Article

Marketing and the New Materialism

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Abstract

Modern man's unsustainable systems of production and consumption are symptoms of underlying problems in how we understand and relate to the material world. Socially constructed dualities between the social and natural sciences and between meaning and materiality have encouraged societies to indulge in magical thinking about the ability of material goods to deliver nonmaterial wellbeing, which in turn places marketing at the center of the destructive overconsumption of natural capital. This essay calls attention to a growing philosophical countertrend, neomaterialism, that is reshaping research in such a way as to collapse such false dualities. The new materialism, carried over to marketing practice, demands a meticulous, if not obsessive, attention to material things, their provenance, their agency and their downstream destinations, thus forming the basis of a more sustainable society.

Keywords

materialism, materiality, natural sciences, sustainability, sustainable marketing, macromarketing

> "If you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand the data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor and you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse"
>
> Paul Hawken

Introduction

When Paul Hawken invoked the problems and possibilities of sustainability in a university commencement address, he underscored the need for both intellect and compassion. Inherent in Hawken's message is the wisdom to work with the situation at hand and develop theory and practice for corrective action. The problems of moving society toward sustainable modes of production and consumption are intransigent inasmuch as they are embedded in a dominant social paradigm (DSP) (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997) and rooted in largely unquestioned cultural values, symbols, practices and infrastructures, as well as in policies and privileged economic positions. In the face of this intransigence Schaefer and Crane (2005) concluded, citing punctuated equilibrium theory (Gersick 1991; Tushman and Romanelli 1985), that any meaningful social movement toward sustainability would require widespread questioning of generally accepted practices, which in turn would require broad acknowledgment of a significant crisis. Across the wide spectrum of science, business and government the crisis of unsustainable production and consumption has been acknowledged.

This issue of the *Journal of Macromarketing* asks whether sustainability is a megatrend. Regardless of the ways that question gets answered here and in other articles, one thing is certain: The opposite is true. Environmental degradation, freshwater depletion, and global warming are demonstrable megatrends. It is not our purpose to rehash or argue the science and statistics of environmental catastrophe, but rather to make the simple observation that to the extent that sustainability is not a countering megatrend it needs to be. Hundreds of millions of human lives—not to mention the existence of countless other species—over the next few decades hang in the balance.

In this essay we take up the old argument that consumer materialism and related overconsumption, rooted in market-promoted magical thinking, constitute one set of barriers to sustainable living. We conclude that what is needed, not only at the consumer level but also, and perhaps primarily, at the level of marketing systems are new relations to materiality, namely a conscious materialism characterized by a meticulous, if not obsessive, attention to material things, their provenance, their transformation through consumption, and their downstream destinations. In making this argument we first contrast two very different and seemingly unrelated meanings of materialism: as it is traditionally understood in marketing and consumer research, and as it informs an emerging body of theory, a new materialism, that explains the powerful agentic

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roles of materiality in social life. Within the wide gap between these two areas of thought and research we attempt to construct a new path forward for marketing research and practice.

Materialism, Marketing and Magical Thinking

Researchers in marketing and consumer behavior have an obvious interest in the relations between people and material possessions. A key stream of research in this tradition is the study of materialism. The main concern with respect to sustainability as a possible megatrend is the close identification of materialism with consumerism—presumed to be endemic to industrialized societies and spreading rapidly among populous, economically emerging ones—and with the global overconsumption of finite resources.

Materialism once referred to the philosophical position that nothing exists except matter and its movements (Novack 1965), a concept to which we will return. In modern and common use, however, materialism has become associated with a tendency to privilege possessions and physical comfort over spiritual values (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2014), giving it the tenor of a personal moral failing. The negative connotations ascribed to materialism persist in the marketing literature. Belk (1985) identifies three sub-traits of materialism: possessiveness, nongenerosity and envy, none of which are highly prized character attributes. Richins and Dawson (1992) also conceptualize materialism as having three dimensions: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success. While these traits lack some of the subjective unattractiveness of Belk's categories, they nevertheless point to a rather shallow focus on stuff as the route to happiness and as a means of keeping score in a status-conscious world. Holt (1995) similarly characterizes materialism as ''a distinctive style of consumption that results when consumers believe that value inheres in consumption objects rather than in experiences or in other people'' (p. 13), and contrasts materialistic consumers with non-materialists, who place greater value on experiences and people, with possessions playing supporting roles. These scholars do not overtly judge people for their materialistic tendencies; they do, however, draw clear links to negative consequences of materialistic behaviors without going so far as to draw causal links. Belk (1985) indicates that materialistic people may strive for false or unattainable happiness and thus become disappointed, or that those who are dissatisfied with their lives may turn toward material possessions for happiness. Materialism is also negatively linked to satisfaction with family, friends, fun, income, and life as a whole (Richins and Dawson 1992).

Social psychologists Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, and Sheldon (2004) also present materialism as problematic. They specify materialists' major life goals as ''the culturally sanctioned goals of attaining financial success, having nice possessions, having the right image (produced, in large part, through consumer goods), and having a high status (defined mostly by the size of one's pocketbook and the scope of one's possessions)'' (p. 13). Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) conclude on the basis of nineteen studies that materialism is associated with long-term negative consequences both for society and for individual consumers in terms of happiness or subjective feelings of well-being. Kasser (2003) identifies three factors that may explain this negative relationship with wellbeing: materialists have higher feelings of insecurity, they are forever trying to prove themselves to others, and they report lower quality of relationships. Materialistic people may also suffer more negative physical symptoms such as sore muscles, headaches and backaches (Kasser 2003), and those who prioritize financial success report lower levels of self-actualization and vitality and higher levels of depression and anxiety (Kasser and Ryan 1993).

Other researchers focus on the use value of material goods. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) distinguish between two forms of materialism, instrumental and terminal. They characterize instrumental materialism as the use of objects to pursue meaningful life goals such as safety, longevity and productivity in contrast to terminal materialism, which is about valuing possessions for the sake of possession or for the status the possessions confer. This conceptualization has been supported by some (Belk and Pollay 1985; Holt 1995) but questioned by others (Richins and Dawson 1992). In line with instrumental materialism, Mowen (2000) emphasizes humans' innate need for material resources to use tools, create clothing, develop weapons, and build shelters. Shrum et al. (2013) link materialism to identity construction and maintenance. In summary, despite a few exceptions, research on materialism positions it as a way of relating to material goods that is problematic both for individuals and for society. Inasmuch as overconsumption and overproduction drive environmental degradation, resource depletion and global warming, it follows that unnecessary or counterproductive consumption is indefensible.

Judgments regarding materialistic consumption and its consequences have led to a body of cultural criticism focused on individual failings and responsibility. Humphery (2010) describes this phenomenon:

> ''. . . a good deal of recent critical commentary on western overconsumption indulges, to varying degrees, in a high moralism, a pop psychologism, and a self-helpism, all directed rather more at the individual as consumer than at the institutions of commercial and political power that drive consumption systems.'' (p. 7)

Indeed, if modern society is overly materialistic to its detriment then marketing in the service of corporate power owns much of the blame for it. Especially implicated are marketing discourses that promote magical thinking and the enchantment of material goods. In a study of consumer desire Belk, Ger, and Askegaard (2003) conclude that, ''Consumer imaginations of and cravings for consumer goods not yet possessed can mesmerize and seem to promise magical meaning in life. Among the sorcerers helping to enchant these goods are advertisers, retailers, peddlers, and other merchants of mystique'' (p. 327). Whether as mirrors or drivers of magical

thinking, marketing and advertising have inexorably promoted an ideology of ''the good life'' as a material paradise (Belk and Pollay 1985). Marketing, it would seem, provides detailed instructions on how to live the good life. The problem is that the good life is a mythical construct wherein mundane products and brands promise material resolution to unresolvable paradoxes (Holt 2004).

Consumption myths promote magical thinking. Holt (2006) explains that ''because myths are narratives rather than rational arguments, their ideological effect works through the magical elision of facts and ideals'' (p. 359), that ''in the alchemy of myth, social contradictions are transformed to cultural tensions, which are readily mended by the therapeutic salve of a 'truthful' parable'' (p. 375), and that ''brands load the myth into products used everyday [providing] the ability to viscerally experience the myth through one's actions'' (2004, p. 60). This combination of myth making and tension resolution result in magical thinking that permeates consumption practice at levels that are essentially unexamined and thus ''naturalize the status quo, containing otherwise destabilizing changes in society'' (Holt 2006, p. 375). Marketplace myth and magical thinking support and reinforce the dominant social paradigm (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997). Consumer reflexivity and resultant changes in behavior and attitude have been the focus of much sustainability research in marketing and consumer behavior, but asking consumers for reflexivity in the face of sophisticated marketing communication and infrastructures supported by the dominant social paradigm is tantamount to asking them to view the invisible and move the apparently immovable. The ability to affect change requires an ontology and methods that are capable of demystifying materiality—of pulling back the curtain on the great and powerful Oz and examining the techno-social reality that lurks there.

The New Materialism

There is a new materialist philosophy at large in the world (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012), which departs dramatically from idealist traditions that prioritize the social construction of meanings—including consumption mythology—and returns to, or at least touches back in with, the tradition of materialism that prioritizes matter, its movements and its transformations (Novack 1965). As DeLanda says, ''Any materialist philosophy must take as its point of departure the existence of a material world that is independent of our minds'' (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, p. 38). The point is not to deny the social construction of knowledge and meaning. It is, rather, to ground it in the realities of matter and energy and, in so doing, to recognize the critical roles that natural and technological landscapes play in shaping those constructions.

George Novack (1965) traces materialist thought to the ancient Greeks, and he attributes to that materialism many of the important developments in civilization. Modern social scientists have developed various materialist theories for explaining the relations between people and the material, non-human world. One such theory, cultural materialism, influenced by Marx (1904) and advanced by anthropologist Marvin Harris (1979) holds that all social life is organized around material and behavioral infrastructures that emerge from modes of production and reproduction. According to Harris material relations precede social relations, which precede symbolic or ideational relations, all of which precede ideological relations in a process he calls probabilistic infrastructural determinism. In an article with multiple commentaries, Westen et al. (1984) make it clear that Harris's cultural materialism is controversial in anthropology, in no small part for the challenging nomothetic claims it makes and, more recently for aligning with Skinnerian behaviorists (Harris 2007). Nevertheless, the Westen et al. discussions reveal agreement among many anthropologists that, along with approaches that privilege cognitive, meaning-making processes as the building blocks of culture, we would do well to grant to materiality a central place in our thinking about the origins and shapes of social relations and cultural forms.

In *The Social Life of Things* Appadurai (1986) theorizes reciprocal relations between people and the material world. We create the world around us in the form of objects, texts and infrastructures and those in return shape our experiences of the world. Appadurai's work, although not patently materialist in the way of Harris, has a strong element of materialism in it. It deals with processes of commoditization wherein objects become valued by society and by individuals for various reasons and those values form the basis of political relations. The premise of a social life of things has influenced a number of other social scientists (van Binsbergen 2005) that recognize the agency of commoditized objects in consumption. Taking the same premise to the realm of art, Gell (1992) describes how certain objects crafted by people with exceptional skill actually have power akin to enchantment or magic. In his discussion of the ''Technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology'' Gell asserts principles that resonate with our previous points regarding magical thinking and materialism. We would contend that the smoke and mirrors of modern technology and marketing make enchantment of the mundane and material even easier and more effective than ever before. A point of agreement in all the forgoing thought is that materiality matters. The material world is more than the passive product of human endeavor. It exerts forces that shape, limit and direct the most essential human experiences.

Actor-network theorists also make explicit the power of material objects and other non-human actors to co-constitute the social world (Callon 1986, Latour 1987, Law 1988). Society organizes, and it inscribes that organization on objects, infrastructures and nature—or as Latour (1991) puts it, ''Technology is society made durable.'' At the same time, those objects, infrastructures and nature shape and limit human action. Social and material realities emerge from the relations between matter and meaning. The particular technologies that humans develop depend at least in part on what kinds of resources, opportunities and challenges nature throws down and what kinds of knowledge and technology those humans have already created.

Similar to actor-network theorizing with respect to its treatment of materiality is the thinking of Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and DeLanda (2006), who also accord agency to objects in constantly emerging and shifting assemblages of people, places, objects and discourses. Thrift's (2008) non-representational theory likewise respects materiality as a shaping force, not only in the topography of social interaction but also in the fundamental ways people think and make meaning. Speaking to this orientation to materiality Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012) characterize the new materialism as:

> ... a cultural theory that does not privilege matter over meaning or culture over nature. It explores a *monist* perspective, devoid of the dualisms that have dominated the humanities (and sciences) until today, by giving special attention to matter, which has been so neglected by dualist thought. (p. 85)

Much like actor-network theory, neomaterialism navigates between and around human and non-human agencies, finding reality in their tangled relations. In an interview with Dolphijn and van der Tuin, Karen Barad explains the new materialism's monism in these terms:

> ... the entanglement of matter and meaning calls into question this set of dualisms that places nature on one side and culture on the other ... and shifts them off to be dealt with by ... "separate academic divisions," whereby ... the natural sciences are assigned matters of fact and the humanities matters of concern .... (p. 50)

When it comes to solving the problems of the material overconsumption and environmental degradation that imperil humanity's current and future wellbeing, the implications of the nature-culture divide are profound. Social sciences may plumb the psychology of materialistic overconsumption and yet come up empty of workable solutions for a failure to comprehend its material and infrastructural underpinnings. Natural scientists may discover material-technological solutions and yet find their implementation impossible for a failure to understand barriers of culture and practice. In rejecting the partitioning of the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, the new materialism provides a potential corrective.

Another key characteristic of neomaterialist thought is an emphasis on movement and transformation in assemblages such as organizations, markets, economies and ecosystems. Each assemblage is the ongoing product of the interactions among the various and changing human and non-human actors that constitute it. No assemblage remains static. All are in constant flux and may be moving toward greater or lesser stability. Latour (2005) refers to this constant movement in terms of translations, which he defines as transformations or movements of materials or meanings from one medium or space to another as the product of the relations among actors.

In summary, the new materialism is a philosophical movement that attends deliberately to the agency of material and non-human actors in its understanding of the constitution of the social and physical world. Neomaterialists seek to cross or even erase disciplinary boundaries to examine the highly entangled and dynamic relations between science and humanities, between matter and meaning, and between nature and culture. The new materialism rejects dualisms in favor of a holistic monism, and it rejects reductionism of any kind in favor of whole-system thinking. In a field such as macromarketing that favors systemic views and solutions, the new materialism is a perfect fit. The new materialism also carries epistemological implications. Key principles that guide neomaterialist research are (1) scrupulous attention to material agency (or how objects, infrastructures and discourses shape and limit human action), (2) a primary focus on the relations among the actors in any assemblage, and (3) a focus on the translations of matter and meaning that those relations produce.

New Materialism and Sustainability

Given that the problems of sustainability are systemic, we take heart from the holistic and integrative perspectives of the new materialists. We believe there is much more that marketing and consumer researchers can learn about materiality and its impacts on society by turning to the natural and physical sciences. To illustrate we evoke a few fundamental scientific principles and then relate them back to sustainability, production, consumption, and marketing.

A principle familiar from basic biology is that all life depends on natural systems and cycles. Two mutually interdependent cycles, photosynthesis and respiration, are the basis for all plant and animal life, and the all the energy driving those processes comes from the sun. The cycles run sustainably precisely because each one's waste is the other one's food. From geology we know that all life exists in a thin envelope, called the biosphere, between the Earth's crust and upper atmosphere. We recall the relations of land to ocean through cycles of rainfall, watersheds, percolation and water tables. We learn about the limited natural exchanges between the biosphere and the earth's crust, or lithosphere, through volcanic action, mountain formation, erosion and sedimentation. From physics and the laws of thermodynamics we understand that the Earth is a closed system with respect to matter. Whether solid, liquid or gas, no matter ever disappears. All the material that was here when the earth formed still exists today and will exist into the future. Similarly we are reminded that all matter is subject to entropy and dispersion.

Trying to understand sustainability without science is like trying to understand opera without music. For all the various definitions of sustainability, the most actionable and scientifically sound definition we have found was developed by the Swedish NGO, The Natural Step (Robèrt 2002). It begins with the principle that the Earth's natural cycles are sustainable unless disrupted by external forces. Society however, through technology, disrupts the cycles in three fundamental ways: (1) by extracting large quantities of materials from the Earth's crust, such as petroleum and coal, which contribute irreversibly to concentrations of greenhouse gases and toxic metals, such as mercury that accumulates in the food chain, (2) by creating and

dispersing synthetic compounds, such as plastics, pesticides and flame retardants that persist in the environment, increasing their concentrations and toxicity, and (3) by physically degrading the ecosystems, such as watersheds, forests and oceans, that provide vital ecosystem services. Each of these disruptions is exacerbated further where political and economic conditions deny populations the resources they need to meet their human needs. Sustainability is a condition in which society no longer contributes to increasing concentrations in the biosphere of materials from the lithosphere (e.g., fossil carbon or heavy metals) or of synthetic compounds (e.g., plastics, pesticides or flame retardants); does not systematically increase ecosystem degradation (e.g., overfishing or deforestation); and accords all people the materials they need to provide for their own wellbeing.

Put simply, sustainability is a matter of material flows and transformations. All production and all consumption are nothing more than meaningful transformations of matter and energy. Matter and energy go in, and matter and energy come out. To those transformations we attribute meanings such as value and waste. What new materialist perspectives and approaches demand of us is a thorough and holistic accounting of the flows and transformations as they affect materials, energy and meaning.

Another important principle of new materialism is that of transposition. From Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012):

> New materialism allows for the study of … two dimensions in their entanglement: the experience of a piece of art is made up of matter *and* meaning. The material dimension creates *and* gives form to the discursive, and vice versa. Similar to what happens with the artwork, new materialism sets itself to rewriting events that are usually only of interest to natural scientists. Here it becomes apparent that a new materialist take on "nature" will be shown to be transposable to the study of "culture" and vice versa (p. 91).

Transposing insights from nature to culture or technology holds great promise for the sustainability project. Many of the theoretical gains in sustainable production and consumption have come from modeling technological or business processes on natural systems. For example, cradle-to-cradle design and manufacturing (McDonough and Braungart 2002) is a nature-mimicking model for creating products that are sustainable, regardless of the amount of consumption. The underlying principle is elementary: waste equals food. Theoretically, all products can be made in such a way that organic waste biodegrades and returns as food for the biosphere, and synthetic waste returns as food to the technosphere to be reused, remanufactured or recycled using renewable energy sources. Similarly, whereas value chains modeled on linear take-make-waste models (Hawken 1994) are inherently unsustainable, value circles (Martin and Schouten 2012), wherein consumers function as suppliers, funneling their waste appropriately back to the biosphere or the technosphere, would mimic natural cycles, abetting cradle-to-cradle processes in a scientifically sustainable fashion. To reiterate, the sustainability of production and consumption based on these nature-mimicking models is *not a function of the amount of goods produced and consumed, nor of the motivations driving the consumption*. It is a matter of material flows and transformations that mimic and harmonize with natural cycles.

A more sustainable relationship with material goods and flows does not necessarily lead to deep sacrifice and austerity for consumers. Alternative forms of consumption such as sharing, membership, services or joint ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Belk 2010) provide opportunities to enjoy the pleasure and utility of materiality without contributing to overconsumption, as can a renewed emphasis on values of quality, durability and craftsmanship. In the case of entertainment, dematerialization such as the electronic delivery of books, music and movies reduces the need for material products and packaging (Sun 2000). Those who choose a contemporary nomadic existence take the concept of dematerializing even further, relying primarily on instrumentality to manage mobility (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012). Service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004) and a shift from goods to services can also contribute to reduced environmental impact. In short, reduced or alternative consumption can be part of the answer to sustainability in cases where it fits with consumers' value systems—meaning and matter must and do co-constitute.

Principles such as value circles and cradle-to-cradle design and manufacturing offer a vision of materiality that is likely to be far more palatable than perceived austerity to consumers and marketers alike. Sustainability may not require reductions in the levels of manufactured goods if marketing and manufacturing systems are redesigned to make do with the abundant material resources already available in the biosphere. Resource recovery can be made more profitable and desirable than resource extraction. Non-renewable energy resources can and should be made more expensive than renewable ones. Instead of ravaging the surface of the earth and rummaging in the lithosphere for minerals that, once extracted, contribute to problems of toxicity, mining operations could turn their focus to landfills and dumps. This is especially important given the climbing global population and the hundreds of millions of people in the world's modernizing economies that clamor for higher standards of living, thus putting accelerating pressure on every type of natural capital.

In its recognition of the agency inherent in objects and infrastructures, the new materialism suggests that science, technology and commerce need not conform to static or entrenched consumer lifestyles, preferences and practices. Lifestyles, preferences and practices have never stood still. Lifestyles change and markets arise as the result of changing technology (Martin and Schouten 2014). Changes in matter bring about changes in meaning and vice versa, and all of it happens in systems that are highly entangled and, to use Karen Barad's coinage, intra-active. Traditional consumer psychology suggests that marketers may influence consumers' choices by changing their awareness and beliefs, but nothing affects choice as directly as changing what options

are available and at what price. Americans in the 1970s needed no persuasion to switch to unleaded gasoline in their cars. The lead went away and consumers adapted to a new definition of "regular" gasoline. If the only produce on the shelves at the local supermarket were organically grown, then consumers would not agonize over whether to choose organic produce. If the electricity available at their power outlets were exclusively the product of renewable sources, consumers would give no thought to missing coal.

Sustainability, Marketing and New Materialism

This brings us back to marketing. Marketing systems are prime movers of both matter and meaning, shaping culture both material and immaterial. Most of the goods and services that people consume across the globe are produced and distributed by marketing institutions, and marketing is the same system that attaches much of the meaning to those goods and services. In many ways marketing at the macro level is the perfect institutionalization of the new materialism, the place where meaning and matter are completely entangled, where discourses and infrastructures conspire to shape the global society in which we live. It follows logically that marketing—as a system, a group of professions and a discipline of study—bears special responsibility for the relative sustainability of production and consumption. New materialism would argue that in marketing also lies special opportunity. Marketing systems operating with the neomaterialist logic would pay close attention to material (and energy) compositions and flows. Moreover, they would draw from the natural and social sciences and the humanities to create new, sustainable ways of delivering more value to more people.

Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero (1997) argue for a macromarketing approach to sustainable consumption in the face of the resilience of the dominant social paradigm. We agree with Kilbourne and colleagues that our unsustainable society is a systemic problem that must be addressed through technical, economic, and political processes and institutions. From a standpoint in the new materialism we derive hope for the possibility of systemic change, and for that change to emanate from marketing. Rather than a wholesale rejection of capitalism and marketing as we know them, a neomaterialist marketing could continue within a capitalist system doing the things it does best: providing the interface between business and society, creating and delivering value to customers, and attaching meanings to the material world. However, business and marketing guided by the new materialism would approach natural and human capital from an enlightened system perspective, optimizing operations and profitability within the limits of ecosystem health, human wellbeing and sustainable techno-material flows. In short, a neomaterialist marketing would harness the economic engine of capitalism and use it in the service of a sustainable society.

Marketing reaches from planning and production all the way to consumption and disposition. It integrates messages and media and material goods. The connections or relations among all of marketing's human, material and discursive actors are entangled in such a way that tugging on one thread causes movement in all the others. For insight into which threads to pull or where to create a shift of matter or meaning requires research that transcends the dualities of nature and culture and traverses the territories of academic disciplines. As researchers we have an important role to play. It is in our domain of interest and influence to generate the knowledge and rhetorical devices necessary to overturn the flawed dualistic and reductionist models that have supported the dominant social paradigm with its voracious, environmentally disastrous and often inhumane practices. A social science that embraces natural sciences and pays meticulous attention to material flows and transformations can hardly be used to justify current take-make-waste patterns of production and consumption.

How then, specifically, can the new materialism help marketing institutions move society toward greater sustainability? One answer lies in its focus on movements of both matter and meaning. In the opening to this essay we alluded to a conscious materialism characterized by a meticulous attention to materiality. Sustainability, as we have established, is largely a matter of material flows. The what, where, and when of those flows are intimately tied to culture. We can safely assume that deep-seated values are not what keep people, or businesses for that matter, from consuming sustainably. Most people do not value waste and human suffering. Businesses certainly do not. The failure to be sustainable is more likely due to materiality, that is, to the practices and infrastructures that preferentially facilitate unsustainable production and consumption.

The new materialism's attention to movements of matter can help create pathways for materials that make it easier, more convenient and more profitable to consume sustainably than to do otherwise. Martin and Schouten (2012) have conceptualized practices of sustainable marketing that integrate the science-based Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) developed by The Natural Step (Robèrt 2009), and they make the business case for sustainability as a source of long-term competitive advantage. One key feature of the FSSD is a complete accounting for all the flows of materials and energy in, through and out of an organization in order to establish a sustainability baseline from which to make and measure changes. The framework's integration of science and organization has a logic to it that works even in the most purely capitalist system, and yet following it demands and creates levels of awareness or consciousness that are likely to reveal fallacies in status quo thinking.

The monist perspective of the new materialism also would help to advance marketing solutions to issues of sustainability and wellbeing. For example, rather than debate the relative virtues of fast food and slow food, neomaterialists would attempt to comprehend foods of all types in terms of their material characteristics and their entanglements with the Earth, with farm laborers and animals, with chemicals, with consumers' bodies, with culinary meanings and with other foods. Similar analysis would erase the fast-fashion and slow-fashion duality in order, perhaps, to arrive at some sense of sustainable

fashion wherein material flows support humane conditions for workers, sustainable sourcing of both natural and synthetic fibers and dyes, the meanings and drivers of fashion preference, and end of life channels that facilitate the recovery of materials for remanufacture.

Formidable barriers to sustainability exist in the form of socially constructed and false dualities such as sustainability vs. cost, sustainability vs. competitiveness, sustainability vs. convenience or sustainability vs. performance. The idea that sustainable production is antithetical to cost and competition, or the notion that sustainability in products necessarily compromises affordability, convenience or performance for the consumer, holds companies and consumers back and must be abrogated. The business case for moving toward sustainability is clear. Done properly and strategically it yields short- and long-term cost benefits in such terms as energy savings, reductions of waste, conversions of waste streams to revenue streams, reduced risk and insurance costs, and more stable and cheaper supplies of material resources. It also provides several other sources of competitive advantage such as increased innovation, enhanced employee wellbeing and performance, and the ability to stay ahead of regulations (Anderson 1998; Martin and Schouten, 2012). Furthermore, the FSSD details a process of backcasting that ensures real progress toward sustainability while ensuring reasonable returns on investment (Martin and Schouten, 2012; Robèrt 2009). Markets gravitate to advances in social, political and technological spheres where a business case can be made. Making the business case for sustainability requires the kind of whole-system perspective advocated by macromarketing, and no system can be correctly understood without attention to the interconnections inherent in the new materialism.

Accountants have a particularity unemotional argument for moving towards sustainability. Cost and risk equations are dynamic, and the long-term shifts clearly favor sustainable production and sourcing. PricewaterhouseCoopers warns businesses that:

> We have passed a critical threshold ... Governments' ambitions to limit warming to 2C now appear highly unrealistic. This new reality means that we must contemplate a much more challenging future ... Investors in long-term assets or infrastructure, particularly in coastal or low-lying regions, need to consider more pessimistic scenarios. Sectors dependent on food, water, energy or ecosystem services need to scrutinize the resilience and viability of their supply chains. More carbon-intensive sectors need to anticipate more invasive regulation and the possibility of stranded assets (Confino 2012).

This bloodless report from a conservative, major accounting firm underscores both the urgency of the sustainability challenge and its inherent materiality. Instead of falling back on facile dualities, marketing firms need to examine very closely the specific entanglements of people, places, politics, and processes that form their current realities. They then need to make adjustments such as securing stable, renewable sources of materials and energy and supporting the kinds of legislation and regulations that pave the path to the necessary investments and infrastructural changes.

Holt (2012) advocates the engineering of market- or industry-level change through combinations of material and discursive constructions that supplant unsustainable systems with more sustainable ones. He points out that many industries become locked into unsustainable practices and ideologies, which are unique to each industry. Companies within an industry can, in-spite of the "us vs. them" duality of market competition, collaborate to bring about industry-level change. By pooling resources they can create new infrastructures and new market logics to benefit all competitors in the market as well as their respective stakeholders. Alternatively, firms or whole industries may leave themselves open for new markets to be constructed in direct competition with them, even to the point of making their own industries obsolete. It is the focus on the actual entanglements of materials and meanings in a particular market that makes such a solution possible.

Conclusion

We have contrasted materialism in the sense of its popular, consumerist meaning with the new materialism, an emerging monist philosophy with clear ontological and epistemological implications. We did so not because they have much in common beyond nomenclature and a general concern with material things but because they illustrate a set of challenges and opportunities for the global sustainability project. Materialism as a consumer preoccupation with possessions and a faith in the ability of possessions to make life better may be a barrier to achieving sustainable modes of production and consumption. However, asking consumers to be less materialistic does not work. First, such admonitions often take a moralizing tone; second, they ask consumers to voluntarily give up lifestyles in which they have invested significant resources; and third, widespread materialism is supported by the dominant social paradigm, which promotes magical thinking about the power of possessions and regards constant growth in consumption as a virtual panacea to the world's economic problems. Research on materialism shows its downsides for individuals and society but offers no real insight into how to address the problems. This owes, we believe, to the relatively narrow disciplinary perspectives of those that study it.

The new materialism, by comparison, insists on broadening perspectives to the point of erasing dualities such as matter and meaning, nature and culture, and science and humanities. To social constructionism it adds a focus on materiality, not to perpetuate the dualism of mind and matter but, rather, to explore and understand them as co-constitutive parts of a complex and tangled whole. Rather than promote magical thinking about products' abilities to deliver happiness, the new materialism demystifies products through close scrutiny of their entanglements of matter and meaning. By razing disciplinary partitions the new materialism facilitates transpositions from one discipline to another. Many of the developments in theorizing

sustainable production, consumption and marketing—such as cradle-to-cradle design, value circles, and biomimicry (Benyus 2009)—result directly from transpositions of principles from the natural sciences to economic and technological systems.

We opened this essay offering the possibility of a new path forward for marketing research and practice in the service of sustainability. That way, we propose, is anchored in the ontology and epistemology of the new materialism, its rejection of reductionist dualities, and its scrupulous attention to material agency in all things social and cultural. We advocate for a marketing research that, in the vein of actor-network theory and similar approaches to assemblages and agencements, embraces (not mimics) the natural and physical sciences in its understanding of social worlds and commercial enterprises. We support a macromarketing that is able to grasp entire systems and their entanglements of matter and meaning.

Getting back to the question of whether sustainability is a megatrend, we would have to say it depends on the definition of sustainability. If we are talking about sustainability as a topic of conversation or as an ill-defined umbrella term with all its cousins such as corporate social responsibility, triple bottom line and conscious capitalism, then yes, sustainability probably qualifies as a megatrend. If we refer to a scientific, systemic understanding of sustainability, then we fear it unfortunately does not. Not yet. We hope, however, that the trend toward a new materialism in marketing and consumer research may signal the beginning of wholesale shifts in modes of marketing thought, and that marketing—as a powerful mover of both matter and meaning—will become a major force behind the creation of a more sustainable society.

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