

**Consuming Corporations:
Waste, Distrust and Unsustainable Consumption in Food
Manufacturing and Retail**

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Extended Abstract

Environmental sustainability is a powerful social and marketing discourse permeating contemporary society (see e.g. Guillard and Roux 2014; Markkula and Moisander 2012). The promotion of products and corporations as sustainable has become a key element of marketing strategies (Gordon, Carrigan and Hastings 2011; Peñaloza and Mish 2011), and sustainable consumption is increasingly important to consumers' identity projects (Cherrier 2012; de Burgh-Woodman and King 2013; McDonald et al. 2012; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).

While marketing and consumption researchers have taken a keen interest in sustainability, the disconnect between sustainable consumption as norm and practice has been emphasized (Cherrier 2012; de Burgh-Woodman and King 2013; Guillard and Roux 2014; Markkula and Moisander 2012; Shove 2005). Consumption has been conceptualized in stark contrast to sustainability because it seems to entail the inevitable production of waste (Baudrillard [1970] 1998; Cooper 2005; Thøgersen 1996). As Gordon et al. (2001) point out, the deep divisions regarding how to tackle e.g. climate change while sustaining economic growth from consumption are

indicative of how sustainability is perceived as contrary to the ‘wasteful’ capitalist economics of western consumerism (Gordon, Carrigan and Hastings 2011: 144). Central to discussions of sustainability are, thus, issues of waste derived from disposal practices as an innate element of consumption (de Coverly et al. 2008; Guillard and Roux 2014).

The food market, for instance, is commonly described as one of the most ‘unsustainable markets’ despite the discursive focus of market actors on sustainability, with a growing number of reports showing that millions of tons of edible food is disposed of as waste annually in everyday consumption and the supply chain (see e.g. Environmental Protection Agency 2008; WRAP 2008). Indeed, the proliferation of waste remains an undeniable reality of contemporary society (Brosius, Fernandez and Cherrier 2013; de Coverly et al. 2008; Türe 2013).

Recent consumption research has, nevertheless, showed that consumers may go to extreme lengths in eluding ‘unsustainable consumerism’; not wasting in everyday food consumption (Cappellini 2009). Indeed, consumption research has examined broadly how consumers relate their identity projects to practices of sustainable disposal by, for instance, selling things (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Denegri - Knott and Molesworth 2009; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005), renting them (Botsman and Rogers 2010), sharing (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Belk 2010), and giving them away (Arsel and Dobscha 2012; Bajde 2012; Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe 2007; Guillard and Roux 2014; Price, Arnould and Folkman Curasi 2000). This resilient fascination with the individual consumer in consumption studies (cf. Cherrier 2012; Dolan 2002) has, however, drawn attention away from the institutional

context in which corporate actors and marketers may negotiate sustainability discourses beyond the agency of consumers. And while recent marketing and consumption research has emphasized *sustainability* in consumption (e.g. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007), and marketing (e.g. Gordon, Carrigan and Hastings 2011), we know little about the concrete ways in which sustainable consumption is contested institutionally in organizational contexts (Green, Morton and New 2000), as well as how this affects how consumption is enacted more broadly in society.

Advancing on Green, Morton and New's (2000) ideas concerning consuming organizations (i.e. how and why organizations consume), and following Woodall's (2012) call for further research on marketers' self-conceptions in fueling unsustainable consumption, the aim of this article is therefore to investigate how waste and 'unsustainable' consumption practices are negotiated and legitimized in the supply and retail setting. It does so through a critical discourse analysis of qualitative data generated from observations and interviews with Swedish food manufacturers and retailers; corporate actors' narratives of organizational consumption - waste derived from internal practices of disposal, such as the in-store removal of unsold products due to expired/short best before dates. Drawing on Institutional theory (Scott 2008), Consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005), and inspired by Luhmann's (1979) social systems theory, the article shows how sustainability is challenged institutionally through a startling distrust of consumers reproduced within the supply system, which operates innate to marketing discourse. These findings help in flushing out the discursive disruption of sustainability in contemporary markets and have broad implications for conceptualizing both the legitimation of ethical concerns in corporate practice and regulative intervention in markets.

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