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Editorial Note

This issue of *AYIKA* brings together a rich and timely collection of scholarship that underscores a central truth: in Africa, environmental questions are deeply political, and political realities are increasingly shaped by environmental change. The contributions in this volume reflect the growing complexity of this relationship, engaging themes that span governance, technology, security, sustainability, and identity across diverse African contexts and beyond.

A defining feature of this issue is its strong engagement with the role of digitalisation in advancing sustainability. From the systematic review on how digitalisation enables decarbonisation, to analyses of agri-tech adoption in Nigeria and South Africa, the volume highlights the transformative potential of technology in addressing environmental challenges. These contributions move beyond optimism, carefully examining the mechanisms and constraints that shape technological uptake. They remind us that digital solutions are not neutral; their effectiveness depends on policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions.

Equally prominent is the question of governance, particularly in relation to service delivery and institutional performance. The examination of water service failures in Gauteng Province offers a sobering account of how governance lapses can translate into environmental and public health crises. Similarly, the discussions on public service reform and parliamentary oversight reveal the persistent challenges of accountability and administrative effectiveness across the continent. Together, these studies point to a critical insight: sustainable environmental outcomes are contingent on capable, transparent, and responsive institutions.

The issue also engages deeply with questions of political order, security, and regional cooperation. Analyses of Zimbabwe's political history, hybrid regimes in Central Africa, and border conflicts involving Nigeria reveal how political instability and governance structures shape environmental management and development trajectories. The exploration of indivisible security within the SADC region further highlights the interconnectedness of peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. These contributions reinforce the idea that environmental sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation from broader political and security dynamics.

Another important strand in this volume is the emphasis on economic strategies and livelihoods, particularly in rural contexts. Articles on organic agribusiness, marketing strategies aligned with climate action, and the challenges faced by women in agribusiness illuminate the everyday realities of sustainability. They foreground the experiences of local actors, especially women entrepreneurs, whose resilience and innovation are often overlooked. By examining the socio-economic factors shaping revenue growth and participation, these studies contribute to a more inclusive understanding of development.

The volume also makes a significant intellectual contribution by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies. The exploration of

Ubuntu as a framework for regional governance offers a human-centred perspective that challenges dominant policy paradigms. Similarly, the critique of epistemic violence in transboundary conservation highlights the marginalisation of local knowledge and agency. These interventions are particularly important in rethinking whose knowledge counts in environmental governance and how more equitable frameworks can be developed. Urban spaces and cultural expressions are not left out of this conversation. Contributions on city branding in Harare and the intersection of art, space, and identity in Durban demonstrate how environmental and political dynamics are experienced and expressed in urban contexts. These studies expand the scope of environmental politics by incorporating cultural and spatial dimensions, offering fresh insights into how cities in the Global South are responding to climate change.

Notably, this issue also extends its analytical reach beyond Africa, with a study on urban climate initiatives in Brazil and a comparative examination of socio-economic vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands. These contributions enrich the volume by situating African experiences within a broader global context, encouraging cross-regional learning and dialogue.

Finally, the inclusion of research on language and education, such as the study on tense substitution errors among Tshivenda-speaking students, serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of knowledge production, communication, and development. It highlights the importance of education in shaping the capacity to engage with complex environmental and political issues.

Taken together, the articles in this issue reflect a vibrant and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. They challenge simplistic narratives and instead offer nuanced analyses that recognise the interconnected nature of environment and politics in Africa. As the continent continues to navigate the pressures of climate change, population growth, and political transformation, the insights presented here are both timely and necessary. This volume invites scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to think more critically and act more collaboratively. It is our hope that the conversations sparked within these pages will contribute to more just, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to environmental governance in Africa and beyond.

Managing Editor

Prof. Kayode EEsuola

Institute of African and Diaspora Studies.

University of Lagos, Nigeria

oeesuola@unilag.edu.ng

Editor

Dr. Bamidele Olajide

Department of Political Science

University of Lagos, Nigeria

contactdele@gmail.com

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ALIGNING MARKETING STRATEGIES WITH CLIMATE ACTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Gugulethu Mhlanga

Department of Management and Entrepreneurship,
College of Law and Management,
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 3629,
South Africa

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2388-3443>

&

Andrisha Beharry-Ramraj

Department of Management and Entrepreneurship,
College of Law and Management,
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 3629,
South Africa

Beharrya@ukzn.ac.za

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5674-885X>

ABSTRACT

As climate change intensifies in South Africa, businesses face growing pressure to align their marketing strategies with sustainability imperatives. However, marketing's potential to support Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), remains underexplored and inconsistently realised. Therefore, this study examined how climate change influences marketing strategies in South Africa and assessed the extent to which these strategies align with SDGs 12 and 13 to foster authenticity, reduce greenwashing, and promote responsible consumption. The study employed a qualitative desktop research design, drawing on secondary data from academic literature, corporate reports, policy documents, and sectoral case studies. Thematic analysis was applied through the lenses of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Stakeholder Theory, and the Triple Bottom Line (TBL). The findings revealed that while some South African firms are making strides in sustainable branding, most marketing campaigns remain symbolic, lacking measurable impact or authentic consumer engagement. Furthermore, it was found that SDG alignment in marketing is often performative, with limited educational depth or strategic coherence. It was recommended that firms embed SDG principles into core marketing strategies through transparent metrics, inclusive storytelling, and systemic behavioural nudges. Marketing must evolve from persuasion to transformation, becoming a key driver of climate accountability and sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable marketing, climate change communication, greenwashing, SDG integration, responsible consumption

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is no longer a distant environmental concern, it is a lived economic, social, and ecological reality in South Africa. With mounting water scarcity, rising temperatures, and volatile agricultural outputs, the country's vulnerability to climate disruption is increasingly undeniable (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2021; IPCC, 2021). These pressures not only threaten national development goals but also place businesses under growing scrutiny to adopt sustainable practices, especially in how they communicate with consumers. As Chan et al. (2019) explain, the role of marketing is evolving beyond selling products towards shaping public values, behaviours, and expectations around sustainability. However, despite the global momentum around the SDGs, particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), marketing strategies often remain misaligned with these goals in both substance and intention (United Nations, 2022).

Gonzalez and Pacheco (2021) assert that many companies refer to SDGs in their sustainability reports, but fail to integrate them into their brand narratives, resulting in what Peattie and Crane (2020) describe as "greenwashing", which is the illusion of environmental responsibility without meaningful action. This has led to rising consumer scepticism and demands for more transparent, authentic communication. In response, scholars such as Kotler, Keller, and Chernev (2021) argue for a new marketing paradigm, one that positions marketing as a driver of climate-conscious

behaviour and systemic change rather than mere consumption.

This study investigates how climate change is influencing marketing strategies in South Africa and critically assesses the extent to which these strategies align with SDGs 12 and 13 to foster authenticity, reduce greenwashing, and promote responsible consumption. Grounded in the TPB, Stakeholder Theory, and the TBL, the study provides a theoretically informed and context-specific analysis of how marketing can support or undermine climate action. By interrogating literature, industry case studies, and sectoral practices, this research makes an urgent call for marketing to move from promotional rhetoric to transformative engagement in the face of South Africa's climate crisis.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

As sustainability becomes a central priority in global development, marketing is being redefined not merely as a tool for commercial persuasion, but as a mechanism to shift societal norms towards responsible consumption and environmental accountability. According to Belz and Peattie (2012), traditional marketing often prioritised profit over environmental or social considerations, leading to unsustainable consumer behaviours. However, growing climate risks and the rising urgency of sustainability discourses have forced firms to revisit how they communicate environmental responsibility. Ben (2021) explains that while many businesses are adapting operations to reflect sustainability concerns, their outward marketing messages often lag behind or remain inconsistent with these internal efforts.

This disconnect reflects a deeper tension between sustainability ambition and communicative authenticity. Murimbika (2023) asserts that in emerging markets like South Africa, this gap is particularly problematic due to rising environmental literacy among consumers and the uneven implementation of sustainability frameworks across sectors. Roux (2024) further notes that despite the existence of formal environmental regulations and policy instruments, firms often interpret their obligations narrowly, resulting in fragmented or tokenistic marketing strategies. This raises questions about whether current approaches to climate-responsive branding are capable of influencing consumer behaviour in ways that genuinely support long-term environmental goals.

Furthermore, the strategic inclusion of sustainability language in marketing campaigns has, in some cases, been leveraged more for symbolic capital than transformative change. Peattie and Crane (2020) warn that when marketing draws on vague or unverifiable sustainability claims, it risks creating an appearance of ethical conduct while bypassing measurable impact. This concern is amplified by the growing use of digital platforms, which, while enabling rapid dissemination of sustainability messaging, also expose inconsistencies and invite public critique. Saura, Palos-Sanchez, and Rodríguez Herráez (2020) explain that these platforms amplify consumer voices and demand real-time accountability, placing added pressure on brands to be transparent and sincere in their environmental communication.

In addition, stakeholder expectations are evolving beyond compliance.

Moyo, Knott, and Duffett (2022) contend that South African consumers increasingly expect companies to position themselves as responsible social actors capable of addressing interconnected issues such as climate change, poverty, and inequality. This broadening of consumer expectation requires marketing to operate at the intersection of ethics, inclusion, and innovation. However, as Rashidi-Sabet and Madhavaram (2022) observe, the absence of standardised sustainability marketing metrics continues to undermine efforts to assess or compare climate-related impact across industries.

Ultimately, marketing in the age of climate disruption must transcend persuasive aesthetics and embrace strategic depth. Harrison (2020) emphasizes that companies who embed sustainability into their brand identity through storytelling, measurable action, and transparent communication are more likely to secure lasting trust and competitive advantage. This backdrop forms the basis for interrogating how South African businesses are responding to environmental imperatives, not only through what they produce, but through how they market it, and whether these messages truly reflect the sustainability ideals they claim to uphold.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite widespread acknowledgement of sustainability as a strategic imperative, the integration of climate action and responsible consumption into marketing strategies remains conceptually fragmented and inconsistently practiced. According to Gonzalez and Pacheco (2021), many organisations claim alignment with

sustainability goals in internal policy and annual reporting, yet fail to translate these commitments into meaningful marketing interventions that influence consumer behaviour. This results in a growing mismatch between what companies promise and how they engage the public, weakening the potential of marketing to contribute to sustainable development. Furthermore, as TerraChoice (2010) reveals through its classification of the “Sins of Greenwashing,” consumers are increasingly confronted with misleading environmental claims that erode trust and blur the distinction between authentic and opportunistic branding.

The absence of standardised tools to evaluate sustainability-linked marketing further compounds the problem. Belz and Peattie (2012) note that while frameworks such as the TBL offer guiding principles, the lack of specific metrics for marketing impact undermines efforts to ensure accountability or foster behavioural change. Additionally, Domazet and Kovačević (2018) assert that most sustainability communication disproportionately targets middle- and high-income consumers, overlooking marginalised communities who are often more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. This selective targeting excludes large portions of the population from sustainability narratives and reinforces social inequalities under the guise of ethical branding.

Digital platforms, though rich in potential, have not been fully leveraged to close this credibility gap. Kumar and Singh (2020) argue that while digital marketing can enable real-time feedback, traceability, and inclusion,

most campaigns still prioritise product promotion over climate literacy and public engagement. This underutilisation signals a deeper issue in how marketing continues to function within a profit-first logic rather than as a vehicle for environmental accountability. According to the World Economic Forum (2021), businesses are under increasing scrutiny to not only address climate risk but to communicate their actions transparently and accessibly.

What emerges is a systemic failure to embed responsible consumption and climate responsiveness into the marketing core of South African businesses. Rather than acting as an enabler of sustainable development, marketing often reinforces superficial narratives, masking the absence of structural transformation. Until businesses can reconcile internal sustainability intentions with externally visible, trustworthy, and inclusive communication, the role of marketing in supporting environmental and social resilience will remain unrealised. This persistent gap poses both a reputational risk for firms and a missed opportunity to influence consumer behaviour in support of broader environmental goals.

Purpose of the Study

This study critically examines how climate change is shaping marketing strategies in South Africa, with particular attention to alignment with SDGs 12 and 13. It focuses on promoting authenticity, reducing greenwashing, and encouraging responsible consumption. Drawing on theory, existing literature, and case studies, the study evaluates the current state of climate-responsive marketing

and identifies gaps limiting its effectiveness. The findings offer practical value for multiple stakeholders. Marketing professionals can gain insights into building trust through authentic sustainability communication, while policymakers can use the evidence to strengthen transparent and measurable guidelines. The study also contributes to academic discourse in marketing and environmental studies, and underscores the role of consumers and civil society in demanding accountability. Ultimately, it highlights that aligning with SDG principles is both an ethical imperative and a strategic pathway to long-term competitiveness.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To critically examine the influence of climate change on marketing strategies in South Africa, and to evaluate how effectively these strategies align with SDGs 12 and 13 in promoting authenticity, minimising greenwashing, and advancing responsible consumption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review critically explores the dynamic intersection between climate change and marketing strategy in South Africa, foregrounding how environmental imperatives are reshaping brand communication, consumer expectations, and corporate responsibility. It begins by situating the marketing function within the country's socio-ecological challenges, then progresses through theoretical lenses such as the TPB, Stakeholder Theory, and the TBL to frame sustainable marketing responses. Subsequent sections interrogate the degree to which SDGs 12 and 13 are integrated into marketing practice, analyse the role of

authenticity and trust in countering greenwashing, and draw on South African and global case studies to assess cross-sectoral implementation. The review concludes by identifying critical gaps and proposing the need for a transformative marketing paradigm that transcends promotional rhetoric to drive systemic behavioural change aligned with sustainability goals.

Climate Change and the Evolving Role of Marketing in South Africa

Climate change is increasingly altering the business landscape in South Africa, compelling companies to reconsider their marketing approaches in response to mounting environmental vulnerabilities and consumer demands for sustainability. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021) highlights the intensifying severity of climate-induced risks, such as prolonged droughts, biodiversity loss, and extreme weather patterns, across southern Africa. These conditions have placed substantial pressure on businesses to align their communication strategies with broader ecological imperatives. The Department of Environmental Affairs (2021) similarly emphasizes that South Africa faces severe water insecurity and agricultural volatility, which threaten not only national food systems but also corporate supply chains and brand reputations.

Against this backdrop, marketing is evolving beyond its traditional transactional role to become a vehicle for sustainability engagement and public climate responsiveness. Chan et al. (2019) explain that environmental instability now requires systemic shifts in how businesses communicate with stakeholders, prioritizing transparency

and long-term value over short-term promotional gains. While older marketing paradigms fixated on persuading consumers to consume more, sustainable marketing discourse instead aims to stimulate mindful consumption aligned with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) (United Nations, 2022).

Kotler, Keller, and Chernev (2021) assert that marketing must now foster environmental stewardship by actively redefining brand narratives through purpose-driven strategies. However, Harrison (2020) cautions that few South African companies have embedded sustainability deeply into their marketing ethos, often defaulting to surface-level commitments rather than structural change. This tension underscores a disjuncture between escalating climate risks and the pace of marketing innovation.

Roux (2024) concurs that sustainable development frameworks remain peripheral in many corporate marketing departments, despite growing societal pressure. According to McKinsey & Company (2020), South African consumers are increasingly aware of climate-linked issues and expect brands to demonstrate genuine environmental accountability. This consumer awareness represents both a threat and an opportunity, where companies that fail to evolve risk reputational damage, while those that integrate authentic sustainability messaging may gain competitive advantage and brand loyalty.

Furthermore, Saura, Palos-Sanchez, and Rodríguez Herráez (2020) argue that digital platforms have revolutionized how marketing

narratives around climate are constructed and disseminated. In the South African context, this digital evolution allows firms to engage consumers on issues such as water use, plastic reduction, and carbon footprints in real-time, while also collecting feedback and tracking sentiment. Bocken et al. (2014) add that marketing now plays a key role in driving sustainable business model innovation, acting as a bridge between internal corporate sustainability efforts and external consumer expectations.

However, Belz and Peattie (2012) contend that despite these opportunities, many marketing strategies remain poorly aligned with measurable sustainability outcomes. They call for a shift towards embedded climate metrics, consumer education, and systems thinking in branding practices. Therefore, the South African marketing ecosystem finds itself at a crossroads, where as climate change accelerates, so too must the industry's commitment to enabling informed, responsible consumption patterns.

Theoretical Foundations for Sustainable Marketing and Consumer Behaviour

Understanding how climate change influences marketing strategies requires a strong theoretical foundation to interpret consumer behaviour, organisational responsibility, and the broader impact of sustainability-driven campaigns. Three major frameworks, which are the TPB, Stakeholder Theory, and the TBL, serve as critical lenses through which these phenomena can be examined.

Ajzen (1991) asserts that the TPB explains individual actions through

three determinants, which are attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In the context of climate-aligned marketing, this theory has been used to predict how consumers engage with sustainable products and messaging. According to Peattie and Crane (2020), TPB offers insight into the psychological mechanisms through which consumers respond to green branding, especially when environmental values are activated by social norms or transparency cues. However, Domazet and Kovačević (2018) argue that while TPB captures the intention-behaviour link, it may underplay the role of systemic barriers such as affordability or access, which are particularly pronounced in emerging economies like South Africa. Therefore, although TPB provides a useful framework for predicting eco-conscious behaviour, it must be complemented by contextual considerations that influence sustainable choices.

Stakeholder Theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), extends the discussion beyond the consumer to include multiple actors affected by or capable of influencing a firm's activities. According to Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010), marketing strategies that integrate stakeholder perspectives tend to foster stronger trust and legitimacy, especially when companies demonstrate environmental responsibility. This theory is particularly relevant in South Africa, where social justice, community development, and environmental degradation are interlinked issues. Moyo, Knott, and Duffett (2022) assert that stakeholder-inclusive approaches can enhance the effectiveness of

sustainability campaigns by incorporating local community values, thus bridging the gap between corporate sustainability rhetoric and social expectations. However, Belz and Peattie (2012) caution that stakeholder alignment can be superficial if firms use it merely as a public relations tool without embedding sustainability into core decision-making processes. This reveals an ongoing tension between performative and authentic marketing, a crucial concern in avoiding greenwashing and achieving meaningful progress on SDGs 12 and 13.

Elkington's (1997) TBL model adds a critical evaluative layer by encouraging businesses to measure success not just by profit, but also by their social and environmental impact. Bocken et al. (2014) explain that TBL offers a robust framework for aligning marketing strategies with broader sustainability goals by emphasizing value creation across three dimensions which are people, planet, and profit. The model challenges marketing professionals to design campaigns that reflect ethical sourcing, climate consciousness, and inclusive growth. According to Ben (2021), firms that integrate TBL principles in their marketing narratives tend to extract stronger consumer loyalty, as they are perceived to prioritise long-term wellbeing over short-term gains. However, Rashidi-Sabet and Madhavaram (2022) contend that TBL metrics often lack standardisation, making it difficult to compare or validate sustainability claims across industries.

In synthesis, TPB, Stakeholder Theory, and TBL collectively provide a multifaceted lens through which sustainable marketing in response to

climate change can be understood. While each theory contributes valuable insights into behavioural intent, stakeholder trust, and systemic impact, their combined application reveals both the promise and complexity of aligning marketing with SDG-driven climate action.

Aligning Marketing with the SDGs 12 and 13

The global prioritisation of the SDGs, particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), has placed new expectations on marketing as a strategic tool for driving sustainable behavioural change. In South Africa, climate vulnerability and economic inequality amplify the urgency of embedding these SDGs into marketing practices. However, scholarly debates reveal substantial variation in how businesses interpret and implement these goals.

According to Gonzalez and Pacheco (2021), while the SDGs have been widely acknowledged in corporate sustainability reports, their integration into marketing strategy remains superficial in many contexts. This is especially evident when firms cite SDG alignment without translating those commitments into meaningful promotional campaigns or product innovation. Unilever (2020) claims to operationalise SDG 12 through product reformulation and sustainable sourcing, yet critiques persist regarding how deeply these changes permeate the brand's market-facing communications. This highlights a recurring gap between corporate sustainability messaging and marketing execution.

United Nations (2022) asserts that SDG 12 calls for transformative shifts in

production-consumption patterns, but many South African campaigns focus on awareness without reshaping consumer choices. According to Woolworths (2022), environmentally responsible branding, such as reduced packaging or organic labels, is often showcased in marketing, but lacks deeper consumer education about systemic sustainability. Saura, Palos-Sanchez, and Rodríguez Herráez (2020) argue that such symbolic actions, while useful for market positioning, fall short of fostering the behavioural depth needed to advance SDG outcomes.

Furthermore, SDG 13's call for urgent climate action is rarely foregrounded in marketing narratives. Harrison (2020) notes that although Patagonia centres climate justice in its campaigns, few South African brands explicitly connect their marketing to climate mitigation. The World Economic Forum (2021) adds that the financial sector, despite recognising climate risk, tends to address it through policy statements rather than consumer-facing engagement. Consequently, marketing remains disconnected from the broader climate discourse, limiting its role in catalysing public mobilisation around SDG 13.

Kumar and Singh (2020) emphasise the potential of telecommunications and digital platforms to mainstream SDG messaging. However, implementation is uneven, as companies like MTN (n.d.) focus on education and empowerment but rarely anchor such initiatives in SDG-linked brand identity. Murimbika (2023) similarly observes that while reputation management is increasingly tied to sustainability performance, the SDG framework is often used for symbolic

legitimacy rather than strategic transformation.

The risk of SDG-washing has become increasingly prominent. Peattie and Crane (2020) caution that brands may appropriate the language of the SDGs to create an illusion of responsibility without accountability. This performative alignment is not only ethically questionable but also undermines public trust. According to TerraChoice (2010), vague or irrelevant environmental claims, termed “sins of greenwashing”, erode consumer confidence and distort the intent of sustainable marketing.

Notably, the World Economic Forum (2020) explains that digital tools offer an opportunity to close the gap between SDG rhetoric and practice by enabling traceability, transparency, and tailored engagement. However, as Belz and Peattie (2012) assert, without systemic commitment, such technologies risk becoming another layer of tokenism. While the SDGs offer a vital framework for reshaping marketing towards sustainability, their integration into South African marketing strategies remains inconsistent. The literature signals a need for more rigorous, authentic alignment that moves beyond surface branding to embed SDG principles into the core of marketing design and communication.

Consumer Trust, Greenwashing, and the Authenticity Imperative

As sustainability becomes a central feature of modern branding, consumer trust has emerged as a critical factor in the effectiveness of climate-aligned marketing strategies. However, increased environmental awareness among consumers has been paralleled by growing scepticism, particularly in

response to misleading or exaggerated sustainability claims. According to TerraChoice (2010), greenwashing practices are pervasive and can be classified into “The Sins of Greenwashing,” which include hidden trade-offs, vagueness, irrelevance, and no proof. These tactics not only compromise consumer trust but also threaten the credibility of genuine sustainability efforts.

Peattie and Crane (2020) argue that greenwashing occurs when brands use environmental claims to appear sustainable without substantive action, creating a disconnect between brand image and operational reality. This disconnect has become increasingly visible in South Africa, where consumers are showing heightened sensitivity to authenticity in green messaging. Nielsen (2021) confirms that a significant proportion of South African consumers now expect brands to back their claims with verifiable data and clear accountability mechanisms. Therefore, marketing strategies that lack transparency are likely to face consumer backlash.

One of the most effective tools for rebuilding trust in the wake of greenwashing concerns is third-party certification. According to Charter and Polonsky (1999), verified environmental standards, such as eco-labels and fair-trade certifications, serve as external validation of a brand’s sustainability credentials. These certifications, when clearly communicated, can counteract scepticism and differentiate genuinely responsible brands from opportunistic ones. However, Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010) warn that even third-party certifications can be undermined if not

accompanied by coherent storytelling and consistent brand behaviour.

Storytelling, particularly when rooted in brand heritage and purpose, plays a vital role in conveying authenticity. Patagonia (2021) demonstrates how narrative-based marketing can embed sustainability into brand identity by highlighting lived values, long-term commitments, and real-world outcomes. In the South African context, Murimbika (2023) emphasizes that corporate reputation is increasingly shaped by how companies communicate their role in sustainable development. As such, storytelling is not merely a marketing tool but a trust-building mechanism that enables consumers to emotionally invest in a brand's climate journey.

Furthermore, metrics-based reporting enhances transparency and accountability. According to the United Nations Global Compact (n.d.), regular disclosures on carbon emissions, water usage, and sustainability performance indicators allow consumers to evaluate the credibility of a brand's environmental claims. Saura, Palos-Sanchez, and Rodríguez Herráez (2020) add that when these metrics are integrated into digital platforms, they enable interactive and real-time engagement, thereby reinforcing trust.

Digital platforms also function as double-edged swords in the discourse on authenticity. While they allow companies to engage directly with environmentally conscious consumers, they also amplify scrutiny and criticism of greenwashing practices. According to Accenture (2021), digital-savvy consumers in South Africa actively research sustainability claims and expect brands to respond transparently

to public inquiries. Therefore, authenticity on digital platforms is not just about self-promotion, it requires responsiveness, evidence, and consistency.

Ultimately, the literature reveals that brand authenticity in the sustainability era depends on a delicate balance between transparency, credibility, and engagement. As greenwashing becomes more visible and consumer expectations rise, South African marketers must navigate a complex trust landscape where failure to substantiate environmental claims risks alienating the very audience they aim to attract.

Sectoral Case Studies in Climate-Responsive Marketing: Lessons from Practice

Examining real-world examples of climate-responsive marketing provides valuable insights into how businesses operationalise sustainability principles across sectors. In South Africa and beyond, companies have adopted varying approaches to aligning their brand strategies with the SDGs, particularly SDG 12 and SDG 13. These case studies highlight how some firms actively promote responsible consumption and climate action, while others exhibit inconsistencies between stated commitments and market-facing practices.

Woolworths is frequently cited as a South African retail leader in sustainable branding, especially for its commitments to reduced packaging, organic sourcing, and water stewardship. Woolworths (2022) states that its marketing strategy incorporates SDG-linked messaging to promote responsible consumption, yet there is limited consumer-facing campaigns

that educate buyers on the environmental rationale behind product changes. This illustrates the tension between internal sustainability action and its translation into public engagement.

In the food and beverage sector, Coca-Cola Beverages Africa has taken steps to integrate climate considerations through recycling initiatives, water replenishment, and energy efficiency in its supply chain. According to Coca-Cola South Africa (n.d.), these initiatives are promoted through targeted campaigns aimed at sustainability-conscious consumers. However, Ben (2021) asserts that while Coca-Cola's sustainability marketing appears comprehensive, the core product portfolio remains largely environmentally taxing due to packaging waste and sugar content, raising questions about the depth of SDG alignment in the company's brand positioning.

Patagonia, by contrast, offers an international benchmark for authentic climate-aligned marketing. Harrison (2020) explains that the brand uses advocacy-based campaigns that elevate climate justice, repair culture, and degrowth narratives. These values are embedded in both its corporate operations and external communication, providing a consistent and transparent alignment with SDG 13. Patagonia (2021) further demonstrates that its storytelling is backed by verifiable metrics and third-party certifications, which foster consumer trust. However, such deep integration is often more feasible in niche markets and less replicable in resource-constrained environments like South Africa.

In the telecommunications sector, MTN's sustainability campaigns primarily focus on education and digital inclusion. MTN Group (n.d.) reports on initiatives such as "Airtime for Education," which supports community development. Yet Kumar and Singh (2020) argue that despite their social emphasis, telecom marketing strategies often lack environmental urgency. This gap reveals a missed opportunity to leverage digital infrastructure to mainstream climate communication and behavioural change aligned with SDG 13.

Unilever presents a hybrid case of success and contradiction. Unilever (2020) claims that sustainable living is core to its brand ethos, integrating lifecycle assessments and purpose-driven campaigns across products. While this represents a strong alignment with SDG 12, Peattie and Crane (2020) caution that multi-brand corporations risk greenwashing when sustainability narratives are inconsistently applied across different product categories. Furthermore, Unilever (n.d.) highlights selected brand-specific achievements, yet the broader consumer education landscape remains underdeveloped.

Across sectors, several patterns emerge. Roux (2024) observes that companies face regulatory pressure and consumer demand to adopt responsible marketing, but actual integration varies by sector and organisational maturity. Financial services, for instance, often articulate ESG policies but lack proactive marketing tied to climate action (World Economic Forum, 2021). Therefore, while climate-responsive marketing is increasingly recognised, its practice remains uneven, with some sectors demonstrating alignment with

SDGs and others falling short of transformative impact.

Towards a Transformative Marketing Paradigm: Gaps, Critiques, and Future Directions

Despite an expanding literature on sustainable marketing, significant theoretical and practical gaps persist, particularly in the ability of businesses to translate internal sustainability efforts into compelling marketing strategies that resonate with consumers. This “sustainability-value proposition gap” reflects a disjuncture between corporate environmental ambition and the actual practices that influence consumer behaviour. According to Gonzalez and Pacheco (2021), many firms refer to SDG alignment in sustainability reports, yet fail to integrate these commitments into promotional narratives that foster genuine public engagement. This weakens the potential of marketing to serve as a strategic lever for responsible consumption in line with SDG 12.

Rashidi-Sabet and Madhavaram (2022) assert that climate-aligned marketing should not be confined to surface-level messaging, but must be deeply integrated into corporate culture and long-term brand structures. However, current marketing strategies often operate within short-term horizons, targeting profitability over environmental wellbeing. Peattie and Crane (2020) argue that marketing continues to function largely as a promotional tool, reinforcing consumerism rather than reconfiguring consumption norms. This undermines the sector’s capacity to act as a catalyst for systemic behavioural change, a role increasingly demanded by global climate imperatives.

One critical oversight in the literature is the lack of robust SDG-driven marketing metrics. Belz and Peattie (2012) explain that while frameworks like the TBL offer general principles, there remains a lack of standardised indicators to assess the actual climate or social impact of marketing campaigns. Without concrete benchmarks, it becomes difficult to evaluate whether sustainability messaging translates into responsible purchasing decisions or merely green brand perception.

Additionally, there is limited literature on inclusive sustainability communication that resonates across diverse socioeconomic groups. Domazet and Kovačević (2018) point out that green marketing is often directed at affluent, urban consumers, neglecting rural and low-income communities who are disproportionately affected by climate change. This exclusion not only limits market reach but also weakens the social justice dimension of SDG 13. According to Moyo, Knott, and Duffett (2022), sustainability must be localised and demographically nuanced if marketing is to foster meaningful behavioural shifts across South Africa’s highly unequal landscape.

Furthermore, long-term climate literacy campaigns remain underexplored. The World Economic Forum (2021) highlights the urgency of fostering public understanding of climate science and its social implications. However, few companies invest in sustained marketing strategies that educate consumers beyond product benefits. Saura, Palos-Sanchez, and Rodriguez Herráez (2020) argue that digital platforms offer opportunities for such engagement, but are often underutilised in favour of sales-driven content. As a

result, marketing's potential to deepen climate consciousness and facilitate informed consumption remains unrealised.

In conclusion, the reviewed literature reveals that while climate change has prompted marketing in South Africa to evolve towards sustainability, progress remains uneven, fragmented, and often symbolic. Theoretical insights offer strong justification for aligning marketing with responsible consumption and climate action, yet practical execution is undermined by superficial SDG referencing, underdeveloped metrics, and greenwashing risks. Consumers are increasingly discerning, demanding transparency, authenticity, and inclusion in sustainability narratives. Case studies demonstrate both promise and contradiction, illustrating that deep, sector-specific transformation is still emerging. Therefore, this study positions itself to contribute a critical, context-sensitive understanding of how marketing can shift from being a promotional tool to a driver of systemic environmental and social accountability.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative desktop research design, which was appropriate for interrogating the complex intersection of climate change, marketing strategy, and SDGs in the South African context. Given that the research was grounded in existing theoretical perspectives, prior empirical studies, policy discourse, and corporate practice, a qualitative approach enabled a nuanced and interpretive analysis of marketing's evolving role in sustainability. As Belz and Peattie (2012) explain, qualitative research

facilitates the exploration of meaning, values, and context in sustainability-driven behaviour, making it ideal for investigating how marketing aligns with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Data were generated exclusively from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic articles, published books, corporate sustainability reports, government publications, and organisational documents from entities such as the United Nations, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs. These materials offered rich, triangulated insights into environmental marketing trends, climate action narratives, and sectoral responses to sustainability imperatives (Gonzalez & Pacheco, 2021; United Nations, 2022). The selection of literature focused on publications from the past ten years to ensure relevance and recency, although seminal texts such as Elkington's (1997) TBL were included to provide theoretical depth.

The study followed a systematic process of identifying, screening, and thematically analysing the literature. Key thematic domains were extracted, including responsible consumption patterns, climate-related marketing innovation, consumer trust, and greenwashing. Thematic analysis allowed for the identification of recurring patterns, contradictions, and critical gaps in how marketing has engaged with climate narratives (Peattie & Crane, 2020). These themes were then critically interpreted through the lens of three theoretical frameworks: the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984),

and the TBL (Elkington, 1997). This theoretical triangulation strengthened the analytical rigour by grounding observed phenomena in behavioural, relational, and impact-driven constructs.

Additionally, the research incorporated case-based analysis of South African companies whose sustainability claims and marketing communications were publicly accessible. These included entities such as Woolworths, MTN, and Coca-Cola Beverages Africa, allowing for comparative insights into best practices, contradictions, and sectoral nuances (Woolworths, 2022; Coca-Cola South Africa, n.d.; MTN Group, n.d.). These cases were selected based on visibility, availability of sustainability disclosures, and relevance to the SDG framework. Overall, the methodology allowed for a rich, context-sensitive exploration of how climate change is shaping marketing discourses and strategic responses in South Africa.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the intersection between climate change and marketing strategy in South Africa, specifically assessing how marketing practices align with SDGs 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and 13 (Climate Action). What emerges from the literature is a complex, often fragmented landscape in which marketing is slowly evolving in response to environmental imperatives, yet remains entangled in contradictions of intent versus practice. The findings suggest that although the urgency of climate change has driven some businesses into recalibrating their communications and brand positioning, many strategies remain superficial and

fall short of fostering authentic, accountable, and transformative behaviour change.

The evolving role of marketing in South Africa under the shadow of climate change is unmistakably shifting from transactional persuasion towards strategic responsibility. This is reinforced by Kotler, Keller, and Chernev (2021), who argue that marketing must now become a medium for environmental stewardship, focusing on long-term brand value rooted in purpose and sustainability. However, the gap between rhetoric and embedded change remains wide. Harrison (2020) notes that many companies adopt sustainability language without fundamentally reengineering their marketing systems or consumer engagement strategies. While Chan et al. (2019) support the idea that marketing must embrace transparency and systemic thinking, the literature collectively points to a slow, uneven shift, one constrained by organisational inertia, fear of reputational risk, and market conservatism. Roux (2024) reinforces this by suggesting that sustainable marketing frameworks are still marginal in many corporate strategies, even as consumer demand for ethical and climate-aware brands intensifies (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

The theoretical perspectives employed, namely the TPB, Stakeholder Theory, and the TBL, reinforce the notion that sustainable marketing must transcend promotion to reflect systemic accountability. TPB offers a psychological entry point to understanding consumer intention, especially when environmental messages align with prevailing social norms or perceptions of behavioural

control (Peattie & Crane, 2020). However, Domazet and Kovačević (2018) adds another layer to this view by drawing attention to structural barriers that limit consumers' capacity to act on sustainable preferences, such as affordability and access, particularly in low-income South African communities. Thus, while TPB explains motivational pathways, it cannot on its own address the inequitable material conditions that shape consumption behaviour.

Stakeholder Theory extends the conversation by broadening the field of responsibility from consumer preference to multi-actor governance. Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010) underscore that companies that consider the interests of diverse stakeholders, including local communities and environmental actors, cultivate deeper trust and legitimacy. This is critical in South Africa, where issues of environmental justice, community marginalisation, and corporate accountability are deeply interwoven. However, Belz and Peattie (2012) critique this stakeholder alignment as often being cosmetic, a box-ticking exercise rather than a structural integration. Moyo, Knott, and Duffett (2022) offer a more optimistic reading, suggesting that stakeholder inclusion, if authentic, can bridge the gap between sustainability rhetoric and lived social realities, but this remains more of an aspirational norm than a consistent practice.

TBL further deepens the evaluative criteria, insisting that marketing success must be judged not just in financial terms, but also in social and environmental contributions (Elkington, 1997; Bocken et al., 2014). The appeal of TBL is its emphasis on

integrated value, where profit, people, and planet are treated as mutually reinforcing pillars. Ben (2021) shows that firms that embrace this triadic logic often secure stronger consumer loyalty, as they project a commitment to long-term well-being. However, as Rashidi-Sabet and Madhavaram (2022) caution, the practical application of TBL is hindered by inconsistent metrics and limited regulatory pressure, making it difficult to verify or benchmark sustainability claims. These three frameworks work in concert to explain the promise and limitations of sustainable marketing, but their utility is undermined when companies choose only the most convenient aspects without embracing the deeper commitments they entail.

The integration of SDGs 12 and 13 into marketing strategies is marked by inconsistency and ambiguity. While corporations increasingly reference the SDGs in sustainability reports (Gonzalez & Pacheco, 2021), actual marketing alignment is often symbolic. For instance, Woolworths (2022) highlights responsible consumption practices like reduced packaging and organic sourcing, yet consumer-facing messaging lacks educational depth and strategic coherence. Similarly, Unilever (2020) references lifecycle improvements and responsible sourcing, but public campaigns are uneven across product categories, suggesting a fragmented SDG implementation. The World Economic Forum (2021) identifies this as a critical weak point where SDG language is deployed as a signifier of responsibility but rarely tied to outcome-based metrics or transformative behaviour change.

Where SDG 12 focuses on responsible consumption, the challenge lies in translating corporate sustainability into consumer literacy. Campaigns that merely celebrate eco-labels or packaging innovations (Saura et al., 2020) without connecting them to broader sustainability narratives fall short of the behavioural influence needed to reshape consumption. This problem is mirrored in the underutilisation of SDG 13 in marketing communication. While climate action remains a policy priority, it is seldom central to consumer-facing campaigns. Harrison (2020) contrasts this with Patagonia's climate justice narratives, where climate urgency is embedded into brand DNA and advocacy. In the South African context, few brands exhibit this level of integration, suggesting a missed opportunity to mobilise public sentiment and foster public engagement through marketing.

The issue of authenticity emerges as a crucial filter for interpreting whether SDG-linked marketing delivers on its ethical promise. The growing problem of greenwashing, defined by TerraChoice (2010) as misleading environmental claims, erodes trust and delegitimises the entire sustainability marketing agenda. Peattie and Crane (2020) argue that superficial claims, unsupported by operations or data, are not only unethical but also strategically flawed in an era of rising consumer scrutiny. Nielsen (2021) confirms that South African consumers now demand greater transparency, pushing firms to back their sustainability claims with verifiable evidence. However, even mechanisms like third-party certification, while helpful (Charter & Polonsky, 1999), can become

performative if not embedded in consistent brand behaviour (Du et al., 2010).

This brings the discussion to the imperative of storytelling and metrics as twin pillars of authenticity. Patagonia (2021) exemplifies narrative coherence where its climate-oriented brand stories are reinforced by measurable outcomes and third-party audits. Murimbika (2023) observes that South African corporate reputation is increasingly influenced by how brands communicate their contributions to sustainable development. Thus, authentic marketing is not merely a matter of content but of consistency between messaging, operations, and consumer experience. The role of digital platforms adds another layer. Digital channels enable real-time communication and feedback loops (Saura et al., 2020), but also amplify scrutiny and backlash when inconsistencies arise (Accenture, 2021). Hence, authenticity must now be interactive, transparent, and continuous.

Sectoral case studies bring these tensions into distinct relief. Woolworths shows relative success in aligning internal sustainability efforts with external messaging, but the consumer-facing narrative remains thin. Coca-Cola's South African campaigns promote recycling and water stewardship, yet the environmental impact of its core products undermines these gains (Ben, 2021). MTN offers social sustainability through education campaigns but fails to engage climate issues explicitly (Kumar & Singh, 2020). By contrast, Patagonia, though not local, offers a model of climate-aligned marketing that is strategic, transparent, and embedded. Unilever

straddles both sides, with pockets of innovation overshadowed by brand inconsistency and risk of SDG-washing. These cases reveal that sectoral and organisational contexts deeply shape how SDG alignment is enacted, or evaded, in marketing.

The literature identifies deep structural and conceptual gaps that hinder progress. The most prominent is the disjuncture between corporate ambition and consumer engagement, the sustainability-value proposition gap (Gonzalez & Pacheco, 2021). Even where companies implement environmentally sound practices, these are rarely translated into marketing strategies that inspire or educate consumers. Moreover, the absence of standardised SDG-linked marketing metrics (Belz & Peattie, 2012) weakens the accountability and comparative analysis of sustainability claims. Critically, the literature shows that green marketing remains skewed toward affluent, urban consumers, sidelining those most affected by climate change, namely rural and low-income communities (Domazet & Kovačević, 2018). As Moyo, Knott, and Duffett (2022) argue, sustainable marketing must become demographically inclusive if it is to achieve its full social and environmental impact.

This discussion ultimately shows that while the South African marketing sector is beginning to respond to climate change, the response is neither uniform nor uniformly impactful. The frameworks exist, consumer appetite is growing, and tools are available, but the full integration of climate action and responsible consumption into marketing remains aspirational. Achieving that vision will require a

shift in institutional mindset, not just branding strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that South African companies move beyond surface-level sustainability claims and embed SDG 12 and 13 principles into the core of their marketing strategies through systemic, measurable, and transparent practices. This requires a reorientation of marketing from a promotional tool to a vehicle for consumer education, behavioural change, and environmental accountability. Firms should invest in authentic sustainability storytelling that is consistently reinforced by operations, third-party certifications, and metrics-based reporting. Furthermore, marketing teams must be capacitated to understand and communicate the nuances of responsible consumption and climate action in ways that resonate with diverse consumer segments across income, geography, and access. To mitigate the risks of greenwashing and restore consumer trust, brands must adopt a zero-tolerance approach to vague or unverifiable claims, ensuring all messaging is underpinned by traceable data and clear impact indicators. It is also essential to leverage digital platforms not just for visibility but as tools for interactive engagement, real-time accountability, and inclusivity in sustainability discourse. Lastly, government and industry bodies should support the development of standardised SDG-linked marketing frameworks and ethical codes of practice that hold companies accountable to genuine environmental commitments. These recommendations collectively aim to transform climate-responsive marketing from a rhetorical exercise

into a strategic pillar of sustainable development in South Africa.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should explore how sustainable marketing strategies can be co-designed with consumers, particularly in underrepresented and climate-vulnerable communities, to ensure that messaging around SDG 12 and 13 is both contextually relevant and socially inclusive. There is also a need to investigate the long-term behavioural impacts of climate-aligned marketing campaigns across different demographic segments in South Africa, including rural, youth, and low-income populations. Additionally, future studies could develop and validate robust metrics and evaluative tools that link marketing practices to measurable environmental and social outcomes, thereby advancing accountability frameworks within the sector. Comparative research across African countries would further illuminate regional best practices and policy frameworks that enable authentic sustainability integration in marketing. Finally, interdisciplinary studies that combine marketing with behavioural economics, digital technologies, and environmental psychology could yield new insights into how to foster lasting consumer engagement with responsible consumption and climate action in emerging economies.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that although climate change is prompting South African companies to rethink their marketing strategies, many responses remain symbolic, fragmented, or primarily reputational rather than transformative. Authentic alignment with SDGs 12 and 13 is still the exception, with numerous brands resorting to greenwashing or superficial sustainability claims without substantive action. While frameworks such as the TPB, Stakeholder Theory, and the TBL provide robust guidance for ethical and inclusive marketing, they are frequently underutilised or inadequately applied. Consumer trust is increasingly fragile, shaped by demands for transparency, credible data, and authenticity in a digitally connected environment that holds brands accountable. Evidence from case studies reveals a mixed landscape; some organisations are progressing towards climate-conscious and socially responsible practices, while others remain anchored in traditional promotional approaches. The gap between ambition and execution persists. Moving forward, marketing in South Africa must transcend surface-level messaging and fully embrace its role in driving behavioural change, environmental stewardship, and social inclusion. As climate risks intensify, marketing must shift from passive observer to active agent of leadership, education, and transformation.

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