Social normalisation and consumer behaviour: using marketing to make green normal

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Abstract

In this paper we introduce a potentially valuable approach to green marketing: repositioning activities as normal, or not normal, to encourage the adoption of more sustainable consumer practices. Initially, we draw attention to the challenges facing green marketing, as well as the behavioural models on which it is often based. Then, drawing on focus group research, we demonstrate that consumer attitudes towards, and adoption of, green behaviours are often expressed in relation their understandings of what is normal. Further, we show that consumer understandings of what is normal changes over time. To frame the findings, we use the concept of social normalisation; a temporal process in which activities that were once marginal and unusual become normal and everyday, and we argue that green marketing can contribute to processes of social normalisation by making green normal.

Keywords

Green marketing; conformity; social normalisation; practice theory; social norm approach

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

The 2008 Climate Change Act committed the UK to an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050. The UK government expects consumer behaviour change to play a major role in achieving this reduction (UK Low Carbon Transition Plan, 2009). Although marketing has been accused of stimulating unsustainable levels of consumption (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Van Dam and Apeldoon, 1996; Stearns, 2001; Abela, 2006), this policy focus draws attention to the potential role that marketing can play in the adoption of more sustainable behaviours, products and services (Jones *et al.*, 2007; Peattie and Peattie, 2009).

This paper proposes a novel environmental marketing approach in which greener consumer behaviours are encouraged by repositioning them as normal. The research was undertaken in order to help to explain the disappointing performance of green marketing initiatives (Peattie and Crane, 2005; Brennan and Binney, 2008; Pickett-Baker and Ozaki, 2008). Although climate change is a key consumer issue, with 59% of consumers concerned worldwide (Nielsen, 2011), this is not reflected in consumer behaviour. The study illuminates the ways in which consumers conceptualise and adopt pro-environmental behaviours and products, and highlights the importance of consumer ideas about what is normal.

The research indicates that consumers are more likely to adopt behaviours and products that they think are normal, and that what is regarded as normal changes over time. New activities and products that are initially seen as different, and as outside normal behaviour, may eventually become mainstream and accepted as normal. There seems to be a process of "social normalisation" in which ideas, behaviours and products that are initially regarded as outside the range of normality, gradually become accepted as normal and as part of ordinary, everyday life. As part of this process, other behaviours which have been mainstream, everyday ways of doing things can become marginalised over time.

This paper argues that green marketing could potentially contribute to sustainability objectives by driving processes of social normalisation. Marketing techniques could be used to reposition those pro-environmental behaviours and products that consumers do not currently adopt, because they see them as "not normal" and therefore as relevant only to very green consumers. To encourage adoption pro-environmental behaviours need to be repositioned as mainstream, normal and what everyone else does. Similarly, there is scope to reposition those unsustainable behaviours that persist because consumers see them as "normal"; these need to be repositioned as unusual and not normal. The findings also indicate that new green products should be positioned as mainstream rather than as niche alternatives; differentiating products on a green platform limits their sales potential, because they are seen as of interest only to committed "green" consumers.

The next section briefly reviews key papers on green marketing, this is followed by the research methodology and the research findings, which focus on the relationship between consumer behaviour and conceptions of normality. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research.

CHAPTER 2:

GREEN MARKETING

Peattie and Charter (1997: 389) define green marketing as "the holistic management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying the needs of customers and society, in a profitable and sustainable way". This broad definition covers both commercial and non-commercial marketing, and green behaviours as well as products and services. In this broader sense, green marketing can potentially play an important role in encouraging more sustainable consumption (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Jones *et al.*, 2007; Peattie and Peattie, 2009).

Peattie and Crane (2005: 357) note the disappointing performance of green marketing. They attribute this failure to "misconceived" marketing practices, which are often ineffective and provoke consumer cynicism. The authors argue that green marketing strategies should adopt a more holistic consumer approach and a customer focus. Lee (2008) characterises the development of green marketing as encompassing three stages: introduction in the 80's, the consumer backlash of the 90's and a third stage that commenced with the new millennium. She argues that increasing environmental concerns, technological innovation, and stricter regulation have created a new momentum that will move eco-friendly business into the mainstream. However, despite some resurgence of interest, research indicates that green marketing is still failing to engage consumers (Pickett-Baker and Ozaki, 2008). Brennan and Binney (2008) claim that greenwash has led to consumer scepticism and disillusionment. "Greenwash" is defined as a superficial or insincere display of concern for the environment shown by an organisation (Collins English Dictionary, 2009). Increasing levels of greenwash in the UK are reflected in a sharp increase in complaints about environmental claims, which were up 470% in 2007 (Wilson, 2008). The prevalence of greenwash helps to explain the "greenophobia" observed by Grant (2007: 200), who claims that consumers see green products as more expensive, less effective and aimed at "weird" people.

Young et al. (2010) note that there is an attitude-behaviour gap (Blake, 1999) so that, although 30% of consumers claim to be very concerned about the environment, this does not translate into green purchase behaviour. There is considerable empirical evidence of an attitude-behaviour or "green gap" (Black 2010). Numerous studies report only modest correlations between environmental values, attitudes and behaviours (Schlegelmilch et al., 1996; Follows and Jobber, 2000; Fraj and Martinez, Mostafa, 2007; 2007; do Paço, and Raposo, 2009; Jansson et al. 2011). Similarly, in Bamberg and Moser's (2007) meta-analysis of 57 environmental studies, intentions accounted for only 27% of the variance in selfreported pro-environmental behaviour. This gap is also supported by qualitative research. Carrigan and Attalla (2001) report that despite consumer intentions, actual purchase behaviour is often uninfluenced by ethical concerns. Szmigin, Carrigan, and McEachern (2009) found that even very ethically conscious consumers are inconsistent and flexible in their purchase behaviour. Findings from quantitative research on consumer motives for proenvironmental behaviours have been inconsistent and have not helped to explain consumer behaviour in this area (Ewing, 2001; McEachern and McClean, 2002; Straughan and Roberts, 1999; Oates et al., 2006).

This review indicates that although green marketing has a long history, its position is somewhat ambivalent, with little evidence of success and allegations of greenwash and 'misconceived' marketing practices (Peattie and Crane, 2005, Brennan and Binney, 2008). There has been considerable quantitative research and some qualitative research on green marketing, but it is generally agreed that there is limited understanding of green behaviour or how it might be more successfully shaped by green marketing. Researchers have responded to this seeming impasse in a variety of ways. Within the green marketing literature, researchers have argued for an emphasis on interpretive, qualitative research methods to better understand the motivational basis of green behaviours (Hartmann and Ibáñez 2006; Mostafa, 2007). Within the context of anti-consumption research, the foundational notions of the green consumer and green behaviour are challenged. Instead of focusing on what people do or consume, researchers of anti-consumption emphasise the importance of what people do not consume or do not do, and why (Black, 2010). Thus, the anti-consumption literature draws on concepts such as authenticity, identity, self-expression and happiness, and discusses these in the context of actions, such as product or brand boycotting, avoidance, resistance and retaliation. By contrast, sociologists working with practice theory tend to eschew the emphasis on individuals making decisions about consumption (or anti-consumption) (Shove, 2003). Instead, practice theorists understand consumption to emerge through everyday and, importantly, taken-for-granted practices, such as cooking and cleaning (Warde, 2005). Practice theory draws attention to the interlinked arrays of meanings, know-how, material objects that shape practices, and argues that these are socially, not individually, constituted (Schatzki, 1996; Shove, 2003).

The current research aims to meet the call for more qualitative research (Hartmann and Ibáñez, 2006; Mostafa, 2007) and to contribute to the understanding of pro-environmental behaviour.

CHAPTER 3:

METHODOLOGY

The research aimed to explain the poor performance of green marketing initiatives and to increase understanding of green behaviour and consumption. Qualitative research was selected in order to explore respondents' understandings, attitudes, norms and behaviours, including those that were not immediately salient, and in order to observe how respondents reacted to a range of green marketing initiatives. Focus groups were used because the interaction between participants provides key insights about language use, world views, values and beliefs (Kitzinger, 1994) and because they are particularly appropriate for exploring socially shared knowledge (Marková *et al.*, 2007).

The research consisted of six, two-hour, professionally recruited and moderated, focus groups involving a total of 48 respondents, who received a small financial incentive. In order to ensure a diversity of perspectives, the groups comprised four female-only groups and two male-only groups, four age ranges, three urban UK locations, and respondents who were classified as "not green", "light green" or "dark green" using environmental attitudinal questions (see Table 1).

Group	Sex	Demographics	Consumer Type	Location
1	Female	55-65, C1C2	Not green	Birmingham
2	Female	21-29, BC1	Dark Green	Birmingham
3	Female	40-55, C1C2	Light Green	Manchester
4	Male	25-35, BC1	Not green	Manchester
5	Female	25-35, C1C2	Light Green	South London
6	Male	40-55, BC1	Dark Green	South London

Table 1. The six focus groups.

The topic guide covered: attitudes to sustainability and climate change; sustainability related behaviours and consumption; and responses and attitudes to commercial and government sponsored green marketing initiatives. Photo elicitation can increase informant involvement (Heisley and Levy, 1991); participants were therefore given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of activities and objects they thought were green or not green, bringing the prints to the group. Research stimuli included the 261 photographs contributed by respondents, 20 concept boards for mapping exercises, and 22 advertisements depicting manufacturer, retailer, government and NGO green initiatives.

The groups were moderated by the second author of this paper, who produced an initial analysis of the findings. A more thorough thematic analysis, influenced by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was also conducted. Transcripts, produced from the audio recordings, were coded by the first author and a second coder using Atlas.ti software. The two coders coded the 261 photographs independently, identifying 43 themes which were compared and consolidated to form six final codes. Disagreements between the two coders

were resolved by discussion and re-examination of the relevant text. In the results section that follows, pseudonyms are used in the illustrative quotations.

Results

The most striking feature of the focus groups was the way in which participants discussed green behaviours in relation to their understandings of what is normal. This forms the focus of the paper and is discussed in detail below.

The research confirms that consumers are very cynical about green marketing initiatives (Peattie and Crane, 2005; Grant, 2007) although there was relatively little cynicism about global warming and climate change. All participants were cynical about commercial and government communication on green issues. Companies are seen as hypocritical because they are inconsistent in their initiatives; respondents were aware, for instance, that the same companies made concentrated and unconcentrated cleaning products. *"I keep on seeing the adverts on the telly for Comfort, the concentrated bottles. But you can still go into Tesco's and buy the normal one. If they can do that, why bother with the other one?"* (John, group 4). In this last quotation John compares the new concentrated clothes softeners to the "normal" one. This is an example of how consumers often relate new products to their normal counterparts. Normal in this sense is what most people do or buy. Given high levels of consumer cynicism about green products it may be particularly difficult to persuade people to move from the reassurance of what is normal to trial and adoption of new green products.

The groups began with a discussion of the photographs that participants brought to the groups. Recycling was the most common topic of the photographs (30%). Other themes included transport, energy saving devices, plastic bags and water conservation. Behaviours typically categorised as green were recycling, reusing plastic bags or buying energy saving light bulbs, whereas activities that were categorised as not green included driving a 4 x 4 car, taking an excessive number of flights, or using too much packaging. It was clear from respondents' discussions that they found it easy to categorise activities as green or not green. There is broad consumer agreement as to what is green and not green, and these views largely coincide with expert views. Consumers do not assess greenness in terms of actual impact on the environment, e.g. by attempting to calculate the CO2 related emissions, but rely instead on their perceptions of how society classifies activities.

Recycling was the key focus for respondents' green behaviour; the consensus was that recycling was normal nowadays, and that this reflected a general behaviour change. The normality of recycling is supported by the visibility of recycling bins; respondents were very aware of whether or not their neighbours recycled. David explained, "A *household that isn't recycling anything, and they're putting it all in the brown bin. It would be offensive now, rather than, who cares.*" (group 6). David's use of "now" reflects his view that recycling behaviour has changed, and is normal nowadays. It was clear from the research that consumers are aware that what is normal changes over time; what is relevant is what is "normal nowadays". Nearly all interviewees claimed they had adopted greener behaviour, indicating lay awareness of the "attitude-behaviour" gap noted in the literature. Behaviour change was seen as a slow process because it took time and "retraining" to acquire new

habits. For example: "I keep trying to get myself into the habit of doing that [turning the tap off while brushing teeth] but I haven't managed to do it." (Mary, group 2). Norms and the approval of others clearly influenced behaviour, "You don't want to be seen as being the bad one. You know, you want to be seen to be doing the right thing." (Sam, group 6). There were many comments about the way norms and attitudes to the environment had changed over time: "People are starting to care about things a bit more" (April, group 2).

An unexpected feature of the focus groups was the way in which participants talked about the greenness of activities in relation to their normality. The analysis distinguished three aspects of this. First, for many consumers it appears that there is something about considering an activity to be normal that makes its classification as green or not green less relevant; instead, it is just normal. This helps to explain why some unsustainable behaviours are difficult to change; they are taken-for-granted and not challenged because they are just normal. Second, some activities which are recognised as green (an example from the research was putting a water bottle in a lavatory cistern to reduce water consumption), but which have not been normalised, are not adopted because they seem too different from the ways things are normally done. Finally, as discussed above, what is normal is often explicitly related to "nowadays" reflecting an awareness that normality changes over time.

These features of the focus group discussions were not always directly reflected in participant comments. Rather, they emerged in often vague and extended interactions between participants. However, Group 2's discussion of the water saving measure of placing a water-filled plastic bottle in the toilet cistern demonstrates the ways in which an understanding of an activity as not normal precludes its adoption. The topic was introduced by Maria with the observation "I've known for ages that if you put one of those big two or three litre bottles of lemonade, when you've used it up, fill it with water and put it in your toilet system once you've flushed it, then every time it fills up it uses less water. And have I done it? No." Having made this comment, Maria went on to explain the technique to the other participants, some of whom struggled to understand, and to attempt to explain why she had not started to do something that she clearly thought was sensible. Throughout these exchanges, the tone of the discussion revealed that for Maria and the others, while this might be a green thing to do, its likelihood of being adopted was minimal because it was also understood to be not normal. This was brought into sharp relief by Gill, who commented, "I'm going to tell my friend about that, she'll love that, she's so green". Gill's comment is important because it reflects a sense among the group that this particular behaviour is specifically for people who are green, but not for normal people like them.

The research highlights the importance of what is seen as normal, and the way in which this changes over time. Whether or not an activity or product is regarded as normal is important for green consumer behaviour. The perception that an activity is normal seems to encourage adoption and discourage behaviour change, whereas the perception that it is not normal seems to deter adoption. The research suggests that consumers do not contemplate changing some activities, such as flying abroad or driving to work, although they recognise that they are not green because they regard these activities as normal and as part of modern life. Conversely, many consumers are reluctant to adopt those green behaviours which they regard as not normal and as too unusual until these become mainstream.

This highlights the importance of a process of "social normalisation" in which new activities and behaviours gradually become accepted as ordinary and normal, encouraging their adoption and rendering them less susceptible to revision. Precedents for the term "normalisation", include Foucault's (1975) disciplinary use, the "normalisation thesis" (Parker *et al.*, 1998) in the context of drug use, and "normalisation process theory" (May and Finch, 2009) in the context of new work practices. Shove's (2003) work on showering and laundering can be understood in terms of the social normalisation of specific forms of these practices. These works have identified different processes in which conceptions of what is seen as normal change, either on an individual or on a social level. This research indicates that the concept of normalisation can be extended to pro-environmental behaviours, where it is relevant to the adoption and maintenance of green consumer behaviour. The word "social" in the term "social normalisation" is used to indicate that what is relevant is that the behaviour is normal within a social group and not simply to an individual.

The importance of social normalisation helps to explain why respondents saw green initiatives that promote activities that are currently outside the norm, such as calculating one's carbon footprint or drinking carbon neutral beer, as irrelevant to them and as directed at those who are very green rather than at ordinary people. Thus, key elements in the promotion of such activities is positioning them as normal and for everyone, and targeting a mass market rather than a niche group of green consumers.

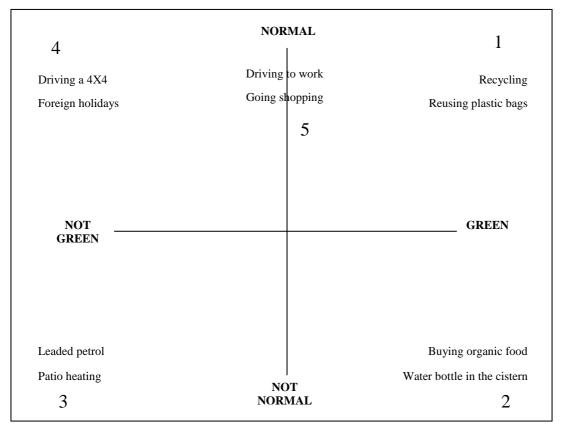




Figure 1 maps respondents' conceptions of different activities by depicting them on two continua: a scale from very normal (i.e. what people generally do) to not at all normal and a

scale from very green to not at all green. Depicting activities on these two scales is useful because it provides a snapshot of the extent to which an activity has been normalised and the extent to which it is seen as green. Thus activities in area 1 (e.g. recycling) are seen as green and as normal, while those in area 3 are seen as neither normal nor green (e.g. using patio heaters). This mapping also indicates possible green marketing strategies. Sustainability marketing initiatives directed at pro-environmental activities in area 1 should focus on reinforcing existing conceptions. In contrast, activities in area 2 (e.g. buying organic food) are seen as green, but as not normal. Marketing could be used to normalise these activities by positioning them as popular, normal activities, and thus attempting to move them towards area 1. Activities in area 4 (e.g. taking foreign holidays) are currently regarded as not green, but as normal. Marketing could challenge and attempt to reposition these unsustainable behaviours which are seen as normal while reinforcing conceptions that they are not green. The task for unsustainable activities in area 5 (e.g. driving to work) is rather different. These activities are currently regarded as normal and as neither green nor not green. Marketing could help to change perceptions so that eventually they are seen as not green and not normal (area 3).

The research suggests that a process of social normalisation is relevant to green behaviour. Some pro-environmental behaviours which had been considered as outside the range of normality have gradually become normal. Respondents spoke about the way in which everyday normal life had changed over time, and in particular about how their awareness of and attitudes to green issues have changed: "We didn't think about these sort of things five years ago, no way, none of us" (Tom, group 6). Respondents' comments suggest that recycling used to be seen as green but as unusual rather than normal (area 2) but that it is now regarded as green, but/and normal (area 1). The authors suggest that in the future, recycling may well be taken-for-granted and, like putting out general rubbish for collection, regarded as neither green nor not green, but just as normal (area 5). The research suggests that driving a 4x4 car used to be seen as neither green nor not green, and as normal (area 5), but that it now regarded as not green, although normal. In the future, driving 4x4 cars may no longer be seen as normal (area 3).

Some respondents were aware of this process of social normalisation. Older respondents spoke about how everyday practices had changed and harked back to the 50's and 60's, and to an earlier understanding of normality that did not include the "excessive" consumerism evident today. They talked about past generations, when things came in brown paper bags, produce was local and there was a culture of not wasting anything. One remembered: "We don't wear clothes as long as we used to years ago. When we were kids you had to wear them two or three days running. Now they have them on half an hour and throw them into the wash." (Nancy, group 1). Comments like this and the following excerpt reflect older respondents' awareness of changes in normality. Our nans and our mums used to go to the shops with their little wicker bags to get their groceries, and we didn't used to have carrier bags and then all the carrier bag thing came in and it was convenience, convenience, and now we're going back to taking our bags with us when we go shopping. (Peter, group 6).

Although respondents were allocated to "dark green", "light green" and "not green" groups on the basis of their environmental attitudes, the importance of what is seen as normal was a common factor. However, respondents in the "dark green" groups were more inclined to think of the current status quo as unsustainable, even if normal. They were more likely to see green problems as endemic in normal everyday life, to acknowledge the need for change and to envisage the possibility of a different normality. In contrast, those in the "not green" groups saw what is normal in more reassuring terms. They were much less likely to see normal everyday life as a problem and tended to believe that their own contribution was negligible. Most respondents aspired to be normal rather than green and consequently they saw initiatives that told them how to be green, or exhorted them to think about their carbon footprints, as irrelevant.

CHAPTER 4:

DISCUSSION

Green marketing has been disappointing (Hartmann and Ibáñez, 2006; Lee, 2008; Pickett-Baker and Ozaki, 2008). This research indicates that a key reason for this is that the positioning of activities and products as green inadvertently positions them as relevant only to a niche of "green" consumers, discouraging mainstream adoption. The paper identifies ways in which marketing could play a more proactive role in the achievement of sustainability (Jones et al., 2007; Peattie and Peattie, 2009; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). The research suggests that consumer adoption of green practices and products is constrained by conceptions of green initiatives and products as relevant to a green niche rather than to everyone. Green marketing can potentially play an important role in the social normalisation of green behaviours by portraying these behaviours as normal and everyday rather than highlighting their greenness. The concept of "social normalisation" extends previous work on normalisation in other contexts, and is defined as a social process in which ideas, behaviours, products and practices that are initially considered as outside the range of normality, gradually become accepted as standard, normal and part of ordinary life. Respondents' discussions indicate that the extent to which activities are seen as normal, and as green, changes over time. This has been applied in a quantitative study of the social normalisation of more, and less, sustainable activities (Anonymous, 2012).

Marketing has traditionally been used to change consumer conceptions, to position and reposition brands, and to build brand values and images. These techniques can be applied to the normalisation of behaviours; for instance, campaigns could suggest normality by showing celebrities or authority figures doing the relevant behaviour (a Take That video had inspired one respondent to switch the tap off while brushing her teeth), or by using product or behaviour placement (e.g. in television soaps) and, where feasible, by providing selected information about the popularity of the relevant behaviour (cf. the social norm approach Cialdini *et al.* 2006). Obviously, the normalisation of behaviours is difficult; in many cases conceptions about what is normal are accurate and entrenched. However, marketing can help to gradually change these views, until a tipping point is reached, where the behaviour is, and is seen to be, normal. Contrary to Rogers (1962), who highlights the role of early adopters in the diffusion of innovation, the research highlights the role of the majority in normalising, and thus encouraging, the adoption of new practices and products. The process of social normalisation, and the consequent scope for marketing, is relevant not only to sustainability, but also to other behaviour change areas, such as health and welfare.

These findings are relevant to governmental and non-governmental agencies who seek to encourage more sustainable behaviour and to companies seeking to promote the sales of greener products and services, or who wish to add green credentials to their brands. The perception that some unsustainable behaviours are normal impedes progress towards sustainability by making these practices less susceptible to challenge and revision. On the other hand, some proactively sustainable behaviours are not adopted because they appear to the consumer to be outside accepted normal behaviour. Rather than urging consumers to "act on CO2" and reduce their carbon footprint, campaigns could encourage the social normalisation of pro-environmental behaviours. Many green products are positioned as different from the norm, either as premium or as targeting a niche of green consumers. It is tempting to launch green products and brands on a platform of differentiation that enables premium pricing or additional shelf facings (cf. green harvesting, Peattie and Crane, 2005). However, the high level of consumer cynicism found in this research suggests that this strategy is short sighted and may damage brand values. Positioning a product as the "new normal", rather than as a green alternative, may forestall consumer cynicism and secure a larger market share. The research suggests that manufacturers who supply both mainstream (i.e. less sustainable) and more sustainable "green" products can sometimes be seen as hypocritical and as lacking in commitment to the green goals they espouse. Manufacturers should consider *removing* less green alternatives to accelerate the adoption and normalisation of new green products. Brands such as the Body Shop were seen as avoiding this kind of hypocrisy. Their entire portfolio is focussed on the same philosophy and they are consequently seen as championing a new way of doing things - a new normal that is rooted in their own value system and corporate culture.

It is unhelpful to construe consumer conceptions of normality as barriers or constraints within an individualistic model of behaviour. Consumer conceptions of normality are social rather than individual, as in the practice theory perspective (Schatzki, 1996; Shove, 2003; Warde, 2005). Thus while the research might be seen to support the extension of the social norm variable in the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) to include notions of normality, the authors would challenge the assumption that behaviour must be analysed at an individual level, and would argue that much behaviour is not "planned" and as such, is often not subject to a balancing of attitudes, norms and behavioural control. These findings support a practice theory perspective; as well as trying to change individual values, attitudes and choices, it is important to address societal conceptions of normal practices. As demonstrated by the social norm approach (Cialdini *et al.* 2006) what is regarded as normal or as the norm carries a normative influence (cf. Foucault, 1975, on the prescriptive character of the norm). Marketing is generally conceptualised in terms of individual consumer behaviour, but it can also be conceptualised at a societal level, as shaping social norms, meanings and practices.

Peattie and Peattie (2009: 261) assert, "Creating meaningful progress towards sustainability requires more radical solutions than just the development of new products and product substitutions amongst consumers". This research suggests one radical solution: using marketing as a vehicle of social normalisation. This would involve repositioning unsustainable behaviours as not normal, and repositioning greener behaviours as normal. Successful marketing solutions may help to answer the accusation that marketing has fostered an unsustainable consumerism, and to assuage the damaging image of greenwash.

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