

## MARKET-ORIENTED SUSTAINABILITY. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON A 'TWO-TAILED RELATIONSHIP'

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**Abstract.** *Even though the concept of “sustainability” has received more and more attention in the specialized literature, limited empirical studies have been deployed about the connections between sustainability and marketing strategies. One of the main reasons may reside in the fact that the relationship between sustainability and the marketing practices finds itself in continuous progress. Here, the current theoretical endeavor strives to offer some insights into the “two-tailed” relationships between sustainability, respectively sustainable entrepreneurship, and the Contemporary Marketing Practices (CMP). It lays emphasis on the relational perspective of CMP – i.e. on Interaction and Network Marketing - given the fact that, according to the extant literature, they are more indicative of the entrepreneurs’ sustainability orientation than their counterparts. Framed within the market-oriented sustainability framework, the present approach provides further considerations on the underlying market-oriented and generally intangible constructs that precipitate sustainability efforts.*

**Keywords:** *market-oriented sustainability; sustainable entrepreneurship; Contemporary Marketing Practices (CMP), Interaction and Network Marketing.*

### Introduction

The emergence of the digital economy and, inherently, of the growing competitiveness in the online marketplace have reconfigured the approaches of market-oriented sustainability, that is, a novel facet of business sustainability. In the following years, it is anticipated that consumer mindfulness and wise choice would set themselves as the norm, not as the exception, constraining organizations to adjust their entire vision. Either incrementally, or exponentially, different conditions of sustainable buying choices will spring up which should be taken into account as guidelines of the new consumption patterns and of new business models (Gorgos & Vătămănescu, 2016; Gazzola et al., 2017; Andrei et al., 2017a; Andrei et al., 2017b). Here, Crittenden et al. (2011, p.71) advance a theoretical framework fit for a better understanding of the topical phenomena, that is “market-oriented sustainability”, which refers to “incorporating sustainability into market orientation”, having as purpose the strategic alignment of sustainability with marketing strategies for competitive advantage achievement.

Marketing for sustainability is able to apply marketing techniques with a suitable objective, by following market necessities, creating more sustainable products and identifying more convincing methods of communication to foster behavioral change, according to Font and McCabe (2017). An innovative mix of consumer-facing marketing goals and approaches developed, that enables consumers to make suitable, healthier and sustainable buying and consumption decisions and supports organizations in becoming more competitive.

Framed within the paradigm of the market-oriented sustainability (Crittenden et al., 2011), a myriad of studies have addressed the interplay between sustainability, respectively sustainable entrepreneurship, and marketing practices, often considering a certain marketing strategy as a precursor of the entrepreneurs' sustainability orientation (Hapenciuc et al., 2015) or the reversed relationship (Vătămănescu et al., 2017a).

At this point, irrespective of the relationship direction, understanding how individuals and groups generate value among complex relationships and networks is pivotal in order to achieve sustainability goals (Vătămănescu, Alexandru & Andrei, 2015; Vătămănescu et al., 2016a; Vătămănescu et al., 2017a). For marketers who attempt to reach sustainability of the business, it is crucial to understand the costs and benefits to develop the right relationships and networks (Păduraru et al., 2016).

Building on the market-oriented sustainability premise, the present paper strives to offer some insights into the "two-tailed" relationships between sustainability and sustainable entrepreneurship and the Contemporary Marketing Practices (CMP) as described by Coviello et al. (1997). It lays emphasis on the relational perspective of CMP, given the fact that, according to the extant literature, it is more indicative of the entrepreneurs' sustainability orientation (Vătămănescu et al., 2017a).

The endeavor has a theoretical and exploratory nature and is primarily focused on novel studies which capture the interconnections between the aforementioned constructs (Hapenciuc et al., 2015; Păduraru et al., 2016; Vătămănescu et al., 2016b; Soto-Acosta et al., 2016; Vătămănescu et al., 2017a), giving voice to the need for more developments on the matter. That being the case, firstly, some considerations on the issues of sustainability and sustainable entrepreneurship are introduced. Secondly, a concise section on CMP is developed. Thirdly, the relationships between sustainability and sustainable entrepreneurship and the relational perspective of CMP are more thoroughly addressed, giving credit to recent studies (2015-2017) on the topic.

## **Theoretical overview**

### ***The angle of sustainability and sustainable entrepreneurship***

Nowadays, in the 21st century economy, sustainable development is perhaps the most prominent topic of our time, with a paramount influence on entrepreneurship. Reports of ozone depletion, climate change, and destruction of biodiversity - that demonstrate the negative and potentially deadly consequences these processes have for living species - are widely approached not only by scholars, but also by experts from the international economic organizations (IPCC, 2013; UNEP, 2016). In this vein, scholars

such as Cohen and Winn (2007) and Dean and McMullen (2007) have claimed that entrepreneurial action can preserve ecosystems, counteract climate change, reduce environmental degradation and deforestation, improve agricultural practices and freshwater supply, and maintain biodiversity if placed in a sustainability framework.

The perception on entrepreneurship, according to Say (2001), is that an entrepreneur uses the three existing production factors – labor, land, and capital (which constitute the society's welfare source) and exploits available resources to achieve the highest results, expressed in the amount of profit gained. A special attention was paid to the entrepreneurial innovation, which was connected not only to searching necessary resources and factors but also to looking into various combinations for achieving the economic and financial optimum. This point of view was widely acknowledged and was further reflected in other works on entrepreneurial theory pertaining to scholars as Hayek, Schumpeter, Drucker, and others (Korobov et al., 2017).

When addressing sustainability and providing recommendations for the entrepreneurial environment, the investigation usually starts with the big companies, such as Wal-Mart or Unilever and their leaders. The enquiry inclines towards companies, and leaders, who dispose of large platforms for making their engagements public, for modifying products, procedures, and personnel as they put their optics for sustainability into practice. But, most of the times, the purpose of sustainability is associated with environmental issues, not being restricted to those, but also including social and economic issues, as well (Chebeň et al., 2015).

Giving the competitiveness pressure in today's setup, organizations cannot implement environmental policies that do not take into consideration meeting social and economic needs. Not only is entrepreneurship for sustainable development supposed to result in economic success, but sustainable entrepreneurs are prone to handle the "triple bottom line", a concept stressed by Elkington (1997), that is, to combine social, environmental and economic imperatives in an integrative form (Kuckertz & Wagner, 2010). The Triple-Bottom-Line (TBL) was successful in interpreting the basic elements of sustainability evaluation, which are people, planet and profit. Taking into account these three components in an integrative framework, TBL has presented a new approach on the relationships between economic expansion, the effect of the judicial system on society and environmental concerns, and stressed the significance of long-term objectives (Soto-Acosta et al., 2016). Nevertheless, Kuckertz and Wagner (2010) remarked that the triple bottom line exigencies dare entrepreneurs to envision complex twofold solutions which encompass both community-centric welfare and organization-centric profitability.

In this respect, there are numerous examples – such as those suggested by Easterly (2006) - of entrepreneurial action creating financial benefits for shareholders, businessmen, and economies. A multi-level perspective of sustainability transitions was approached by Hörisch (2015), integrating elements of sustainable transformations and development into the research and emphasizing the importance of growth and de-growth in the context of sustainable entrepreneurship.

Weaving on the shared research interests of a community of scholars interested in sustainable entrepreneurship, Shepherd and Patzelt (2011) advanced an encompassing definition in this respect: "Sustainable entrepreneurship is concentrated

on protecting the nature and the communities aiming to find opportunities to create future products, procedures, and services destined for growth, where growth is extensively perceived as encompassing economic and non-economic gains for the people, the economy, and the communities". In this front, sustainable entrepreneurship entails a higher potential both for society and the environment (Kuckertz and Wagner, 2010).

Here, albeit most scholars have studied sustainability and sustainable entrepreneurship from the Western countries standpoint, some steps were made towards approaching the relationships between these phenomena beyond the landscape of developed economies. A study in this respect has been conducted by Choongo et al. (2016), focusing on the factors which influence the identification of sustainable opportunities among SMEs in Zambia. Moreover, especially in the developing countries, such actions are likely to enhance education, productivity, socioeconomic status, physical health, and self-reliance of individuals and societies (Wheeler et al, 2007).

Therefore, from a bird's eye view, the process of sustainability comprehension and handling within markets, governments, and non-profit organizations will pave the way for a stronger, more prosperous, and more harmonious society.

### ***The angle of marketing practices***

Coviello et al. (1997) undertook an extensive review of the wider marketing literature encompassing both the traditional and relational views of marketing. They analyzed and synthesized the literature to develop an integrated conceptual framework that reflects a pluralistic view of marketing practices – the Contemporary Marketing Practices (CMP). At its core, the CMP model is formed of four marketing types: Transaction Marketing (TM), Database Marketing (DM), Interaction Marketing (IM) and Network Marketing (NM). All of them are acknowledged to be complimentary marketing practices and implicit coordinates of an integrative framework revealing diverse empirical phenomena (Brodie, Coviello & Winklhofer, 2008; Hapenciuc et al., 2015).

Thus, rather than viewing traditional and relational marketing as mutually exclusive, the researchers suggest that marketing is characterized by multiple complex processes that are manifested in four different approaches to marketing practices. The key point of the framework is that various marketing approaches unfold on a continuum, the authors arguing that any or all of the approaches might be relevant to, or practiced by, an organization at a given time. At the same time, each of these approaches is distinct and can be differentiated by a series of dimensions derived from an extensive review of the literature (Coviello & Brodie, 2001, p.397), as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1. Four marketing approaches classified by exchange and managerial dimensions (Coviello & Brodie, 2001, p.387)**

Criteria	Transactional perspective		Relational perspective	
	Transaction Marketing	Database Marketing	Interaction Marketing	Network Marketing
Purpose of exchange	Economic transaction	Information and economic transaction	Interactive relationships between a buyer and a seller	Connected relationships between firms
Nature of communication	Firm „to“ mass market	Firm „to“ targeted segment or individuals	Individuals „with“ individuals (across organizations)	Firms „with“ firms (involving individuals)
Type of contact	Arms length, impersonal	Personalized (yet distant)	Face-to-face, interpersonal	Impersonal – interpersonal
Duration of exchange	Discrete, yet perhaps overtime)	Discrete and overtime	Continuous (ongoing and mutually adaptive, may be short or long term)	Continuous (stable yet dynamic, may be short or long term)
Formality in exchange	Formal	Formal (yet personalized via technology)	Formal and informal (i.e. at both business and social level)	Formal and informal (i.e. at both a business and social level)
Managerial intent	Customer attraction	Customer retention	Interaction	Co-ordination
Managerial focus	Product or brand	Product/ brand and customers (in a targeted market)	Relationships between individuals	Connected relationships between firms (in a network)
Managerial investment	Internal marketing assets (focusing on product/ service, price, distribution, promotion capabilities)	Internal marketing assets (emphasizing communication, information and technology capabilities)	External market assets (focusing on establishing and developing a relationship with another individual)	External market assets (focusing on developing the firm's position in a network of firms)
Managerial level	Functional marketers (e.g. sales manager)	Specialist marketers (e.g. customer service manager, loyalty manager)	Managers from across functions and levels in the firm	General manager

Transaction marketing (TM) was outlined as making potential customers interested and satisfied through the management of the marketing mix components. It is also acknowledged as handling the communication process “to” clients in the mass market with the goal to create discrete, arms-length transactions. Database marketing (DM) implies the use of database technology in order to shape a relation, hence granting companies to become competitors in a different way from mass transactional marketing. The aim is to keep identified buyers, even though marketing is still “directed” to the client, rather than “connected” to the client. The relation itself is not close or interpersonal and is eased and personalized by database technology (Coviello & Brodie, 2001).

By shifting towards the relational perspective, Interaction marketing (IM) involves face-to-face interaction between individuals and is considered to be “connected” with the clients, since both participants in the relationship spend resources in order to

expand reciprocally advantageous and interpersonal partnerships (Palmer & Wilson, 2009; Brodie, Coviello & Winklhofer, 2008).

Analogously, Network marketing (NM) is “connected” with the clients, but takes place within and across organizations – the entrepreneurs assign resources for the development of the company’s position in a network-pattern of different business-level relationships (Palmer & Wilson, 2009; Hapenciuc et al., 2015). Via multilevel transactions occurring steadily, the organizational actors embrace an inter-firm approach and practice. Coordination of parties through network marketing may be conducted by the entrepreneurs themselves, general managers or by “part-time” marketers from all areas in the company (Lindgreen, Davis & Brodie, 2000; Brodie, Coviello & Winklhofer, 2008).

Taking into account the previous reflections, using the relational CMP tools in exploring the processes of entrepreneurial companies appears to be very relevant because of its elaborated and holistic purpose. Moreover, in line with the present challenges, the discussion of the relational marketing strategies and practices often implies the consideration of sustainability issues, in general, and of sustainable entrepreneurship, in particular.

### **Bridging the gap: sustainability, sustainable entrepreneurship, and relational marketing practices**

Even though the concept of “sustainability” has received more and more consideration in the specialized literature, limited empirical studies have been deployed about the connections between sustainability and marketing strategies. One of the main reasons may reside in the fact that the relationship between sustainability and the marketing practices finds itself in continuous progress.

Placing the market-oriented sustainability framework at the core of their study, Crittenden et al. (2011, p.72) provide a preliminary insight into its scope:

*The market-oriented sustainability framework compiles the underlying triggers or mechanisms that precipitate sustainable actions that result in a competitive advantage for the firm. Such a framework will enable researchers to explore the underlying market-oriented and generally intangible constructs that precipitate sustainability efforts.*

The strategies of interaction marketing and network marketing accentuate the evolution of the relationship between sustainability and these types of marketing, and how they can harmonize one another in order to communicate in a distinctive and original way to various stakeholders. By clearly sending this message, consumers are empowered to make wiser purchasing choices taking into consideration their own values, which assist them in making responsible and sustainable consumption decisions (Andrei et al., 2017b; Vătămănescu, Nistoreanu & Mitan, 2017; Gazzola et al., 2017). Within the development of the relationship between sustainability and interaction and network marketing, it will be captivating to follow which approaches and campaigns specific to interaction or network marketing prove efficiency and longevity, and which new strategies and tactics will take shape in the next years as consumers will turn out to be ever more informed, aware and demanding of all companies.

Triggered by a more preminent consciousness of both global concerns and businesses' capability to find solutions for these issues, the process of embedding sustainability into interaction or network marketing practices can drive an increase in business benefits and also an evolution in a consumer mentality and purchase choice process. Here, IM is prone to help a company to be transparent about all the aspects related to sustainability, covering the environment as well as employees, products, and communities (Vătămănescu, Nistoreanu & Mitan, 2017; Gazzola et al., 2017). On the stakeholder engagement front, interaction marketing can support the company in various ways. For example, the online tools like blogs, newsletters, and news releases can provide regular updates, while an annual sustainability report with updates throughout the year can show the big picture of a company's sustainability efforts.

Similarly, NM opens a gate to make information available across the whole company and to negotiate with customers and stakeholders, as a whole (Vătămănescu, Alexandru & Gorgos, 2014; Păduraru et al., 2016; Vătămănescu et al., 2017a; Vătămănescu et al., 2017b). For instance, when using voluntary simplicity/ sustainable consumption as actions to promote sustainable clothing, the network marketer must involve the network of stakeholders involved in the production (e.g. suppliers of raw materials and manufacturers) and consumption (e.g. distributors, retailers, and consumers). Furthermore, other stakeholders can be added to the network, stakeholders that could influence these target audiences, for example, trade unions, governments, international organizations, etc.

As previously inferred, the market-oriented sustainability framework gives credit to the interconnections between the two phenomena, namely sustainability and relational marketing practices; nonetheless, the relationship direction is yet to be finally decided all the more so as recent studies have acknowledged its "two-tailed" nature. In this respect, a brief overview on several studies conducted over the past two years, on Romanian samples, is able to bring forward some relevant insights.

To start with, Hapenciuc et al.'s (2015) research focused on 104 Romanian start-ups on purpose to "investigate the correlations between sustainable entrepreneurship and the marketing types articulated by the Contemporary Marketing Practices (CMP) research program" (p.938). By hypothesizing that start-ups employing a certain type of CMP are more oriented towards sustainable entrepreneurship, the research showed higher correlations between sustainable entrepreneurship (the *people* component of TBL) and IM and NM. At this level, the relational marketing practices are considered, to some extent, as precursors of sustainable entrepreneurship.

Another study – conducted by Vătămănescu et al. (2016b) - addressed the issue of sustainability within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), by pointing to the importance of capitalizing social networks and to the limitations of the transactional approaches. The study brought evidence that innovation and quality, the technological development and the social networks capitalization positively influence business sustainability – "the main driver of sustainable businesses is the innovation and quality approach that acts as a mediator bridging the firm's orientation towards technological development and business transactions with sustainable objectives fulfilment, such as long-term profitability, customers' loyalty, environmental footprint and improvements in community welfare" (p.270). As in Hapenciuc et al.'s (2015) perspective, the current

research endeavor supported the positive impact of NM – in the form of social networks capitalization – on business sustainability and sustainable entrepreneurship.

Concentrated on sustainability in relationship marketing in the industrial field, Păduraru et al.'s (2016) undertaking rely on “an articulated body of research and knowledge on the relational perspective and inter-organizational networks, reflecting the dynamics of industrial markets and supply relationships management” (p.1636). Adopting a dynamic and somehow coalesced vision on relationship marketing and sustainability rather than a definite relationship direction, the authors discuss the role of the entrepreneurs' traits, attitudes, and behaviors as antecedents of relationship marketing sustainability. Here, the entrepreneurs' orientations “have a significant predictive power on the number of partners and business profitability achieved through international partnerships, together contributing to the relationship marketing sustainability” (p.1644).

A similar approach was brought to the fore by Soto-Acosta et al.'s (2016) article which assumed and confirmed that sustainable entrepreneurship leads to business performance. Through the lens of SMEs, the research addressed the entrepreneurs' approaches towards people, planet and profit and on their prioritization within business dynamics. These dimensions were deemed as “important factors engendering business performance in terms of turnover, customer attraction and retention and market share” (p.1). Although the issue of marketing practices was not analyzed as such, the findings supported that sustainable entrepreneurship approaches towards the people and profit dimensions (e.g., *building long-term cooperative relationships with partners in our market(s); operating within business networks for achieving tenable economic goals*) have a significant positive influence on business performance. As in the previous case, Soto-Acosta et al. (2016) give credit to an integrative perspective in that sustainable entrepreneurship encapsulates IM and NM in its genuine rationale.

Assigning the relationship direction from the entrepreneurs' sustainability orientation towards the relational marketing practices (i.e., IM and NM), the brand-new investigation of Vătămănescu et al. (2017a) showed that “the entrepreneurs' orientation towards sustainability accounts for almost 35% of variance in interaction marketing practices and 16% of variance in network marketing practices, thus positing a higher influence on the former” (p.1). In this front, business sustainability – objectivized through the entrepreneurs' overall approach – is considered an antecedent of IM and NM, positing that business philosophy in term of sustainability significantly determines the selection of relational marketing practices.

## Conclusions

Given the aforementioned theoretical avenues, the current paper aimed at exploring recent undertakings regarding the relationship between sustainability, respectively sustainable entrepreneurship, and the relational marketing practices. The focus was on different studies published between 2015 and 2017 which envisioned twofold interconnections between the constructs, termed as “two-tailed relationships” in accordance with their bidirectionality. The scope of the exploratory endeavor was limited to the case of SMEs, as most of the cited researches concentrated on the Romanian business environment from the perspective of start-ups.



By corroborating the extant literature on the topic, the paper intended to provide an insight into the state of the art. Also, it assumed the relevance of a phenomenological overview all the more so as few studies have approached the two-tailed relationship by placing it within a market-oriented sustainability framework. Subsequently, it aimed to provide an answer to the deficit of preoccupation for the sustainable entrepreneurship in developing or emerging countries which have emerged as prominent over the past years.

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