

You're Not as Sustainable as You Think: How Corporations Use Sustainability to Promote Consumption and Create the Illusion of Climate Action

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Introduction

In 2009, Rockström et al. released a paper introducing a set of scientifically-based global planetary boundaries which helped humanity define the environmental limits of the Earth within which humans could operate. These boundaries have helped humans conceptualize that climate change is an prevalent issue which needs to be accurately addressed if we hope to avoid going beyond the zone of uncertainty and entering a new biospheric state (Rockström et al. 2009). In line with increased awareness about global planetary boundaries, the development of environmentally sustainable goals has become a key initiative that corporations are attempting to integrate into different markets. The concept of sustainability refers to maintaining, renewing, or restoring something specific, such as the climate (Wilkinson et al. 2001). As humans have become increasingly aware of how anthropogenic activities impact the planet (particularly the role played by large corporations), sustainability has become a key business imperative, resulting in many companies manufacturing sustainable products (Lozano, 2013). These products are created with the intention of reducing human impacts on the planet while simultaneously appealing to consumer goals (Ramirez et al. 2015) and as a result have become widely utilized across most western societies.

Sustainability has emerged as a megatrend; an overarching direction that is shaping the business world and how society functions (Mittelstaedt et al. 2014). Many consumers are unaware, however, of what sustainability truly represents, and are therefore distracted from engaging in meaningful action. Current sustainability initiatives do not function to create long-lasting behavioral changes which would result in positive action towards the climate movement, and so are arguably ineffective in addressing climate issues. It is important that consumers understand the motivations behind commercially-driven sustainability initiatives, and what specific changes in human behavior are need to reduce the current rate and degree of climate deterioration (Kumar, 2012).

In this essay, I will argue that commercially-driven sustainability initiatives are not sufficient in accurately and effectively addressing global climate change because they do not encourage reductions in

overall consumption, but rather encourage people to deceive themselves into thinking that they are appropriately remediating human-induced climate change through the consumption of sustainable products.

Commercially-Driven Sustainability Initiatives

Advances in the understanding of human behavior and biosphere functioning has caused the impacts of human progress on the planet to become more evident than ever before (Rimanoczy, 2010). Consumers are becoming more conscious about their environmental impact, and as a result, businesses have been forced to integrate climate change into their corporate strategies. As evidence regarding the role of large organizations in environmental issues has grown, corporations have been pushed to claim responsibility and develop new ‘green’ policies and products which aim to address climate issues (Ramirez et al. 2015). Evidently, taking responsibility for one’s environmental impact is an advantageous battle tactic in the corporate world, and is providing some companies with a competitive advantage in a changing market (Galbreath, 2009). The requirement to develop sustainable products is one of the key challenges facing industries in the 21st Century (Maxwell and Vorst, 2003). Conformity with newly imposed environmental regulations, overhauling the organizational image, keeping pace with competitors and new markets, as well as adding value to new products are the main drivers which appear to be encouraging this corporate transition to sustainability (Kumar, 2012).

This industrial response to demands for a more eco-friendly market can be described as commercially-driven sustainability initiatives, which work to combine consumer demands with eco-friendly marketing tactics. Where the consumer is concerned with the impact of a product or service on the environment, companies are concerned with continued profit and remaining competitive. Although these initiatives may seem beneficial towards the climate, upon further investigation it becomes clear that their primary purpose is to benefit the company rather than the planet.

Promoting Consumption Through Sustainability

A number of academics agree that current corporate sustainability initiatives are inadequate in addressing climate issues, as they do not tackle the root issue of overconsumption. A growing number of products are being lobbied as environmentally sustainable, however when it comes to practicing and not simply preaching sustainability, many companies fall short (Bhattacharya and Polman, 2016). This can be seen in a variety of products, such as paper straws, electric vehicles, and compostable containers. These products share the common approach that environmental appeals are more effective when a product's features are presented in a manner that is consistent with the consumer's characteristics and goals (Ramirez et al. 2015), and as such are marketed in a way which appeals to those goals (Rettie et al. 2012).

For example, paper straws are manufactured to meet the social demand for a more sustainable product when compared to conventional plastic straws. While paper straws are portrayed as being more environmentally friendly, research has found that standard plastic straw production requires less than half the energy demand, and has one-third of the global warming potential compared to sustainable alternatives (Rana, 2020). Rather than focus on initiatives which encourage reductions in consumption, corporations create seemingly more-sustainable alternatives which meet consumer's demands, while simultaneously generating profit. The most sustainable option would be to omit straws entirely, as they are not a necessary item, however companies would no longer benefit from sales, and so instead consumers are convinced that they are making a sustainable choice.

A similar case can be seen with electric vehicles, which are becoming a popular alternative to conventional cars (Wesseling et al. 2013). While electric vehicles are effective in reducing combustion-based emissions, studies have found that their manufacturing process causes more pollution when compared to conventional vehicles (Ellingsen et al. 2016). Additionally, indirect emissions associated with the production of energy used to power these vehicles is omitted from life-cycle analyses, further contributing to the delusion that consumers are making a sustainable choice. Despite this, many governments have supported the purchase of electric vehicles by consumers as opposed to encouraging

reductions in consumption, and promoting more sustainable methods of transportation such as walking, cycling, or public transit (Zhao et al. 2020).

There are arguably 4 levels of sustainability: resisting, reducing, reusing, and recycling. As you traverse down these levels, the sustainability value derived from each is significantly reduced (Nalewajek and Macik, 2013). As commercially-driven sustainability initiatives are, at their core, commercially-driven, corporations tend to pursue lower sustainability levels. This allows them to continue selling products to consumers who want to be sustainable but still promote consumption. Rather than encouraging markets to decrease consumption, companies encourage consumers to invest in their own sustainable products, effectively saying “do anything, just please don’t stop buying our product”, going as far to alter packaging and product descriptions to make them appear more eco-friendly (Devlin, 2015).

Engaging Consumer ‘Feel Good’ Factors

Buying sustainable products makes consumers feel better about climate issues because it gives them something tangible to do, and creates control over individual behaviors in a way which appears to benefit the planet (Mulligan, 2019). Corporations are able to create products which align well with consumer’s daily goals and emotions, encouraging their engagement, which in turn creates this ‘feel good’ factor that convinces buyers they are effectively addressing climate issues (Devlin, 2015; Ramirez, 2015). Alas, this feel-good sentiment is an illusion, as these purchasing actions do not result in long-lasting behavioral change. This can be seen in the clothing industry, with companies using different social approaches like organic and recycled material to frame their products as more sustainable (Armstrong et al. 2015). Additionally, by supplementing the market with sustainable products, corporations distract consumers from the root issue of overconsumption, enabling these companies to reap benefits while creating a sense of meaningful action for buyers (Earth Day Network, 2019). This is evidenced by our continued consumption and demand for sustainable products which promise to offset human activity.

Long-term Implications for Climate Action

Transformations to sustainability practices that aim to reduce consumption in order to address climate change are more crucial than ever (Arora, 2019). Current commercially-driven sustainability initiatives support misunderstandings about what kinds of human behaviors can lead to effective climate change, resulting in the perpetuation of these ineffective and misguided policies (Clayton et al. 2015) which act as propaganda for the ideology of overconsumption (Stuart et al. 2020). Corporations use sustainability as a cover to hide how production drives consumption, how advertising creates a false sense of need, and how this continued consumption threatens social and ecological well-being. This works to harm the climate movement in the long run, as continued support for consumption results in increasing levels of production and economic growth, undermining reductions in carbon emissions and limiting climate change actions (Stuart et al. 2020). These ‘sustainable’ products may discourage individuals from engaging in meaningful behavioral changes because they believe they are effectively addressing the issue, when in reality they are supporting the main driver of the issue itself.

What is Needed for Lasting Change

There is a clear relationship between production, consumption, and climate change; however current sustainability initiatives fail to account for this ever-present relationship. Effective mitigation efforts will require significant alterations to consumption and production behaviors, as well as social norms (Stuart et al. 2020), however achieving that behavioral change is not easy. The challenge of overconsumption exposes the need for a strong, coherent strategic narrative which employs psychological and sociological elements to engage a range of actors, and provide an accessible explanation for government strategy, as well as harness the drivers of behavioral change needed to meet this challenge (Bushell et al. 2017). By and large, there is an intense need for a paradigm shift away from consumption and towards true sustainability if humanity hopes to avoid a rapidly approaching climate disaster. Without this critical reduction in consumption, we can only expect the rate of climate degradation to continue to grow to the point of no return (Anderson and Bows, 2012).

Is Something Better Than Nothing?

It all boils down to a simple question: is doing nothing better than doing something? While doing nothing effectively reduces overall consumption of products, effectively addressing climate change at the root cause, the situation is often far more complicated than it initially appears. In cases where consumers must purchase something out of need, choosing a product which is supposedly sustainable is arguably better than selecting items which are not, as they stand to have less of an environmental impact. Nonetheless, it is important that consumers understand that not all sustainable products are made the same, and that the root issue at hand is overconsumption, not whether their coffee cup is recyclable or not.

Conclusion

Commercially-driven sustainability initiatives are ineffective in addressing climate change issues as they promote increased consumption and function to deceive consumers into thinking they have taken appropriate action towards climate issues. The evidence provided exposes corporate encouragement of overconsumption through the production and marketing of products under the lens of sustainability, and the unwillingness of companies to sacrifice profit for the behavioral changes needed to accurately address the issue. Using paper straws and electric vehicles as examples, it is clear that not all sustainable product are as eco-friendly as corporations would like them to appear, instead deceiving consumers into thinking that they have appropriately remediated their anthropogenic actions. As this is not yet a widely discussed issue, much more remains to be unveiled regarding the effectiveness of current sustainability initiatives.

A collective societal movement towards a dramatic reduction in the number of products consumed in society is needed to effectively address climate issues. For this to occur, there is a requirement for increased awareness and education about the ‘sustainable’ marketing tactics that corporations employ in addition to exposing the true impact that sustainable products have on the planet so consumers can make informed decisions. Without this radical change in behavior, we stand to create a climate disaster which will push humanity beyond current global planetary boundaries, devastating all species for generations to come.

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