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Embedding the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Marketing Education

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Education is a human right with immense power to transform
Kofi Annan

There have been increasing calls for the marketing discipline to proactively engage with ‘doing good’ (Stoeckl & Luedicke, 2015), with marketing clearly embedded in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). For example, SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) is central to Marketing. These calls essentially argue that marketing should create value not just for the shareholders but also for all stakeholders, including the broader community and the natural environment. Doing good includes alleviating poverty, mitigating climate change, and increasing gender equality. For example, Chandy et al. (2021) propose the *Better Marketing for a Better World* approach to proactively explore how marketing can engage with societal and environmental global challenges.

It has long been suggested that marketing can be harmful or helpful in addressing global challenges facing society (Kotler & Levy, 1969). In this special issue, we take the view that the inherent strengths of marketing make it a critical player in overcoming the societal challenges associated with the UN SDGs. Additionally, we think it is important for marketing to embrace a broader firm purpose that goes beyond profits (Blocker et al., 2024).

Calls for marketing to engage with the SDGs

There are various frameworks that capture societal, economic, and environmental global challenges. The United Nations 17 SDGs have become a chief driver of reframing marketing and business (Nobre, 2024). This framework, developed in 2015 and ratified by all United Nations member states, provides a map for all parts of society, including business, to

proactively seek out ‘peace and prosperity for people and planet, now and into the future’, based on its vision of ‘leaving no one behind’. The 17 SDGs (Figure 1) have 169 specific targets to which marketing can contribute.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

For marketing to be relevant and play an instrumental role in addressing global challenges, ongoing marketing conversation seeks to connect various marketing sub-disciplines (e.g., macro-marketing, marketing and public policy, business-to-business marketing, and strategic marketing) to sustainable development and to the SDGs. Table 1 presents some key quotes from marketing researchers highlighting the importance of marketing proactively engaging with the SDGs.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Why should marketing educators consider the SDGs?

Although the SDGs are increasingly prominent in marketing scholarship and practice, it is surprising that there is very limited focus on how marketing educators are embedding the SDGs in their curricula. For example, Peterson (2022) highlights the importance of cases relating to the SDGs in marketing education. An Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) article (Voola & Doyle, 2023), jointly authored by a marketing faculty and a student, shared recommendations for embedding the SDGs into marketing education that emerged from their marketing and SDG-focused undergraduate module. These two authors suggest that educators embed SDGs in the curriculum effectively by: (1) reflecting on why the SDGs are important in marketing education, (2) challenging the foundational assumptions of marketing discipline that may act as barriers to engaging with SDG-related marketing education, (3) incorporating marketing-SDG research into teaching, and (4) emphasizing the importance and relevance of the SDG-related marketing course in the broader marketing degree.

The importance of producing graduates educated on SDGs is evident in Hübscher, Hensel-Börner, and Henseler's work (2023), which provides a framework to guide and develop future marketing managers who can engage with sustainable development. Shapiro et al. (2021) call for preparing marketing students to be agents of positive change via marketing education, characterised by critical thinking and system-based approaches. Despite the prior insights, there is a limited understanding of how marketing educators engage with the SDGs. Importantly, SDG-related marketing education is urgent and imperative because, at the halfway stage of the SDGs (2015-2030), progress on the SDGs has stalled and, in some cases, gone backwards (e.g., SDG 2-Zero Hunger, SDG 10-Reduced Inequality, and SDG 14-Life below Water). This will result in more pain and suffering due to poverty, hunger, inequality, and environmental disasters (UN, 2023). All parts of society (e.g., businesses - including marketers, governments, NGOs, and individuals) must reflect on their role in engaging with the SDGs, as societal challenges require a collective effort and cannot be addressed by only certain sections of society. Marketing educators should address the question of how they can develop future marketers who can strategically and passionately engage with global challenges via the SDGs.

Echoing Kofi Anna, we believe there is an immense opportunity for marketing faculty and students to engage in transformative marketing education based on the SDGs. This belief motivated the special issue editorial team to turbocharge the conversation at the intersection of the SDGs and marketing education. Specifically, we are still to gain a deeper understanding as to what extent we are preparing faculty and students within their marketing coursework to be agents for good by engaging deeply with the SDGs. Thus, the goals of this special issue are to better understand how marketing educators are bringing the SDGs to the

forefront of marketing education practices and are incorporating the SDGs into course curricula, assessments, pedagogical approaches, and discussions.

How are marketing educators embedding the SDGs?

The seven papers that comprise this issue can be broadly categorised into two themes. The first five articles focus on incorporating SDGs into the marketing curriculum and the last two articles take a broader perspective on embedding the SDGs. Within the first theme, the articles engage with different frameworks (Bloom’s taxonomy, transformative sustainable learning framework) and approaches (arts-based approach and experiential learning approaches). Additionally, papers focus on different SDGs: SDG 3-Good Health and Wellbeing, SDG 8-Work and Economic Growth, SDG 9-Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, SDG 11-Sustainable Cities and Communities, SDG 12-Sustainable Production and Consumption, and SDG 13-Climate Change.

Initially, Sheetal Deo, Mercedes Hincheliff, Nguyen Thai, Mary Papakosmas, Paul Chad, Troy Heffernan, and Belinda Gibbons in their article, “Educating for the Sustainable Future: A Conceptual Process for Mapping the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Marketing Teaching Using Bloom’s Taxonomy”, explore how SDGs are integrated into a university-level marketing curriculum. The five-phase reflective process of mapping SDGs in their teaching across Bloom’s taxonomy dimensions reveals that these goals are included in subjects in two ways: direct (assessment tasks relate to a specific SDG) and indirect (topics are linked to SDGs but not explicitly stated that topics are SDG-related). The heat map illustrates wide coverage of indirect and direct SDG integration across subjects with a high concentration on certain SDGs (i.e., SDGs 3, 9 and 11). They call for educators to go beyond introducing SDGs to students and develop critical thinking skills.

In the second article, “Raising Marketing Students’ Awareness of their Role in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals: An Arts-and-Crafts-Based Pedagogy”, Eva

Delacroix demonstrates how students can gain a deeper understanding of SDG 12 (Sustainable Production and Consumption) through an arts-based pedagogical approach in their sustainable marketing class. The Rag Rug Weaving Project (RRWP) allowed students to explore a circular and traditional non-industrial production method as they weave a rug made of rag yarn recycled from their old clothes. Adopting the Transformative Sustainability Learning (TSL) framework, this project engaged students' heads (knowledge of relevant problems and solutions), hands (developing skills, creating the rag), and hearts (feelings and the motivation and desire to act sustainably) in their experiential learning process. This project emphasised the environmental impacts of the textile and fashion industry, and students reflected on paradoxes, trade-offs, and tensions related to sustainable production and consumption.

From there, Satyam and Rajesh Aithal, in their article "Embedding the UN SDGs into a Marketing Elective on Base-of-the-Pyramid Markets: An Experiential Learning Approach", discuss SDG integration into a marketing course on Base-of-the-Pyramid (BOP) markets for an MBA program. The rural market project was designed to improve students' understanding of key stakeholders in a BOP market, characteristics of the periodic market, sale practices of retailers, and consumer practices of subsistence consumers. Drawing on experiential learning stages, the project involved four stages: (1) concrete experience (observation and interviews with market participants, comparing rural markets with urban markets), (2) reflective observation (individual reflection on their visit and interactions), (3) abstract conceptualisation (group presentation on the shared meaning of the marketplace and observations with a focus on SDGs 8 and 12), and (4) active experimentation (individual level exercise where students apply new ideas or evolved understanding of the phenomenon in an end-term exam). Four lessons for marketing educators in designing an experiential approach are offered.

In the fourth article, “RESCUER: Combining Passive and Active Learning Techniques to Teach Food Sustainability”, Narmin Tartila Banu, Aron Darmody, and Leighann Neilson illustrate another experiential learning approach to embedding SDG 12 by creating and implementing an experiential learning assignment within the context of sustainable food consumption. Based on experiential learning theory, they developed an exercise centred on the framework titled RESCUER (Resources-Engagement-Social influence-Cognizance-Underlying problem-salience-Expediting factors-Responsible behaviours). This framework supported students in becoming more conscious consumers in the context of food waste. The assignment was supplemented by pre- and post-assignment surveys, which captured students' initial perspectives and changes in perception after the exercise. The analysis reveals how students who underwent the RESCUER process manifested more sustainable behaviour.

In the next article, “From Talk to Action: How Small Steps Can Make a Big Impact on Marketing Education for Climate Action”, Isabel Rodriguez-Tejedo and Cristina Etayo argue that, despite ongoing efforts to incorporate climate change education (SGD13) into the curriculum, limited capacity to teach climate change or developing innovative methodologies remain. They propose two low-cost and easy-to-implement teaching and learning activities: a brief talk and a case discussion. Four activities were included in a first-year marketing course: (1) an initial survey to capture students’ perceptions, (2) a talk about sustainability, the SDGs, and climate change, (3) a Patagonia case discussion on marketing intervention centred on climate action, and (4) a final survey. A combination of these activities elicited reports of greater willingness to donate money, change behaviour, and volunteer to mitigate climate change. The authors guide marketing educators in including climate change education in their teaching.

Barbara Tomasella, Bilal Akbar, Alison Lawson, Richard Howarth, and Rebecca Bedford in their article, “Embedding the Sustainable Development Goals into Higher Education Institutions’ Marketing Curriculum”, perform an integrative literature review of 40 articles examining how higher education institutions (HEIs) incorporate the SDGs in their marketing curriculum. Three themes emerged from the review: Integration (focuses on theories, concepts and principles linked to sustainability, CSR and ethics), Transformation (changes in pedagogic approaches, teaching methods, tools and related materials), and Leadership for collaboration (processes need to facilitate collaborations with different actors in the HEI landscape and the wider community). The authors propose the 3Es (Engage-Expand-Enact) framework for embedding sustainability in the marketing curriculum, illustrating links between pedagogical approaches, theories, and tools as well as stakeholders involved in teaching and learning activities. The authors call for experiential and collaborative partnership-led pedagogical approaches in SDG integration within the marketing discipline.

Wrapping up this special issue is the article “Addressing the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals: An Examination of Sustainability Offerings in Marketing Curriculum and a Framework for Advancement” by Ryan Langan, Naz Onel, and Kelly Weidner. These authors examine how sustainability is embedded into business school curricula by undertaking a systematic analysis of 529 websites of undergraduate marketing programs accredited by the AACSB. They propose a new sustainability curriculum framework, suggesting that institutions evolve along a continuum of stages regarding how sustainability concepts are integrated into their marketing curriculum. Their work provides insights into the nature of sustainability courses and specializations offered in business and marketing curricula and encourages institutions to reflect on the sustainability orientation of their curriculum.

Concluding Thoughts

We hope this special issue and the insights provided by these 23 authors advance awareness of the SDGs and their importance for marketers and marketing education, as well as provide teaching and learning strategies to embed the SDGs. As engaging with ‘doing good’ becomes mainstream in business, it is important for marketing educators to facilitate the development of future marketing practitioners who are equipped to engage with societal challenges.

Currently, we believe that the SDGs provide a strong framework for marketing educators to engage with these challenges. However, it is important to note that the SDGs are at the halfway mark and will finish in 2030. It is imperative that the profession engages with the SDGs and joins conversations that will shape discussions on a new framework to be developed in 2030. By reflecting on our engagement with the SDGs, we, as marketing educators, can be at the forefront of integrating the new framework into business education.

Finally, we are sincerely grateful to the authors and the reviewers for allowing us to increase awareness of the SDGs and to encourage embedding SDGs in marketing education. We are also very grateful to the editor, Dr. Victoria Crittenden, for encouraging and guiding us through the process. Lastly, our primary motivation for this special issue is to facilitate our marketing students to develop the knowledge and skills to proactively engage with societal challenges as encapsulated by the SDGs. We thank our students for this inspiration.

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Table 1: Marketing Research and the SDGs

Russell-Bennett et al., (2024)	“The scope of the SDGs covers <i>all</i> countries, <i>all</i> services (whether economic or social services), <i>all</i> of humanity and <i>all</i> of the planet. Consequently, as service researchers, we <i>all</i> have the opportunity and responsibility to situate our research within the SDGs and to step up to the challenge of using our knowledge and skills for the greater good – to serve humanity and transform the world. It should be noted that this does not exclude commercial service organisations whose primary purpose is for profit” (p. 148).
de Ruyter, et al., (2022)	“Embracing the broader changes in academia, the outcome we seek here is a renewed call for the facilitation of better marketing strategy that will boldly address society’s grand challenges, and contribute to tackling the UN SDGs through responsible, resilient, and respectful research collaborations with stakeholders” (p. 20).
Bolton, (2022)	“All work in marketing should be considered in light of the SDGs....” (p. 107).
Voola et al., (2002)	“Although there is a growing body of scholarship on sustainability, by not extending this rich body of literature on sustainability specifically to the UN SDGs, B2B scholars are at risk of missing a valuable opportunity to participate in the meta-narrative of the world, which is important to various stakeholders (e.g., governments and firms), and increasingly to marketing practitioners and students” (p.13).
Mende & Scott (2021)	“The UN sustainable development goals: compass for marketing as a force for good” (p. 119).
United Nations Global Compact, n.d	“While consumers’ buying values and companies’ bottom lines increasingly hinge on ethical considerations, the SDGs provide solid anchorage for companies looking to do good”.

Figure 1: The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Source: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/>