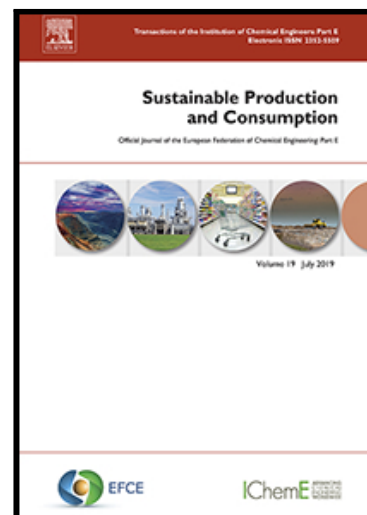


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Sustainable Marketing and Consumer Support for Sustainable Businesses

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Abstract

Numerous studies have focused on how consumers evaluate the sustainability of products. However, researchers need more understanding about how consumer values and consumer perceptions of the marketplace practices of firms influence consumer support for those firms pursuing sustainable business practices. This is important in building knowledge about how sustainable marketing programs of firms might more strongly link marketing programs to consumer values and to what consumers prefer regarding sustainability. The study features an online survey and large-scale sampling in the US (304 respondents) with data analyzed using structural equation modeling. Three important results suggest 1) consumers' nature-based values have the most positive influence on consumers' support for sustainable businesses, 2) followed by attitude toward firm benevolence, and 3) concern about the ethicality of firms. Valuing social justice and recognizing business' contribution to one's own quality of life did not register as being influential on consumers' support for sustainable businesses.

Keywords

sustainability, sustainable marketing, sustainable business, business ethics, business benevolence, social justice, quality of life.

1. Introduction

In 1987, the UN's Brundtland Commission gave the world a definition of sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987). Since then, a definition of sustainability has evolved calling those in markets (such as buyers, sellers, and government officials) to respect future generations through 1) reduced adverse impact on the resources of the natural environment and/or 2) increased beneficial impact on local communities and society at large (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019). Elkington (1994) termed this definition of sustainability as "the triple bottom line" (TBL) of people, planet, and profit.

Elkington welcomed the subsequent experimentation related to the TBL after its introduction in 1994 (noting twelve forms, such as ESG—environmental, social and governance factors-- among others) (Elkington, 2020). However, in recent years, he has decried the lack of progress in measuring the real-world impact of TBL-type approaches to business sustainability (Elkington, 2018). In fact, Elkington has proposed a "recall" of TBL in order to fine-tune it.

TBL's goal from its inception was system change—pushing toward a transformation of capitalism. It was not supposed to be an accounting system inviting business leaders to trade-off among the dimensions, but rather it offered a way to understand the full cost involved in doing business—the value businesses create and destroy. Although there are some corporations that are configuring themselves around

the TBL (e.g., B Corporations that try to balance profit with purpose), the profit dimension or single bottom-line continues to dominate the thinking of most corporate leaders. For this reason, Elkington has called for a new wave of TBL innovation and deployment.

In response to this growing TBL focus, the study herein focuses on consumers' sustainability-focused purchasing to better understand how consumers are reacting to firms' sustainable business practices. Specifically, the study takes aim at understanding how consumers make decisions about supporting the group of firms they recognize as pursuing sustainable business practices. Firms strongly pursuing sustainable business practices would receive more support from consumers who care about business playing a role in protecting the natural environment and increasing social justice. Firms' sustainable business practices here include investing effectively and responsibly their financial capital, and simultaneously achieving certain environmental and social goals which assure the protection of the natural environment and social justice (Nikolaou, Tsalis, and Evangelinos, 2019).

Hoffman asserts that there have been two phases of business sustainability (Hoffman, 2018). The first phase ran from the 1970's (when government imposed environmental regulations) to about 2018 when more impactful innovations for sustainability began arriving in markets in significant numbers, such as electrical vehicles (EVs) (REVE, 2019). Integrating sustainability practices in firms characterized this first phase. In many ways, reducing unsustainability was the focus.

In this first phase, things changed so that the market shifted to favor green products made and marketed with regard to the TBL. In part, this shift came from a change in

consumers' increased regard for the TBL, but also from firms marketing green products that were more appealing and effective. However, these two influences were among many that shifted market conditions including the work of NGOs, as well as the maturation of the internet and of social media, which brought more accountability to firms (Peterson, 2021).

The second phase of —now, in effect—can be characterized (and will be increasingly characterized) by businesses pursuing innovative ways for transforming markets using innovation across the spectrum of functions business conducts. For example, not only are there increasingly more electric vehicles, but enabling such EVs to power homes when they are parked outside during electrical grid outages (or brown-outs due to lapses in solar or wind-power) will be possible.

Researchers view everyday marketing exchanges as mixed exchanges (Bagozzi, 2010). Parties in transactions exchange tangible benefits (utilitarian exchange), as well as intangible benefits (symbolic exchange). For example, buyers of roof-top solar panels want reduced energy bills (a tangible benefit), but they also likely want to be identified as caring for the natural environment and supportive of the aims of a broader environmental movement in which firms pursuing sustainable business practices would be associated (intangible benefits). For intangible benefits, social identity becomes more influential in consumer decision-making regarding marketplace exchange (Homburg, Wieseke and Hoyer, 2009).

Better knowledge about the multivariate nature of sustainability (Sikdar, 2019) and consumer support for sustainable businesses should boost the effectiveness of marketing strategies for firms—especially those pursuing sustainable business practices

(Moorman and Day, 2016; Lee, Yap and Levy, 2016). Without such knowledge, researchers and firms will miss opportunities for TBL innovation, and sustainability efforts will likely develop more slowly and with wasted effort in sustainable marketing-programs at a time these are urgently needed (Elkington, 2020).

Our study addresses a gap in understanding for how consumer values and consumer perceptions of the marketplace practices of firms influence consumer support for sustainable businesses. By taking this focus, the study sheds light on how sustainable marketing practices can develop in the future.

It is important to note that sustainable marketing is only one part of the solution to environmental issues. Sustainable product development, as well as production processes, are also important (along with other factors, such as knowledge of customers and knowledge of competitors in the marketplace) (Claudy, Peterson and Pagell, 2016). Sustainable marketing can be used to help promote these practices as well as linking marketing programs to consumer values. While not all consumers are likely to use sustainability as a primary choice-criterion, even based on the findings of our research, we do believe that insight from this study can contribute valuably to theoretical explanations regarding sustainable choices consumers make.

Without an adequate understanding of support for sustainable business (along with the other factors previously mentioned), threats to the environment will continue to increase over time. Such threats include 1) increased levels of greenhouse gasses that boost the insulating properties of the upper atmosphere, 2) increased stress on dwindling fresh-water resources, and 3) intolerable levels of particulate matter in the air humans breathe in major cities of Asia and elsewhere (Stavins, 2011). These threats are likely to increase without a close focus on sustainable business practices. This is because research has shown that businesses have the potential to have great influence on environmental degradation

both in their own operating practices as well as in encouraging and informing consumers to operate sustainably as well (Arouri, Uddin, Chakraborty, Chaibi, & Foulquier, 2014; Noorman & Uiterkamp, 2014; Prothero et al., 2011).

In fact, a study conducted by the United Nations disclosed that the 3,000 largest public companies worldwide produced \$2.2 trillion in environmental damage in 2010, which represents a monetary amount larger than the GDPs of all countries except seven worldwide (Jowit, 2010). The financial impact of environmental degradation by firms has only increased since 2010 (Azam, 2016).

We provide some of the needed knowledge to positively contribute to reduced environmental degradation (e.g., through reduced greenhouse gas emissions, reductions in plastic usage, pro-environmental changes to logistic practices, etc.) in the context of understanding how consumers perceive sustainable businesses and their practices. Specifically, we examine this through a study using a representative panel of adult consumers in the US and analysis of this data using structural equation modeling.

In conceptualizing the possible antecedents of consumer support for sustainable business, we draw from two theoretical perspectives – value-belief-norm theory (Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999) 1999) and the GREEN framework of sustainable marketing (Lunde, 2018). In the sections that follow, we review the literature on environmental and human values that are relevant to support sustainable business practices. The study also reviews important literature regarding the theoretical foundations for the modeling done in this study.

2. Literature Review

Sikdar (2019) has called for measurement that is more rigorous across the three domains of the TBL in a way that would allow researchers to better gauge the interdependence of these domains. Sikdar also notes the challenge in measuring sustainability because of the different scales at which sustainability systems operate. To illustrate such different scales of operation, Joshi and Rahman (2017) focused their study of sustainable purchase behavior at the micro-level of how consumers make decisions across a variety of products (within stores). Other researchers have focused on how consumers decide to consume a product category (organic food) (Pham, Nguyen, Phan, & Nguyen, 2019).

Macromarketing's sustainable consumption framework posits that in order to understand sustainability, we must understand it holistically, inclusive of individual values as well as business and environmental inputs (Kilbourne et al., 1997). Value-belief-norm theory provides more of the nuanced individual insight as to how values guide beliefs and norms. This proposed cognitive process allows understanding of how support for sustainable businesses might result from consumers' values positively related to sustainable marketing, as well from the sustainable products/services offered.

We explore consumer support for sustainable business using the theoretical background of value-belief-norm theory (Stern et al., 1999) and sustainable marketing (Lunde, 2018). We choose to use these two theoretical frameworks in conjunction with one another because both help to explain different aspects as to the underlying processes behind consumer support for sustainable business. According to value-belief-norm theory, consumers' values (e.g., valuing of nature or social justice) should influence their beliefs that then guide expected norms in the marketplace. In this study, we specifically focus on marketplace norms (i.e., standards for behavior that are based on personal values as well as cultural and marketplace factors; Klein, 1999; Vitell, Rallapalli, & Singhapakdi, 1993) in understanding consumer support for sustainable business.

Going beyond the triple-bottom-line view of sustainability, Lunde (2018) has proposed sustainable marketing as promoting offerings that lower harm to the environment while ethically increasing the quality of life (QOL) of consumers and other global stakeholders now, as well as for future generations. Aligning with the call for TBL innovation (Elkington, 2018), Lunde has offered a five-dimensional GREEN framework for sustainable marketing. The first letter of the first word for these five dimensions spell the acrostic “GREEN” and include:

- Globalized marketplace of value exchange (not narrowly focused on buyers and sellers, but also society, which implies that firms would engage in charitable actions benefitting local communities, society, as well as those in other societies),
- Responsible environmental behavior (implying lowering harm to the natural environment),
- Equitable sustainable-business-practices (implying value created for all stakeholders—even the marginalized or disadvantaged),
- Ethical sustainable consumption (implying the ethical operations of firms and supply chains required for consumption to be as ethical as possible), and
- Necessary quality-of-life & well-being (implying the role of firms comprising a vast provisioning system made-up of a diverse set of firms that results in improved quality of life for consumers).

We use the term *consumer support for sustainable business* as a comprehensive term to represent the focal construct for our research. We operationalize this as intentions and behaviors that reflect support for sustainable business (e.g., viewing support for sustainable business as important, being more likely to purchase from businesses that actively employ sustainable business practices, being more likely to recommend sustainable businesses, demonstrating loyalty to sustainable businesses).

This study examines five predictors of consumer support for sustainable business. These five predictors correspond to one of the five dimensions of the GREEN framework of sustainable marketing (Lunde 2018). Importantly, we did not intend each construct developed and included in the study as a predictor to capture all aspects of the

corresponding dimension from the GREEN framework, but rather a core element of the GREEN dimension. In this way, the model of the study employs a broader set of predictors grounded in a framework of sustainable marketing of consumer support for sustainable businesses, to further scholars' understanding and subsequent theory development.

The five GREEN dimensions and their corresponding constructs used in modeling follow: 1) Global/societal value-exchange—represented by consumers' attitudes toward business benevolence, 2) Responsible environmental behavior—consumers' valuing of nature, 3) Equitable sustainable-business-practices—consumers' valuing of social justice, 4) Ethical—consumers' concerns about the ethical behavior of businesses, and 5) Necessary QOL and well-being—consumers' perceptions of businesses contributing to their quality of life.

Using the GREEN framework allows a more holistic understanding of consumer support for sustainable business that is theoretically-grounded in Lunde's (2018) conceptualization of sustainable marketing. Figure 1 depicts these five antecedent-dimensions of consumers' support for sustainable business, which serve as potential targets for sustainable marketing programs. However, researchers do not understand well the relative influence of these five antecedent-dimensions on consumer support for businesses employing sustainable business practices.

2.1 Effect of Benevolent Actions of Firms

On August 19th, 2019, 181 CEOs of the Business Roundtable signed a new statement on the purpose of a corporation (Business Roundtable, 2019). Since 1997, the Business Roundtable had periodically issued Principles of Corporate Governance that endorsed principles of shareholder primacy—in other words, that corporations exist principally to serve owners or shareholders. In stark contrast to these prior pronouncements, the August 2019 one asserted a modern standard for corporate responsibility in encouraging firms to

focus upon serving its primary stakeholders: customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and shareholders.

Alex Gorsky, Chairman of the Board and CEO of Johnson & Johnson, as well as the Chair of the Business Roundtable's Corporate Governance Committee described the stakeholder approach for businesses as a better way to run corporations today. "It affirms the essential role corporations can play in improving our society when CEOs are truly committed to meeting the needs of all stakeholders," Gorsky said.

The Business Roundtable's pronouncement will likely be developed in a variety of ways in the future, but for now, the pronouncement reinforces firms' efforts in pursuit of corporate social responsibility (CSR)—the duties of the firm to society (Smith, 2003). Porter and Kramer (2006) assert that successful firms need a healthy society. Through the operations of firms and their supply chains, firms conduct business in a competitive context in which social conditions form an important part.

The motivations for firms' CSR pursuits include "doing good" (the normative case) or "doing well (in terms of firm performance) by doing good" (the business case) (Peterson, 2013). This is similar to how firms have approached societal obligations throughout history (McCarty, 1988). The various benevolent actions of firms can be understood through Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid that consists of four categories: economic responsibility, legal responsibility, ethical responsibility, and philanthropic responsibility. Economic responsibility is at the bottom of the pyramid and described as firm profitability, which is the foundation for allowing the other components of the pyramid to succeed (e.g., taking actions to increase profits for key stakeholders, conserve limited financial resources). Next consists of legal responsibilities and doing what is right according to the legal system, even if this may prove at a corporate disadvantage to other firms that are not following the intent

of the law. Ethical responsibility goes without saying and involves all the actions of doing what is right, fair, and just (e.g., offering consumers refunds when a situation warrants even if corporate policies do not specifically dictate for it, operating in an environmentally-conscious fashion). Lastly, philanthropic responsibilities represent contributions to the community and the quality of life of consumers (e.g., donation programs to local charities, clean-up days, sponsoring community events).

Philanthropy has long served as a frequently used mechanism for businesses and businesspersons to give back to local communities and society (Bishop and Green, 2008). Additionally, societal marketing or cause marketing is increasingly observed (Bloom et al., 2006), despite claims by some corporations that their philanthropic efforts are not marketing, per se. The pharmacy retail chain Walgreen's helped raise \$18 million by selling more than 12 million "red noses" at its stores in 2019 (Double the Donation, 2020). The six-week campaign focused on customers buying the foam red-noses and wearing them in group photos shared to spread awareness for the campaign's beneficiary—poverty alleviation charities targeting children.

Given the expectation that consumers should favor benevolent actions of businesses, consumers with higher attitudes toward business benevolence should indicate more support for sustainable business. With the rise of a broadened approach to the market by corporations adopting a stakeholder approach in which CSR efforts featuring corporate philanthropy takes a high profile, the first hypothesis of the study follows:

H₁: Attitude toward business benevolence will positively influence support for sustainable business.

2.2 Effect of Valuing Nature

According to value-belief-norm theory, consumers have valued objects that appear threatened (such as the natural environment) and later resonate with a movement focused on protecting the threatened object (such as environmentalism) (Stern et al., 1999).

Further, consumer beliefs that their actions can help restore or protect the valued object feel an obligation (personal norm) for pro-movement action that creates a predisposition to provide support for the movement.

Values that guide consumers in important life endeavors, such as protecting the natural environment, can be derived from culture, moral or religious grounding, family upbringing, social groups, and other external influences (Minton, Kahle, & Kim, 2015; Steg, Dreijerink, & Abrahamse, 2005). This study focuses on consumers' value of nature (i.e., nature valuation) as an antecedent of support for sustainable businesses (Bogner, 2018; Haring, Jagers, & Matti, 2017; Mustonen, Karjaluoto, & Jayawardhena, 2016; Pascual et al., 2017).

Consumers who value nature more would be expected to understand many of the environmental impacts of businesses (Arli et al., 2019), which aligns with the theory of planned behavior in that attitudes and subjective norms (alongside other factors) influence consumer behavior (Ajzen, 1991). For example, businesses that 1) generate pollution, 2) do not recycle products resulting in more waste in the landfills, or 3) wastefully use limited environmental-resources all can have negative effects on the living conditions of consumers. Such negative effects would likely have an adverse influence on consumers' overall support for businesses responsible for such externalities (Kilbourne, McDonagh, & Prothero, 1997; Shapiro, 2006; Steg & Gifford, 2005).

Fitting with prior research on sustainable business and consumption, consumers' personal values and perspectives should influence support for sustainable business in the form of consumer spending and goodwill toward sustainable businesses (Frank-Martin & Peattie, 2009; Johnson et al., 2017; Minton et al., 2015; Ng & Burke, 2010; Sarre, 1995). Consumer values that are congruent with sustainable marketing should positively influence such support for sustainable businesses (Stern et al, 1999). As such, we offer the second

hypothesis of the study proposing that consumers with a higher (lower) valuation of nature should express higher (lower) support for sustainable business:

H₂: Valuing nature will positively influence support for sustainable business.

2.3 Effect of Valuing Social Justice

In a similar way to the valuing of nature, we propose that consumers' valuing of social justice will also positively influence support for sustainable business. Following the earlier theorizing regarding value-belief-norm theory (Stern et al., 1999), social-justice values should influence related beliefs and norms, which should then influence subsequent evaluations of sustainable business.

Valuing social justice should positively influence support for sustainable business because both social justice and sustainable business practices tap into a core desire of many consumers for enabling all people to have equal access to society's resources and services (Haughton, 1999; Hopwood, Mellor, & O'Brien, 2005). The combined concepts of social justice and sustainability can be termed "environmental justice". Here, "environmental burdens are unevenly distributed among people, [with] economically and socially deprived groups often being relatively more disadvantaged by environmental problems than others" (Jeurissen, 2000, p. 231). Additionally, environmental justice can be seen when firms promote sustainability to key stakeholders including employees within their organization, outside of their organization to other firms, and to society in general (Lunde, 2018). Given the importance of preservation of natural resources in the ability of all consumers to have access to the environment (Shultz & Holbrook, 1999; Stavins, 2011), valuing social justice should lead to greater support for sustainable business because both relate to valuing equality and care for others. Thus:

H₃: Valuing social justice will positively influence support for sustainable business.

2.4 Effect of Concern about Business Ethical Practices

Consumers' perceptions of business' ethics influence their responses to business. For example, consumers with higher (lower) perceptions of the ethicality of a firm's ethicality in business operation would result in higher (lower) levels of trust and loyalty for such a firm (Diallo and Lambey-Chechin, 2015). In the marketplace, consumers carry concern about businesses behaving unethically toward consumers in realms such as defective products, over-pricing, deceptive advertising, and privacy violations (Pride and Ferrell, 2017).

Consumers also carry concern about the businesses' ethical practices toward other non-consumer stakeholders, such as society, institutions, and other businesses. Such concerns include businesses 1) dodging taxes (Naritomi, 2019), 2) overpaying CEOs (Core and Guay, 2010), 3) bribing officials in government or NGOs (Collins, Uhlenbruck and Rodrique, 2009; Bensinger, 2018), or 4) wielding excessive influence through lobbying (Rasmussen, 2015; Vogel, 1983), and 5) pursuing cozy (conflict of interest) relationships with those who regulate businesses and their operations (Buraimo et al. 2016).

Firms have pursued ethicality in different ways, but the stakeholder concept (regarding the firm as socially embedded in society with a variety of constituents to whom the firm is responsible) offers firms a valuable way to approach ethical operations (Chabowski, Mena and Gonzalez-Padron, 2011). Since 2015 when all countries of the United Nations adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), businesses have had guidance about priorities to 1) end poverty, 2) protect the planet, and 3) ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 (United Nations, 2020). Such sustainability-oriented efforts are regarded as ethical ones (Eagle and Dahl, 2015). Increasingly, firms use the SDGs to revise their strategies, suggesting that ethical operations matter to firms (Hult et al., 2018; Peterson 2020).

This study proposes that consumer concern regarding the ethical practices of businesses should lead consumers to manifest more support for firms pursuing sustainable business practices. In this way, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: Concerns about the ethical practices of businesses will positively influence support for sustainable business.

2.5 Perceived Quality of Life Contributions

Quality of life (QOL) is the product of an overall appraisal of life that includes both good and bad experiences (Sirgy, 2012). While high income cannot buy happiness (subjective QOL), researchers find that a positive relationship exists between income and life satisfaction up to an annual income of about \$75,000 (Kahneman and Deaton 2010). Researchers have found evidence that there is a strong association between prosperity and environmental values (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). In other words, QOL and environmental concerns move to higher (lower) priorities for consumers who have higher (lower) incomes and/or more wealth.

According to Social Exchange Theory, exchange is a particular type of association involving actions that are contingent on rewarding actions from others and that cease when these expected reactions do not happen (Blau, 1964; Ferrell and Zey-Ferrell, 1977). Social influence is possibly the most important determinant of exchange outcomes and consists of specific actions, communications, and information transmitted between actors in a transactional exchange (Bagozzi, 1975), or in relational exchange over time (Anderson, Challagalla and McFarland, 1997).

Essential to norms of relational exchange are expectations of a mutuality of interest connecting actors in such exchange (Heide and John, 1992). Mutuality norms are values and beliefs about the inherent value of cooperating for mutual gain (MacNeil, 1980). Mutuality

norms presume that both parties recognize the ongoing value of maintaining the relationship to reap shared gains (Campbell, 1997).

For those with higher (lower) QOL, it follows that a higher (lower) priority for many consumers will be sustainability and that providers of such sustainability (firms pursuing sustainable business practices) will receive higher (lower) support from consumers.

Accordingly, the fifth hypothesis of the study follows:

H₅: Perceptions of businesses contributing to one's QOL will positively influence support for sustainable business.

3. Methods

To test hypotheses 1-5, we collected data using an online survey that assessed the focal constructs of our conceptual model. The purpose here was to explain possible antecedents of consumer support for sustainable business. Our primary analysis consisted of structural equation modeling (SEM) using Stata 15 to analyze the data and to evaluate the five hypotheses we proposed. We elected to utilize SEM due to its ability to account for measurement error and test the fit of the model to the data (Kline, 2015).

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

We collaborated with SDR Consulting, a marketing research firm, to make certain that our 304 respondents were from the U.S. and that the study featured a representative panel. In important ways, the sample proved to be representative as follows: (48.36% female (50.8 % 2010 US Census); mean age 49.03 years (49.16 median age for those 18 or over in 2010 US Census; 71.38% Caucasian (76.3 % white 2010 Census); 53% married (48.2 % in 2010 US Census); 27.3% had earned a bachelor's degree (31.5 % in 2010 US Census). As can be seen, the sample of the study proved to be representative of the US population on important demographic dimensions.

All participants were compensated \$8.00 for their time. Each participant completed

an online survey that included measures of the following constructs: 1) attitude toward business benevolence, 2) valuing nature, 3) valuing social justice, 4) concern about business ethical practices, and 5) business contributions to quality of life, as well as 6) support for sustainable business. Importantly, the online survey platform allowed for the randomization of measures for each construct when presented to respondents.

3.2 Measures

This study operationalized constructs representing core elements of the five dimensions of the GREEN framework of sustainable marketing (Lunde, 2018). Unless otherwise noted, we employed or adapted questions from previous research and used seven-point Likert-type scales. Table 1 presents the survey items of the study along with their descriptive statistics, the factor loadings for the items, as well as each corresponding construct's average variance extracted, and reliabilities.

GREEN Dimension 1—Global societal value exchange: Attitude toward Business

Benevolence. We developed a six-item construct to measure consumers' attitudes toward businesses performing acts of benevolence to help the disadvantaged in local communities. This construct is a macro-level construct regarding businesses in general. It was adapted from a five-item construct "perceived CSR," focused on an individual firm (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004).

GREEN Dimension 2—Responsible environmental behavior: Valuing Nature. Participants were provided three items from Schwartz's (1992) value survey that measured the degree that nature is personally important and guides their decisions and actions. The three items were evaluated using a seven-point scale (1 = "not at all important"; 7 = "extremely important").

GREEN Dimension 3—Equitable sustainable-business-practices: Valuing Social Justice.

Three items from Schwartz's (1992) value survey were provided to participants that measured the degree that social justice is personally important and guides their decisions and actions. The three items were evaluated using a seven-point scale (1 = "not at all important"; 7 = "extremely important").

GREEN Dimension 4—Ethical sustainable consumption: Concern about Business Ethical Practices.

Important research in ethics reports that the leading challenges for marketing practitioners are 1) bribery, 2) fairness, and 3) honesty (Chonko and Hunt, 1985; Chonko and Hunt, 2000). Accordingly, we developed a five-item scale to assess consumers' views toward businesses conducting ethical practices. These items addressed 1) challenges for businesses operations (bribery) (McNeil & Pedigo, 2001), 2) the continuing controversy about the fairness of CEO pay (Kaplan, 2013) and tax avoidance for businesses (Murphy, 2013) (fairness), 3) the principles of social contract theory in marketing contexts (honesty) (Dunfee, Smith, & Ross Jr, 1999), as well as excessive lobbying and corruption involving businesses (Putrevu et al., 2012).

GREEN Dimension 5— Necessary quality-of-life & well-being: Business Contributions to My Quality of Life (QOL).

We adopted Peterson, Ekici, and Hunt's (2010) scale to assess how consumers perceived various business institutions as contributing to a consumer's QOL. Participants rated the contribution (1 = "very negative contribution"; 7 = "very positive contribution") of five different business institutions (e.g., new product developers and local businesses) to their QOL.

Dependent Variable: Support for Sustainable Business.

Minton et al.'s (2012) scale for commitment to sustainable marketing served as the structure for the items used to operationalize support for sustainable business. Specifically, participants evaluated five

items that measured the extent to which they purchased from and recommended firms that employ sustainable business practices.

4. Results

4.1. Factor Analyses

Researchers in the study first tested each construct's one-factor structure using principle components analysis with direct oblimin rotation. As expected, our analyses revealed one factor for each newly developed construct and eigenvalues greater than one for the one-factor structure of both constructs, explaining 68.1% of the variance for attitude toward business benevolence and 65.5% of the variance for concern about business ethical practices.

4.2. Measurement Model

We examined the full measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with all model variables to ensure the items reflected their appropriate latent constructs. A six-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2(309) = 699.64, p < .001$; CFI = 0.92; SRMR = 0.07; RMSEA = 0.06) and all factor loadings were substantial ($> .54$) and significant (p 's $< .001$). The comparative fit index (CFI) provides a measure of model fit compared to other models, while the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) represents the standardized difference between the observed and predicted correlation. Lastly, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is the standard deviation of the predicted errors (Kline, 2015).

Next, following the suggestions of Fornell and Larcker (1981), we tested for convergent and discriminant validity. Analyses supported convergent and discriminant validity of our constructs in the following ways: (1) AVEs extracted for all constructs exceeded the suggested value of .50 except for valuing social justice (i.e., .47); (2) the AVEs

exceeded the squared correlation between constructs; and (3) the composite reliabilities for all constructs showed healthy convergence of the items ($> .73$). Because the measure for valuing social justice was drawn from Schwartz's (1992) established value survey, we opted to retain all three items for this construct.

We assessed common method variance in the following manner. First, we ran Harman's one-factor test (Korsgaard & Roberson, 1995; Mossholder, Bennett, Kemery, & Wesolowski, 1998). Loading all items from the latent variables on one-factor in a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) resulted in a CFA model that did not fit the data well ($\chi^2(324) = 2879.65, p < .001$; CFI = 0.50; RMSEA = 0.16). Second, we introduced a common-method-factor to our six-factor measurement model (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The CFA with the common method factor showed that the additional factor accounted for less than 4% of the variance in the indicator variables. In sum, common method variance did not pose a problem in the study.

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix, descriptive statistics, AVEs, and composite reliabilities of the model constructs. The correlation table of Table 2 shows consumer support for sustainable business was positively related to both valuing nature and social justice, attitude toward business benevolence, concern about business ethical practices, and business contributions to consumers' quality of life.

4.3. Structural Model

The focal analysis of the study used Stata 15 to test our hypotheses for the proposed predictors of support for sustainable business. The exogenous variables in the model were 1) attitude toward business benevolence, 2) valuing nature, 3) valuing social justice, 4) concern about business ethical practices, and 5) business contributions to my QOL. The support-for-sustainable-business construct was regressed on the exogenous variables. Because each of the exogenous constructs represented a dimension from the GREEN

framework of sustainable marketing, we expected these exogenous constructs to be positively related to each other. Accordingly, we allowed the constructs to be correlated in the structural equation modeling of the study.

The initial structural model was estimated with ML (maximum likelihood), resulting in adequate fit indices ($X^2(314) = 746.56, p < .001, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .92, SRMR = .12$). Although correlations specified in our initial model emerged with statistical significance, two of our five direct paths did not emerge with significance. The final structural model run without the non-significant paths resulted in adequate fit indices once again ($X^2(316) = 747.98, p < .001, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .92$). Notably, the final model fit-indices remained unchanged from the initial model.

As can be seen in Figure 2, three exogenous constructs posted statistically significant standardized path coefficients at $p = .05$ when regressed on support for sustainable business (attitude toward business benevolence, valuing nature, and concern about business ethics).

In this way, the model results supported H1, H2, and H4. Notably, the influence of valuing nature on support for sustainable business was more than twice as strong as 1) the influence of attitude toward business benevolence, and 2) concern about ethical business practices.

By comparison, the model returned no statistically significant results for the influence of either 1) valuing social justice, or 2) contributions to my QOL. In this way, H3 and H5 did not receive support. Overall, the study found support for three of the five hypotheses.

5. Discussion

Researchers have called for TBL innovation (Elkington, 2018) and for more rigorous

measurement across the three domains of sustainability in a way that would allow the interdependence of these domains to be quantitatively measured (Sikdar, 2019). This study accomplished this by employing structural equation modeling of consumer responses in a large-scale survey with questions representing constructs in Lunde's GREEN framework for sustainable marketing (Lunde, 2018).

After completing the modeling of the study, researchers can better evaluate how Lunde's (2018) GREEN framework for sustainable marketing offers knowledge about consumer support for sustainable businesses practices. Specifically, the GREEN framework represents five dimensions that firms can use in their sustainable marketing to consumers. The interdependence of these five dimensions can be seen in Figure 2's correlations between exogenous constructs. All statistically significant correlations (at $p = .05$) were positive in sign with Attitude toward Business Benevolence and Valuing Social Justice having the most correlations with other constructs in the GREEN framework. This suggests how these constructs share commonality with the other dimensions of the GREEN framework.

The paths directly influencing the dependent construct Support for Sustainable Businesses suggest that Valuing Nature posts the most influence on support for sustainable business and their practices, followed by Attitude toward Business Benevolence and then Concern about Business Ethical Practices. At this time in the development of sustainable marketing programs, these three dimensions appear to have the most impact on consumers' support for sustainable businesses and their practices.

Upon reflection, businesses registering high performance on these three dimensions would more likely be businesses that consumers would recognize as uniquely pursuing sustainable business practices and would support because of such pursuit. By comparison,

the profile of the firms emphasizing the two dimensions of the GREEN framework not supported in the modeling of the study (social justice, and improved QOL) might be lost among the number of NGOs and government agencies pursuing social justice, or the numerous non-sustainability-oriented firms in the marketplace offering to boost the material standards of living of consumers (an important dimension of QOL).

One of the challenges for firms pursuing sustainability programs is how to weight the effort the firm directs to the different domains of sustainability. For example, Patrick Thomas, former CEO Germany's Covestro, a manufacturer of high-tech polymers, believed that progress on two dimensions of the TBL for his firm should only be done if the third dimension remained unaffected. The outcome of this study suggests that firms desiring to increase consumers' support for sustainable businesses practices could give more weight to their efforts for boosting the natural environment among the variety of things that could be part of firms' sustainability programs.

Regarding the social justice dimension not supported in the model, sustainable businesses are just one set of potential actors in a broad ensemble of other actors targeting more equitable outcomes for all in society, such as 1) government agencies, 2) judicial systems, 3) educational institutions at all levels, 4) religious organizations, 5) community organizers, and 5) NGOs oriented to relief or development. While businesses have a role in social justice (such as providing customer satisfaction, conducting fair hiring, providing livable wages, as well as offering training and skill development for employees), these efforts are circumscribed by the boundaries of the business' operations. Other actors in society oriented to social justice often have broader support among members of society, as well as targeted resources for their social justice initiatives and programs for 1) correcting injustice, 2) bringing equality for all, and 3) caring for the weak and vulnerable in society.

Likewise, for consumers' recognizing the role of sustainable businesses in their own

QOL, other businesses that ignore sustainable business practices or weakly pursue them might eclipse or obscure sustainable businesses' contribution to consumers' QOL. In short, at this time, sustainable businesses are not the only businesses that uniquely boost the living standards and QOL of consumers—even though such sustainable businesses might boost QOL using sustainable business practices.

Having noted the lack of influence social justice and improved QOL had on support for sustainable businesses in the model of the study, it should be noted that the sampling of the study did not focus on consumers with heightened interest in the sustainable business practices of firms. For example, researchers have designated the segment of consumers with responsiveness to sustainable marketing as Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) (Kotler, 2011). LOHAS consumers prefer environmentally-friendly products and services, as well as locally-made products. Researchers estimate that one in four consumers in the US are LOHAS consumers (41 million) who spend more than \$290 billion annually in their shopping (Sung and Woo, 2019).

In sum, social justice and improved QOL should remain in the view of sustainable businesses. Recently, researchers have decried the scant attention given to societal and economic aspects of corporate sustainability efforts (Nikolaou, Tsalis and Evangelinos, 2019, p. 4). Now, more thought and energy need to be devoted by sustainable businesses in developing their efforts regarding social justice and improved QOL, as well as in communicating their successes in these two dimensions. Currently, the results of this study suggest that consumers more readily understand the way businesses can positively influence 1) charity (benevolence), 2) protection for the environment (nature), and 3) ethical practices (playing fair) with their sustainable practices.

If the pro-environmental preferences of consumers influence support for sustainable businesses and their practices more than social justice concerns, the results of

this study suggest that firms that can compete effectively on pro-environmental dimensions (their products and services, as well as their operations) should do so (Moorman and Day, 2016). As an example of this, an advertisement about corporate recycling efforts might highlight how the firm's recycling reduces 1) the number of trees cut down, as well as 2) the mining for valuable minerals. Such advertisements can also facilitate the relationship between sustainable actions a company takes in terms of product/service development and the utilization of advertising as a promotional medium to communicate this sustainable development process.

Similarly, new zero-landfill factories provide a real-life example of how business is operating more sustainably in line with Conscious Capitalism firms (Mackey and Sisodia, 2014). Again, sustainable production practices are directly relevant to developing and design sustainable marketing initiatives. Subaru, Proctor & Gamble, DuPont, and Caterpillar are some of the businesses with such zero-waste-to-landfill facilities (Hamid, Skinder and Bhat, 2020). Our findings suggest that such firms could enhance consumer support for their sustainable business practices by highlighting how a zero-landfill facility harmonizes with nature because more land that is public is preserved and not used for the purpose of a landfill. In this way, a consumer's grandchildren will be able to enjoy the same natural spaces, as the consumer is able to enjoy today (i.e., higher QOL). Taken together, sustainable businesses that are aware of consumer preferences about sustainable practices will likely help decrease overall environmental harm.

For those firms emphasizing local communities and society in their triple-bottom-line approach, special effort to emphasize these firms' role in addressing social concerns should be made in sustainable marketing (Frémeaux and Michelson, 2017). Cascade Engineering based in Grand Rapids, MI specializes in the manufacture of large-part plastic injection molding (used in auto manufacturing, and plumbing) offers an example of a firm

actively pursuing sustainable business practices emphasizing social justice in its approach (Cascade Engineering, 2020).

Cascade Engineering is a certified B Corporation. The B Corp Certification is currently the only recognized protocol for measuring a firm's social and environmental performance (B Corp, 2020). A B Corp-certified firm receives evaluation across the spectrum of sustainable business aspects, such as how the firm affects workers, the community, the environment, and customers. In addition, the supply chain of the firm receives assessment along with input materials used in the operations of the firm, as well as charitable giving and employee benefits. Importantly, such an evaluation leads to meaningful improvement in these areas and allows the firm legally to give priority to objectives other than profit maximization.

B Corps offer firms employing sustainable marketing a means for improving and developing across the five dimensions of the GREEN framework. For the more challenging measurement challenge of assessing social justice, the B Corp Assessment offers firms knowledge about boosting employees, local communities, and society (Stubbs, 2017). As firms such as Cascade Engineering share their successful practices with other B Corps, the B Corp designation can increasingly serve as a recognizable signal of effectiveness in the dimension of social justice for consumers as well as investors.

This study is limited in the cross-sectional nature of the data sampling of the study. However, most social science research carries this same limitation (Malhotra, Shawa and Oppenheim, 2006). Related to this, we adopted our measure for assessing quality of life and well-being from a study developed in Turkey, while we fielded the current study in the United States. To address this, researchers should conduct future studies in different cultures.

While consumer perceptions about sustainable marketing and support for sustainable businesses will likely evolve over time, the current study's conceptual, methodological and analytical rigor offers researchers a valuable lens to view likely predictors of consumer support for sustainable business. Additionally, it is important to note that our study mostly assessed the likelihood to buy rather than actual purchase behavior representing support for sustainable business. Prior research shows that there is often a gap between consumer intentions and behavior with regard to sustainability (Prothero et al., 2011), and thus future research should seek to measure actual behavior to confirm that our findings replicate.

Our study also does not directly address causation. Future work could improve the internal validity of our study by manipulating the brand positioning of a firm (i.e., nature-focused vs. socially-focused) in an experiment and examining whether differences emerge

between the brand positioning on support for sustainable businesses. It is quite possible that study participants were not fully cognizant of the varying traits for valuing nature and valuing social justice in a firm context. Notably, brand research has long established that the strategic brand position (e.g., functional, experiential, or symbolic) can lead to differences in consumers' attitude toward the firm (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986).

Future research about sustainable marketing and support for sustainable businesses might give attention to how consumers make ethical evaluations. For example, researchers have proposed that individuals make different types of ethical judgments, such as (1) broad-based ethical judgments (i.e., general acceptability and morality perceptions), (2) deontological judgments (i.e., obligation/duty to act in a certain way), (3) social contract judgments (i.e., based on unwritten contracts or promises), and (4) teleological judgments (i.e., examining efficiency, utility, and cost/benefit ratios) (Hansen, 1992).

6. Conclusion

This study focused on sustainable marketing and support for sustainable businesses. Using Lunde's five-dimensional GREEN framework, results using large-scale sampling in the US suggested that consumers' nature-based values have the most positive influence on consumers' support for sustainable businesses. Attitude toward firm benevolence and concern about the ethicality of firms followed in the strength of relationship for predicting support for sustainable businesses. The three predictors registering statistically significant influence on support for sustainable businesses featured businesses in roles of offering benevolence in society, protecting nature, and playing fair in the competition of the marketplace. Because other actors in society address social justice and individual QOL, these two dimensions of sustainable marketing need better understanding for firms to have efforts in these dimensions influence support for sustainable businesses in the future.

The knowledge from this study allows researchers and practitioners to improve the match between sustainable production and consumption. Researchers are also now able to develop approaches for policymakers to encourage consumer support for aspects of sustainable business practices currently less appreciated by consumers.

Former Unilever CEO Paul Polman turned his firm toward becoming more sustainability-oriented when he took leadership of the firm in January 2009 (Lawrence, Rasche and Kenny, 2019). He envisions a day when a holistic assessment of the full cost involved in doing business is not an option, but a requirement.

So, it's not a question in my mind of balancing different or conflicting needs. The fact is shareholders—like all stakeholders—can only benefit over the long term if companies are willing to pursue responsible sustainable business models that serve the needs and interests of the societies and environments in which they operate. In fact, I believe that this is the only model in the future that consumers and citizens will give permission to exist. (Polman, 2018).

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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Figure 1. The GREEN Sustainable Marketing Framework (Lunde, 2018) and Corresponding Constructs in the Conceptual Model

Figure 2. Final Modeling Results (n = 304)

Table 1. Measurements for Constructs and Items



Table 2. Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics

