

Embedding Sustainability and Responsible Business Practices in Undergraduate Marketing Education: A Case Study from a Scottish University

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Abstract

As the global business environment becomes increasingly uncertain, there is a growing need for marketing professionals who can balance profit, people, and planet. This developmental paper outlines the early stages of a case study examining how sustainability and responsible business practices are embedded into an undergraduate marketing module at a Scottish university. The study aims to explore how students' attitudes, knowledge, and capabilities may evolve when sustainability is introduced from the first year through analysing students' reflective coursework about their behaviour as consumers and future marketers and post-module surveys. While the full data analysis is still ongoing, the paper offers practical insights for aligning marketing education with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and identifies challenges and opportunities for educators to prepare students as agents of change in an uncertain world.

Key words: SDGs, Responsible Management Education (RME), Undergraduate Marketing Education, Case Study, Sustainability Pedagogy

Word count: 2050

Introduction

Sustainable Development (SD) was first officially introduced in the 1987 Brundtland Report (United Nations, 1987), which describes it as development that meets the needs of current generation while ensuring that future generations can also meet their own needs. In 2015, all 193 member states of the United Nations adopted Agenda 2030 for SD which covers 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (PRME, no date). Successful implementation of the SDGs will demand collective action across all sectors and require all players and stakeholders to champion this 2030 agenda (PRME, no date). Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a critical role in promoting and supporting this initiative and bear a unique responsibility to equip future leaders with the skills to address sustainability challenges (Leal Filho et al., 2020). This responsibility is particularly acute

in business education, where traditional profit-centric paradigms and a long-standing capitalist dominance often clash with the SDGs' emphasis on ethical, social, and environmental stewardship (Snelson-Powell et al., 2020), presenting significant paradox in management education (Smith et al., 2023).

Amid rising global attention on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly pressured to prioritise these objectives as a way to reorient management education toward responsible practices (RME) and shift beyond conventional teaching frameworks (Azmat et al., 2023; Snelson-Powell et al., 2020). This reorientation is complex. It involves navigating the inherent tensions between people, profit, and planet while also addressing the subtle influence of the hidden curriculum, implicit messages within the educational environment that may either reinforce or contradict explicit sustainability teachings (Smith et al., 2023). Business schools often unintentionally reinforce neoliberal ideologies, where sustainability is framed as a secondary concern rather than a core business priority (Smith et al., 2023). Within this context, the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME), launched in 2007, have driven business schools to embed sustainability into curricula (Morsing, 2022; Storey et al., 2017; Tomasella et al., 2024). Under PRME, themes like ethics, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and sustainable development have been systematically integrated into dedicated modules at both undergraduate level (Avelar et al., 2019; Tomasella et al., 2024) and postgraduate level (Doh and Tashman, 2014; Gómez et al., 2015; Tomasella et al., 2024).

Although PRME has led to visible changes in curricula design, progress remains uneven across disciplines. A critical perspective on the implementation of SDGs reveals ongoing challenges in achieving their full transformative potential within educational settings (Séraphin et al., 2021). The true impact necessitates fostering a profound sustainability mindset among students, rather than merely imparting knowledge (Cripps and Smith, 2024). Particularly within marketing education, a discipline historically rooted in consumerism and growth-maximisation logic, the integration of SDG remains rare (Hübscher et al., 2024). There is a tension between the transformative aims of responsible management education and the persistence of traditional business paradigms. This tension reflects what Smith et al. (2023) term the responsible management paradox — where business schools are encouraged to develop sustainability-literate graduates while remaining structurally tethered to capitalist, performative metrics such as league tables, employability scores, and industry ties.

Moreover, the presence of a hidden curriculum, unspoken institutional norms and values that shape students' perceptions of success, may undermine the espoused sustainability goals of formal curricula (Cripps and Smith, 2024). For instance, while sustainability is increasingly included in module titles and learning outcomes, assessment practices and faculty priorities may continue to reward more conventional

commercial approaches. Consequently, students may receive mixed messages, learning to *talk sustainability* while continuing to think and act within dominant market-oriented frameworks.

Businesses nowadays need marketing graduates to address these sustainability challenges (Peterson, 2022). Marketing education has both a responsibility and an opportunity to catalyse change. Scholars have called for a paradigm shift toward sustainability mindsets (Cripps and Smith, 2024) and ethically grounded marketing practices (De Ruyter et al., 2022; Sheth and Sisodia, 2015). This means cultivating student capacities not only to understand sustainability frameworks such as the SDGs, but to internalise and apply them critically within professional contexts. De Ruyter et al. (2022) highlighted the growing interest in responsible marketing and advocated for the development of enhanced marketing strategies that proactively tackle societal grand challenges and advance the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through ethical, resilient, and collaborative partnerships with stakeholders. Similarly, Sheth and Sisodia (2015) contended that students need to be taught to use the power of marketing responsibly, emphasising that marketing should resist pressures to promote products harmful to individuals or society and instead educate customers in ways that foster global well-being. There is an urgent need to transform marketing education (Harris, 2022), and the integration of SDGs into the marketing discipline is underway (Tomasella et al., 2024). Educators need to design pedagogical interventions that go beyond content delivery to challenge assumptions, disrupt norms, and equip students as agents of change in complex, paradox-laden environments. The increasing importance of embedding sustainability and responsible business education in shaping future marketing professionals has been acknowledged.

Various studies have examined how to integrate sustainability in university operations and curriculum (e.g., Barber et al., 2014, Doh and Tashman, 2014, Thomas, 2004; Hill and Wang, 2018; Vrečko et al., 2024). However, limited studies explore what and how the SDGs are integrated into the marketing curriculum, with a few exceptions (Bolton, 2022; Hübscher et al., 2024; Rosenbloom, 2022; Shapiro, et al., 2021; Voola et al., 2022).

Existing studies tend to focus on curriculum design or conceptual models rather than capturing the lived experiences of students engaging with sustainability content. This study attempts to address the SDGs agenda from a marketing education perspective and aims to address this gap by examining the experience of integrating SDGs into a marketing module, *Marketing for A Better Future*, at a Scottish University through experiential learning, industry guest lectures and critical reflections, etc. The objective of this study is to investigate how embedding sustainability into a first-year marketing module affects student learning, values, and behavioural intentions. It offers practical insights and a critical evidence base for marketing educators aiming to embed the SDGs meaningfully into curricula.

This study is set within an undergraduate marketing programme at a Scottish university where sustainability topics have been integrated from the very first year. This study documents and presents how SDGs can be integrated into a marketing module, and evaluates the effectiveness of the SDG integrations, and provides valuable insights into the impact of sustainability-focused education on student learning and development in marketing. Educators can consider using the structure and design of the pedagogical intervention to integrate SDGs.

Literature Review

SDGs and Responsible Management Education in Higher Education

Since the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, higher education institutions (HEIs) have increasingly been called upon to align their missions with sustainable development imperatives. The PRME initiative has spurred HEIs to adopt whole-institution approaches to sustainability, embedding SDGs into research, operations, and teaching (Azmat et al., 2023; Tomasella et al., 2024). Numerous institutions have introduced sustainability-focused modules, extracurricular initiatives, and community-engaged learning opportunities (Avelar et al., 2019; Gómez et al., 2015). For example, PRME signatories report increased student engagement with sustainability projects post-curriculum integration (PRME).

Despite these efforts, progress remains uneven. While disciplines like engineering and public policy have pioneered SDG-aligned curricula, business schools often lag, particularly in subject areas like marketing (Hübscher et al., 2024). PRME initiatives are sometimes co-opted as institutional branding strategies rather than drivers of meaningful change (Snelson-Powell et al., 2020). Business ethics and CSR are commonly taught as standalone modules, while interdisciplinary SDG integration, particularly in marketing, is rare (Hübscher et al., 2024). This highlights a crucial challenge in business education: navigating the paradoxical perspectives related to balancing profit with people and planet (Smith et al., 2023). The traditional capitalist dominance in business school education often creates a hidden curriculum that may subtly undermine sustainability principles, despite overt efforts to integrate them (Smith et al., 2023). Cultivating a sustainability mindset in students becomes paramount to addressing these underlying tensions (Cripps and Smith, 2024).

Paradoxes and Contradictions in Responsible Management Education

These tensions are conceptualised in the literature as manifestations of the responsible management paradox, the simultaneous pursuit of sustainability and profit within business education (Smith et al., 2022). On the one hand, educators are tasked with fostering critical reflection and global citizenship; on the other hand, they are embedded in institutions that privilege market-oriented outcomes and employability metrics.

Paradox theory provides a useful lens for examining how these contradictory logics coexist, clash, and potentially catalyse innovation (Smith et al., 2023).

Within this paradoxical landscape, sustainability education faces the risk of being decoupled from core business practice, confined to elective modules or soft skills training. This is particularly evident in marketing education. Marketing's historical focus on consumerism and profit maximisation has long been critiqued for perpetuating unsustainable practices (Sheth and Sisodia, 2015; Varey, 2010). Yet, its potential to drive societal change is increasingly recognised. Scholars argue that marketing graduates must learn to balance profit motives with societal well-being (De Ruyter et al., 2022; Sheth and Sisodia, 2015). This duality, marketing as both a cause of unsustainable consumption and a potential advocate for ethical practice, creates unique pedagogical challenges.

Shapiro et al. (2021) looks back at the previous 40 years of micromarketing pedagogy, before offering contemporary approaches to teaching macromarketing through four illustrative case studies found in an online repository called Pedagogy Place. Tomasella et al. (2024) proposed the 3Es' Framework (Engage, Expand, Enact) for SDG integration in marketing curricula, but its reliance on an integrative literature review rather than empirical evidence limits actionable insights. Despite these studies, most models/frameworks lack empirical validation.

Gaps in the literature

Few studies evaluate how SDG integration impacts student learning outcomes (e.g., attitude shifts) (Hübscher et al., 2024). While interdisciplinary SDG frameworks exist, marketing-specific models are underdeveloped (Tomasella et al., 2024) and many proposed frameworks lack empirical validation. Most research focuses on curriculum design, neglecting industry partnerships or student co-creation (Doh and Tashman, 2014). There remains a dearth of empirical studies that assess the actual impacts of these interventions on student learning outcomes.

This study addresses these gaps by evaluating a marketing module where sustainability is introduced in the first year, offering early evidence of how such interventions shape student mindsets. It provides a foundation for a critical, evidence-based approach to responsible marketing education, rooted in both theory and practice.

Methods

A qualitative single case study approach is adopted to explore the implementation and impact of sustainability education in an undergraduate marketing module – Marketing for a Better Future at the University of the West of Scotland. This module integrates SDGs through lectures, experiential learning (e.g. design sustainability related marketing campaign plan for UWS), workshop activities (e.g. case studies, reflections), industry

engagement (e.g. guest speakers from industry and NGOs), and critical reflection (e.g. reflective assignments). etc. The qualitative case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of educational practices and student experiences. Participants are the undergraduate students enrolled in the Marketing for a better Future module (2023 cohort, 2024 cohort, 2025 cohort).

A post-module survey will be distributed to students to understand their changes in attitude, knowledge and perception of sustainability. Students have submitted their reflections on their behaviour as consumers and future marketers. Consent will be obtained from students for quoting their coursework regarding their reflection. A thematic analysis approach with NVivo software is used to identify key themes and patterns in student reflections. Ethical approval will be obtained from the School Ethics Committee. Student consent will be sought to ensure voluntary participation, anonymity, data confidentiality, and informed consent for quoting reflection.

Conclusion and Future Development

This developmental paper sets the stage for a rich empirical investigation into the impact of sustainability integration in undergraduate marketing education. The initial design and framework align with the goals of PRME and SDG-driven pedagogy, but also acknowledge the deeper paradoxes and institutional constraints that shape responsible management education. By exploring student reflections and behavioural shifts, this study aims to offer evidence-based recommendations for marketing educators committed to embedding sustainability meaningfully into their teaching.

Moving forward, data collection and analysis will be finalised in the coming months. The author will also critically synthesise theoretical perspectives—including paradox theory, the hidden curriculum, and sustainability mindsets—alongside student voice. These developments will culminate in a full paper that contributes not only to pedagogical practice but to the broader debate on how marketing education can evolve in response to global sustainability challenges.

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