Sustainability communication in marketing: a literature review

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the foundations and current research streams of sustainability communication (SC) within the marketing field through a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature. Furthermore, it identifies promising areas, gaps, and guides for future contributions in SC literature.

Design/methodology/approach – This study relies on a sample of 103 articles published in high-ranked marketing journals. Through co-citation and qualitative thematic analyses, it examines a network over the foundations and central themes in current literature.

Findings – In the marketing field, the foundations of SC rest on institutional and stakeholder theories, corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication and its effectiveness, green advertising, ethical consumerism and marketing strategies, and social marketing for sustainable consumption. Additionally, the analysis reveals four core current themes: reporting sustainability, sustainability advertising, consumer reactions, and promoting pro-sustainable behaviour.

Research limitations/implications – This paper defines the foundations and boundaries of SC in marketing based on a comprehensive evaluation of existing research. By doing so, it offers a valuable reference for future research, enabling scholars to understand better the past and current state of SC in marketing and to identify areas for further investigation.

Practical implications – Businesses and marketers can use the findings to develop more effective SC strategies and to focus on the main topics that require their attention.

Social implications – This research is of societal importance because it deepens our understanding of SC in marketing. It illuminates uncharted territory and helps decision-makers across sectors create a more sustainable future. In essence, this research enriches society by promoting sustainability awareness and guiding the development of practices that emphasize the value of SC.

Originality/value – This study advances previous literature reviews on SC in the marketing field by providing a roadmap for researchers to delve deeper and contribute to the field of SC in marketing, advancing our understanding of the importance of organizations effectively communicating their sustainability strategies to stakeholders.

Keywords Sustainability communication, Corporate sustainability, Bibliometrics, Literature review, Corporate communication, Sustainability advertising, Communication strategy

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

At the firm level, term corporate sustainability summarizes the notion of sustainable development. It serves as an umbrella term encompassing various concepts related to the role of business in the world (Signitzer & Prexl, 2007). Companies are progressively changing their organizational structures to balance economic objectives with ecological and societal goals (Elkington, 2018).

In this process, the role of communication is paramount, as it can build legitimacy, support trust in the relationship with different stakeholders and provide trustworthy and transparent information (Crane & Glozer, 2016). Given its critical importance, sustainability communication (SC) of companies and brands has attracted significant attention from academics in the past decades. The term SC is recent (Adomßent & Godemann, 2011), yet it has been the subject of exploration in prior literature reviews (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011; Golob, Podnar, & Zabkar, 2023) across several disciplines, including communications, sustainability, business and management. This paper focuses on examining the literature on SC within the marketing field, including its foundations, research streams and main themes, and suggests avenues for further advancing this body of work.

The increasing awareness of the need for SC motivated Godemann & Michelsen (2011) to publish a handbook on the interdisciplinary perspectives and theoretical foundations of SC. The handbook offers a compendium that explores the broad spectrum of SC across its various facets, yet it does not claim to provide a complete review. In a recent study, Golob et al. (2023) investigated key conceptual and empirical studies in the field of SC and found a general understanding of sustainability as environmental impact, mainly within marketing and communication literature. Moreover, prior literature perceives sustainability messages as a critical element, but SC is not the central concept discussed in most cases. Besides, research focuses either on communication tools and their impact, or on stakeholders' reactions, mainly consumers' responses.

In turn, our literature review advances prior literature in at least two significant ways. Firstly, while previous literature reviews focus solely on bibliometric approaches, we combine a quantitative bibliometric technique with a qualitative thematic analysis. This approach provides a network view of the intellectual structure and research streams, along with an overview of central themes of SC in the marketing field. This leads to our second point, that is, while prior literature focused on the interdisciplinarity of SC literature, we propose a focus only on marketing top journals (first quartile of marketing journals in Scimago Journal & Country Rank) and in the analysis of promising areas for future contribution on SC in the marketing field.

Furthermore, we propose using the concept of "sustainability", which is broader than "corporate social responsibility" (CSR). Following Dyllick & Hockerts (2002), we define the term corporate sustainability "as meeting the needs of a firm's direct and indirect stakeholders (such as shareholders, employees, clients, pressure groups, communities), without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well" (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002, p. 131). Thereby, this term differs from CSR as it does not address only events or situations; instead, it focuses on the going-concern, long-term business models of firms (Lueg, Pedersen, & Clemmensen, 2015) in a holistic and more supportive and responsible way (Ashrafi, Adams, Walker, & Magnan, 2018).

From this premise, our research questions are: What are the intellectual structure, research streams and promising areas for future contributions of SC in the marketing field? To answer this question, we conducted a comprehensive analysis of existing research in SC supported by recent advances in bibliometrics analysis (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Bibliometric methods allow us to base results on aggregated bibliographic data

generated by researchers. When this data is combined and examined, insights can be generated about the structure of the field, social networks and topics of interest, and help identify gaps to guide future research.

This study contributes to the field of SC in marketing in at least two ways. Firstly, by using bibliometrics, this study offers a better understanding of the foundations of SC literature in marketing, revealing the connections of its key pillar areas. These key pillars are institutional and stakeholder theories, CSR communication and its effectiveness, green advertising, ethical consumerism and marketing strategies and social marketing for sustainable consumption.

Secondly, this study also offers a qualitative interpretation of predominant themes in the area, helping to provide a more in-depth understanding of the research themes and topics for a clear view of the field. Specifically, four streams were found: reporting sustainability, sustainability advertising, consumer reactions and promoting pro-sustainable behaviour. Each stream represents a unique yet interconnected aspect of SC research in marketing. This demonstrates how researchers have intricately explored the intersection of sustainability, communications and marketing practices.

Overall, these results point to a particular evolution of the co-citation groups to the current broad themes in SC literature in marketing. Thus, this study provides a valuable contribution to the field of SC by shedding light on the foundations of SC in marketing, as well as on the key research streams and themes that are currently and will be in future shaping the topic state of art.

2. Sustainability communication literature

SC is pivotal in fostering a deeper understanding and engagement in corporate sustainable development. Godemann & Michelsen (2011) describe SC as a process of mutual understanding focused on sustainability, highlighting the need to integrate human−environment relationships into societal discourse. This approach emphasizes enhancing awareness of environmental issues and societal values. Despite its broad theoretical base, including roots in psychology and sociology, media, communication and systems theories, SC faces challenges due to a lack of clear definitions, leading to conceptual confusion (Golob et al., 2023). This ambiguity hinders theoretical coherence and underscores the need for precise conceptualizations within SC research.

There is a notable focus on environmental aspects, often explored through green advertising and one-way communication strategies (Golob et al., 2023). While such emphasis is relevant, it suggests a need for more complete approaches considering social and economic sustainability dimensions. Additionally, Golob et al. (2023) point to a trend towards applied communication methods in empirical studies, which may limit the exploration of broader systemic and theoretical issues.

Although different, CSR communications is a related phenomenon frequently explored by prior literature reviews. Nielsen & Thomsen (2012) were pioneers in researching streams and themes of CSR communication, finding two distinct perspectives: strategic (focus on the strategy behind CSR communication) and operative (aimed to discuss how companies communicate CSR). Furthermore, Golob et al. (2013) identified a broad array of perspectives, including public relations, marketing and organizational communication, and themes, as disclosure, accountability and the impacts of CSR communication.

Recently, Verk, Golob, & Podnar (2021) used a bibliometric approach and confirmed the field's fragmented nature and its interdisciplinary character, alongside two evolving frameworks: the business case and reporting frames. The former explores the benefits of corporate investments in CSR communication, involving direct and indirect measurement of

its outcomes, and relates to a strategic approach. The latter refers to the idea of CSR disclosure, derived from the fields of accounting and accountability. It is seen as a tool for corporate disclosure tool of non-financial information, intended to highlight CSR activities.

Also, adopting a bibliometric approach, as seen in recent CSR communication studies (e.g. Ji et al., 2020; Verk et al., 2021), our analysis expands the knowledge of SC literature in the marketing field by using co-citation analysis (Zupic & Čater, 2015) alongside qualitative thematic analysis to uncover not just current intellectual trends and research streams, but also to pinpoint promising areas for future contributions, offering a holistic understanding of SC's landscape in marketing.

3. Method

This study uses a comprehensive bibliometric and qualitative analysis to explore SC within the marketing discipline. The methodology unfolds in distinct stages:

Data collection and sample selection. Firstly, the selection of relevant journals. Only journals in the first quartile of peer-reviewed marketing journals of Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SCI, 2021) were selected, totalling 47 journals. In sequence, the keywords "sustainab*", "green", "environmental", AND "communicat*" were used to search titles, abstracts and author keywords across selected databases, yielding 115 articles. The search for articles occurred in March 2021. Next, this initial sample was filtered, leading to the exclusion of 12 articles that marginally mention sustainability and communication and not as part of its conceptualization and main scope of discussion, which resulted in a final sample of 103 articles spanning 1993 to 2020, authored by 253 different authors and published in 33 different journals.

Bibliometric analysis. A bibliometric approach, specifically co-citation analysis, is used to analyse the data using VOSviewer software. Co-citation analysis identifies the most frequently cited publications within the SC field, revealing the intellectual structure and key scholarly contributions (Zupic & Čater, 2015). Co-citation analysis operates on the premise that two documents are co-cited when they appear together in the reference list of a third document, uncovering relationships between publications and revealing how pieces of work are interconnected within the scholarly network. By examining the patterns and frequency of co-citations, it is possible to identify the foundational works and emerging trends in the SC field. This technique highlights the core literature that has significantly influenced the discipline, enabling the mapping of theoretical framework and methodological approaches supporting SC research (Zupic & Čater, 2015).

Qualitative thematic analysis. Furthermore, a qualitative thematic analysis was performed to interpret the main themes within the articles in the sample. Following prior literature (e.g. Vedula et al., 2022), we developed a coding guide to collect information about the papers' objective, theoretical framework, main conclusions, definition of sustainability and the focus on its economic, environmental or social dimensions, among other relevant information. This process resulted in the definition of themes and subthemes that emerged from the readings, encompassing four main themes: reporting sustainability, sustainability advertising, consumer reactions and promoting pro-sustainable behaviour.

By combining quantitative bibliometric methods with qualitative analysis, this study maps the intellectual and thematic landscape of SC in marketing and identifies critical research streams and promising areas for future exploration.

4. Results

While the first articles in our sample were published in 1993, it was only in 2005 that production started to increase. The annual growth rate is 25.42%, meaning research interest in the topic is rising (see Figure 1). The journals with the most articles published on the
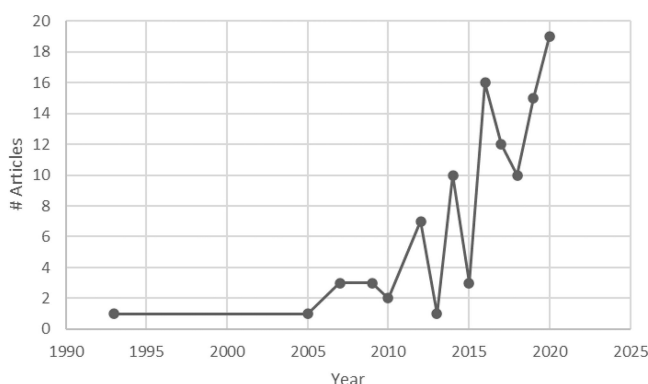
Source: Figure elaborated by the authors

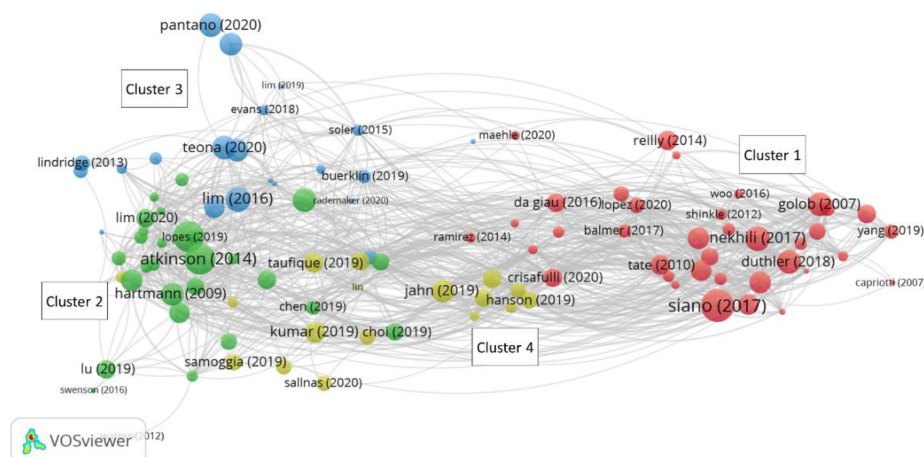subject are led by *Public Relations Review* (16), *Journal of Business Research* (10) and *Journal of Advertising* (7).

4.1 Co-citation analysis

The co-citation analysis of publications revealed five foundational groups of SC in the marketing field (Figure 2). This network not only maps the intellectual territory of SC but also reveals the synergistic relationships among different research domains, pointing towards an integrated approach to understanding and addressing sustainability challenges.

At its core, Cluster 1 is rich in theory and highlights the relevance of institutional and stakeholder frameworks as foundational to SC. In turn, Cluster 2 appears as a central cluster, linking the theoretical insights of Cluster 1 with a focus on application, mainly regarding

Source: Figure elaborated by the authors

consumers' attitudes and behaviours. Cluster 3 revolves around green marketing, uncovering its practical implications for consumer behaviour and environmental advertising. Cluster 4 interacts with both Clusters 3 and 5, suggesting a dialogue where marketing strategies are informed by social marketing and the strategic implementation of CSR. Cluster 5, while slightly more peripheral, connects the social marketing approaches to the broader discourse of sustainability, emphasizing the role of marketing in driving sustainable consumption.

Group 1 – Institutional and stakeholder theories. The first group focuses on the foundations of institutional and stakeholder theory, exploring aspects such as institutional isomorphism and legitimacy management (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and stakeholder engagement (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997; Porter & Kramer, 2006) connected with a strategic perspective (Freeman, 1984), often, related to themes of sustainability and CSR (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). This group represents a solid theoretical foundation that emphasizes formal structures, legitimacy and stakeholder salience in sustainability practices.

Group 2 – CSR communication and its effectiveness. This collection of studies investigates the relationship between CSR communication strategies and consumer engagement, emphasizing the impact of CSR on consumer perceptions, attitudes and behaviours and the strategic alignment and perceived authenticity of CSR efforts. The core discussion relies on CSR initiatives and consumer responses to it (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), underscoring the strategic value of CSR alignment within business objectives. Again, the risks of consumer scepticism and the negative impact of perceived greenwashing (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2015; Parguel, Benoît-Moreau, & Larceneux, 2011; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013) are highlighted, together with the importance of credibility (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000) and alignment with consumers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Overall, this pillar of SC suggests that effective CSR communication requires strategic coherence with the company's core values, resonating with consumers' expectations to build trust and reputation.

Group 3 – Green advertising. Articles in this group delve into how green marketing appeals affect consumer perceptions and behaviours, including the exploration of the effectiveness of different stimuli (Schuhwerk & Lefkoff-hagius, 1995) when advertising a green product and the effects of informational claims and virtual nature experiences on consumer's attitude towards a brand (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2009). This literature also explores strategic aspects, such as the structure of green advertising on TV and printed media (Banerjee, Gulas, & Iyer, 1995), and the impact of greenwashing on consumer attitude (Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla, & Paladino, 2014; Schmuck, Matthes, & Naderer, 2018).

Group 4 – Ethical consumerism and marketing strategies. The fourth groups into ethical consumerism and marketing strategies, with a notorious prevalence of the theme of sustainability in the fashion industry (e.g. Caniato, Caridi, Crippa, & Moretto, 2012; Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, & Chan, 2012; Niinimäki, 2010). It underscores the strategic engagement with ethical consumerism (e.g. Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Eckhardt, Belk, & Devinney, 2010; Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011) and the implementation of marketing strategies that resonate with consumers' growing environmental consciousness (e.g. Carlson, Grove, & Kangun, 1993; Cronin, Smith, Gleim, Ramirez, & Martinez, 2011; Phau & Ong, 2007). The discussion extends to cause-related marketing (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988) and relationship marketing (Grönroos, 2004; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), highlighting the need for strategic alignment of corporate objectives and efforts. This group reveals the pivotal role of marketing strategies in navigating consumer expectations and fostering a sustainable, ethical consumer culture.

Group 5 – Social marketing for sustainable consumption. Lastly, articles in the fifth group address the application of social marketing to promote sustainable consumption behaviours, offering insights into how to encourage environmentally friendly consumer actions (Laroche, Bergeron, & Barbaro-forleo, 2001; Ottman, Stafford, & Hartman, 2006) or critiques into more profound pro-sustainability marketing (e.g. Gordon, Carrigan, & Hastings, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This area includes influential works like Kotler & Zaltman (1971) pioneering social marketing for social change, McKenzie-Mohr (2000) on community-based social marketing for sustainability, and Peattie & Peattie (2009) discussing social marketing's pathway to reducing consumption. This group suggests a foundation of the SC field that explores the foster for a deeper understanding and commitment of marketing into a pro-sustainable approach.

4.2 Qualitative thematic analysis

Next, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to better understand the main themes in current SC literature. Four main themes were identified: reporting sustainability, sustainability advertising, consumer reactions and promoting pro-sustainable behaviour. We discuss each next.

The theme of reporting sustainability involves corporate communication aimed at reporting sustainability issues, concerns and information. It is typically voluntary, characterized by one-way communication, and occurs through public statements, reports and press releases. It often involves understanding patterns and content of disclosure adopted by companies (Golob & Bartlett, 2007; Lee, Chang, & Chen, 2017; Matthes, 2019; Tate, Ellram, & Kirchoff, 2010), and the communication channels used to it, such as corporative websites (Branco, Delgado, Sá, & Sousa, 2014; Da Giau et al., 2016; Hetze & Winistörfer, 2016) and social media platforms (Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Within this theme, institutional, neo-institutional, legitimacy and stakeholder theories predominate, as identified in co-citation analysis. This suggests the motivation for companies to disclose and report sustainability issues.

Sustainability advertising is another significant theme in SC literature. Through advertising campaigns, companies communicate about sustainability to multiple stakeholders, especially consumers. The discussion around this theme is heavily focused on the promotion of sustainable products (e.g. Lopes & Veiga, 2019) and environmental and social communication appeals (e.g. Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014; Hsuan-Hsuan, Kuo, Wu, & Wu, 2012; Usrey, Palihawadana, Saridakis, & Theotokis, 2020) aiming to provide greater value to consumers that are more concerned about sustainable issues.

Furthermore, consumers play an essential role in SC, as they are the target audience for many sustainability initiatives in marketing. Consumer reactions as a theme refer to discussions over consumers' perceptions and responses to companies' sustainability practices and communications (e.g. Chen, 2016), often it involves exploring effectiveness or the best way to achieve this effectiveness (Kronrod, Grinstein, & Wathieu, 2012; Lee et al., 2017). Understanding consumer perspectives on sustainability issues and communication can help companies to develop more effective SC strategies and engage with consumers meaningfully. As a result, this stream is typically practical and instrumentalist.

Finally, promoting pro-sustainable behaviour within SC emphasizes strategic efforts aimed at encouraging environmentally friendly consumer actions and fostering a culture of sustainability. This theme is built on theoretical frameworks from psychology and communication, directing its focus towards practical methods and strategies that engage individuals and communities in sustainable practices. It encompasses a range of tactics, from social labelling as a tool to subtly activate environmental values (Cornelissen, Dewitte,

Warlop, & Yzerbyt, 2007), to the utilization of green advertising that leverages virtual nature experiences to enhance communication effectiveness (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2009). It also explores the framing of messages to appeal to individuals with egoistic values (Lagomarsino, Lemarié, & Puntiroli, 2020). Within this theme, it is highlighted the critical role of targeted, psychologically informed communications in driving the transition towards more sustainable consumption patterns.

5. Discussion

5.1 Intellectual structure

The intellectual structure of SC within the marketing field, as delineated through this study, reveals theoretical foundations and strategic approaches that guide the discourse and practice of SC. At the centre of this intellectual structure lies the institutional and stakeholder theories, which provide a foundation for understanding the dynamics of SC. These theories emphasize the importance of formal structures, legitimacy and stakeholder engagement in shaping corporate sustainability practices. It explains SC as both a communication practice and a strategic imperative that requires a deep understanding of institutional norms and stakeholder dynamics.

Moreover, the integration of CSR communication and its effectiveness, green advertising, ethical consumerism and marketing strategies, alongside social marketing for sustainable consumption, extends the intellectual structure of SC into a multifaceted domain that intersects with consumer behaviour, marketing strategy and ethical considerations. CSR communication's role in fostering consumer engagement and loyalty, the impact of green advertising on consumer perceptions and behaviours and the strategic implementation of marketing strategies that resonate with ethical consumerism, illustrate the broad spectrum of research and practice in SC. These elements collectively represent the evolving nature of SC in marketing, where the effectiveness of sustainability messages is critically evaluated in terms of consumer response and the broader societal impact. The inclusion of social marketing strategies further suggests a proactive approach to promoting sustainable consumption behaviours through marketing initiatives.

5.2 Thematic structure

The thematic structure of SC within marketing is characterized by a set of themes that collectively address sustainability within marketing practices. The identified main themes – reporting sustainability, sustainability advertising, consumer reactions and promoting pro-sustainable behaviour – contribute with unique insights into how sustainability is communicated and perceived in marketing.

Reporting sustainability emphasizes the importance of transparency and accountability in corporate communication about their environmental and social impacts, initiatives and progress towards sustainability goals. Based on institutional and stakeholder frameworks, the strategic use of disclosure to manage legitimacy and engage with key stakeholders underlies this stream.

Sustainability advertising, consumer reactions and promoting pro-sustainable behaviour further expand the thematic structure of SC, exploring how sustainability messages are crafted and received. Sustainability advertising explores the strategies through which companies communicate their commitment to sustainability or promote sustainable products, practices and messages, aiming to influence consumer perceptions and behaviours.

Consumer reactions to sustainability initiatives is also a central theme, as understanding consumer attitudes and behaviours, especially to craft effective SC strategies. This theme

explores the instrumental role of consumers in the success of sustainability initiatives, emphasizing the need for messages that resonate with consumer values and expectations.

Lastly, promoting pro-sustainable behaviour focuses on the transformative potential of SC to encourage more sustainable lifestyles, showcasing the strategic application of marketing techniques to foster environmental and social change. Together, these themes illustrate a comprehensive view of SC in marketing, where the interplay between corporate communication strategies, consumer engagement and the promotion of sustainable behaviours form the thematic structure of SC field.

Beyond the core streams, the findings pointed that the literature of SC within marketing broadly discuss SC in terms of strategic aspects of it, referring to the plans and tactics used to communicate about sustainability. In doing so, a significant part of this literature aims to investigate efficiency and impacts that primarily benefit the company. Still, the stream is concerned with promoting pro-sustainable behaviour, which also often relies on a strategic approach.

Moreover, our findings highlight an interdisciplinary approach that resonates with previous literature (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011; Verk et al., 2021), yet extends the discourse with a nuanced focuses on consumer engagement and ethical consumerism. Besides, our analysis finds a focus on strategic and operative dimensions, as outlined in CSR communication by Nielsen & Thomsen (2012) and (Golob et al., 2013). As Golob et al. (2023), we found a significant focus on the environmental dimension and a limited use of sustainability encompassing social and economic dimensions.

6. Future directions

SC is an important field as it can help promote effective communication about sustainability, including companies' strategies towards sustainability and awareness of the need to meet sustainable goals. However, a reflection on the existing perspectives of SC reveals that there are several areas requiring further investigation. Table 1 presents a summary of the uncovered SC themes and related gaps in the literature, and future directions that are discussed in more detail below.

Firstly, future studies can explore how deploying sustainable initiatives and communication throughout the value chain can affect the promotion of market changes towards more sustainable consumption. Secondly, the SC strategies of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and how they differ from larger companies require further investigation. Comparative research between different industries and contexts can provide insights into how idiosyncratic characteristics of firms influence their SC strategies. This is particularly important, as SMEs often face challenges in implementing sustainability strategies due to their limited resources and capacities. Understanding these challenges can help researchers and organizations develop effective SC strategies for SMEs.

Thirdly, researchers have not extensively explored the internal communication of sustainability strategies. The alignment between internal and external communication is crucial to the success of a sustainable strategy, as inconsistencies harm companies' image. However, little research has been conducted on how to align internal and external communication of sustainability strategies effectively. Future research should examine the effects of alignment and misalignment of internal and external communication on the success of sustainable strategies and consumer and public perception. This can help organizations effectively communicate their sustainability strategies to their employees, thereby enhancing their commitment to sustainability goals.

Fourthly, the digital domain of SC presents an opportunity for further exploration. Social media platforms are increasingly being used as a means of SC, as they provide organizations

Discussed theme	Brief summary of discussion	Research gaps	Research questions
Reporting sustainability	Focuses on transparency and accountability in corporate communication of sustainability efforts, aligning with institutional and stakeholder theories	– Impact of reporting on consumer trust and behaviour – Integration of broader sustainability dimensions in corporate reporting	1. How does transparency in sustainability reporting influence consumer trust and corporate reputation? 2. How can organizations integrate economic and social sustainability aspects into their reporting more effectively? 3. What are best practices for enhancing stakeholder engagement through sustainability reporting?
Sustainability advertising	Examines strategies to influence consumer perceptions and behaviours towards sustainability, highlighting challenges in avoiding greenwashing	– Consumer responses to sustainability advertising. – Effectiveness of different advertising strategies in promoting sustainable behaviour	1. What are the most effective sustainability advertising strategies for changing consumer behaviour? 2. How can companies ensure their sustainability advertising is perceived as authentic and not greenwashing? 3. What role do emotional appeals play in sustainability advertising effectiveness?
Consumer reactions	Investigates consumer perceptions and responses to companies' sustainability practices, emphasizing messages that resonate with consumer values and expectations	– The gap between consumer attitudes towards sustainability and actual behaviour. – Influence of cultural and demographic factors on consumer reactions	1. How do consumers' sustainability perceptions influence their purchasing decisions? 2. What factors contribute to the gap between positive attitudes towards sustainability and actual consumer behaviour? 3. How do cultural and demographic factors affect consumer reactions to sustainability communications?

(continued)

Table 1.
Summary of discussion and future research agenda

Discussed theme	Brief summary of discussion	Research gaps	Research questions
Promoting pro-sustainable behaviour	Focuses on SC's potential to inspire and facilitate more sustainable consumer lifestyles through strategic marketing techniques	– Strategies and communication techniques that effectively encourage sustainable behaviour. – Long-term impact of SC campaigns on behaviour and lifestyle changes	1. Which communication techniques are most effective in promoting sustainable behaviour among consumers? 2. How can SC campaigns be designed to have a lasting impact on consumer behaviour? 3. What are the challenges in measuring the effectiveness of SC in promoting sustainable behaviour?
Integration of SC across the value chain	Explores how sustainability initiatives and communications integrated across the value chain can promote market changes towards sustainable consumption	– Exploration of SC's role in the entire value chain. – Impact of integrated SC strategies on sustainable consumption market changes	1. How does integrating SC across the value chain influence market changes towards sustainable consumption? 2. What are the challenges and opportunities in implementing SC throughout the value chain? 3. How can value chain integration enhance the effectiveness of SC in promoting sustainable consumption?
SC strategies of SMEs	Investigates the SC strategies of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and how they differ from larger companies	– Comparative research between SMEs and large companies. – Challenges faced by SMEs in implementing SC due to limited resources	1. How do SC strategies differ between SMEs and larger corporations? 2. What unique challenges do SMEs face in implementing effective SC strategies? 3. How can SMEs overcome resource limitations to engage in effective SC?

(continued)

Table 1.

Table 1.

Discussed theme	Brief summary of discussion	Research gaps	Research questions
Internal communication of sustainability strategies	Examines the alignment between internal and external communication of sustainability strategies	– Effects of alignment/misalignment on corporate image. – Strategies for effective internal communication of sustainability initiatives	1. How does the alignment of internal and external SC affect a company's sustainability image? 2. What strategies can enhance the effectiveness of internal SC? 3. What are the impacts of internal SC on employee engagement and sustainability practices adoption?
Effectiveness of SC in behavioural change	Considers how SC strategies can drive not just attitude but also behaviour change towards sustainable practices	– Bridging the gap between attitude change and actual behavioural adoption. – Factors and techniques that promote tangible actions and positive environmental outcomes	1. What factors influence the effectiveness of SC in driving sustainable behaviour change? 2. How can SC campaigns bridge the gap between positive sustainability attitudes and actual behaviour change? 3. What are the most effective techniques for SC to promote tangible actions towards sustainability?

Source: Elaborated by the authors

with the ability to reach a wide range of stakeholders in a cost-effective way. However, the use of algorithms and customization of social media content can significantly impact the effectiveness of SC. Researchers should explore the dialogue between consumers and brands in virtual spaces to gain insights into optimizing SC in these platforms. This can help organizations to develop effective social media strategies for SC.

Furthermore, it is crucial to investigate the effectiveness of SC in influencing attitudes and behaviour change towards a sustainability paradigm. It is essential for organizations to understand how communication strategies can effectively drive behavioural change towards sustainable practices. Research should explore the factors and techniques that can bridge the gap between attitude change and actual behavioural adoption, contributing to the development of impactful SC campaigns that drive tangible actions and positive environmental outcomes.

7. Contributions

The contributions of this paper to the SC in the marketing landscape can be viewed from theoretical and practical perspectives. From a theoretical perspective, this paper significantly contributes by establishing the foundations and delineating the current field boundaries of SC literature in the marketing field. By mapping this research field, this study provides a reference for future research as it facilitates the selection of relevant studies and themes within the discipline and points out possible outlets for future intellectual productions. Furthermore, by identifying research gaps, this study can help researchers define their research objectives, ensuring that future studies are more focused and targeted.

Furthermore, the identification of diverse elements such as CSR communication, green advertising, ethical consumerism and social marketing into the intellectual structure of SC represents a significant understanding of the field. It illustrates the complex nature of SC, bridging consumer behaviour, marketing strategy and ethical considerations. This approach broadens the scope of SC research and enriches the theoretical framework by introducing interdependencies between various marketing strategies and their impact on sustainable consumption. Moreover, the thematic analysis, which encompasses reporting sustainability, sustainability advertising, consumer reactions and promoting pro-sustainable behaviour, offers a comprehensive view of how sustainability is communicated and perceived within the marketing domain. This thematic structure contributes to theory by illustrating both the strategic and operative dimensions of SC, emphasizing the transformative potential of marketing techniques in fostering environmental and social change.

From a practical perspective, this paper's contributions are also significant. By providing a comprehensive overview of the adoption of SC in marketing, this study offers valuable insights into the practical application of the research. For example, businesses and marketers can use the insights gained from this study to develop more effective SC strategies, leading to more sustainable business practices. Organizations have different approaches when reporting sustainable practices aiming to attend to stakeholders' expectations, especially shareholders, versus when adopting communication tools to achieve customers.

This study reveals the boundaries among these areas within organizations and calls for companies to adopt sustainable practices through a more integrated perspective. For instance, reports should be a consequence of the company's strategic plan and sustainable conduct throughout the entire organization, reflecting shareholders' interests and, especially, the company's cultural practices. That is, a genuine integration of sustainable practices and culture consistently throughout the company. Companies are increasingly pressured by society and

their consumer base to extend their sustainability efforts beyond mere reports and superficial practices. Still, literature and practice reveal significant gaps as companies are not embedding sustainability at their core (Tardin, Perin, Simões, & Braga, 2024).

Similarly, policymakers and non-governmental organizations can use the insights gained from this study to develop more effective policies and programmes aimed at promoting SC in marketing. Overall, the theoretical and practical contributions of this paper are significant, providing valuable insights into the field of SC in marketing and offering a reference for future research and practical applications.

8. Conclusion

The paper's systematic literature review reveals that the field of SC has undergone significant growth over the past 15 years. This growth has its foundations in five interconnected groups: institutional and stakeholder theories, CSR communication and its effectiveness, green advertising, ethical consumerism and marketing strategies, and social marketing for sustainable consumption. Furthermore, four core themes shaping current research on SC within marketing field were identified, namely: reporting sustainability, sustainability advertising, consumer reactions, and promoting pro-sustainable behaviour. These streams suggest an evolution of the prior clusters into these thematic in the marketing's perspective, but also show that scholars are interested in exploring various aspects of SC from multiple perspectives. Overall, these results point to a particular evolution of the co-citation groups to the current broad themes in SC literature in marketing.

One interesting finding of the study is that the research on SC has been conducted in top marketing journals. This indicates that SC is becoming an increasingly important topic in marketing. As sustainability becomes a more pressing issue, companies are more likely to prioritize it in their communication efforts. Scholars have recognized the importance of studying SC to inform best practices and better understand how companies can effectively communicate their sustainability efforts to consumers.

The present study acknowledges its limitations regarding keyword selection and journal inclusion. While the selected keywords were deemed appropriate for the research object, a future expansion of this study should consider additional terms such as "environmental, social, and governance" (ESG) literature. This would provide a more comprehensive review of the research field of SC. Also, the study only considered a set of 47 journals, which are considered high-impact journals in the marketing field. While these journals represent a significant proportion of the research output in the field, expanding the journal selection could provide a more significant number of articles and potentially different insights. It is also worth noting that while the current study focuses on the marketing literature, SC is a multidisciplinary field, and future studies may benefit from including literature from other fields, such as communication studies, sociology and environmental sciences.

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