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ON THE EXPECTED ROLE OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES TO SUPPORT THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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In this article, we present the results of a qualitative survey based on semi-structured interviews administered to 60 citizens of the French-speaking part of Switzerland to determine their attitudes, behavior, and expectations concerning sustainable development. The study sheds light on what individuals think about the impact of their own behavior, their efforts in sustainable development, and the role they expect private companies and public authorities to play in this area. On the one side, they are becoming aware of the growing power they can wield over private companies to force them to make substantial efforts and, above all, to prevent them from greenwashing. On the other side, they are also very clear about the role expected of public authorities. They don't rely solely on public authorities to establish a legal framework to govern and oversee private companies' carbon emissions. They also anticipate public services to establish a framework that encourages greater transparency in communication regarding this matter. This transparency will help consumers make more informed decisions aligned with environmental concerns and empower them to play an active role in driving change, rather than being passive observers. This is an expectation that they are also clearly expressing to better understand the impact of the digitalization efforts they are making individually and within their company.

1. Context and literature

Sustainability has become an increasingly significant perspective within the field of macromarketing since the early concerns expressed in the early 60s about the finite nature of the world's resources which were seen as a limiting factor for economic growth (Sheth, J. N., & Parvatiyar, A., 2021). Our society is facing significant sustainability challenges. Organizations can no longer thrive without the backing of society. Companies are increasingly feeling the weight of sustainable development goals and marketing managers have no other choice than placing a substantial focus on fulfilling the socio-ethical expectations of their target audience (Gong et al., 2023). A sustainable enterprise, therefore, contributes to sustainable development by delivering simultaneously economic, social, and environmental benefits (Elkington, 1994). Over time,

the concept of sustainability has evolved to encompass a wider range of issues, including societal concerns, ecological considerations, and environmental factors. This requires coordinated efforts from both governments and businesses. One key challenge in this endeavour is to shift away from consumption-driven approaches, moving from a primarily consumer and market-driven perspective to a more responsible one that actively promotes sustainable products and services, ultimately contributing to the creation of sustainable societies (Sheth, J. N., & Parvatiyar, A., 2021).

Consumers globally are increasingly aware of sustainability, prompting marketers to adapt to these evolving preferences and transition towards sustainable marketing. Consequently, both marketers and academics now find it imperative to acquire a comprehensive understanding of sustainability marketing (Pooja et al., 2022). Sustainable marketing aims at fostering consumers' sustainable purchase intentions through the influence of brand image, customer involvement, and corporate social responsibility (Gong et al., 2023). It sets the contemporary standard for modern marketing and offers a detailed roadmap for incorporating and promoting sustainable practices within any organization. Consumers no longer accept brands that disregard or show indifference towards sustainability and now demand that brands demonstrate genuine concern and proactive efforts in areas supporting sustainable development (Carvill et al., 2021).

Alongside this body of literature devoted to the impact of SD on consumers and their relationship with brands, another body of research focuses on the role of public authorities in SD. Public authorities are supposed to assume responsibility for both the social and economic development of the nation. Through legislation, programs, plans, and strategic initiatives, they support individuals in making choices within various sectors of the economy and encourage them to pursue sustainable development without fearing for the future (Gorica et al., 2012). They have the capacity to further sustainable development through the establishment of legal and regulatory frameworks that incentivize businesses to embrace sustainable practices and minimize their environmental footprint. Additionally, they can advance sustainable development by implementing tax policies and assistance programs that foster and support sustainability initiatives. And, as Kishimoto et al. (2017) highlight, public authorities, whether at the national, regional, or local levels, are tasked with taking a prominent role in implementing measures aimed at decreasing expenses and tariffs, enhancing labour conditions, elevating service quality, and simultaneously demonstrating increased transparency and accountability.

At present, the growth of sustainable marketing considerations has not yet been able to drive markets and business practices towards robust and enduring sustainability objectives. To fill this gap, (Sheth, J. N., & Parvatiyar, A., 2021) suggest that it is necessary to frame companies' marketing strategies through relevant interventions by public authorities which tie in with the suggestions of the 2023 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development states (United Nations, 2023). Promoting sustainable consumerism is a collective duty that involves various stakeholders, such as governments, businesses, consumers, and pertinent civil society organizations.

The aim of our research is to gain a better understanding of how consumers¹ position themselves in relation to sustainable development and also to better define their expectations in relation to the roles and responsibilities they expect from the various play-

¹ From now on, we will use the term 'consumer' to refer both to citizens and to citizens as consumers.

ers in this field, including public authorities. To do this, we used qualitative survey techniques based on semi-structured questionnaires. This enabled us to carry out a detailed analysis of consumer expectations and motivations in terms of sustainable development strategies and policies.

2. Methodology

Sixty interviews were conducted in Q1/2021 in the French-speaking region of Switzerland among citizens working in service sectors (banking, insurance, healthcare, education, etc.) and with various professional statuses (employees, managers, etc.)². All interview transcripts were then analyzed using NVivo software to synthesize the results.

After a small warm-up to introduce the topic (“If I say, ‘sustainable development, what does it recall to you, what comes first to your mind? Is it a topic you often talk or hear about?’”), the following questions were used as a basis for the interview.

- What do you think should be the top priorities for sustainable development?
- How do you see things evolve in terms of sustainable development? If you could see in a crystal ball, what would you see at 5-10-20 years?
- Do you think that sustainable development is more the business of politics, businesses, or citizens?
- Do you think sustainable development is more of a local initiative or a global one?
- Do you think that the digitization of our economy (access internet, mobile) is a good thing for sustainable development and the climate?
- If I gave you Aladdin's lamp and a genie offered you to make 3 wishes in terms of sustainable development, what would they be?

In terms of sociodemographic characteristics, the sample consists of 56% of men and 44% of women and the distribution among age classes is as follows: 18-24yrs 6%, 25-34 years 35%, 35-44 years 33%, 45-54 years 15%, 55+ years 11%. About 30% of the persons interviewed are active in the public sector (vs 70% in the private sector) and 10% are self-employed. Lines of business include public administration, international organization, health, education, transportation, construction, fast-moving consumer goods, banking, insurance, wealth management, real estate, automotive, watchmaking, pharmaceutical industry, retail, trade, energy, and construction. Most respondents are white collars (90%).

² These interviews were conducted by participants of the Executive MBA at the Haute Ecole de Genève (HEG, HES-SO)

3. Synthesis of results

3.1 Do my own individual actions make sense?

When people are asked to share first intention thoughts about the theme of 'Sustainable Development', environment-related topics are always coming first. The most frequent words quoted first are environment, climate change, global warming, waste/management of waste, 'fossil based' energy, natural/alternative energy resources, plastic, and overconsumption. Although this could have been expected, the very low occurrence of appearance of topics related to the social and economic aspects of SD is a more appealing result. Those were quoted only when the profession of the person interviewed was in direct relation with SD, by the nature of the job itself, or through the engagement of his employer in the area.

Besides all comments related to purely environmental items (energy, pollution, etc.), one comment that very frequently came across was the need to change each other (own) individual behavior. Respondents are aware that they need to change their habits in terms of consumption as in terms of waste. Where they seem to be committed to adapting or rather keep improving their behavior in terms of management of waste (they feel to know what to do and to be 'supported and guided' in this area), the story is quite different when they must tell what else to change in their daily behavior. On the one side, they feel lost about the real net impact of any potential additional action, what would make sense to change first, and to what extent (often quoting the lack of information on the environmental impact of specific behaviors and actions). Their question is: what is worth doing? On the other side, they also wonder about the usefulness of their individual actions if no more structural actions are taken at a higher (say national or global) level Does it make sense to change our own behavior if others, and especially industries and/or countries are doing the same? (*"I have the feeling that my own small actions are annihilated by the immobilism of politicians of large multinationals...."*, Male, 55+, employed in the energy sector).

This might explain why most respondents expressed the critical need to change individual behaviors... although this clearly remains at the level of intention rather than actual behavioral change. They all say that everyone must change her/his own behavior... but, surprisingly enough, none of them shares evidence that they actually do or are willing to do it (with the exception of very small and simple daily actions). This is particularly true when they talk about consumption. Changing consumption behavior is often flagged as a must.... But no concrete example is shared about this and how they want to put this into practice.

3.2 Consumers get the power and feel they can act against greenwashing

Our study addresses a gap in understanding 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. Related to the need to adapt consumption behavior, many respondents also quoted the permanent pursuit of short-term profit and its relying economic model as a major hurdle to changing individuals' behavior. It is very hard to consume less or consume in a more responsible way if one is constantly invited/induced to consume more and more easily. Hence, many respondents clearly stated the need for a profound change in the economic model, less centered on short-term profit but more focused on social and economic responsibility.

This ties in with Elkington (2018) who stated that while certain companies are adapting their structures to incorporate Triple bottom-line principles (people, planet, profit, see Elkington, 1998), the profit aspect or the single bottom-line perspective still largely prevails in the mindset of the majority of corporate leaders.

In this frame, the active and critical role of industries and companies was logically very often quoted in our interviews. Many respondents feel that large companies are using SD as a marketing tool. SD has become a way to communicate, to improve its image against public opinion ... and ultimately to try to sell more. Many respondents clearly stated that they are not fooled by the real intentions of these companies (*"Multinationals are misusing the trend of SD and will keep doing it as long as they feel it can help them increase their short-term growth"*, Man, 35-44, Manager in retail. *"Large Companies are not only buying complacency, but they also understand that communicating about their efforts to save the planet is a powerful marketing tool. Look at the airline companies who communicate about trees that they plant to compensate for the impact on CO² emission"*, Man, 35-44, Health sector). Such opinions and statements reflect why a very small portion of the corporate messages about sustainability are considered credible to the public, mostly by lack of (perceived) honesty and commitment (see Vermeulen, 2022).

However, there is a large consensus among respondents that they have never had that much influence and power to get and force companies to change. Leveraging social networks, mobilizing citizens' power and energy can become a very effective tool to get companies to behave in a more exemplary manner and start not only to communicate but actually behave in terms of sustainable development rather than short-term profit (*"With a few tweets and without any filter from politicians or economic lobbies, you can raise public awareness at large scale and make things move"*, Woman, 35-44, a teacher in the public sector). Social media empowers individuals to actively collect information and express their viewpoints, transforming them from passive receivers of product information into active creators and disseminators of such content (Stewart & Pavlou, 2002).

3.3 Public authorities are expected to set the right legal framework for SD

Although, this 'power' might not be effective enough without an adequate and well-defined legal framework. This is also a very clear expectation from respondents. They really and massively expect public authorities to provide a legal framework (penalizing, regulator, or incentive) to guide companies in the frame of SD policies. If they need to better control their consumption, they clearly expect public authorities to facilitate this process and oblige industries/companies to not only adapt their production process but also to communicate more openly about the ecological footprint of their services/products (*"Change must be driven from everyone, but I think that there will be a lot of resistance from industries because of the economic interests that prevail.... Politicians needs to force them to communicate more about their products and push them to act with SD in mind and not only short-term profits... as they did for instance to force the replacement of filament light bulbs"*, Man, 25-34, public sector). This is truly in line with the United Nations (2023)'s recommendation encouraging nations to formulate and put into action a combination of policies aimed at fostering sustainable consumption and production, including the enforcement of consumer protection laws against misleading and unfair commercial practices, particularly related to false environmental claims and greenwashing.

The role expected from public authorities is also very expressly referenced when respondents are asked about who should take the lead with respect to SD: public, companies, or individuals. They are very clear on this question: public authorities must take the lead and provide the right framework to industries/companies to integrate SD into their daily behaviors (*“Politicians need to set rules and penalties to regulate bad behaviors but also need to incentivize proper behaviors and initiatives supporting SD”* (Man, 45-54, Watchmaking industry and Woman, 25-34, Health sector). This refers to Gorica (2012) suggestion that public authorities have the capacity to further sustainable development through the establishment of legal and regulatory frameworks that incentivize businesses to embrace sustainable practices and minimize their environmental footprint.

However, this will only become possible if they do not (or stop to) think about their own short-term interest and re-election but rather about the long-term public interest. (*“Politicians tend to plan actions or take decisions to increase their chance of re-election rather than with a long-term view. This must change!”* Man, 35-44, Manager in pharmaceutical industry). This expectation does not limit to control industries/companies but also ensures international environmental coordination and management through country-level regulations (*“It does not make sense to plant few trees in Switzerland if, at the same time, one lets the forest burn in Brazil”*, Woman, 55+, Insurance).

These remarks point out the fact that numerous governments tend to prioritize short-term objectives while overlooking the long-term welfare of their constituents. Due to citizens' preoccupation with immediate concerns, democratically elected governments find it challenging to address the deep-seated structural issues. Short-term remedies often impede the pursuit of long-term solutions (Streeck, 2014). The implementation of necessary long-term strategies is often also hindered by electorates primarily focused on short-term concerns unless political leaders can persuade their constituents to adopt a more forward-thinking outlook (Offe 2015). This is a real concern that came out of our survey and that is known to be at the root of climate issues as governments across the world have failed to engage in aggressive and coordinated mitigation policies which will leave millions unable to enjoy the standard of living to which they are entitled (Caney 2010).

3.4 Digitalization requires public regulation to support rather than harm SD

In general, digitalization is seen at first sight (first reaction) as having a rather overall positive influence on the environment and ecological balance. The benefits of digitalization spontaneously quoted were the improved access to and sharing of information, the reduction of paper waste, and the increased easiness of shopping. However, the latter and the products offer extension through online services were systematically pointed out for the perverse effect this can have as this can lead to overconsumption. Here again, industries/companies are singled out for their frantic scramble for immediate profits, and respondents are calling for more socially responsible behaviors.

However, as the interviewees developed their thoughts on the subject, it led to another interesting outcome. Indeed, a large proportion of respondents acknowledged that they were aware that the massive use of web servers to store digitized data had a negative cost on the environment. In the end and on reflection, they finally admitted that they did not know whether, in the end, their own increase of digital tools (individual or professional) was reducing their carbon footprint and having a positive impact on the environment (*“Actually, now that I think about, I am really not sure if the digitalization of*

the economy is good or not for the planet”, Women, 45-54 years old public service). This is an issue that has been widely flagged, even at the macro-economic. Though it would be imprudent to disregard the advantages linked to the progress in digital and technological advancements in attaining social and economic development, it's crucial to acknowledge that this advancement comes with a substantial environmental toll that requires careful consideration and effective management (Pérez-Martinez et al., 2023). When people realize this, they typically would expect public authorities to play a prominent role in this area as well. "Ultimately, it's the public authorities who should be telling us what we need to do in terms of digitalisation if we want to preserve the environment. How can we make the right decisions without valid information?, Man, 35-44 years old, entrepreneur).

Also quite interestingly, almost no single interviewee referred to the fact that digitization is supposed to have a real potential to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals through the development of smart systems connected to the Internet of Things can generate unique opportunities to evolve towards more equitable, environmentally sustainable, and healthy society (Mondejar et al., 2021).

In this case, too, consumers expect the public authorities to create a legal framework to encourage or oblige private companies to communicate more transparently about the footprint of the production of the goods and services they make available to consumers. They are not just looking to public services to create a legal framework to regulate and control the behavior of private companies in terms of carbon emissions. They also expect public services to create a framework that promotes more transparent communication on this subject, so that they can make more informed choices that respect environmental considerations, and so that they can behave as active rather than passive agents of this critical change.

3.4 SD must be at the heart of organization's vision and mission

Another major learning of this survey is related to the risk industries and (especially large) companies are facing if they cannot integrate SD in a clear and convincing way into their management policies. They do not only face the risk of seeing their services/products being boycotted by consumers/public opinion (*"SD can be a true means of pressure against companies and industries. Soon, we will buy only sustainable brands or from manufacturers committed to SD"*, Woman 35-44, public sector) But they also face the risk of being cast aside as potential employers (*"Soon, people will refuse to work for companies that are not clearly engaged into SD"*, Man, 18-34, automotive industry). It is pretty clear that private companies will have to demonstrate good SD behavior and not just communicate about it (see Moravcikova et al., 2017 on this topic).

While the general feeling of the interviewees is that SD (and mainly environment-related) practices are improving over time due to public opinion's pressure, many people still fear that SD could be a simple fashion phenomenon, therefore just another marketing weapon (*"I still wonder if SD is approached as a real problem rather than as an ephemeral fashion phenomenon"*, Man, 35-44, Public health sector). Hence, they claim that individuals should keep using their growing power to get public authority but also industries/companies to integrate SD concerns into their business plans. They are now becoming aware that they can make a difference, not only by changing their individual behavior but also by exerting pressure on public authorities and industries/companies (through conscious and coordinated actions impacting consumption at a large scale).

This message is clear and companies who want to be sustainably successful might better integrate this into their long-term business plans and strategies (“*Successful companies in the long-term will be those who effectively integrated SD into their core values and practices*”, *Man*, 45-54, *international organization*). Their challenge is to demonstrate unambiguously how they can actively support the shift towards a world where businesses succeed by promoting the well-being of the planet (Vermeulen, 2022).

4. Conclusion

The primary aim of our research was to gain a better understanding of what consumers think about sustainable development policies and strategies, what their expectations are in this area, and what they expect from the various players involved. Based on data gathered through a field survey of 60 active citizens in French-speaking Switzerland, our study has brought to light a series of quite interesting results.

On the one hand, they confirm the received idea that the power of consumers vis-à-vis manufacturers and brands is growing unequivocally and, above all, that consumers are aware of this. On the other hand, they underline the fundamental role that consumers attribute to public authorities. Consumers expect public authorities to define a legal framework that protects them and obliges companies to make an unequivocal and transparent commitment to sustainable development. Ultimately, they expect public authorities to take the necessary action to enable them to play a more active role in sustainable development.

Understanding consumers, what they really think beyond what they say and do, what motivates them, what moves them, or what prevents them from moving, is fundamental. This is a hot topic of sustainable marketing as more and more studies focus their attention on consumers' choices related to sustainability-driven purchases to gain insights into how consumers respond to firms' sustainable business initiatives and support companies that they perceive as actively pursuing sustainable business practices (Peterson et al. in 2021).

We strongly believe that it would be useful for public authorities and researchers in the field of sustainable development to pay as much attention to how citizens feel and what they expect from them in this area. Without this knowledge, sustainability efforts are likely to develop more slowly, and their impact will be diminished at a time when they are urgently needed.

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