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## SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND THE UK'S LEADING RETAILERS

*Peter Jones, Daphne Comfort and David Hillier*

*'The many products we buy and use every day contribute to our comfort and well-being. However awareness of the unsustainable levels of resource consumption and the significant impacts of these products on the environment is growing among consumers and, policy makers and business' (European Commission 2010).*

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to offer an exploratory case study of how the UK's leading retailers are addressing sustainable consumption.

**Design/Methodology/Approach**-The paper begins with a discussion of the growing awareness of the importance of sustainable consumption and of the role that retailers can play in promoting more sustainable patterns of consumption. This is followed by a short literature review of current thinking on sustainable consumption. The paper draws its empirical information from the top ten UK retailers' corporate web sites and from an observational survey conducted in these retailers' largest stores in the town of Cheltenham in the UK. The paper concludes with some reflections on how the UK's leading retailers are addressing sustainable consumption and on how the concept fits into their business models.

**Findings**-The findings reveal the UK's top ten retailers make few public corporate commitments to sustainable consumption and that while some of these retailers were offering customers some information which might encourage more sustainable shopping behaviour such information was systematically undermined by marketing messages which were designed to encourage rather than restrict consumption. More critically the paper concludes that the leading retailers' commitments to sustainable consumption are couched within existing business models centred on continuing growth and that as such they are effectively ignoring the fact that present levels of consumption are not sustainable.

**Originality/Value**-This paper provides an accessible review of the extent to which the UK's leading food retailers are addressing sustainable consumption and communicating sustainable consumption agendas to their within stores and as such it will be of value to academics, practitioners, consumer organizations and policy makers interested in the role retailers can play in promoting sustainable consumption.

**Keywords:** sustainable consumption; UK food retailers;

## ***Introduction***

There is a growing awareness that the need to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption is becoming increasingly pressing. The European Commission (2012a), for example, has argued that Europe's environmental footprint is one of the largest on the planet and suggests that if the rest of the world lived like Europeans, it would require the resources of more than two and a half earths to support all of us. As such, everyone in society has a role to play in moving towards more sustainable consumption. BSR, a consultancy which works with over 300 companies worldwide *'to build a just and sustainable world'* has argued that *'it is increasingly clear that the consumption based model of economic growth cannot be applied globally without causing immense environmental and economic disruption'* (BSR 2010). More pressingly the European Environment Agency (2012) has argued that *'consumption of products and services impacts the environment in many different ways'* suggesting that *'the things we buy contribute, directly or indirectly through the product life cycle, to climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss and resource depletion'* and branding *'unsustainable consumption'* as *'the mother of all environmental issues.'*

The World Economic Forum (2012) has stressed that *'businesses must reshape demand by making sustainable consumption more personal and relevant to consumers, leveraging the power of technology to drive engagement and transparency and by redesigning products and services to deliver increased value with fewer resources, thus making the sustainable choice the default choice.'* However the World Economic Forum (2012) has also argued *'there is no silver bullet for achieving sustainable consumption'* and this strikes a chord with Cohen's (2005) argument that *that 'sustainable consumption is the*

*most obdurate challenge for the sustainable development agenda.'* In examining *'the role of business'* in *'mainstreaming sustainable consumption'*, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2010) stressed the importance of *'using marketing communications to influence consumer choice and behaviour.'* The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2010) further argues that marketing *'can help consumers to find, choose and use sustainable products and services, by providing information, ensuring availability and affordability, and setting the appropriate tone through marketing communications.'*

More specifically there is growing awareness that retailers have a vital role to play in promoting more sustainable patterns of consumption. In March 2009, for example, the European Commission and a number of the UK's leading retailers along with several of their European counterparts launched a 'Retail Forum' as part of an initiative to promote more sustainable consumption. Retailers are the active intermediaries between primary producers and manufacturers on the one hand and consumers on the other and as such they can be seen to be in a singularly powerful position to drive sustainable consumption in three ways, namely through their own actions, through partnerships with suppliers and through their daily interactions with consumers. Durieu (2003), for example, argues that large retailers *'can greatly influence changes in production processes and consumption patterns and are well positioned to exert pressure on producers in favour of more sustainable choices.'* In a similar vein the European Commission (2012a) has argued that *'retailers in Europe are in an exceptional position to promote more sustainable consumption not only via their daily contact with millions of European customers but also through their own actions and partnerships with suppliers.'* That said in advertising its 2012 Bi-Annual Conference on Business and the Environment, Globe, a not for profit organisation *'dedicated to finding practical business oriented solutions to the world's environmental problems'* posed the questions *'is sustainable retailing an oxymoron?'* and *'is the overarching need to reduce consumption simply at odds with the very foundation of retailing?'* (Globe 2012). With these thoughts in mind this paper reviews how the leading UK retailers are publicly addressing sustainable consumption. More specifically the aims of the paper are three fold namely to examine the corporate commitments the UK's leading

retailers are making to sustainable consumption; to explore how information about sustainable consumption is communicated to customers within the retailers' stores; and to offer some critical reflections on the ways in which these retailers are currently addressing and pursuing sustainable consumption.

### ***Sustainable Consumption***

Cohen (2010) has traced the emergence of the term sustainable consumption to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and since then it has become an increasingly important policy element in national sustainable development strategies. Currently there is little consensus in defining sustainable consumption and it is widely recognized to be a contested concept (Seyfang 2004) which embraces '*competing discourses*' (Hobson 2006). While some authorities and individuals offer definitions others draw attention to the intrinsic difficulties in constructing such a definition. A number of definitions of sustainable consumption mirror mainstream definitions of sustainable development. The United Nations Environment Programme (1995), for example, defines sustainable consumption as '*the use of services and related products that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations.*' More simply Dahl (1998) suggests that '*sustainable consumption refers to the need to stay within the global sustainability of resources.*' However the UK Sustainable Development Commission (2003) has recognized '*the difficulty of defining sustainable consumption.*' Marchand and Findeli (undated), for example, have argued that sustainable consumption '*is a goal with uncertain boundaries*' and that it has '*no clear definition, nor are its implications well understood.*' (Dolan 2002) claims that existing definitions of sustainable consumption are prescriptive in that they do not describe what consumption is but what it should be and Schaefer and Crane (2005) have called for a re-examination of existing conceptualisations of sustainable consumption in order to incorporate the social and cultural functions that consumption fulfils.

Jackson (2006) summarises a variety of definitions but notes that these adopt different positions not only on '*the extent to which sustainable consumption involves changes in consumer behaviour and lifestyles*' but also on whether sustainable consumption

implies *'consuming more efficiently, consuming more responsibly or quite simply consuming less.'* Jackson (2006) further argues that *'the dominant institutional consensus'* is that sustainable consumption *'is to be achieved primarily through improvements in the efficiency with which resources are converted into economic goods.'* More generally a distinction can be made between *'weak sustainable consumption'* and *'strong sustainable consumption.'* The former has been defined as *'choosing products and services that either are less resource consuming, or less burdening for the environment, or less destructive for those people actually producing them'* (Church 2009). The latter definition embraces *'increases in the eco-efficiency of consumption (often via more efficient production patterns or an efficiency friendly design) and fundamental changes in consumption patterns and reductions in consumption levels in industrialized countries'* (Fuchs and Lorek 2004).

Sustainable consumption, variously defined, *'has become a core policy objective of the new millennium in national and international arenas'* (Seyfang 2006) and as noted earlier a growing number of major retailers claim to be integrating it into their core business strategies. However embedding, namely *'changing mind set, information sources, decision making processes and reporting'* (Accounting for Sustainability 2010) sustainable consumption is a major challenge for large corporations (Bartlett 2009). Such a challenge which must embrace senior management commitment, a clear understanding of the key sustainable consumption drivers, the comprehensive integration of sustainable consumption not only into core business strategy but also everyday decision making at all levels of the organization and the effective monitoring and public reporting processes, represents a major cultural and operational change for retailers. Without such changes there are likely to be major difficulties in embedding sustainable consumption throughout the supply chain. More pointedly Crewe (2001) suggested that *'the majority of British consumers have neither the political clout nor the financial means to mobilize against the dictates of big retail capital.'* At the same time the European Commission (2012b) has recognised that *'sustainable consumption is seen by some as a reversal of progress towards greater quality of life'* in that *'it would involve a sacrifice of our current , tangible needs and desires in the name of an uncertain future.'*

## ***Frame of Reference/Methodology***

In an attempt to review how the UK's leading retailers are publicly addressing sustainable consumption the top ten retailers, ranked by annual sales, namely Tesco; J. Sainsbury; Asda (Walmart); Wm. Morrison Group; Marks and Spencer; Co-operative Group; John Lewis Partnership; Boots; Home Retail Group; and Kingfisher (Retail Week 2013) were selected for study and a two dimensional approach to information collection was adopted. The first focused on the leading retailers' publicly reported corporate commitments to sustainable consumption and the second on how information on sustainable consumption is communicated to customers within stores. Bowen (2003) suggested that the majority of large companies have realised the potential of the World Wide Web as a mechanism for reporting sustainability commitments and achievements and argued that its interactivity, updatability and its ability to handle complexity adds value to the reporting process. The authors' experience and previous research in the field suggested that large retailers/companies report publicly on their corporate commitments to sustainability in their annual sustainability/corporate social responsibility reports. With this in mind the authors undertook first an Internet search, using the key term 'sustainability report' and 'corporate social responsibility report' and the name of each of the UK's top ten UK retailers (Table 1) in February 2013 employing Google as the search engine. The aim here was to locate and access some general information on the retailers' corporate approach to sustainability. The authors then undertook a digital word search using the key words 'sustainable consumption' to discover the retailer's more specific commitments to sustainable consumption. In discussing the reliability and validity of information obtained from the Internet, Saunders et.al. (2007) emphasise the importance of the authority and reputation of the source and the citation of a specific contact individual who can be approached for additional information. In surveying the top ten UK retailers the authors were satisfied that these two conditions were met. At the same time the authors recognise that the approach chosen has its limitations in that there are issues in the extent to which information and reports posted on the Internet genuinely, and in detail, reflect current strategic corporate thinking on sustainable consumption. However given the need to drive forward exploratory research such as this and to begin to understand the role retailers are

currently playing in promoting sustainable consumption the internet based analysis adopted offers an appropriate approach.

Secondly a straightforward observational survey technique was employed in an attempt to gain some insight into how the UK's top ten retailers are communicating information about sustainable consumption to customers/currently trying to engage customers in sustainable consumption within their stores. More specifically a 'walk through combining structured visual observation and recording' survey was undertaken by two of the authors in March 2013 in the largest retail outlet operated by each of the ten retailers within the town of Cheltenham. The survey systematically recorded the extent to which information on sustainability was used in marketing communications on banners, posters, on shelves and shelf edges, on products and on information and promotional leaflets and flyers. Such an approach, though basic, offered two distinct advantages. Firstly it was simple to conceptualise, easily executed and readily replicated. Secondly the authors believe that it captured an accurate picture of the ways in which messages about sustainable consumption were, or were not, being presented directly to customers within store and as such successfully captured the richly detailed reality of the customers' retail experience and their engagement with sustainable consumption at the point of sale. At the same time it locates sustainable consumption in a dynamic retail setting and provides a view through the lens of the customer which replicates everyday real world behaviour. In pursuing both methods of information collection the principal aim was to undertake a general exploratory review of the extent to which the UK's leading retailers were publicly addressing sustainable consumption and the specific information cited below is used for illustrative rather than comparative purposes.

### ***Findings***

The Internet search revealed that while all of the UK's the top ten retailers stressed their corporate commitment to sustainability, any focus on sustainable consumption was conspicuous primarily by its absence. The retailers' commitments to sustainability was emphasised in a variety of ways. J. Sainsbury, for example, claimed '*We want customers at the heart of everything we do and see a huge opportunity in helping them make better, more sustainable choices.*' More practically the company argues '*Our Nectar loyalty scheme*



*enables us to incentivise and reward sustainable choices. So, for example, we award points to customers for every carrier bag reused, with an 18 per cent increase in the number of points earned in this way in 2011.'* Marks and Spencer report establishing 'Plan A' in 2007 with *'the ultimate goal of becoming the world's most sustainable major retailer'* and the company claims to be *'integrating sustainability into how we run the business'* and suggests that *'by 2020 every Marks and Spencer product has Plan A built into it, making sustainability new norm.'* John Lewis argues that *'sustainability is placed at the heart of our decision making'* while Kingfisher claims to be committed to *'embedding a new approach to sustainability within the workings of our business.'*

These corporate commitments to sustainability are evidenced across a number of environmental, social and economic issues. A wide range of environmental issues are addressed including climate change, carbon emissions, energy consumption and efficiency, waste management, environmentally friendly products, packaging, the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity. A range of social issues also loom large and a number of common themes can be identified including responsible trading and sourcing, diversity and equality of opportunity, training and development, working conditions at suppliers, health and safety within the workplace and links with local communities. A number of the selected retailers also claim corporate commitments to enhancing economic sustainability, for example through the creation of new employment opportunities and working with local producers. While these corporate commitments to sustainability might, in theory, be seen to provide a contextual framework for the UK's leading retailers to report their achievements in moving towards sustainable consumption, the digital word search revealed the term is conspicuous by its virtual absence from their sustainability and corporate social responsibility reports.

Indeed only two of the selected retailers make explicit reference to sustainable consumption. Firstly Tesco made three references to sustainable consumption in reporting on its commitment of £25 million in 2007 *'to create the Sustainable Consumption Institute in Manchester- a global centre of excellence focusing on sustainability and encouraging consumers to adopt more sustainable lifestyles.'* More specifically the company reports that the research undertaken by the Institute *'includes looking at climate change, consumer*

*behaviour and technological innovations across the supply chain.*' Secondly in the press release that accompanied Marks and Spencer's 2012 sustainability report Marc Bolland, the company's Chief Executive emphasised *'we now have a better, greener and more ethical Marks & Spencer. Moving forward we will continue to engage customers in sustainable consumption'* (Marks and Spencer 2012).

The observational survey within stores revealed two contrasting themes. Firstly there was only limited evidence that the top ten UK retailers are looking to communicate any information about sustainable consumption to customers. In some of the selected stores, large posters are employed which provide messages with a sustainable consumption theme. On the wall by the escalator between the first and second floors in the Marks and Spencer's store, for example, a large poster entitled *'Sustainable Raw Materials'* are the messages *'Our goal is to make sure our key raw materials come from the most sustainable sources available to us'* and *'there's nothing uniform about our staff uniforms. They're made from recycled bottles.'* A hanging poster in the fruit and vegetable section of the Waitrose store under the *'LEAF'* namely *'Linking Environment and Farming'* banner announces the company is *'Helping you choose food grown in harmony with the environment'* and that this is part of its commitment to *'Treading lightly the Waitrose way.'* while a large wall poster facing the checkouts in the J. Sainsbury asks *'Can a shopping bag make a difference to the world'* and exhorts students to *'Shop with our reusable bags'* because *'Every time you use one the planet says thanks.'* In a similar vein a sign on the wall behind the checkouts in the Wm. Morrisons store, read *'Today – We'd like you to do something for tomorrow and re-use your bags.'*

A number of the stores have messages seemingly designed to stress the sustainability of specific products. A poster adjacent to the display of bananas in the J. Sainsbury store proclaims *'We are the largest retailers of Fair Trade products in the world'* while in the Marks and Spencer store a small poster adjacent to the Fair Trade bananas advises customers *'When you chose Marks and Spencer's Fair Trade bananas, you're giving your support for producers in developing countries by supporting new investment in local communities.'* Some of the selected retailers advertise the sustainable sourcing of fish products. Within the J. Sainsbury store, for example, the packaging on the Taste the

Difference Speyside Whisky Smoked Salmon included the message *'Our fish are fed on bespoke feed designed to protect and enhance the natural environment'*, a number of packaged fish products advised customers that *'This product comes from a fishery that has been independently certified to the Marine Stewardship Council standards for well managed and sustainable fishing'* and a large poster behind the store's wet fish counter announces *'100% of our fresh fish is responsibly caught from sustainable sources.'* A large wall poster facing the checkout tills in the Marks and Spencer store proclaims that *'All our fish and seafood are responsibly sourced'* while in the Waitrose store the packaging on a number of fish products informs customers that the products are *'responsibly sourced from a well managed fishery.'* A large wall notice facing customers at the checkouts in the J. Sainsbury store announced *'We're converting our standard t-shirts to Fair-Trade cotton to ensure farmers are paid fair prices.'* The majority of the selected retailers which have a food offer mark their generally small selection of Fair Trade coffee with a shelf edge label which includes the Fair Trade symbol. In the J. Sainsbury store, for example, a shelf edge label in the Fair Trade range informed customers *'Fair Trade means fairer trading conditions for Fair Trade producers and opportunities for them to invest in their businesses and communities for a sustainable future.'*

Within the B&Q store small notices in the timber products section inform customers that *'All wood used in these products is sourced from well managed forest sources'* and that *'At B&Q we do not want to contribute to devastation caused by indiscriminate felling of forests. We work hard to ensure that our wood products are sourced from forests independently certified as sustainable and well managed.'* Also within the B&Q store a notice above the company's own label(Verve) bags of growing media, claims *'Verve is committed to sustaining the environment and its resources; therefore we have a full range of growing media including reduced peat and peat free compost.'* More generally the B&Q store had a *'One Planet Home'* leaflet subtitled *'Home improvement need not cost the earth.'* This leaflet sought to explain that *'One Planet Living is a lifestyle where we can all enjoy an excellent quality of life while staying within our fair share of the Earth's resources.'* In explaining the rationale behind this concept the company argued *'we're consuming resources and polluting the planet at a level the Earth just can't sustain.'* More specifically

the company suggests that *'Ecological Footprinting shows that if everyone in the world consumed as many natural resources as the average person in the UK we'd need three planets to support us.'* More specifically the leaflet provides simple illustrations of how customers can save water and energy, grow their own food, re-cycle household waste and conserve the natural environment.

Secondly the most visually dominant, and often most pervasive, set of messages confronting customers within the selected retailers' stores were concerned with price enticements to consume, rather than to encourage more sustainable patterns of consumption. These messages covered a wide range of products. The majority of the top ten retailers advertised a number of 'multiple purchase at reduced price offers' such as *'Buy Any 2 for £5'* and *'Buy 4 for 3.'* In the Asda store, for example, such offers were widely and prominently advertised with red labels and included a selection of wines offered at *'3 for £10'* (on an individual product price of between £3.98 and £4.98), *'2 for £2'* (£1.35) on a wide range of sliced bread, *'6 for £3'* (£0.65) on Muller Rice and Yoghurt and seasonal chocolate Easter Eggs were on offer at *'3 for £10'* (£5.00). Wm. Morrisons advertised *'Any 2 for £2'* (£1.25) on a range of fruit snack packs, *'2 for £3'* (£2) on packaged cod, haddock, salmon and prawns and *'2 for £2.50'* on a range of own label soups. The Boots store advertised a twin offer on Gillette Venus Razors and Olay Skin Care Cream of *'2 for £17.00'* (£10.46 and £10.59), *'2 for £1.40'* (£1.37) on Fanta, Oasis and Dr. Pepper bottled soft drinks, a wide range of *'Mix and Match '3 for 2'* offers on sandwiches and snacks and *'2 for £1.00'* (£0.70) on a variety of Kelloggs Special K bars. In a similar vein the Co-operative store advertised a range of pizza products as *'Buy Any 2 for £5'* (£2.97), a range of packaged own label bacon and sausages were advertised as *'Buy Any 2 for £5'* (£2.85) and a range of bottled fruit juices were advertised *'Buy Any 2 for £3'* (£1.65). Homebase advertised a range of potted plants as *'Buy 2 for £10'* (£6.00) and *'3 for £9'* (£3.50).

All the selected retailers also prominently advertised a variety of *'Buy 1 Get 1 Free'*, *'Buy 1 Get 1 Half Price'* and *'3 for 2'* style offers. On a number of the windows of the Boots store large posters advertised *'3 for 2'* offers on a range of shampoos, hair styling products and conditioners, make-up, eyelashes and beauty accessories and these messages were reinforced at the entrance to the store on a number of free standing signs. Additionally

throughout much of the ground floor of the store hanging banners and signs on the top of a number of shelf displays, all displayed the same message. The Boots store also had shelf, and display stand, edge labels advertising *'Buy 1 Get 1 Half Price'* on a range of own label cotton wool buds and pads and on a range of Lynx, Nivea and FCUK men's toiletries. The Co-operative Group advertised *'Buy 1 Get 1 Free'* offers on a range of Batchelors Cup-a-Soup, on Taveners Fruit Jellies and on Cadburys Easter Eggs while the Tesco store had a *'Buy 1 get 1 Free'* offer on chicken fillets and the J. Sainsbury store had the same offer on Barkers West Country Mature Cheddar Cheese. More generally the Co-operative store displayed a number of posters and shelf edge labels for a range of products exhorting customers to *'Try Me I'm Truly Irresistible.'*

## **Discussion**

The findings reported above reveal, at best, somewhat mixed messages about the leading UK retailers' public commitment to sustainable consumption. On the one hand the selected retailers publicly recognised and reported on the impacts their businesses have on the environment, the economy and society and stressed their strategic corporate commitment to sustainable development but they made little specific commentary on, or make any specific commitments to, sustainable consumption. On the other hand within stores while some of the selected retailers provided customers with some limited product information on sustainable consumption many of the marketing communications appeared to be designed to encourage consumption rather than to encourage more sustainable purchasing behaviour. At the same time where information was provided on sustainable consumption it was often written in small print on the packaging. While such information may be located and read by committed consumers who positively look for products with sustainable consumption credentials it seems unlikely that this approach will engage those customers who currently have little awareness or concern for such issues. More generally a number of issues merit discussion.

Firstly there are issues about the way in which the UK's leading retailers construct definitions of sustainability within which interpretations of sustainable consumption might realistically be set. In many ways the leading retailers have constructed a definition of sustainability built around business efficiency and the search for competitive advantage and

may be driven as much by business imperatives as by any concern for sustainable consumption. The emphasis is thus primarily on efficiency gains across a wide range of economic, social and environmental areas rather than on maintaining the viability and integrity of natural ecosystems and on reducing seemingly ever increasing demands on finite natural resources. Thus while many of the environmental initiatives are designed to reduce energy and water use and waste generation, for example, they also serve to reduce costs. In a similar vein workplace initiatives focused on training and development, succession planning and employee wellbeing all help in recruiting and retaining members of staff, in motivating them, and in providing a fulfilling workplace experience. More critically Banerjee (2008) has argued that *'despite their emancipatory rhetoric, discourses of corporate citizenship, social responsibility and sustainability are defined by narrow business interests and serve to curtail the interests of external stakeholders.'* In a similar vein this, echoes Hobson's (2006) argument that rich and powerful groups will construct sustainability agendas that do not threaten consumption, per se, but seek to link them *'to forms of knowledge – science, technology and efficiency – that embody the locus of power'* which is already held by the retailers.

That said the retailers' construction of sustainability which emphasises efficiency, can be interpreted, for, example, as being consistent with the UK government's vision for sustainability which looks to *'encouraging economic growth while protecting the environment and improving our quality of life'* (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2013). This in turn raises questions about complexity and ambiguity in defining sustainable consumption referred to earlier, and about the nature of the relationship between the state and retail capital and about the locus of power within that relationship. French (2002), for example, argues that many states within advanced capitalist societies have sought to *'implement sustainability through a restricted public sphere paradigm which places greater emphasis on the corporate imperative'* namely that the state must not jeopardise *'the competitiveness of domiciled corporate interests in the wider globalized economy'*. With this in mind he views the role of the state in the promotion of sustainability and sustainable consumption as a controversial one and he argues that *'there is a balance to be drawn somewhere between overly prescriptive regulation, on the one hand, and the*

*withdrawal of the state from the debate altogether, on the other*'. Here the argument is that without direct, sustained and purposeful political direction the market cannot, of itself, be relied upon to promote sustainable consumption while at the same time the state cannot deliver sustainable consumption goals by regulation and legislation alone.

Secondly while a wide and complex set of factors influence consumer buying behaviour the findings reported above particularly draw attention to the tension between price offers designed to encourage consumption and the more limited messages designed to foster sustainable consumption. Price is always likely to be an important factor for the majority of customers, particularly during a recession, but as Shell (2009) argues, discounted prices may prove to be unsustainable in that they can drive down wages, stifle innovation, lead to waste from over-purchasing and lead to irreversible environmental damage. Nevertheless the leading retailers in the UK have been very successful in developing marketing strategies built around competitive pricing. However much less is known about how consumer concerns about sustainable consumption influence their buying behaviour. On the one hand a number of leading retailers report that customers have growing concerns about a range of environmental issues, particularly climate change and that they are increasingly looking for retailers to publicly take responsibility for addressing such issues. More independently (Ipsos/Mori (2008) argue that retailers *'point to increasing awareness, interest and even excitement among the mainstream public on sustainability issues.'* On the other hand while Goss (2006) recognised that *'various movements have emerged to promote alternative consumption lifestyles'* he reported that *'there is widely observed to be an attitude behaviour gap'* in that *'customers are not willing to pay higher prices for cause related products, lack adequate information to make effective choices... and are easily distracted by marketing rhetoric.'* That said there is general recognition that *'changing consumer behaviour is particularly problematic, especially in societies where the freedom of consumer choice is highly valued'* and while *'most initiatives to change behaviour have amounted to price incentives and penalties for the purchase of particular goods and services'*, or information campaigns and that *'the rate of change is not commensurate with the scale of the problem'* (Sustainable Consumption Institute undated).

Thirdly while Brand (2010) recognised that *'in environmental and consumer policy it has become common place to view the critical consumer as the decisive agent for a change towards sustainable consumption'* he argued that such *'individualized approaches do not take into account the complex socio-technical nature of consumption, its dependency on systems of provision, its varying symbolic meanings across social milieu , and the systematic interlinkages of consumption practices and conventions of everyday life.'* More pointedly Shove and Spurling (2013) argued that *'rather than seeing change in the resource intensity of daily life as an outcome of individual choice, or of seemingly of external economic and social forces, it makes sense to ask how social practices evolve, and what this means for the use of energy, water and other natural resources.'*

There is certainly growing interest in developing how a better understanding of the practices of consumption can help to foster moves towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and here *'practices, instead of individuals become the units of analysis that matter most.'* Such work draws on the wider genre of practice theory which in simple terms looks to understand *'the role that practices play in our lives'* (Schatzki 2010). Ropke (2009) asserts that *'Practices are meaningful to people, and if asked about their everyday life, they will usually describe the practices they are engaged in. Consumption – which is interesting from an environmental perspective – comes in as an aspect of practices: performing a practice usually requires using various material artefacts, such as equipment, tools, materials, and infrastructures'* and that *'primarily, people are practitioners who indirectly, through the performance of various practices, draw on resources.'* Further Ropke (2009) argues that *'with regard to particular practices, it is important to identify the practices demanding considerable resources and to study the formation of these practices as a basis for policies.'* That said Ropke (2009) concludes that *'the practice perspective emphasizes the immense challenge involved in promoting sustainable consumption'* and *'the practice perspective suggests that moralizing or trying to persuade individuals that curbing consumption would contribute to both environmental improvements and increased wellbeing – has little chance of success.'*

While *'there is no one theory of practice and no such thing as a practice approach'* (Shove and Spurling 2013) a number of lines of empirical enquiry have emerged under the



practice umbrella. Shove et. al. (2007) looked to examine how *'consumption practices and their component materials, symbols and procedures develop over time, generating new product opportunities'* and report on four case studies focusing on 'Do-It Yourself ' (DIY) and home Improvement; digital photography; product design; and the development of plastic. Studying consumption associated with DIY, for example, allowed identification of *'a provisional chain of relationships through which consumer goods are linked to competence, competence to practice and practice to the consumption of consumer goods.'* Watson explored how theories of practice can inform the transition to a decarbonised transport system within the UK. He focused on *'understanding the detailed bundling of practices at the level of accomplishing everyday life-for example how cycling works as an essential part of some family households' coordination of travel- may provide small, specific but potentially significant opportunities for intervention'* (Watson 2012). While Spaargaren (2011) has suggested that there is a need for policy makers *'to gain a better understanding of everyday consumption practices'*, nevertheless problems remain in that *'their utility for understanding socio-technical processes is limited to comprehending the details of local doings'* (Watson 2012) and more generally that they *'bypass issues of political economy and power'* (Shove and Spurling 2013).

Fourthly there are broader and more fundamental issues about the tension between the efficacy of promoting both sustainable consumption as well as continuing business growth and resource consumption. In some ways the UK's leading retailers general position was epitomized by Sir Terry Leahy, the then Chief Executive Officer of Tesco, in his 'Foresight' contribution at the start of The Global Coca Cola Retailing Research Council Forum report (2009), who argued that, at that time, his company *'is seeking to create a movement which shows that it is possible to consume, to be green and to grow'*. This approach is certainly consistent with the argument advanced by Reisch et.al. (2008) for example, that although moving towards sustainable consumption is a major policy agenda, *'Growth of income and material throughput by means of industrialization and mass consumerism remains the basic aim of western democracy.'* Reisch et.al. (2008) further argued that *'rather than controlling consumption, recycling materials and increasing*

*production efficiency have tended to be the dominant means supposed to decouple environmental degradation from economic growth.'*

Technological innovation is widely seen to offer a means of increasing production efficiency. Schor (2008), for example, suggests *'much of the literature on sustainable consumption has focused upon technological solutions'* and claims that *'advocates of technological solutions argue that more intelligent design and technological innovation can dramatically reduce or even stop the depletion of ecological resources, as well as eliminate toxic chemicals and ecosystem disruption.'* Schor (2008) further argued that *'the popularity of technological solutions is also attributable to the fact that they are apolitical, and do not challenge macrostructures of production and consumption'* and that *'they fail to address increases in the scale of production and consumption, sometimes even arguing that such increases are not unsustainable if enough natural-capital-saving technical change occurs.'*

More fundamentally Jackson (2006) has argued that *'it is entirely fanciful to suppose that deep emission and resource cuts can be achieved without confronting the structure of market economies.'* In a similar vein Castro (2004) has questioned the very possibility of sustainable development under capitalism and argued that economic growth relies upon the continuing and inevitable exploitation of both natural and social capital. Here Fernando's (2003) assertion that *'capitalism has shown remarkable creativity and power to undermine the goals of sustainable development by appropriating the language and practices of sustainable development'* resonates loudly. More generally this, in turn, echoes Dolan's (2002) belief that *'the goal of sustainable consumption needs to be seen as a political project, recognising the power relations between social groupings and between cultural value systems'* and his warning that *'this is the context within which the idea of sustainability will stand or fall.'*

### **Managerial Implications**

The findings of this study suggest a range of managerial implications for the UK's leading retailers. These retailers may, for example, wish to explore how they might more effectively pursue their buying and supply activities to promote sustainable consumption and they may also look to develop more effective and focused initiatives to sensitise buyers

to sustainable consumption agendas. Retailers may also look to develop the quality of their verification and external assurance procedures and thus to improve the transparency of their commitments to sustainable consumption, and their achievements in fostering it, throughout the supply chain. That said this is no straightforward task when large food retailers are sourcing products from a large number of suppliers and producers drawn from distant and politically diverse geographical areas. Accurately capturing and storing information across a diverse range of environmental, social and economic activities throughout the supply chain and providing access to allow independent external assurance is a challenging and costly venture but one which may need to be met if greater transparency is to be achieved.

If the UK leading retailers are to strengthen and extend their commitment to sustainable consumption then they will need to undertake, or commission, research to investigate the most effective way that they can use marketing communications within stores to encourage customers to make more informed sustainable choices. At the same time the leading retailers need to make more determined efforts to keep customers informed of progress in moving towards more sustainable consumption. However within a constantly changing and fiercely competitive business environment there will be limits to the information about sustainable consumption that the leading retailers can provide on the vast range of products they offer for sale. At the same time there are dangers, for example, that providing accurate and verifiable information for all products *'drowns out the ability of consumers to make like-for-like comparisons and ceases to provide them with any useful means of comparison'* (Consumer Focus 2009). The leading retailers may also wish to undertake, or commission market research designed to explore what sustainability means to customers, why they think it is important, on the characteristics of their consumers that care about sustainable consumption and on the extent to which those consumers are willing to change their purchasing behaviour, and how sustainable consumption is manifest in new product launches. As retailers increasingly look to use mobile communication technologies and social media so it will become vitally important to undertake research on the efficacy of such approaches to disseminate messages about sustainable consumption.

More strategically the leading retailers should continually look to ensure that their commitments to sustainable consumption are wholly consistent with both the company's overarching corporate strategy and with its day to day operational practices, that they can be seen to be more wholeheartedly and energetically promoting their commitment to sustainable consumption and to be cascading this commitment throughout their organisations. Finally in what is never going to be an easy route to genuinely more sustainable consumption, the leading retailers may want to consider openly sharing information and good practice not only with suppliers but with their business rivals.. However the premature closure of the 'Race to the Top' project (International Institute for Environment and Development 2004) project, originally designed '*to track progress towards a greener and fairer food system*' suggests this will prove no easy task. More optimistically the UK's leading retailers need to more fully acknowledge their pivotal role as leaders, innovators and power brokers in promoting sustainable consumption to consumers, suppliers and government.

## **Conclusion**

While there is growing awareness amongst policy makers that retailers have an important role to play in promoting more sustainable patterns of consumption, the findings of this paper suggest that the leading UK retailers are currently making limited public commitments to sustainable consumption. At the corporate level the selected retailers publicly recognise and report on the impacts their businesses have on the environment, society and the economy and many of them stress their ongoing strategic commitment to sustainable development but they offer no specific commentary on any commitment to sustainable consumption. The findings also revealed that while the selected retailers were offering customers at best only limited information within store to enable them to engage with sustainable consumption or to provide such information to encourage more sustainable shopping behaviour. At the same time such information was systematically undermined by the dominant marketing messages displayed at the point of sale, which were designed to stimulate, rather than to restrict, consumption.

More generally the paper argues that the leading UK retailers' definitions of, and commitments to sustainable consumption (and sustainable development) can be

interpreted as being driven as much by a range of business imperatives as by any commitment to sustainability. More specifically it might be argued that the UK leading retailers are constructing and disseminating sustainable consumption agendas, which are driven by their own commercial goals. Thus the accent is upon efficiency gains across a wide range of economic, social and environmental issues rather than on maintaining the viability and integrity of natural ecosystems and on reducing demands on finite natural resources. At best the UK's top ten retailers might be seen to be pursuing a 'weak' model of sustainable consumption. More critically the authors suggest that the UK leading retailers' commitments to sustainable consumption are couched within existing business models centred on continuing growth and that they are little more than genuflections to sustainable consumption and that they effectively and conveniently ignore the fact that the present patterns of consumption may simply not be sustainable. In 2003 Hobson argued that *'one important element from Agenda 21 – that all social actors must now practice sustainable consumption - has been publicly and politically marginalised in high-income countries'* (Hobson 2003) and a decade later it certainly seems to be marginalised by the UK's leading retailers. As such the UK's leading retailers seem likely to continue to attract potentially increasingly vocal and sustained criticism from those who are exercised about what Jackson (2009) has described as *'an emerging ecological crisis that is likely to dwarf the existing economic crisis.'*

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