

Circular Economy Elements in Marketing Communications: An Opinion Perspective for a Sustainable Future

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Abstract

Purpose : This research aimed to explore the role of the circular economy (CE) in shaping contemporary marketing strategies and promoting sustainable consumption among consumers. The study aimed to delve into the complexities involved in driving behavioral changes toward circular consumption and how marketers can transcend traditional rational marketing communications to achieve this goal.

Methodology : This research adopted an opinion perspective based on a thorough review of literature from credible sources. It drew on research papers published in high-quality peer-reviewed journals focusing on circular economy, sustainability, and marketing communications.

Key Findings : The study examined the application of the elaboration likelihood model to understand how marketers can effectively persuade and influence consumer behavior for a sustainable future. It sheds light on marketers' utilization of the central route and peripheral route strategies to incorporate circular economy principles.

Practical Implications : The insights presented in this research offered valuable guidance to policymakers and marketers in promoting sustainable thinking among consumers and encouraging circular consumption patterns. Consequently, the findings contributed not only to the well-being of consumers and societies in terms of sustainability but also aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) for the year 2030.

Originality : The significance of circular economy and sustainability in the marketing landscape is gaining prominence. This research stands out by offering novel insights and opening up new avenues for further exploration in both theoretical and practical aspects, aspects that have been relatively underexplored in existing literature and practice.

Keywords : circular economy, elaboration likelihood model, sustainability, marketing communication, digital sources of information

JEL Classification Codes : E7, H8, M1, M2, M3, A1

Paper Submission Date : March 5, 2023 ; **Paper sent back for Revision :** May 10, 2023 ; **Paper Acceptance Date :** June 10, 2023 ; **Paper Published Online :** August 16, 2023

The term 'circular economy' (CE) has seized compelling importance in the changing contexts of the economies and business world. It perhaps has driven many aligning research perspectives toward academia and policymaking. Changing lifestyles of consumers in the social cum digital revolution, overconsumption and irresponsible consumption of virgin resources due to abundant choices and accessibilities to products, increasing marketing realities and competitiveness, dynamic changes in the structure of environmental issues, globalization and integration of industries, and technological disruption have been some of the reasons for the world turning toward CE for sustainable life (Rejeb et al., 2023; Shankar, 2022). World economies are now taking the initial steps to promote sustainability across all transactions, aiming to safeguard the planet from environmental degradation, health crises, resource shortages, and the impacts of climate change.

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This drive toward sustainable living is a response to the challenges posed by the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) situations faced by the global environment. Achieving a sustainable future relies on a significant shift in consumer behavior, yet instigating such changes poses a formidable challenge (Kumar & Sheoran, 2021). Consequently, research and policymaking in the field of consumer studies increasingly emphasize sustainability, particularly about circular consumption patterns. The underlying belief is that transforming consumer behavior will ultimately advance the sustainability goals of nations.

UNSDGS 2030 and the Current Scenario of Consumers

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030 foster 17 goals that are very critical for the world to have a better sustainable future. This collective roadmap is for fostering peace and prosperity for both humanity and the planet, both now and in the future. The 17 goals demand immediate action from all nations – whether developed or developing, on eradicating poverty and addressing various deprivations while simultaneously enhancing health, education, and equality, promoting economic growth, emphasizing climate change, and protecting natural resources for a sustainable future. Under this revolution, there are plenty of research works and marketing efforts by researchers, marketers, organizations, and others built on consumers' sustainable consumption. However, the outcomes of such strategic marketing efforts are yet to witness effective changes, mainly in consumer sustainable behavior. Consumers' behaviors are often exemplified by misaligned marketing strategies, particularly when it comes to alluring digital marketing messages being conveyed to them.

Furthermore, in this period of social revolution fueled by digital technologies that improve consumers' lives, people place a higher premium on quality-of-life viewpoints. They place a premium on the quality of whatever they buy and dispose of. Thus, the idea of responsible, efficient, and sustainable consumption takes a backseat when considered alongside the concept of quality of life. Striking a delicate balance between aligning consumer behavior toward CE principles without compromising quality becomes a crucial subjective challenge. In the majority of consumer markets, a linear consumption pattern prevails, wherein products are chosen, purchased, used, and discarded without much thought given to the resulting waste. Moreover, the issue of consumers' irresponsible overconsumption of virgin products or resources is seldom emphasized or reiterated.

Role of Circular Economy (CE)

Nevertheless, CE seeks to achieve a sustainable future by going beyond the disposal stage and encouraging consumers to maximize the use of their purchased products. In essence, it promotes consumption practices that optimize product usage, reduces waste, and encourage recycling, reuse, and extract each item's full potential value (García-Sánchez et al., 2021; Rejeb et al., 2023). Embracing such circular behavior would significantly contribute to the attainment of sustainable development goals, paving the way for a sustainable future worldwide.

However, this transition towards sustainability-driven behavior within consumers' economies requires strategic marketing efforts that influence consumer behaviors, potentially through digital channels. Therefore, it becomes crucial to focus on fostering such circular ideologies to facilitate the shift toward CE adoption and sustainable practices. This perspective emphasizes the need for a consumer-driven economy that aligns with sustainability principles.

Why Marketing Messages?

In the fast-paced world of marketing, it is estimated that individuals encounter a staggering 1,500 marketing messages each day. But here's the catch – not all consumers retain these messages equally. Their response to

marketing efforts varies based on demographics, geography, perception, attitude, self-concept, and, most importantly, the sources of information they rely on. This is where the art of communication strategies comes into play for marketers as they strive to effectively position their brands and products in consumers' minds. In the digital era, information technologies and digital sources hold the key to success. A recent study by Shankar et al. (2022) highlighted the critical role played by these digital platforms in crafting compelling communication strategies. The clever use of such sources can influence consumers' cognitive perceptions and sway their behavior toward specific products or brands (Shankar, 2020). Therefore, understanding and leveraging these information sources become paramount when aiming to bring about changes in consumer behavior. CE places sustainability at the core of its philosophy, emphasizing the need for responsible consumption patterns. To achieve this, marketers must harness the immense potential of digital sources of information. Tiago et al. (2021) stressed the significance of optimizing these channels to promote circular consumption and encourage sustainable behavior among consumers. Strategic use of digital sources can have an impact on molding consumer sustainable behavior. This is critical in advancing toward CE.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Circular Economy (CE)

In the consumer behavior and sustainability literature, the integration of digital sources with CE elements remains relatively scarce. However, the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) presents a promising avenue for conceiving marketing message strategies that foster circular economy principles in digital marketing communications, thereby promoting sustainability among consumers and driving behavioral changes toward circular consumption. ELM, developed by Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo in 1980, holds significant relevance in understanding human persuasion processes. According to the ELM, persuasion involves the act of convincing individuals through compelling reasons and arguments. Consumers acquire information about products or services from various sources, yet not all messages are retained and responded to uniformly. The ELM posits that the persuasive impact of messages relies on how effectively they are processed through two distinct routes: the central route (CR) and the peripheral route (PR).

Under the CR, consumers carefully scrutinize the content of marketing messages, evaluating the merits and implications of the information provided. This route is characterized by a systematic and thoughtful assessment of the message's arguments, leading to stronger and more enduring attitudes and behavioral changes. On the other hand, PR involves a more superficial and heuristic processing of messages, where consumers rely on cues such as the visual attractiveness or credibility of the source to form attitudes and make decisions.

Understanding these routes of persuasion is vital for designing effective marketing strategies that align with circular economy principles. By strategically crafting digital marketing communications that appeal to both central and peripheral processing, marketers can foster sustainable behavior among consumers and encourage the adoption of circular consumption patterns. Integrating circular economy elements with persuasive messaging can potentially create a meaningful impact on consumer behavior, propelling us toward a more sustainable future.

CR and CE

The CR, which centers on consumers' cognitive perception, relies on critical thinking to analyze information, establish relevance, and form judgments about target behaviors (Esfahani et al., 2015). It is a stringent and difficult-to-penetrate route, making it challenging for marketers to impact consumers through this path. However, due to its potential to initiate behavioral changes, the CR holds significant advantages for CE communications. Here, the question arises: What elements of the CE should be embedded in marketing messages when targeting the central route? Primarily, sustainability aspects must be incorporated to raise awareness about sustainability. These

aspects extend beyond environmental considerations and encompass social perspectives, individual responsibilities, organizational responsibilities, and culture (Shankar, 2021). For instance, marketing messages should shed light on how current consumption behaviors negatively impact social values, traditions, and norms of living. They should emphasize individual responsibilities for preserving scarce virgin resources for future generations without compromising their originality. Additionally, messages should highlight how an organization's brand identity can create value for people, the environment, and society. Lastly, the influence of culture as a behavioral antecedent should be reflected upon.

Presenting these aspects negatively in marketing messages can evoke a stronger perception. Consumers tend to refrain from decisions and behaviors that negatively affect the environment (Machová et al., 2022). Negative messages may attract consumers' attention faster and have a more profound impact than positive messages. Therefore, marketers should strategically foster negative perspectives on consumers' current linear consumption behavior while designing communication strategies.

Moreover, selecting the appropriate form of communication is crucial, as consumers on online platforms have distinct preferences for different message types. Video advertisements with fear or sadness elements, pictorial representations with emotive cues, and written messages that evolve into a tagline or mantra can all effectively convey the desired message. The key is to guide consumers toward circular consumption and a sustainable future, as the central route builds cognitive perceptions that are difficult to break. Capitalizing on the central route's power to influence cognitive perception can pave the way for meaningful behavioral changes, promoting circular economy principles through effective marketing communications. By incorporating negative perspectives on current consumption behaviors and tailoring the message formats to suit consumers' preferences, marketers can drive sustainable practices and contribute to a more sustainable future.

PR and CE

The second route, known as PR, may not require high involvement from consumers, but it significantly influences their perceived benefits, effectiveness, and attitudes (Liu et al., 2022). In this route, marketers can effectively influence consumers by tapping into their personal beliefs about behaviors that are beneficial to them (Liu et al., 2022). To leverage this route, marketers can establish research frameworks to gain insights into consumers' motives, preferences, lifestyles, purchasing patterns, and post-consumption behaviors. By understanding what attracts consumers, marketers can segment them based on specific variables and design marketing messages highlighting the benefits of embracing circular consumption. Crafting marketing messages emphasizing the lucrative advantages of circular consumption can engender a favorable attitude among consumers. For instance, showcasing the sustainability benefits of food consumption can positively influence consumers' perceptions (Liu et al., 2022; Pham et al., 2019). This approach is particularly relevant in food marketing, given the critical role food plays in sustainability (Shankar, 2022).

Another critical perspective for marketers to investigate and employ is the complementary roles of CR and PR. While the CR aims to create cognitive perceptions about the circular economy for a sustainable future, the PR should focus on driving behavior. In this era of social and digital revolution, consumers prioritize the quality aspects of their choices, purchases, and consumption. Hence, marketing messages through PR should emphasize the quality of products, lifestyles, and consumer cohorts. It is important to recognize that not all consumers are motivated by the same factors; however, identifying commonalities is the key. In today's sustainability-focused world, consumers seek responsible choices and decision-making. By incorporating sustainability elements that align with global megatrends, marketers can evoke favorable consumer attitudes. As digital platforms play a pivotal role in communicating marketing messages, marketers must judiciously select value proposition elements that emphasize perceived benefits and values, thereby guiding consumers' behavior toward embracing circular economy practices.

Understanding and leveraging PR can be instrumental in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward circular consumption. By tailoring marketing messages to highlight the benefits of sustainability and quality while tapping into consumers' personal beliefs, marketers can drive positive change and contribute to a more sustainable future.

Implications and Conclusion

The ELM holds significant promise for marketers seeking to foster sustainable consumption behavior among their consumers (Bigliardi et al., 2020). This framework zeroes in on two crucial factors that determine the success of sustainable lifestyles through CE: the internal and external aspects. By carefully examining what marketers communicate through digital sources and how consumers process and elaborate on this information, marketers can significantly increase consumers' awareness levels and drive behavioral changes (Kutaula et al., 2022).

As disruptive technologies continue to evolve, organizations strive to enhance the quality of their services for consumers. While these advancements may improve consumer experiences and elicit delight, it is equally vital to prioritize building a more sustainable future. Embracing the CE not only reduces the consumption of scarce virgin resources but also creates opportunities for marketers to optimize product consumption, thereby contributing to responsible and sustainable consumption at the societal, governmental, policymaking, and individual consumer levels. Thereby, such strategic inclusion of CE elements in marketing communication through the lens of ELM will result in behavioral changes in consumers, facilitate moving toward CE, and contribute to UNSDGs.

Limitations of the Study and the Way Forward

The arguments and ideologies presented here serve as opinion perspectives, reflecting the current changing contexts in pursuit of a sustainable future. However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of the author's readings in shaping these perspectives. Quantitative empirical research outcomes focusing on CE and sustainability in the area of consumer behavior will produce novel insights and contribute to the enhancement of theories.

Author's Contribution

Dr. Sabari Shankar Ravichandran has solely drafted this opinion perspective based on readings from literature and reflection.

Conflict of Interest

The author certifies that he has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this paper.

Funding Acknowledgment

The author received no financial support for this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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