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# An analysis of the green consumer domain within sustainability research: 1975 to 2014

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## ABSTRACT

Sustainability requires that consumers and organisations consider how their activities impact on the natural environment. The initial marketing discussion of 'sustainability' as we now define it was into green consumer behaviour and within the literature in this area has continued to grow. This paper analyses 677 journal articles with a green consumer focus that have appeared in 34 leading marketing, psychology and environmental journals between 1975 and 2014. The most influential articles, authors, and institutions are identified using citation analysis. An examination of the trends in topics focused on in the research, over eight five-year periods, identified behavioural intentions, demographics and marketing strategy as the top three subjects in the domain. Overall, the results show that green consumer research is a multidisciplinary research domain that has been explored across a diverse range of issues and contexts, with researchers dispersed globally, ensuring that sustainability continues to be an area of interest within the consumer domain.

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## 1. Introduction

It has been suggested that sustainability is critical for the survival of mankind and thus is a pressing issue of business and marketing research (Chabowski et al., 2011; Lim, 2016). Reviews of sustainability in marketing have identified that the issue has been examined from a range of perspectives and that sustainable or green consumer behaviour was one of the first areas examined within the literature in the 1970s (McDonagh and Prothero, 2014), with sustainable or green consumer issues still being extensively studied. This research focuses on the idea that addressing environmental issues is largely dependent on consumers integrating environmental issues and concerns into decision making as consumer behaviour generates significant negative environmental impacts (Ivanova et al., 2015). As such, understanding consumer behaviour in regard to sustainability and pro-environmental behaviour is important for marketers and policy makers and the environment (Peattie, 2001). Additionally a multi-disciplinary perspective is required, to ensure all salient issues and research are considered (Peters et al., 2013), especially given that green consumer behaviour is by its very nature implicitly multi-disciplinary, covering marketing, psychology and environmental issue.

A wide number of definitions of sustainable or green consumer behaviour exist. For example, the Green Consumer Guide (Elkington and Hailes, 1988) defined green consumerism in terms of consumers' propensity to consume products that are healthy for them and others, minimise environmental harm over the product life-cycle (design, production, transportation, usage and post-usage), are not tested on animals, and do not adversely affect other countries.

As with any area, it is valuable to systematically overview the green consumer research to identify the state of play and evolution of research domains (Wilkie and Moore, 2003). Given the increasing importance of addressing environmental and sustainability issues in marketing (Chabowski et al., 2011), it seems appropriate to trace the multi-disciplinary development of the sustainable or green consumer behaviour research domain. The scope of green marketing issues is also expanding, including within general business contexts and supply chain areas which are also growing (Chabowski et al., 2011; McDonagh and Prothero, 2014), but the role of consumers in driving sustainability is still focal to addressing environmental issues. As such, it is important to trace developments in the discipline and to understand trends in the research field. This can be done by seeking answers to questions such as who are the leading members (authors and institutions) of scholarly community in this research domain, how has research evolved over time, and what are the central issues in the research domain (Porter et al., 2002). This paper addressed these issues by assessing the contributions (quality and impact) of journals, articles and authors to the

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knowledge system of the research domain using citation analysis, as well as the topics focused on within the area.

### 1.1. Sustainability and green consumer behaviour literature

Green consumer research as an academic domain of enquiry is not new. It started in the 1970s when researchers (e.g., [Murphy et al., 1978](#)) began to develop segmentation strategies and models of consumer behaviour that leveraged consumers' environmental concern. A variety of terms have been used to define consumers integrating environmental issues into their thinking ([Kilbourne and Beckman, 1998](#)), ranging from green, ecological, ethical, responsible, pro-environmental and sustainable consumers (within this work the term green consumers is used, given early research focused this terminology). According to a search of Google Scholar, since 1975, there have been over 600 articles dealing with various aspects of green consumer behaviour, which have been published in a wide variety of marketing, psychology, and environmental journals, and this excludes the numerous works that have a broader green marketing strategy or green business marketing focus.

There have been five reviews of the green marketing literature ([Chabowski et al., 2011](#); [Chamorro et al., 2009](#); [Kilbourne and Beckman, 1998](#); [Leonidou and Leonidou, 2011](#); [McDonagh and Prothero, 2014](#)) and within these reviews authors have identified green consumer behaviour as one area of study. While these studies review the literature on environmental issues in marketing, the fact that they have covered all types of issues means there has not been a focus on green consumer research (as shown in [Appendix A](#)) and this paper seeks to explore this domain within the marketing literature in more detail. Most of the previous literature reviews are descriptive in nature and present an overview of conceptual development on green consumer research field. This paper seeks to use bibliometric methods to capture updated trends in the research field that will provide perspectives on the volume of research activity, augmenting and extending these previous reviews. This is not to suggest that other literature has not undertaken reviews of the aspects of work in the green consumer domain, as researchers have reviewed the characteristics of green consumers ([Diamantopoulos et al., 2003](#); [Hughner et al., 2007](#); [Kilbourne and Beckman, 1998](#)), behavioural facets of green consumers ([Brennan et al., 2003](#); [Leire and Thidell, 2005](#); [Leonidou and Leonidou, 2011](#); [Steg and Vlek, 2009](#); [Verain et al., 2012](#)), and alternative methodologies used within green consumers studies ([Chamorro et al., 2009](#)). Many of the previous reviews have documented the volume of research activity on green marketing, and they have been broader than just focusing on green consumer research. As such, there remains a scope of identifying research impacts of the journals, authors and articles using their bibliometric information within this domain. Additionally given the rapid increase in work within the environmental area, it is important to update past studies to identify the trends today, given the previous time frames of earlier studies.

Therefore, identifying patterns within the extant literature on green consumer research, and assessing research impacts of journals, authors, articles and institutions, will augment traditional/descriptive literature reviews ([Porter et al., 2002](#)). This study does this by: (1) identifying the journal articles related to green consumer behaviour in leading marketing, psychology and environmental journals; (2) identifying the journal articles, authors and institutions that have made the most significant contribution to the literature, based on article numbers and citation analysis; and (3) investigating how research sub-topics in the research domain have evolved over time.

### 1.2. Citation analysis

Citation analysis is a library science technique introduced in the 1920s ([Levy, 1977](#)), which is a valuable way to assess the research

impact of a work within a discipline ([Bornmann and Daniel, 2008](#); [Cronin, 2001](#); [Garfield, 1972](#)). There are a number of alternative ways to assess the impact of works and authors in a discipline ([Zupic and Čater, 2015](#)). One approach that has been used relates to assessing the citations of works, where it is argued that papers with higher citations are more impactful and thus influence the development of the domain ([Arnold et al., 2003](#); [Schaffer et al., 2006](#)). Citation analysis is the most common objective approach to ranking authors, articles and journals, used in several business disciplines such as marketing ([Baumgartner and Pieters, 2003](#); [Chan et al., 2012, 2017](#); [Jaffe, 1997](#); [Jobber and Simpson, 1988](#); [Leone et al., 2012](#); [Leong, 1989](#); [Schlegelmilch and Oberseder, 2010](#); [Wang et al., 2015](#)), economics and finance ([Chan et al., 2013](#); [Chen and Huang, 2007](#); [Frey and Rost, 2010](#); [Mabry and Sharplin, 1985](#); [Pinkowitz, 2002](#)), information technology ([Deng and Lin, 2012](#); [Willcocks et al., 2008](#)), and operations research ([Davarzani et al., 2016](#); [Petersen et al., 2011](#); [Vokurka, 1996](#)). It is claimed that citations are free from biases associated with perceptual evaluations of impactful works ([Jobber and Simpson, 1988](#); [Zupic and Čater, 2015](#)), and thus citations are an effective measure of the scientific impact among authors and journals. Nonetheless, it has sometimes been suggested that even this method can be manipulated through behaviours such as self-citation ([Fowler and Aksnes, 2007](#)).

#### 1.2.1. Journals and articles

Citation analysis can be used in three different ways. The first is to identify impact and productivity of journals in a research domain using citation counts of articles published in the journals ([Chan et al., 2012](#); [Coombes and Nicholson, 2013](#); [Leone et al., 2012](#); [Schlegelmilch and Oberseder, 2010](#)). Citation analysis has also been used to assess journal quality and to create rankings of marketing journals ([Guidry et al., 2004](#); [Jobber and Simpson, 1988](#)) and to assess the influence of a journal within a discipline at various points in time. For example, [Leong \(1989\)](#) and [Cote et al. \(1991\)](#) described the influence and contribution of the *Journal of Consumer Research* over two time periods 1974–1988 and 1974–1989, whereas [Sprott and Miyazaki \(2002\)](#) examined the citation of articles published in the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, yearly between 1982 and 2001.

Second, citation analysis has also been used to identify most cited articles in a given journal, so as to understand whether that journal has diverse influence across the literature. For example, [Cote et al. \(1991\)](#) and [Hubbard et al. \(2005\)](#) assessed the most cited works in the *Journal of Marketing*, [Polonsky et al. \(2013\)](#) assessed the most cited works in the *Australasian Marketing Journal*, and [Sprott and Miyazaki \(2002\)](#) assessed the most cited works in the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*.

Third, citation analysis is also used to identify seminal articles within a research domain. For example, [Coombes and Nicholson \(2013\)](#) examined the characteristics of key references for business models and marketing published between 1970 and 2011; [Chan et al. \(2017\)](#) examined the most-impactful articles within the advertising domain published between 2000 and 2014; and [Schlegelmilch and Oberseder \(2010\)](#) examined the most impactful articles within marketing ethics published between 1960 and 2008. This study employs citation analysis to identify impactful journals and journal articles within the green consumer behaviour research domain.

#### 1.2.2. Authors and institutions

Citation analysis can also be used to identify the most influential authors and institutions contributing to a research domain. For example, [Backhaus et al. \(2011\)](#) identified the most influential authors in business marketing in leading marketing journals; [Chan et al. \(2012\)](#) identified most influential authors in marketing research literature between 2000 and 2009; [Chan et al. \(2017\)](#) identified most influential authors in advertising literature between

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