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## **SDG 12, SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION, AND THE UK'S LEADING RETAILERS**

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### **Abstract**

The 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a blueprint to achieve a more sustainable future for all, but in many ways, the concept of sustainable consumption is fundamental to the transition to such a future. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that retailers have a vital role to play in promoting more sustainable patterns of consumption, not least in that they effectively act as gatekeepers between producers and consumers. This chapter provides an exploratory review of how the leading retailers in the UK are publicly addressing the issue of sustainable consumption. The results reveal mixed messages about the leading UK retailers' approach to sustainable consumption. On the one hand, the majority of the selected retailers publicly emphasised their commitment to sustainable consumption on their corporate websites, but give limited attention as to how this is to be achieved. On the other hand, at store level the authors found no reference to the SDGs or more specifically to sustainable consumption, and while there was some very limited information on what might best be described as responsible consumption, it was often in small print on product packaging.

**Keywords:** sustainable consumption; SDG 12; UK retailers; external assurance; power

### **Introduction**

Taken together the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer *'the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all'* (United Nations 2019a, webpage), but in many ways the concept of sustainable consumption, part of SDG 12, namely Sustainable Consumption and Production, is fundamental to the transition to a sustainable future. Pantzar et al. (2018, 1), for example, argued that *'consumption of goods and services is at the very heart of the challenge of achieving a more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable Europe.'* In a similar vein, the Nordic Council of Ministers (2018, 11), claimed that *'SDG 12 is the goal most interlinked to other goals, being coupled to no less than 14 out of the 16 remaining goals.'* However, the *'Report of the Secretary-General on SDG Progress 2019'* (United Nations 2019b, 22) on SDG 12 painted a pessimistic picture in that *'worldwide material consumption has expanded rapidly, as has*

*material footprint per capita, seriously jeopardizing the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 12 and the Goals more broadly.* Further the Secretary General reported *'in 2017 worldwide material development reached 92.1 billion tons, up from 87 billion in 2015 and a 254% increase from 27 billion in 1970, with the rate of extraction accelerating every year since 2000'* (United Nations 2019b, 22).

While business organisations in a range of commercial sectors are addressing the SDGs (Wynn and Jones 2020), retailing can be seen to be fundamental in any move to sustainable consumption. There is certainly a growing awareness that retailers have a vital role to play in promoting more sustainable patterns of consumption, not least in that they effectively act as gatekeepers between producers and consumers. As such, large retailers may be seen to be in a singularly powerful position to drive sustainable consumption in three ways, namely through their own activities, through their relationships and partnerships with suppliers and through their daily interactions with consumers. Durieu (2003, 7), for example, argued that large retailers *'can greatly influence changes in production processes and consumption patterns.'*

A number of the world's major retail trade associations have emphasised their commitment to sustainable consumption. In Europe the Retail Forum was launched in 2009 to *'exchange best practices on sustainability within the European retail sector and to identify opportunities and barriers that may further or hinder the achievement of sustainable consumption and production'* (European Commission (2018, webpage). Indeed, the European Commission (2018, webpage) claimed that *'retailers in Europe are in an exceptional position to promote more sustainable consumption.'* Jones and Comfort (2018) reported that in its 2017 Retail Sustainability Management Report, the Retail Industry Leaders Association identified sustainable consumption as the most critical issue for retailers to address.

More specifically, within the UK, in 2018 the British Retail Consortium (BRC) launched *'Better Retail Better World'* (British Retail Consortium 2018, webpage). This initiative looks to mobilise the UK retail industry to make a leading contribution to the SDGs and here the BRC targeted SDG 12, which they formally redefined as *'responsible consumption'*, along with SDG's 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and 13 (Climate Action). With this in mind, this chapter provides an exploratory review of how the leading retailers in the UK are publicly addressing the issue of sustainable consumption. The chapter outlines the concept of sustainable consumption, examines if, and how, the UK's leading primarily store based retailers report publicly on their commitment to sustainable consumption, examines how these retailers are communicating sustainable consumption agendas to their customers in stores and offers some reflections on current approaches to sustainable consumption within the retail sector.

### ***Sustainable Consumption***

The earliest and most widely used definition of sustainable development is *'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'* (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, 43). In a similar vein, sustainable consumption might simply be defined

the use of products and services in a way that minimizes the impact on the environment, so that human needs can be met not only in the present but also for future generations. However, there is little consensus in defining sustainable consumption and it is widely recognized to be a contested concept which embraces '*competing discourses*' (Hobson 2002, 95), but it is also an elusive concept. As such, organisations wishing to pursue sustainable consumption policies face major challenges not only in defining, but also in operationalising, the concept.

In looking to put some flesh on the concept, Environmental Justice Organisations Liability and Trade (2019, webpage) suggested that sustainable consumption can be seen as '*an umbrella term that brings together a number of key issues, such as improving efficiency, minimising waste, taking a lifecycle perspective, but also taking into account the equity perspective, meeting needs meeting needs, and enhancing quality of life, improving resource efficiency, increasing the use of renewable energy sources, minimising waste, taking a life cycle perspective and taking into account the equity dimension.*' More specifically the United Nations Environment Programme (2015, 11) has identified nine elements namely: '*waste management, sustainable resource management: design for sustainability; cleaner production and resource efficiency; sustainable transport; eco-labelling and certification; sustainable procurement; sustainable marketing*' and '*sustainable lifestyles*', which characterize sustainable consumption.

Such definitions aside, Hinton and Redclift (2009, 7) argued that sustainable consumption '*could be considered an ambivalent term: the discourse comprises many different parts, mobilised at different times and in different ways.*' Jackson (2006) summarised a variety of definitions but noted that these adopt different positions, on both the extent to which sustainable consumption involves changes in consumer behaviour and lifestyles as well as on whether sustainable consumption implies consuming more efficiently, consuming more responsibly or more radically, consuming less. Gasper et al. (2019, 84) suggested that by the 1990s, sustainable consumption and production essentially '*meant re-engineered consumption, not reduced or constrained consumption*'. Jackson (2006) further argued that the dominant institutional consensus sees sustainable consumption being achieved primarily through improvements in the efficiency with which resources are converted into economic goods.

At the same time, a distinction has been made between '*weak*' and '*strong*' sustainable consumption.' Lorek and Fuchs (2013, 37) suggested that the former '*can be achieved via improvements in efficiency resulting from technological solutions and, frequently, that these technical solutions will spread through markets due to consumer demand.*' The latter definition '*is based on the assumption that changes in consumption levels and patterns are necessary to achieve sustainable consumption*' and '*emphasizes the need for a reduction in overall resource consumption instead of product-based individual consumption*' (Lorek and Fuchs 2013, 38). Arguably more pointedly, Geels et al. (2015, 1) argued that current thinking on sustainable consumption (and production) is framed by two generic positions. The first, described as '*the reformist position*' focused '*on firms pursuing green eco-innovations and consumers buying eco-efficient products, represents the political and academic orthodoxy.*' This echoes the beliefs that '*underlying SDG12 is a faith in human ability to manage the adverse environmental impacts of unending economic growth*' (Gasper

et al. 2019, 86) and more generally that *'organizations can harness the 17 SDGs to drive growth'* (EY 2017, webpage). The second is described as *'the revolutionary position'* namely *'a radical critique', which 'advocates the abolition of capitalism, materialism and consumerism and promotes values such as frugality, sufficiency and localism'* (Geels et al. 2015, 1).

### ***Frame of Reference and Method of Enquiry***

This exploratory paper looks to address two simple research questions namely if, and how, the UK's leading retailers are addressing sustainable consumption (i) at the corporate level and (ii) within their stores. To explore these two questions, the authors selected the UK's top ten store-based retailers, measured by retail revenue, as listed by Retail Economics (2018) and Deloitte (2019), namely, Tesco, J. Sainsbury, Asda, Morrisons, Kingfisher (B&Q), Marks and Spencer, Dixons Carphone (Curry's PC World and Carphone Warehouse), John Lewis Partnership (John Lewis and Partners and Waitrose and Partners), Co-operative Group and Next for study. The four largest retail companies in the UK, namely, Tesco, J. Sainsbury, Asda and Morrisons, are often referred to as food retailers, though in part this is a misnomer in that while they were all initially established as grocery retailers, they now all sell a wider range of consumer goods. Tesco is the UK's largest retailer, with some 3,400 stores and over 310,000 employees and it trades from hypermarket, superstore, and convenience store formats. J. Sainsbury initially founded in 1869, trades from over 600 supermarkets, some 800 convenience stores and 800 stores operating under the banner of Argos, throughout the UK. Asda was founded in Yorkshire in 1965 and though originally based in the north of England, the company now trades from over 600 locations within the UK. Morrisons, founded in 1899 in Bradford, Yorkshire, trades from some 500 stores. The company's operations were originally concentrated in the Midlands and North of England but it is now well represented in the South of England.

The John Lewis Partnership operates a chain of over 30 John Lewis department stores and some 600 Waitrose food supermarkets. Kingfisher is a UK based home improvement retailer, with over 1,200 stores in 10 countries across Europe, Russia and Turkey and it trades as B&Q, Brico Depot, Screw Fix, Castorama and Praktiker. Marks and Spencer, arguably the UK's most iconic retailer, specialises in the sale of clothing, household goods and food and trades from almost 1,000 stores within the UK, including over 600 that sell only food products. Dixons Carphone is a multinational electrical and telecommunications retailer, which operates in eight European countries under a number of brands including, Currys, PC World, Carphone Warehouse and Elkjop. The Cooperative is a consumer cooperative with a diverse range of retail operations, principally food retailing, but which also includes electrical retailing, travel agencies and funeral services. Next is a multinational clothing, footwear and home products retailer and trades from some 500 stores in the UK and a further 200 in Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

To address the two research questions the authors adopted a twin track method of enquiry, though in pursuing both approaches the focus was on how leading players within UK retailing approached and addressed sustainable consumption rather than on a comparative analysis of their approaches. Firstly, two internet searches, the one using the key phrase 'sustainable consumption' and the name of each of the selected retailers, the

other using the key phrase 'sustainability report', once again with the name of each of the selected retailers, were conducted using Google as the search engine in November 2019. The authors recognised that this approach has its limitations in that there are issues in the extent to which the information and reports posted on the Internet genuinely reflect current corporate thinking on sustainable consumption. However, in looking to undertake an exploratory review of the role retailers publicly claim to be playing in addressing sustainable consumption, the authors believe the Internet based approach is appropriate.

Secondly, the authors undertook a basic observational survey of if, and how, the selected retailers looked to engage customers with sustainable consumption within their stores and this survey was undertaken in the largest store operated by each of the selected retailers within Cheltenham, a town with a population of some 115,000 in the South West of England, during November 2019. More specifically, 'a walk through' survey combining structured visual observation and recording was undertaken and the authors recorded the extent to which sustainable consumption messages were being used in marketing communications on banners and posters on the shelves and shelf edges, on the products themselves, and on information leaflets and promotional leaflets and flyers. The authors recognised that this approach provides a snap shot in both time and space of how the selected retailers are looking to address sustainable consumption within store but would argue that it had three advantages. Firstly, it was simple to conceptualise, easily executed and readily replicable. 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 to customers within store and as such went some way to capture the reality of the customers' retail experience and their engagement with sustainable consumption at the point of sale. Thirdly, it located sustainable consumption in a dynamic retail setting and provided a view through the lens of the customer.

### **Results: Corporate Level**

The Internet survey revealed that eight of the selected retailers outlined their commitment to sustainable consumption in their most recent sustainability reports and/or on their corporate websites. This commitment was largely couched within each retailer's description of how its business plans and strategies were aligned to the SDGs. The retailer's overall approach to sustainable consumption might be best described as aspirational. In addressing how its business plan was aligned to SDG 12, Marks and Spencer (2018, 42), for example, reported '*we'll develop and implement new product circular economy standards and services, ensure all packaging is easy to recycle and halve net food waste.*' In addressing '*Product Sustainability*' Marks and Spencer (2019a, webpage) claimed '*we want to lead our sector in terms of sustainable consumption and production—offering our customers good value, high-quality products and services*', while in addressing '*Responsible Sourcing*' the company (Marks and Spencer 2019b, webpage) claimed '*we want to be a leader on sustainable consumption and production in our sector.*'

Under the banner '*UN Sustainable Development Goals*', J. Sainsbury plc (2018, 21) outlined its commitment to '*ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.*' In recognising that '*the increasing demand on constrained natural resources could cause*

*irreversible damage to our environment'*, the company (J. Sainsbury plc 2018, 21) reported *'we are committed to help halve global food waste per capita by 2030.'* More specifically, the company (J. Sainsbury plc 2018, 21) reported *'we've been reducing food waste in our operations through a number of initiatives, including smarter and more tailored forecasting and supply chain efficiency, while growing our network of charity partners to redistribute unsold edible food.'*

Kingfisher (2019, 92) reported how a number of *'our'* sustainability *'targets'* were linked to the SDGs. Under the banner *'Save money by saving energy and water'* Kingfisher (2019, 92) claimed that its targets to *'enable a 50% reduction in customer energy use through our products, services and advice'* and to *'enable a 50% improvement in customer water efficiency through our products, services and advice'* were aligned with sustainable consumption and production and more generally with SDGs 8, 11 and 12. In a similar vein, under the banner *'Live smarter by getting more from less, reusing or using longer'*, Kingfisher (2019, 93) claimed its targets to offer *'20 products or services that help customers get more from less, reuse or use longer'* and to *'ensure sustainable management and efficient use of key resources'* were aligned with sustainable consumption and production and more generally to SDGs 8, 9 and 15.

*'In line with UN Global Compact guidance'*, Tesco (2018, webpage) identified which SDGs *'are particularly relevant to us: where expectations, risks and opportunities for Tesco are greatest, and where we can make the most significant contribution.'* Here SDG 12 was one of the eight SDGs identified by the company and it was described as being *'particularly significant for Tesco'* (Tesco 2018, webpage) because of its commitment to reduce food waste. Further Tesco (2018, webpage) claimed *'we were the first UK retailer to publish data on food waste in our own operations so that we can track our progress against this target. We are now encouraging other organisations, both within and outside our supply chain, to do the same.'* Tesco (2018, webpage) also emphasised its role in contributing to SDG 12 through its target to make all packaging fully recyclable by 2025. Here the company claimed *'we want to create a closed loop system for packaging so everything can be re-used, recycled or re-purposed. We have committed to remove all hard to recycle materials from our Own Brand packaging by the end of 2019 and are working with our suppliers to find alternatives'* (Tesco 2018, webpage).

The John Lewis Partnership (2019, webpage) identified nine *'priority SDGs'*, and here sustainable consumption was listed as contributing to each of the company's three *'business strategies'* namely, *'source and sell with integrity'*, *'better jobs, better performing partners, better pay'* and *'deliver more for less.'* The Co-op (2019, 27) reported that it had aligned its *'Future of Food Commitments and Property Environment and Resource Strategy'* and its *'material activities'* with the SDGs. More specifically in outlining its alignment with SDG 12 the Co-op (2019, 27) reported *'by 2023 we want 100% of our food product packaging to be easy to recycle by product line, and our latest data shows we're at 72%'* and that *'we've also set a target to reduce food waste generated in our stores and depots by 50% by 2030 compared to 2015.'* Morrisons linked their policies on *'changing our use of plastics'* (Morrisons 2019, 9) and *'tackling food waste'* (Morrisons 2019, 12) to SDG 12.

Next (2019, 5), outlined how it was aligning its sustainability reporting *'against the 9*

*SDGs that are most material to our business operations and the products we sell' in that 'these are the goals where we have the greatest opportunity to contribute.'* SDG 12 was one of the nine SDGs, but Next (2019, 5) described it as *'Responsible Consumption and Production'* rather than sustainable consumption and production. Asda made no explicit reference to the SDGs on its corporate website, though it is a signatory of the BRC's 'Better Retail Better World' initiative. Dixons Carphone (2019, webpage) have *'pledged to support the United Nation's sustainability goals of reducing modern slavery, inequality and climate change whilst supporting sustainable economic growth and responsible consumption and production'* but provided no specific detail on how the company would pursue its commitment to sustainable consumption.

While the majority of the selected retailers outlined their commitment to sustainable consumption, they were generally less forthcoming as to how this was to be achieved but two specific examples provide some illustration of their thinking. In outlining their approach to product sustainability, Marks and Spencer (2019a, webpage), for example, suggested that it took product sustainability to mean that each product *'has a demonstrable positive or significantly lower environmental and/or social impact during its sourcing, production, supply, use and disposal'* and it looks to ensure that *'social and environmental principles are always taken into consideration and inherent in individual products.'* In outlining its approach to responsible sourcing, Marks and Spencer (2019b, webpage) claimed, for example, *'we have a responsibility to ensure workers' rights are at the forefront of our decision making.'*

In addressing reducing food waste, Morrisons (2019, 13) reported *'we have well developed systems for preventing food waste and increasing the distribution of any surplus so that we keep edible food within the human food chain. We buy direct from meat and produce farmers and suppliers in the UK and utilise more of what we buy through our own abattoirs or produce pack houses. We buy whole animals and where practical, we have the capability to process whole crops. This enables us to manage and reduce associated waste and related costs.'* At the same time, Morrisons (2019, 14) highlighted its activities in *'helping customers to reduce their food waste.'* Here, the company noted that *'over 50% of food wasted in the UK comes from UK households. As a food retailer we have a responsibility to drive down avoidable food waste where we can, by providing our customers with clear and consistent information in stores, online and on pack to help them to effectively store and cook food with little waste.'* More tellingly, a survey by Morrisons (2019, 14) conducted amongst their customers suggested *'it is evident that people aren't aware of the food that they're wasting and there is disconnect between personal behaviour and habits and how this is contributing to the global food waste problem.* In looking to tackle this problem Morrisons (2019, 14) suggested *'it's important that we incentivise customers to reduce their food waste in a way where they can see or feel the positive impact of their day-to-day actions, whether this is through money saving or through environmental benefit.'*

### **Results: Store Level**

The observational survey revealed two contrasting sets of themes. Firstly, the authors found no explicit reference to sustainable consumption, nor to SDG 12 or to any of



the SDGs, in any of the stores surveyed. There were, however, a limited number of notices and messages about what could be described as being consistent with a sustainable consumption. In the Marks and Spencer store, for example, there were two prominent notices on the walls at the side of the escalator between the ground and first floors. The first was entitled *'Sustainable Raw Materials'* and it read *'Our goal is to make sure our key raw materials are from the most sustainable sources available to us.'* The second read, *'There's nothing uniform about our staff uniforms. They're made from recyclable bottles. We never lose our bottle when it comes to making a better environment.'*

In the Co-op store a notice on the wall by the front window, entitled *'Local Food is Miles Better For You'* announced that *'50 local products are sourced from within 40 miles of the store and a further 20 that are from our region.'* At the back of the fish counter in the J. Sainsbury store under the banner, *'Responsibly Sourced'*, a notice read, *'We are committed to bringing you great quality responsibly sourced fish all year round.'* A notice at the back of the fish counter in the Morrison's store announced *'Our Tuna is Responsibly Sourced.'* In the B&Q (Kingfisher) store the own label Good Home product range included a notice which carried the title *'Small Change Big Impact'* and which read *'We've made it easier for you to make sustainable choices by making sure all laminate and wood flooring is FSC certified and by using minimal Volatile Organic Compounds in our paint.'*

Within most of the stores surveyed there were a limited number of messages about what might be termed responsible sourcing on the packaging of a small numbers own label and branded products. In the John Lewis and Partners store, for example, the boxes containing the retailers' own brand Duck and Feather and Down Duvets carried the following message *'This product supports cotton farmers who are water efficient, care for the environment, and promote fair and decent work. The feather and down used is certified to ensure high animal welfare and is fully traceable from farm to product.'* In the B&Q store, the sacks of Verve, own brand, Small Leafbark carried the following message, *'Verve puts the well-being of our environment at the heart of everything we do. We aim to conserve precious resources by making it our policy not to buy or sell peat taken from sites of ecological, archaeological or conservation value anywhere in the world.'*

Bags of Morrisons French Style Coffee carried the message *'Rainforest Accredited Certification means that farmers follow more sustainable agricultural practices that protect forests, rivers, soils and wildlife, while being good community neighbours.'* The packaging for Asda's own brand Loose Leaf Tea, for example, carried the message, *'We're working with farmers in the Rainforest Alliance to grow our tea to in an ecologically and sustainable way... that means careful use of pesticides, control of waste water and less soil erosion.'* In J. Sainsbury, a message on the packets Taylor's of Harrogate Coffee read *'Rainforest Alliance Certification helps the environment and helps ensure sustainable livelihoods. We don't just buy coffee, we work to improve livelihoods, protect landscapes and support thriving communities – facing the future together with our coffee farmers.'* In the same store, there was a similar, if shorter, message on Taylor's Yorkshire Tea, namely, *'Rainforest Certification Alliance helps protect the environment and ensure sustainable livelihoods.'*

The second theme confronting customers within the surveyed stores was the messages, which emphasised price enticements to encourage increased consumption,

rather than to encourage more sustainable patterns of consumption. There was marked variation in the number of these messages between the surveyed stores, and they were most prominent in stores selling food, but they covered a wide range of products. Many of the selected retailers advertised offers on multiple purchases at reduced unit prices. In the Tesco store, for example, such offers included blocks of Excreme Salted Caramel Ice Cream at *'2 for £4'* (where the individual price was £3), Schweppes Tonic and Ginger Ale *'Any 3 for £3'* (£ 1.25), two boxes of Mr. Kipling Mince Pies *'2 for £2.50'* (£1.85), cans of Heinz Soups *'6 for £4'* and *'3 for £2.50'* (£0.95), Head and Shoulders Conditioner and Shampoo *'Any 3 for £10'* (£5), *'25% off six or more bottles'* on a range of wines and *'Buy One Get One Free'* on packs of Energizer Batteries. Morrisons advertised offers on a range of beers and lagers including packs of bottled Stella Artois at *'2 for £20'* (£14. 50), packs of cans of Carling at *'2 for £20'* (£13. 50), packs of bottled Old Speckled Hen at *'2 for £20'* (£12) and packs of canned Coors Light at *'2 for £20'* (£12).

In a similar vein, in Asda, offers on the edge of shelves included *'2 for £1.50'* (£1) on selected cookies and doughnuts, *'2 for £3'* (£2) on selected Mini Bites, *'2 for £2'* (£1.75) on selected Dolmio Sauces, *'£2 for £2.50'* (£1.75), Heinz Soups *'6 for £4'* (£0. 95 and £0.85), *'3 for £3'* (£1. 60) on bags of dried nuts and fruit, *'Save 25% when you buy 6 or more bottles of wine.'* Multi Buy Messages on Asda's chilled meat cabinets included Steaks *'2 for £6'* (£4), 18 Rashers of Smoked Back Bacon *'3 for £10'* (£3.90) and Pork Loin Steaks *'3 for £10'* (£4). Marks and Spencer offered bags of Oranges *'2 for £4.00'* (£2.50), packs of Premier Bacon and Sausages at *'2 for £5'* (£3.00) and *'Any 3 for £10'* (£4) in the fish deli cabinets. Marks and Spencer also had advertised offers on their clothing merchandise including *'2 for £30'* (£19.50) on Long Sleeve Oxford Shirts and *'2 for £30'* (£19.50) on Super Soft Jumpers. B&Q offered *'3 for 2'* (£0.85) on Heat Logs, *'3 for £18'* (£7.95) on Coffee Logs and *'3 for £6'* (£2.34) on Natural Firelighters. Currys PC World offered *'3 for 2'* on a range of Smart Phone and iPhone Accessories.

## **Discussion**

The two sets of findings reported above reveal mixed messages about the leading UK retailers' approach to sustainable consumption. On the one hand, it is important to recognise the majority of the selected retailers publicly emphasised their commitment to sustainable consumption, usually as an integral part of their wider commitment to the SDGs and particularly to SDG 12, on their corporate websites. However, much less attention was given to how the retailers planned to promote more sustainable patterns of consumption. Here, the absence of customized or government measurable and verifiable targets, and/or key performance indicators, are conspicuous by their absence in the retailers' commitments to sustainable consumption. Indeed, the old English proverbial saying 'fine words butter no parsnips' resonates in describing the retailers' public approach to sustainable consumption outlined on their corporate websites. On the other hand, at store level, the authors found that the retailers made no reference to the SDGs or more specifically to sustainable consumption, and while there was some very limited information on what might at best be described as responsible consumption, it was often in small print on product packaging. While such information might be located and read by committed customers who look for products with sustainable consumption credentials, many of the marketing messages within stores appeared to be designed to promote consumption rather

than to encourage more sustainable consumption.

More generally, six sets of issues merit reflection and discussion. Firstly, there are issues about the definition of sustainable consumption. Indeed, while some of the selected retailers follow the British Retail Consortium in redefining sustainable consumption as responsible retailing, none of them offers a definition of their own. Their approach to sustainable consumption suggests that they generally couch their corporate commitments to it in the loose and wide-ranging idiom suggested by Environmental Justice Organisations Liabilities and Trade (2019) and the United Nations Environment Programme (2015) earlier in this paper. At best the retailers' approach to sustainable consumption would be seen to reflect the definition of weak, rather than strong, sustainable consumption, as also outlined earlier in the paper and they would certainly seem to be reflect Jackson's (2006) argument that the dominant institutional consensus is that the road to sustainable consumption lies in improvements in the efficiency in which natural resources are converted into economic goods. This also reflects the retailers' more general position on sustainable development, where Jones and Comfort (2015) have argued the focus is on driving business efficiencies and cost savings and on continuing growth.

Secondly, there are issues surrounding measurement and reporting. The United Nations (2015) specified eight specific targets, three targets related to means of implementation and thirteen indicators, for SDG 12, all of which are, in principle, universally applicable. However, Gasper et al. (2019, 90) argued that *'the SDG indicators show major deficiencies, in particular inadequate coverage of corresponding targets and a checklist orientation which privileges counting of reports over examination of their content and quality.'* Almost all leading retailers produce an annual sustainability report, which addresses their commitments and achievements across a wide range of environmental, social and economic arenas. However, attempts to directly map the retailers' achievements in addressing sustainable consumption are conspicuous by their absence from these reports.

Nevertheless, while much of the content of these reports is based around narrative accounts, retailers increasingly use a range of quantitative measures and statistical data to report on their achievements. Here, measures cover many of the issues included in the loose definitions of sustainable consumption cited by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (2017) and the United Nations Environment Programme (2015). Kingfisher's 2018/2019 Sustainability Report, for example, includes performance data on energy efficiency, carbon emissions, waste disposal and recycling and the company's carbon footprint. However, there are two concerns about using such performance data to assess a retailer's success in moving towards sustainable consumption.

On the one hand, there are concerns about the independent external assurance of the performance data included in retailers' sustainability reports. Jones et al (2014) have suggested that at best, some large retailers commission limited assurance of their performance data and that such assurance includes some, but not all, of that data. This can be seen to reduce the credibility, integrity and reliability of the sustainability reporting process and more specifically of the reporting of achievements in moving towards more sustainable consumption. The UK's leading retailers are large, complex and dynamic

organisations, and capturing and storing comprehensive information and data in a variety of geographical locations and then providing access to allow external assurance is a challenging and a potentially costly venture. On the other hand, the existing performance data collected and reported by the retailers, would seem to have little relevance to definitions of sustainable consumption, which are focused on fundamental changes in consumption patterns, reductions in consumption and which stress frugality, sufficiency and localism.

Thirdly, there are tensions between the selected retailers' corporate commitments to sustainable consumption and price offers within their stores designed to encourage consumption. Price is always likely to be an important factor in influencing the behaviour of the majority of consumers, but Shell (2009) argued that discounted prices may prove to be unsustainable in that, inter alia, they generate waste from over purchasing and lead to irreversible environmental damage. Although the UK's leading retailers have been very successful in developing marketing strategies built around competitive pricing, much less is known about how consumer concerns about the environmental damage associated with consumption influence their buying behaviour. Rather pessimistically, while Goss (2006, 244) claimed that *'various movements have emerged to promote alternative consumption lifestyles'*, he reported *'there is widely observed to be an attitude 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'* (Goss 2006, 245).

Fourthly, the consumer is often seen as having the central role to play in adopting a move towards more sustainable consumption, but Brand (2010) argued that approaches to sustainable consumption which focus on individual behaviours do not take account of the complexity of the consumption process, its symbolic meanings within society or the conventions of everyday life. In looking to address these complex issues, Shove and Spurling (2013) suggested that examining the ways social practices evolve and influence the consumption of resources will pay dividends. Such thinking draws on the wider genre of practice theory (Cetina et al. 2001), which essentially seeks to understand the role that practices play in our lives. More specifically, Ropke (2009, 2492) noted that *'the practice perspective emphasizes the immense challenge involved in promoting sustainable consumption'* and concluded that *'moralizing or trying to persuade individuals that curbing consumption would contribute to environmental improvements and increased wellbeing, has little chance of success.'*

Fifthly, information and communication technologies can play a significant role in improving information flows across the supply chain and thereby facilitate more sustainable consumption. Two of the eight specific targets for SDG 12, mentioned earlier, for example, point to the significance of improved information. Target 12.6 is to *'Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle'*, whilst target 12.8 has the objective to *'By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature'* (United Nations 2019a). Currently, despite the development of integrated business systems used by many of the large retailers, the absence of consistent cross-referenced information from the

different parties involved in the extended supply chain (consumer, customer, retailer, producer and various intermediaries) is commonplace. However, as Zhang et al (2015, 1) note, *'Recent technological developments have the potential to streamline the information flow from producer to consumer within supply chains, helping consumers to make more sustainable buying choices'*. Currently, supply chain operations still generate, and are reliant upon, silos of information particular to the different parties within the extended supply chain, and sometimes within these entities themselves.

In the 1990s, the objectives of the company-wide integrated business systems projects pursued by the large retailers were to lower costs, increase efficiencies and improve customer service, and were in the main focused on the companies themselves. With the advent of the internet, E-business or EDI (electronic data interchange) connections were established with customers and suppliers (Business-to-Business) and consumers (Business-to-Consumer) to facilitate data transfer across the extended supply chain (Wynn, 2000). Now, however, the new web-based technologies – often termed 'disruptive' technologies – can facilitate a further level of integration and availability of information that can underpin a move to more sustainable consumer choices and retailer operations. Zhang et al (2015, 1) note *'Ontologies, Linked Data, and Semantic Web technologies can handle the problems that arise when integrating massive amounts of multi-thematic and multi-perspective information from heterogeneous sources to answer complex questions that cut through supply chain domain boundaries. The innovative use of information technologies could reduce the "information asymmetry" that pervades modern supply chains. Reducing barriers to information would benefit not only consumers but also other actors in the supply chain'*.

Finally, there are issues about power, described as *'the missing element in sustainable consumption'* (Fuchs et al. 2016, 298). Geels et al. (2016) have suggested that the role of politics and power could be strengthened in future research into sustainable consumption and production, and Bradshaw et al. (2013) emphasised the need for a politically – oriented analysis of consumption, not only for the sake of informing academic debates, but also for the sake of informing contemporary consumption practices. In concluding their review of the importance of focusing on the importance of power in sustainable consumption, Fuchs et al. (2016, 306) argued *'power is essential in understanding what drives overconsumption and creates barriers against attempts to make it sustainable, and in identifying where potentially effective intervention points may exist.'*

Large retailers are seen to be in a singularly powerful position to define and drive sustainable consumption. However, they currently seem to choose to define the term in a loose and wide-ranging way, which effectively embraces their more general approach to sustainable development. This tends to favour business efficiency and continuing growth over a genuine concern for the conservation of environmental and social capital. At the corporate level, a number of the selected retailers implicitly claim to be using their power to work with their suppliers and customers to encourage more sustainable patterns of consumption. However, at the store level there is little evidence that the selected retailers are looking to encourage customers to adopt more sustainable patterns of consumption, rather the focus of many of the marketing messages in store is to encourage increased consumption. At the same time, the retailers' focus on continuing growth, with its attendant dependence on the world's shrinking stock of

natural resources, can be seen to be the antithesis of sustainable consumption.

### **Conclusion**

Sustainable consumption is both a contested and an elusive concept but, in many ways, it lies at the heart of the United Nations wide ranging SDG agenda. Large retailers have a pivotal position between producers and consumers and, as such, they can potentially play a key role in promoting more sustainable patterns of consumption. Many of the UK's leading retailers report on their corporate commitment to SDG 12 and sustainable consumption, but there is, at best, limited evidence of this commitment at store level. Here, the retailers might be seen to be transferring the responsibility for adopting more sustainable approaches to consumption to customers without providing them with any information to guide their choice at the point of sale. However, the pessimistic picture of overall progress on SDG 12 cited at the start of this paper and the UK '*shockingly low*' public awareness of the SDGs cited by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2019, 33) suggest that large retailers could, and arguably should, play an important role in increasing awareness amongst the large numbers of customers who visit their stores on a regular basis. However, in many ways sustainable consumption is the antithesis of the large retailer's business models, which are underpinned by continuing growth and driven by aggressive marketing strategies designed to promote consumption.

This paper has a number of limitations, not least that it draws on corporate information posted on the Internet rather than on discussions with company executives responsible for drawing up corporate policy and that the observational survey presents a snap shot of details of sustainable consumption in just one of each of the selected retailers' stores. However, the authors believe their approach is appropriate in what is an exploratory study and that provides a platform for research into how the UK's leading retailers are addressing sustainable consumption. Such research might look to provide a more critical analysis of the retailers' approach to sustainable consumption, and as such it will need to adopt a more rigorous research methodology and include the collection of extensive primary information, and to specify its objectives clearly. At the corporate level, for example, the focus might be on exploring the strategic drivers for sustainable consumption at the executive level, though negotiating access to key decision makers may prove to be a thorny issue, in part because sustainable consumption is a sensitive issue for retailers, and in part because of the more general issue of commercial confidentiality. At the same time, investigations of consumer attitudes to sustainable consumption, and of how such attitudes influence everyday buying behavior, might also shed valuable light on how retailers, should they be so genuinely minded, can encourage sustainable consumption at the point of sale within stores. Ultimately, if independent academic research is to contribute to the transition to a more sustainable future, then work which looks to challenge current corporate approaches to sustainable consumption must be firmly rooted in a formal research approach, which allows the creation of a defensible evidence base.

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