children and young people as sustainable actors, we ask: how can marketing research contribute to our theoretical understanding of younger people in the wider sustainability landscape; how can marketing address the promotion of sustainable products and services to this particular audience; and how can marketing facilitate children and young people as influencers for sustainable choices and behaviours?

Despite the increasing importance of children and young people for sustainability, relatively little is known about how they engage, if at all, with sustainable issues, especially within the academic literature. Most research in the field focuses on adults, which has produced contradictory and contentious results, ranging across decades of early marketing research efforts intent on finding the so-called green consumer (Peattie, 2001), and identifying and addressing the attitude-behaviour gap (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001), both of which have proved to be problematic (Davies et al., 2020). Extant research in marketing also privileges a narrow understanding of consumption to the relative under-representation of other sustainable domains, such as disposal (McDonald et al., 2016) and alternative business models like sharing and renting in a circular economy (Henninger et al., 2019, 2022).

Our focus is on under 25s, who fall within either Generation Z or the late Generation Y (Dimock, 2019), who are exposed to many potential encounters with sustainability at an impressionable life stage (Singh et al., 2016; Luo et al., forthcoming) and who have been relatively neglected in terms of research in marketing and sustainability. This age group also covers the emerging adult (Smetana et al., 2016), recognised as a key transition time in the shift towards other socialisation agents and influencers, as they gradually move away from family and parents towards peers, fellow students, colleagues, and partners (Arnett, 2016). Although the socialisation literature is rich in how children and young adults develop in relation to others, the application of socialisation theory to sustainability is relatively scarce (Matthies and Wallis, 2017).

This editorial to the special section starts by identifying and discussing two of the major themes centred on children and young people, sustainability and marketing, both of which run through the papers. These include first what we know about children/young people and sustainability; and second, how they might influence others. We then introduce the five papers which comprise this special section and how they have contributed to the marketing literature. Overall, these papers focus on the role of children and young people in their (non)engagement with sustainability, both from their own perspective, and from the perspective of agents and agencies involved with children and young people. The issue aims to provide the academic community with theoretical advances in understanding children and young adults as sustainable people in themselves, as influencers on others, and as influenced both by others and by structures such as society and marketing. Thus, we hope this special section will contribute to a more sustainable future.

**What do we know about children and young people and sustainability**

We do not know as much about children and young people and sustainability as we know about adults. Most extant research has focused on adults' understanding of sustainability, their (non)behaviours, attitudes and priorities, although that is not to say that research with adults has definitively answered all our questions – certainly, many gaps in knowledge remain (Davies et al., 2020). Children and young people differ from adults in terms of their understanding and awareness of sustainable issues, their experiences with sustainability, and their ability to engage with sustainability as autonomous actors. Young children do not possess the same cognitive facilities as adults (Gunter et al., 2005) or the independence to make decisions which might impact on sustainability, for example switching domestic energy supplier or buying organic food (Grønhøj, 2007). So it is not necessarily helpful to apply what we know about older adults to the child or teenager or emerging adult. Children merit consideration in their own right, and extant research emphasises their key role in environmental challenges (Larsson et al., 2010).

Prior research suggests that children are aware of sustainability, with the traditional agents of school, family, peers, and media providing information and/or support to develop children's environmental socialisation (Singh et al., 2020). The socialisation process develops children's skills and abilities to enable them to engage with sustainability and reduce their environmental impact (Grønhøj, 2007). However, this is a broad picture – Francis and Davis (2014) would argue that there are three dimensions to sustainability socialisation, and children differ with regard to what they know and engage with about each dimension. Socialisation to environmental sustainability (e.g. climate change, pollution, resource depletion) is mainly formal, via the classroom, and children tend not to extend the knowledge and actions they are taught. Socialisation to the self-dimension or personal aspect (e.g. nutrition, exercise, smoking) uses both formal and informal mechanisms, and here children demonstrate a greater likelihood of elaborating and generalising the knowledge they possess about such issues but there remains a gap between awareness and action. Finally, socialisation to societal sustainability (e.g. poverty, inequalities, human rights), an aspect of sustainability rarely explored with children, is more individual and arbitrary than the other two dimensions. Francis and Davis (2014) suggest that even though children may be positively disposed towards these different aspects of sustainability, they may yet lack the knowledge and direction required to action this disposition. They conclude that future research should delineate the three dimensions of sustainability and their associated socialisation processes to enhance the quality and specificity of subsequent findings.

The discussion above introduces the concept of engagement, and again we know more about adults than children and young people in relation to how the latter two engage with various forms of sustainability marketing. There is little research on newer aspects of marketing such as circular economy (Lazell et al., 2018), the sharing economy (Henninger et al., 2019, 2021) and second-hand consumption (Hu et al., 2018) in terms of how children and young people view these services/products and how willing they are to engage. Wider marketing efforts such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) are also lacking in research with the under 25s (Kim and Austin, 2020). Much of the engagement literature in marketing has focused on how people engage with brands rather than with sustainability or the environment, and has focused on adults (e.g. Dessart et al., 2016). What engagement with sustainability actually

means might differ according to whether researchers are examining cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural engagement. We know from previous research (Singh et al., 2020) that children exhibit concern (emotion) for the environment which can be a key factor in the process of reverse socialisation attempts (see below). Children are social actors, embedded in several (overlapping) systems including family, school and peers, and thus, as with adults, taking an individual approach may have limitations in terms of understanding how children engage with sustainability, and what this means to the children themselves.

In relation to more traditional marketing tools, previous research has begun to throw some light on how, for example, children might interpret or respond to packaging and eco-labels (Fretes et al., 2021). Often such research relates more to food choice/diet than sustainability *per se* although clearly there is an overlap between the two. Given young children's limited purchasing power, any effectiveness of sustainability marketing tools encountered in a retail setting may rely on children's ability to ask their parents to make a purchase. For older children, teenagers and young adults, who have more autonomy and spending power, understanding how they notice/interpret/act upon sources of information such as labels is important and currently under-researched. In general, marketing sustainable products/services to children and young people is an area of research that merits further attention.

### **How might children and young people influence others**

A second key stream of research focuses on whether and how children might influence others, often parents, but also other family members and peers, to adopt more sustainable behaviours. This can be examined from a reverse socialisation process which situates the child as an agent and the person to be influenced as a learner (Gentina and Singh, 2015). Evidence of reverse socialisation generally in areas of marketing such as consumption is documented, for example in high involvement purchase decisions (Thomson et al., 2007) and new technology (Ekström, 2007), and children have long been regarded as potential agents for change in their family's sustainable behaviours (Easterling et al., 1995). Children may be provided with sustainability knowledge and experience by their learning at school, or from the media, or from peers, giving them the information to use in persuasion attempts with their parents (Gentina and Muratore, 2012). A number of studies show that reverse socialisation does take place, for example Singh et al.'s (2020) work with families in India, where teenagers learning about the environment in school took home requests and suggestions for saving water, reducing energy consumption and purchasing eco-friendly products. Gentina and Muratore (2012) also found support for reverse socialisation in families with teenagers, in this instance in France, suggesting that some mothers are influenced by their teens in the domains of reducing water/energy consumption, purchasing green products, waste, and transport. A study with younger children in Ireland by O'Neill and Buckley (2019) found evidence for school lessons prompting reverse socialisation in the family in the domains of recycling and energy saving, suggesting that children can be drivers of sustainable behaviour in the home through positive peer power. However, there is still research to be done on why reverse socialisation occurs in some families and not others, and how familial interactions might influence the success or otherwise of reverse socialisation

attempts. Communication patterns and encouragement from parents have both been identified as important factors in environmental (re)socialisation, for example in children's participation with recycling (Schill et al., 2020). Singh et al. (2020) found that a parent's subjective perception of their teenager's environmental ability directs their receptivity towards their teenager's reverse socialisation attempts, and influence strategies used by children affect the success of their influence on their parents. Additionally, Gentina and Muratore (2012) concluded that children's influence is culture specific and is affected by parenting style. In addition, much of the research in this field looks at short-term effects, and there is a lack of longitudinal studies tracking the temporary or enduring nature of children's reverse socialisation influence (Circus, 2022). Grønhøj (2006) noted that children's capacity to be agents for change in the home is somewhat uncertain and under-studied, an observation which may still apply today. In addition, how people's sustainable behaviour in itself might alter over time, developing and/or declining from childhood, through adolescence and into emerging adulthood, is also an under-researched area, which again warrants further investigation.

### **Building up the research on children, sustainability and marketing: Introduction to the special section papers**

In the call for papers for this special section we asked for contributions that would address the gaps in previous work, building on areas around both theoretical and methodological spaces in the area of children, sustainability and marketing. In turn, we received submissions that spanned a wide range of topics, ages and approaches, coming from both non-Western and Western perspectives, reflecting the strong research which is happening around the world on these crucial issues. We are delighted that our contributors have managed to engage with children as young as seven years, unsurprisingly an under-represented age group in research of this kind. At the other end of the age spectrum, we have young adults, thus spanning the age range between childhood and emerging adulthood. The papers also report on work from several countries, namely Denmark, France, India, Belgium, and Portugal. We have gathered papers that take very different theoretical perspectives, including embodied engagement and a developmental view, and various methodologies, ranging from a longitudinal study to an experimental approach. Between them, the five papers address gaps in our current knowledge of children, young people and sustainability, providing innovative research and thought-provoking ideas for future endeavours. Below, we present the five papers which comprise this special section of the *Journal of Marketing Management*.

*Are we growing a green generation? Exploring young people's pro-environmental orientation over time.*

The first paper, by Alice Grønhøj and Marco Hubert, is a commentary piece with original data which also serves as a useful introduction to the field of pro-environmental socialisation. They address the important question of how environmental values and behaviours change in the transition from youth to young adulthood. Young people are key actors in the transition to more sustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns. While growing up, the current generation of young people has been exposed to messages of environmental issues, their relation to human activities, and a policy and societal focus to act more sustainably. However, reports show that young people tend to be less committed to engaging in common, pro-environmental behaviour than older generations. Generational and age-based differences have been identified in pro-environmental concern and behaviour, however the reasons for

such differences are not clear; one problem being the traditionally used cross-sectional research design. Grønhøj and Hubert address these theoretical and methodological gaps by adopting a longitudinal survey research design to explore whether and in which direction the pro-environmental orientation of the cohort changed during late adolescence through emergent and young adulthood. They assess whether the observed changes derive from developmental, cohort or period effects.

The longitudinal study surveyed 1483 young Danish people born between 1988 and 1990, aged 16-20 in the first study and 30-34 in 2021. The participants were surveyed at three points in time with approximately a 13 year lapse between the first and the third study. Three data sets were collected within an approximate 10-year (2008-2017) and a four-year (2017-2021) time span. The questionnaire consisted of constructs on pro-environmental values, attitude towards energy saving, and attitude towards buying organic or environmentally friendly products, and finally two corresponding behaviours: energy-related behaviour and organic/environmentally friendly purchase behaviour. The authors analysed longitudinal, time-lag and cross-sectional differences among the cohorts at different data points.

The findings suggest a negative ageing effect on the pro-environmental orientation of young people. The study found a large drop in the endorsement of pro-environmental values among cohorts due to a negative ageing effect. Attitude towards energy saving and organic/environmentally friendly products was also found to be at a lower level for the current generation of 30-34 years old than it was for this generation in 2008 due to period effects. However, a positive ageing effect led to an increase in the pro-environmental behaviour of energy saving. The authors conclude that their results do not lend support to the notion of witnessing a “green revolution” among the current generation of late adolescents; with respect to the frequently used determinants of pro-environmental behaviour, values and attitudes, the current generation of late adolescents are at the same or a lower level as late adolescents of 2008. The negative ageing and period effects on pro-environmental values and attitudes observed in this study may mean that pro-environmental values established during late adolescence are not stable and will not persist into young adulthood, and changes in pro-environmental value priorities will continue to take place when facing life challenges.

The study offers several theoretical and methodological contributions to the understanding of developmental effects on the pro-environmental orientation of young people. By taking a longitudinal approach, it assesses how and in which direction the pro-environmental orientation develops/or not, as young people transition from late adolescence to young adulthood and explain the changes by developmental and period effects. Methodologically, the study fills a gap in extant research not only by adopting a longitudinal research design but also by separating ageing, cohort and period effects. It offers several policy and practical recommendations to enhance the use of digital and innovative campaigns and marketing to engage young people with ‘green issues’ and provide them with more opportunity to engage with pro-environmental behaviour by making products widely available.

#### *Children’s engagement with environmental issues.*

Previous studies on consumer engagement have firstly concentrated on studying adults, and secondly focused on specific brands as the object of the engagement. Few studies have considered environmental issues as the object of the engagement and even fewer have

studied children in the analytical stage of their development. Schill, Muratore and Hogg address this gap with their article 'Children's engagement with environmental issues', and using a child-centred methodology, examined whether and how children demonstrate individual and collective engagement with environmental issues. Using a qualitative study with 20 children from 14 French families, aged between 7-12 years of age, the authors undertook a two-staged interview process. This involved open questions and a drawing exercise with the children, and was followed up with informal conversations with their parents to understand the family context of each child.

The study found children defined engagement with environmental issues as a promise to protect the environment in the longer term, and whilst the children demonstrated varying levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement, the latter was the most important to them. The authors also found that the presence or lack of individual factors (such as knowledge, interest, perceived responsibility, and perceived behaviour control) and socio-contextual factors (communication, socialisation and reverse socialisation) impacted how much engagement the children had with environmental issues. The research highlighted the need for a child to be part of a complex but supportive ecosystem in order for them to display embodied engagement with environmental issues.

The paper provides a number of theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of whether and how children engage with environmental issues. Firstly, the study focuses on children in the analytical stage of their development and helps to fill the gap in the relevant literature. Secondly, it considers environmental issues as the object of engagement and has developed a framework for analysing children's level of engagement from a lack of engagement to embodied engagement. Finally, it has provided marketing practitioners and social policy makers with recommendations on how to support children, especially those not in a supportive or developed ecosystem, to further engage with different environmental issues and to pursue reverse socialisation.

*Does Generation Z value and reward corporate social responsibility practices?*

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has now become an expectation of the general public. In many countries around the world, the requirement for CSR has even shifted from being voluntary to a mandatory practice. Generation Z is particularly concerned about the sustainability and CSR policies of firms, and their opinions of a firm is shaped by its products and services as well as its ethical practices and ideals. In this article, author Sanjith Narayanan explores whether Gen Z reward business CSR initiatives with higher willingness to pay, purchase intention and brand equity. He further investigates whether these young people value differently the three dimensions of CSR, i.e. economic, social and environmental CSR. Rather than taking a generic approach to brands, the author further assessed whether the effect of CSR perception on Gen Z is the same for well-known and lesser-known brands and evaluates the role of brand equity in this relationship.

To answer the questions, the study adopted an experimental approach where a 4(CSR)\*2(brands) between-subjects factorial design experiment was conducted with 414 students from three universities in western India. An incentive-based Becker-DeGroot-Marschak (BDM) procedure was used. Participants in this study follow the revealed preference

approach as they are asked to buy the goods using money from their endowment fund, unlike the stated preference approach used in many previous studies that ask consumers about the amount they are willing to pay for goods. Narayanan takes a unique approach by using real brands with actual CSR data as stimuli, contrary to previous studies which mostly utilised hypothetical brands as he argues that to truly study brand equity, participants need to have knowledge about the given brand and only real brands can provide this context. The two chosen brands were from a FMCG category where one was of high brand equity and the other of lower brand equity to see if the impact of CSR perception varies as per brand equity.

The results suggest that Gen Z truly values social CSR and environmental CSR equally and are willing to reward companies with a higher willingness to pay for their brands, higher purchase intention, and increased brand equity for both brands i.e. lesser-known and well-known brand. The impact of social and environmental CSR on consumer purchase variables was higher than the economic CSR. This shows that the social and environmental dimensions of CSR allow Gen Z consumers to enhance their self-concept through the identity gained through associations with such companies, leading to increased brand identity, purchase intention and willingness to pay. This study also demonstrates that brand equity mediates the relationship between CSR and purchase intention and CSR and willingness to pay. This showcased that when Gen Z consumers feel honoured and unique due to their association with the brand, this is reflected in their behaviour by increasing purchase intention and their willingness to pay for the brands.

The study makes a valuable theoretical contribution by establishing that Gen Z value the CSR of businesses and reward the responsible brands with positive brand equity, purchase intention and willingness to pay for those companies. Secondly, the study shows that social and environmental CSR is valued equally by Gen Z consumers contrary to past research which states that Gen Z is more sensitive towards environmental issues. Thirdly, the study contributes to existing research by establishing the mediating effect of brand equity in the context of CSR, purchase intention and willingness to pay. Drawing on these results, Narayanan suggests that companies should enhance communication about CSR to build brand equity among Gen Z which will be more relevant for lesser-known brands but equally important for well-known brands too.

#### *Helping mother earth: Young children's responses to sustainability labels on food packaging.*

Sustainability claims have received extensive scholarly attention over the past forty years, which has advanced our understanding of the relationship between sustainability labelling and consumption behaviour. Historically, studies have focused on adults and young consumers and, as such, have left a gap in knowledge on how children respond to on-pack sustainability labels, despite children having a major influence on household consumption patterns. De Bradandere, Hudders and Van de Sompel address this gap with their article 'Helping mother earth: Young children's responses to sustainability labels on food packaging', and explore whether sustainability labels have an impact on children's evaluation of organic food. The authors focus on the efficacy of verbal sustainability labels and their interplay with visual cues as well as the moderating effect of environmental concern.

In their experimental study with 240 children aged between 8-12 years, from six primary schools in Belgium, the authors used a two (label: verbal label vs no label) by two (visual cue: anthropomorphised character vs no character) between-subjects design, moderated by environmental concern. Children were digitally exposed and randomly allocated to a package of cereals where a visual and verbal cue was added to manipulate the experimental conditions. The study reports no statistically significant impact of the presence or absence of a verbal label on children's perceptions of the product in terms of environmental friendliness, taste and healthy attributes. Additionally, the authors found that children with low environmental concern had a high purchase request and packaging evaluation when both a visual and verbal cue were present compared to only a visual one. In contrast, for children with high environmental concern, the presence of both a visual and verbal cue leads to a decrease of purchase request and lower product evaluation.

There are several theoretical and practical contributions to the field of sustainability marketing and labelling communication. Firstly, this study focused on children and as such fills a gap in the relevant literature. In addition, the study draws from two streams of literature, namely consumers' perceptions of sustainability labelling and on-pack nutritional information. Finally, the importance of environmental concern is highlighted as an important factor affecting perceptions of sustainability labels amongst young consumers. The study draws the attention of marketers, manufacturers and retailers to on-pack sustainability labels and highlights the importance of reinforcing existing visual and/or verbal cues and increasing low environmental concern.

*Gen Zers intention to purchase products with sustainable packages: An alternative perspective to the attitude-behaviour gap.*

The last article included in our special section was developed by Lisboa, Vitorino and Antunes, focusing on Gen Zers as part of the young consumer theme within this issue, who have received little attention compared to Gen Y. More specifically, the authors provide an alternative perspective to the attitude-behaviour gap by testing the intention of Gen Z to purchase products with sustainable packages. In doing so, this article provides a unique angle by combining and drawing on three difference strands of literature: consumer behaviour, sustainability and design, to analyse the cognitive – affective – behaviour model.

This quantitative enquiry focuses on testing the impact of the perception of package sustainability and ergonomics on environmental attitude and purchase intentions. The model was tested through administering a self-reported survey, whereby stimuli were provided to gain insights into perceptions of package sustainability and ergonomics. Images of milk cartons were used, as Gen Zers are familiar with such products and asked to rate their responses. The survey was administered in Portugal, with a total of 319 valid responses obtained. The authors highlight that product packaging can provide cues to Gen Zers, which may aid consumer decisions to make an actual purchase. The results of the study demonstrate that package sustainability has a significant influence on environmental attitude, whilst ergonomic perceptions did not show any significance.

The authors conclude the article by clearly outlining their theoretical contribution located at the intersection of the consumer behaviour, sustainability, and design literature, and

highlighting that although past research assumed there is ‘a logical consumer’, this was not evident from this study. The purchase of everyday products such as milk cartons may not be scrutinised with the same intensity as other products bought on rare occasions, and as such, immediate cues play a vital role in facilitating the decision-making process. The article provides managerial implications as well as areas for future research, indicating that this study is merely the start of an increasingly growing debate.

This special section extends the discourse on children, young people and sustainability by presenting five articles. These articles enrich the current understanding on the topic domain, and extend it by offering valuable insights on the developmental approach towards pro-environmental orientation, bringing in the concept of consumer engagement and whether and how children engage with environmental issues, discussing the value of three dimensions of CSR on Generation Z’s purchase intention and willingness to pay, evaluating young children’s response to sustainability labelling, and discussing the attitude-behaviour gap of Gen Z in the context of sustainable packaging. The articles also offer interesting and exciting areas for future researchers. With this special section, we hope that the discourse on how children and young people affect, and get affected by, sustainability continues to develop.

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