Sustainable digital advertising and greenwashing – Fiona Cownie and Rutherford

Sustainability is a key challenge of our age and therefore relevant to our consideration of digital advertising. Here we draw from a relational perspective in our consideration of digital advertising and its link with the sustainability agenda. We suggest how digital advertising might embrace sustainability in both messaging and production processes. We then move to consider why digital advertisers should be attentive to the possibilities of greenwashing emerging within their content production.

As digital advertisers, we understand the importance of communication in sustaining effective interactions between organizations and their partners, be they consumers, employees, suppliers or regulators.

A meaningful commitment to sustainable practices is vital to advertisers for three reasons:

1. Consumers are increasingly vocal in their demands for meaningful action from brands and organizations to address the climate crisis and other pressing social challenges (Porter & Kramer, 2019, Giddings, 2020) and have shown a willingness to punish those brands and organizations which refuse to commit to meaningful changes to their practices. Consumers want to see evidence that the brands they purchase are good environmental and social citizens.

2. Investors are becoming increasingly vocal in their demands for ethical practices which threatens organizations with high carbon footprints – and by association, those who do business with them (AdNews, 2019).

4. Employees and potential employees alike increasingly demand to know what their employer is doing for the environment and so sustainability is therefore an increasingly important factor influencing applicants' choice of a place to work. Millennials especially want to know they're working for a business that is a force for good (Meckler, 2014: edcom, 2019).

We argue that digital advertising has a particular role to play in the communication between an organization and its current and potential consumers, and this is where the contextual focus of our chapter lies.

We treat digital advertising as non-personal messages sent through the paid media which is enacted as digital content. Such a definition means that our consideration of digital advertising is wide ranging. It embraces digital outdoor displays, online advertisements and of course including moving-images and time-based content delivered either alongside the main content of our screens, or as the main content on our screens – big or small – from mobile device to cinematic widescreen. We know that such content can be broadcast or narrowcast to deliver sustainability messaging to more, or to less discrete audiences. These audiences will have differing levels of knowledge, understanding and interest in the sustainability aspect of digital advertising.

At the heart of our thesis is the idea that the key relational concepts especially trust, are relevant when we think about sustainability. Promoting sustainability informed values is important in underpinning the behaviors digital advertisers seek to influence. We are interested in the ways in which digital advertising can influence these ideas. It is imperative to address the challenges embraced by the sustainability agenda – reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals – with urgency. The time demands related to environmental sustainability – in particular the drive to net zero carbon – means that audiences must feel that the digital advertising content to which they are

exposed is trustworthy. Messages must evoke audiences' trust in the claims organizations make about what they are doing within the green arena.

If sustainability-related purchasing appeals are central to digital advertising messages, then these messages must be reliable and demonstrate benevolence. We know from seminal literature in the field of relationship marketing that timely, relevant communication builds trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). We argue that transparency and clarity are also important. Thus, we have criteria to consider the ways in which we should assess sustainability informed digital advertising in its key purpose of conveying trustworthy messages to enhance sustainability-aware behaviors including purchases. Morgan and Hunt (1994) also show us that alongside communication, shared values build trust. We are more confident when interacting with partners with whom we share an understanding of what are 'good' and 'bad' ideas and behaviors – because we know that we are driven by similar goals. At the heart of sustainability is the notion of shared values, a shared understanding between organizations and their consumers of what is important and worthy of attention and effort. Shared values are the shared ideas which connect organization and consumer. Defining and reflecting those sustainability-informed shared values are essential tasks for digital advertisers within their communication strategies.

Finally, a relational perspective also tells us that opportunistic behavior strongly undermines trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Therefore, we are interested in exploring how this might relate to digital advertising in the form of greenwashing. Whilst greenwashing might initially and superficially enhance the green appeal of a digital advertising message, its broader impact on digital advertising which endeavors to cloak itself as sustainability messaging is undoubtably negative. Today's 'greenwashers' will undermine future authentically sustainable digital advertising.

Ultimately, we argue that, in the realm of sustainability, digital advertising must have the hallmarks of effective communication – clarity, transparency, relevance and timeliness – which will build trust in organizations' messaging and behaviors. Digital advertising should reflect sustainability informed shared values and must avoid temptations to engage opportunistically in short termism in the form of greenwashing, a powerful underminer of trust.

Understanding the sustainability agenda

At the heart of our consideration of sustainability within digital advertising are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 global goals articulated by the United Nations have increasingly been adopted as a framework for sustainability by governments as well as by both non-commercial and commercial organizations. Organizations such as Oatley and Bournemouth University report on their progress towards these goals within publicly available sustainability reports. SDGs have a clear purpose highlighted within their name, for example *'Goal 1: No Poverty'*, *'Goal 5: Gender Equality', 'Goal 4: Good Education',* '*Goal 13*: *Climate Action'*. These goals provide a vision of external priorities for the focus of organizational energy to achieve a sustainable future. These targets powerfully demonstrate a meaningful commitment to sustainability and so should be central to the communications objectives articulated within sustainable digital advertising briefs.

Whilst the SDGs do not provide a remedy for all the challenges confronting the world, their ambition can provide a focus for change. Infographic presentations of the goals bring clarity and focus to areas sustainability conversations can occupy and digital advertising can reflect. Digital advertisers can play a role in furthering consumers' affective connections to these goals. However, it is important that digital advertisers should bring a critical eye to these goals to develop a

comprehensive understanding of the sustainability agenda not limited by the precise articulation of the SDGs. For example, digital advertisers might ask how '*Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth'* aligns to sustainability, as sustainability is about having enough rather than promoting excess.

Digital advertisers must recognize that their efforts to address one goal might diminish progress in another area. If organizations are purposefully aligning their activities and digital advertising to the goals, do they exclude addressing challenges uncovered by the goals? Nuclear disarmament, cruelty to animals, global security, modern slavery, eradication of genocide – where do these issues sit? Do digital advertisers deprioritize these areas, and encourage their clients to do the same? We would argue that a critical understanding of the SDGs allows digital advertisers to draw from a well-established template of sustainability whilst not limiting their efforts to engage in and promote purpose-driven behaviors which are not explicitly addressed by the goals.

Sustainable digital advertising

In recognition of the growing demand by consumers and pressure groups for brands to change their practices to address urgent social and environmental challenges, we define 'sustainable digital advertising' as paid-for digital content that serves to enhance a brand's position by encouraging sustainable behavior. It is our position that the continued viability of many, if not all consumer brands (especially FMCGs) will increasingly depend on their ability – and their commitment – to rise to this challenge.

Arnold explains:

> *The Triple Bottom Line:* People, Planet, Profit, *was coined by CSR specialist John Elkington in 1994. Twenty-six years on, in the 'new normal', the well-established Triple Bottom Line has now been replaced by The Triple Top Line:* Purpose, People & Planet. *Devising a communications strategy starts with the ethos – the corporate purpose. This then drives the brand towards a people or planet strategy (though usually a combination of both). Think of it as part of the 'new normal' and new thinking in marketing ethics.* (Arnold, 2020)

The creative brief must therefore clearly identify a value proposition (VP) that conveys a 'dual benefit': one which not only indicates the way(s) in which the advertised brand, product or service will enhance the life and experience of the target audience (TA), but which also offers a social and/or environmental good that is both tangible and truthful. An advertising message or campaign that fails to do the first (one which does not clearly and affectively show how the brand, product or service will improve the life of the TA) will not be able to compete successfully against its competitors in its effort to appeal to consumers; and one which does not provide a tangible social and/or environmental benefit risks serious reputational damage to the brand by appearing to be cynical greenwashing.

Due to the enormously affective power of images to shape consumers' perceptions of brands and the benefits they purport to offer, it is vital for advertisers and sponsors to consider carefully, not only what may be false or misleading claims made in text (advertising copy), but those implied in the accompanying images. While false or misleading claims suggested in visual images may escape the same level of investigation or interrogation by state regulatory or industry bodies, affective visual images can nevertheless mislead consumers about the implied environmental and social benefits of the product – and so risk the same profound degree of reputational damage to the brand.

Further, in designing sustainable digital advertising campaigns and materials, the environmental impact of their production and dissemination must also be considered.

Online video now accounts for a staggering 60 percent of global data flows. The use of digital tools is the principal source of greenhouse gas emissions in the digital sector (The Ecologist, 2019). The global energy consumption of digital media grows by 9 percent per year, according to The Shift Project, a French carbon transition think tank. Globally, video streaming emits as much CO2 as Spain (over 300 Metric tonnes per year), a new Shift Project report has found (Ecologist, 2019). Far from the dematerialized media that it might seem, online streaming is a significant source of carbon emissions. Greater use of information and communications technology (ICT) increases data consumption and the number of new digital services. The growth is visible in the volumes of data transferred across data networks as well as the volume of data stored and processed in data centers. The biggest environmental impacts of communication networks and data centers are caused by their in-use energy consumption. In particular, consumption of mobile data, is less energy efficient – more carbon consumptive – than data received on a fixed fiber optic network (Sitra, 2021). Thus, digital advertisers who are focused on creating mobile content are arguably undermining their sustainable practices.

The film and television industry has developed Albert Certification to evaluate the carbon footprint of digital production processes and embed sustainability in these practices. Whilst the ASA investigates claims of sustainability content, digital advertisers could usefully develop an approach similar to Albert in order to confirm the integrity of their production processes in line with sustainability claims. Such an initiative might formally recognize the use of renewable energy and the use of carbon neutral data centers. It might even include policies aimed at the behavior of digital advertising agency employees. Indeed, the Conscious Advertising Network already shares good

advice specifically related to climate crisis in the areas of briefing, production, content, avoiding misinformation, investing in climate content and climate literacy (Conscious Advertising Network 2023).

To summarize, digital advertising has opportunities to powerfully advance the sustainability agenda through the messages it seeks to communicate, the values they reflect and the behaviors they endeavor to prompt which resonate with their target audiences, and the production processes involved in disseminating these messages. The nature of the 'benefits' offered and the message style defined within the Creative briefs are therefore all central to the effectiveness of advertising messages in promoting sustainable attitudes and behaviors. All of these aspects – the values the messages reflect, the 'benefits' they offer, and the production processes involved in disseminating them – must therefore embody a consistent commitment to the wellbeing of Purpose, People & Planet – what is termed *The Triple Top Line* – and provide clear, relevant, timely and accurate sustainability-focused messages.

Agencies engaging in the production of sustainability informed digital advertising must, of course, also demonstrate their commitment to SDGs through sustainable business practices – from the use of renewable energy and carbon neutral data centers – through to sustainable procurement processes. For digital advertising agencies, 'sustainability' must not just be empty claims, they must truly live it.

The challenge of greenwashing

As suggested above, digital advertisers whose messages seek to promote sustainable values and behaviors and embed sustainable production processes must be attentive to the dangers of

greenwashing which misinform the audience – not just the TA – risks profound – and possibly irreversible – reputational damage to the brand. At the heart of greenwashing is the use of false environmental claims and practices intended to mislead the audience. Pizzetti, Gatti and Seele (2021) defined the term succinctly as 'the discrepancy between responsible words and irresponsible walks' and broadened the term to include false or misleading claims about both environmental and social issues. False or misleading claims about contributions to social justice are referred as 'purpose-washing' or 'ethics-washing' (Carnegie Council, 2023). Greenwashing and purpose-washing must both be avoided by digital advertisers, due to the signals they convey of inherent opportunism and their associated negative consequences including reduced trust and increased online negative word-of-mouth (Jahadi and Acikdilli, 2009; Guo et al., 2018).

Digital advertisers may view greenwashing as embracing the purposeful or unintentional disconnect between sustainability-related practice and communication. Purposeful greenwashing can be conceived as opportunistic behavior, the deceitful pursuit of self-interest (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Opportunism embraces the violation of implicit or explicit promises (John, 1984) and behaviors which lack honesty (Miller, Munoz & Mallin, 2021). Clearly digital advertising content speaking to sustainability related issues, must retain candor and be assured that promises are deliverable.

If greenwashing can be purposeful or unintentional, digital advertising strategies and artefacts which knowingly seek to misrepresent practice would be examples of purposeful greenwashing. Such approaches might comprise selective disclosure of positive information with manipulative intents (Pizetti et al., 2021). An organization might highlight its move to electric vehicles and solar photovoltaic (PV) panels within its digital advertising but omit to mention its investments into fossil fuels, displaying the lack of candor highlighted by Miller et al. (2021).

Uninformed, inaccurate or lazy practices which do not live up to the agreed claims of an organization, could comprise unintentional greenwashing. Another aspect of unintentional greenwashing is digital advertising content which does not fully represent practice, placing inappropriate emphasis on low impact aspects of sustainability practice. For example, an emphasis on recycling, might highlight low impact sustainability solutions, ignoring practices able to make far more substantial differences to the organization's environmental impact. In Channel Four's (2021) analysis of Shell as a potential source of greenwashing, presenter Joe Lycett emphasized the use of distraction as part of the communication practices. Digital communication focused on Shell's development of new technologies, whilst overlooking the huge environmental impact of fossil fuel production and Shell's continued involvement in the extraction of more fossil fuel sources.

We suggest that, in developing sustainability informed creative briefs, digital advertisers must be attentive to the possibilities of greenwashing. Agencies that create digital advertising must challenge their clients to ensure that there is a clear and shared understanding of both the nature and scale of the sustainability focus of the brief. They must be adamant and exacting in establishing a clear understanding how the intended message of the digital advertising content with which they are charged to produce aligns with all other aspects of the organization's practice. Creative solutions must avoid pushing boundaries of honesty and the representation of organizational practice. We argue that consumers' trust in organizations' messaging related to sustainability is of vital importance. It informs trust related to all aspects of organizations' sustainability behaviors – and in turn, consumers' sustainability related intentions and behaviors.

We argue that effective deployment of sustainability related digital advertising is contingent upon the constructive collaboration between key parties, including marketing departments, client-based sustainability expertise and of course, the producers of digital advertising.

The following short case study based upon a reflection on the production of sustainability-related communication within a public institution based in the UK is offered to illustrate the issues discussed above. Whilst the focus is the production of sustainability communication, which is a broader remit than digital advertising, the emerging themes directly inform the central principles and practices of the production of sustainable digital advertising.

Case study

The selected case study as an analysis of the challenges inherent in producing sustainability focused communication content and the risks of purposeful or unintentional greenwashing is based on a public institution in the UK.

Employees within the institution's marketing and sustainability departments, including those with leadership responsibilities, were interviewed. The aim was to explore their experiences of producing digital content related to sustainability in an effort to understand and illustrate how greenwashing practices can be incorporated in the result. Ethical approval was secured to include informed consent. Open questions explored participants' experiences of working with the sustainability agenda, participants' experiences of developing messaging around sustainability, and the challenges participants experienced in developing messaging around sustainability. Questions relating to greenwashing were explicitly introduced at the end of the interviews. Interviews were conducted online, recorded and the transcribed data was analyzed thematically.

Three themes relating to the communication of sustainability emerged from the interviews. First, it was clear that key challenges emerged related to the topic of sustainability itself, 'sustainability

literacy' was identified as a key theme. Indeed, whilst there was real interest in sustainability within the marketing participants, sustainability literacy was low. In essence the marketing team didn't fully understand the sustainability agenda and that lack of understanding shrouded its ability to engage fully with the area. A low sense of salience, priority and visibility of sustainability within the marketing team and their TA (as the marketing team envisaged their TA) emerged. Covid had impacted priorities afforded to sustainability (though of course some practices had arguably become more sustainable as a result of Covid). Sustainability involves challenging concepts and there was evidence of confusion about how these concepts interrelated. For example, marketing participants were unsure how the SDGs mapped against the strategic narratives being promoted by the institution to illustrate the institution's activities and against the institution's actions focused on achieving net zero.

There was a clear divide found between the agendas of the sustainability and marketing teams. Marketing teams were unaware of opportunities for carbon literacy training available within the institution, and so, had not participated in these. Despite a genuine interest in sustainability, the team's knowledge remained poor. The sustainability team felt that conversations with the marketing team often didn't click – priorities varied; insights considered to be important by the sustainability team did not appear to resonate with the marketing professionals. However, within the marketing team's generally poor knowledge, some individuals clearly had genuine interest in sustainability and made real efforts to develop their knowledge. For example, one member of staff had attended a conference in which carbon output related to storage of HD video content was a focus. He returned bringing determination combined with knowledge to his role, with impact evident in changes in digital production practices including plans for website development.

A second theme identified was ‘collaborative orientation’. The ways in which the teams worked together – including their proactivity, communication, confidence, mutual involvement - impacted the creation of both sustainability-informed marketing practices and content. Whilst there was a common understanding amongst participants of the contributions each party could make – the sustainability team’s contributions of knowledge versus the marketing team’s creation of meaning using creative flair – relationships were patchy, collaboration could be improved with more regular communication and agreement of priorities. Opportunities were sometimes missed, again perhaps reflecting conflicting priorities between sustainability and other agendas, and conflicting priorities within sustainability. It was clear that a sustainability communication expert might be a useful addition to the team combining knowledge with skills of communication.

Key characteristics related to the communication of sustainability emerged which had obvious and valuable implications for the conception and design of sustainable digital advertising content. The marketing team recognized that they had a clear responsibility to explain and offer choices to their audiences and that the need for honesty, transparency and accuracy was an important issue. Recycling was frequently the focus of communication – resonating with the values of institution’s audience. Whilst recycling does reduce the need for the extraction of raw materials, its impact on carbon release compared to, for example, reducing the use of packaging or designing out aspects of waste, is comparatively small. Recycling arguably attracted more attention within communication content than its impact compared to for example, reduction and reuse strategies would arguably warrant.

Marketing team members spoke about their role within the design of sustainability communications in emotional terms and their enthusiasm and commitment was evident. Participants talked about this area of their work in terms of the need to be brave, courageous and caring and shared their

feelings of guilt. In an apparent parallel with consumer behavior, whilst the sustainability agenda clearly mattered to the marketing team, this hadn't translated into individual and group wide actions to build a stronger knowledge base. Until they gain such a knowledge base, it is essential that marketing teams respect the input and direction from experts in sustainability.

A final theme which emerged was 'authentic sustainability messaging'. Understanding the target audience was of course paramount, especially audience interpretation of sustainability messaging. The level of detail appropriate within messaging generated very different positions from the sustainability and marketing teams. The sustainability team argued that the audience could tolerate, and could even be interested, in detailed information. Producing useful messaging was seen to be important, including prompts for behavior change. This was considered important particularly by the sustainability team. This emphasizes the need for a clear call to action within sustainable digital advertising.

At times, the marketing and sustainability teams were generating parallel communications as a consequence of their distinctive knowledge bases and outlooks. The sustainability team had more to say and argued that audiences could absorb more frequent and detailed digital communications. The marketing teams argued for brevity and felt that audiences would not engage with detail. Positive stories and hope within messaging generated different views. From the perspective of several marketing participants, hope and positivity were central to the ability of sustainable messaging to change attitudes and behaviors. However, one member of the sustainability team expressed concern as to whether positive stories should be the primary focus of sustainability communication strategies. Concern was also expressed about over-simplification. This participant felt that difficult stories had to be shared.

Little sense of purposeful greenwashing – as deceit-based opportunistic behaviors – emerged from participants' accounts of how sustainability content was generated within the institution. However, participants did acknowledge that greenwashing was evident within their sector – indeed, that greenwashing was even normalized. The central greenwashing concern expressed by the sustainability team was a combination of over-simplification within communication messaging with a focus on light, happy stories about activities with low impact. The lack of knowledge within the marketing team resulted in an inordinate degree of emphasis placed on aspects of sustainability practice which ultimately are not very effective or significant. One participant commented *"Oh no, that's not at all what we meant; it's come out a bit wrong".* In short, that unintended greenwashing was apparent.

In summary, the analysis of the data produced by this case study suggests that there is little evidence of purposeful greenwashing, but also little sense of opportunism (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). However unintended greenwashing was arguably evident, reflecting a discrepancy between responsible words and actions (Pizzetti et al., 2021). Sustainability messaging did not always focus on sustainability activity with real impact. Key impediments of the creation of effective and successful sustainability communications were uncollaborative ways of working compounded by a disconnect in sustainability literacy. Overall, this case study revealed that the efforts by the two teams to develop authentic sustainable communication messages were the result of considered thought, and reflected their commitments to responsibility, honesty, emotion, and a consideration of the audience – and a genuine attempt to avoid purposeful greenwashing. However, the focus on over-simplified and positive stories about areas of sustainability practice which were less impactful (e.g. recycling) might arguably be a source of unintended greenwashed content.

Implications for sustainable digital advertising

The case study suggests that there is a need for experts in sustainability communication to take a central role in the planning and design of sustainable digital advertising. Embedding such expertise in the advertising sector – perhaps by including such knowledge in the design and delivery of university advertising and marketing courses – is likely to provide a wealth of promising opportunities for those communicators who develop these skills. The authors have previously cited the results of studies which attest to the demand by university applicants that their programs of study prepare them for careers in which they can 'make a difference' (Rutherford & Cownie, 2022).

In their 2019 report, the European Association of Communications Agencies (edcom) emphasized this point:

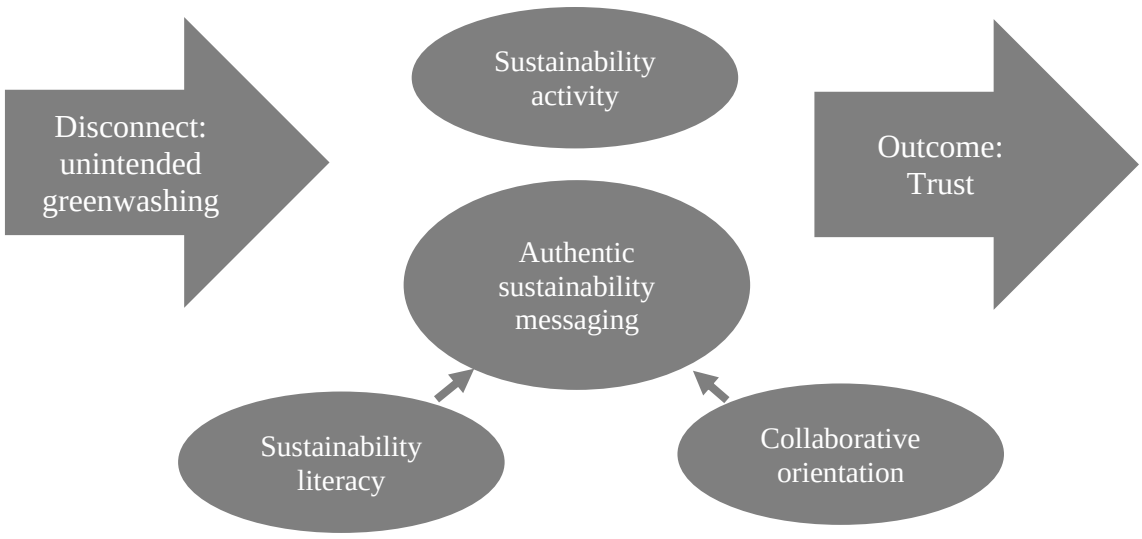
> *[R]esearch indicates that, as a consequence of being resigned to earning considerably less than their parents, Gen Y & Z place a higher priority on finding a job that is intrinsically rewarding and which nourishes their sense of worth, allowing them to believe that what they do 'makes a difference'* (edcom, 2019).

A clear need was evident to prioritize training on sustainability literacy within marketing and communication teams. This echoes the Conscious Advertising Network's advice highlighting the importance of climate literacy for advertisers and their suppliers. The expertise of sustainability teams in crafting powerful and affective messages is of value, but if digital advertising teams engage in training about sustainability, SDGs, and carbon literacy, this – together with their ability to work collaboratively with sustainability experts within their clients' organizations – will enhance both their confidence and their capability in communicating accurate and persuasive information about the issues of sustainability.

Finally, a focus on the impact of changes in personal, professional and institutional practices is vitally important if advertising is to make a powerful and persuasive connection between what must be done – and the ways in which consumers conceptualize the achievement of their desires. If audiences can see clearly what digital advertisers are doing within their own practices, this can be used to motivate their own personal and professional sustainability behaviors.

This case study revealed that there is an interest and energy within organizations to promote sustainability in an authentic 'non-greenwashed' way – as well as a genuine desire to enhance sustainability literacy in order to learn how to improve ways of working. Figure one presents an emerging conceptual framework which summarizes the key ideas which emerge.

Figure one: Emerging conceptual framework



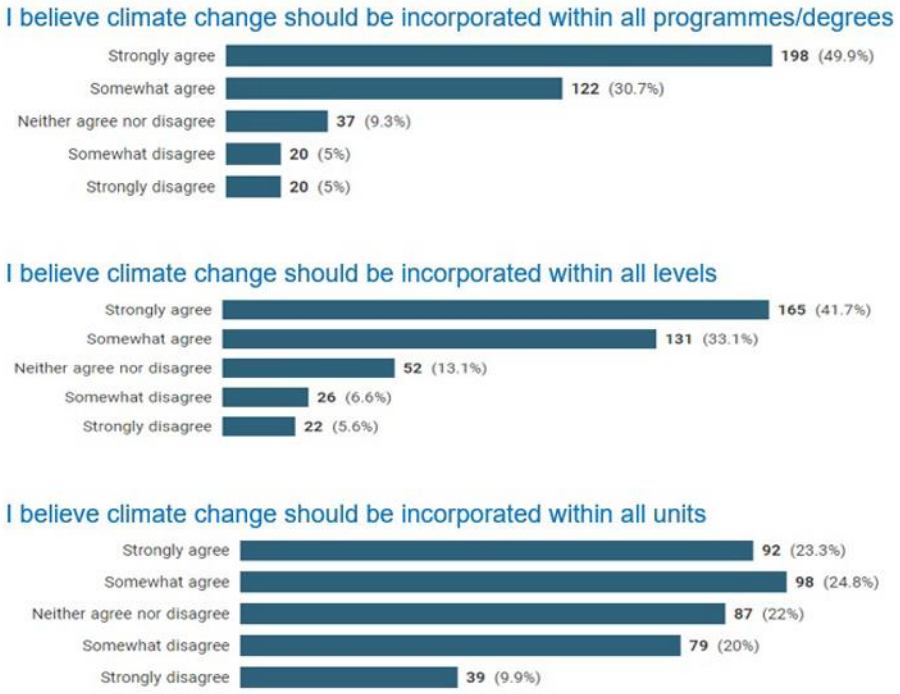
Based on the findings of the case study, we argue that sustainability messages are influenced by two factors: *Sustainability literacy* and *Collaborative orientation*. *Sustainability literacy* - that is

sustainability knowledge and skills - has a positive impact on the nature and authenticity of these messages as it provides the understanding of the impact and scale of sustainability related behaviors. Informed by shared values and trust between collaborating teams, *Collaborative orientation* informs the ways in which teams (in the case study, the marketing team and the sustainability team) can collaborate, by drawing from their respective strengths, respecting the contribution of others, and communicating effectively. This reduces the chance of misunderstanding and enhances the collaborative skills required to generate authentic sustainability messaging. Trust between organization and audiences is enhanced by authentic sustainability messaging as audiences are provided with clear, relevant and timely messaging which demonstrates the benevolence and reliability of the organization which is central to trust.

Embedding sustainability in the teaching of digital advertising in higher education

If we are to promote a greater commitment to sustainable digital advertising, an essential element is in the way that this issue is presented to students – both those studying advertising as well as those studying digital media subjects more broadly. According to numerous surveys carried out among both university students and university applicants is the desire for a career in which they are able to 'make a difference' (Kay, 2019; Caraher, 2014). This has become such a strong driver of student choice that higher education programs across a wide range of sectors and subjects ignore its importance to the student market at their peril.

Figure two. Results of SOS-UK Sustainability Skills Survey 2019-20 - Bournemouth University



Those who design and deliver digital advertising programs therefore have two powerful incentives to embed an understanding of (and, if possible, a commitment to) the sustainability agenda in their programs of study. First, as a vital recruitment strategy to maintain the continued viability of their courses, and – perhaps even more importantly – in the service of the industry their graduates hope to join, as the agencies and organizations who will employ advertising graduates depend on graduates' ability to craft messages that respond both effectively and affectively to this growing consumer demand.

In recognition of its value in attracting students, many universities have begun to engage in what might be described as the educational version of 'brand activism' by embedding SDGs into their programs of study in order to provide students, not only with accurate information about the environmental and social impact of industry practices, but just as importantly, with practical,

‘hands-on’ ways in which to apply their knowledge, skills and commitment to make a difference (Rutherford & Cownie 2022).

Central to the effectiveness of such constructive developments in higher education is the need to encourage students to ‘see’ the learning environment as more than just job training – but as preparation for their responsibilities as informed and engaged citizens. If the graduates of higher education programs are to be capable of assisting the agencies and organizations for whom they hope to work in recognizing, understanding and meeting the challenges of enhanced sustainable practices, we cannot continue to teach – and to frame – advertising, whether digital or analog, as the means to encourage continued patterns of unthinking consumption – but instead, must enable and encourage students to use their knowledge, skills and passions as a means to leverage new and creative ways of thinking about the role and responsibilities of corporate practices. By equipping students with the skills to assist brands and organizations in making meaningful changes to their practices, thereby enabling graduates to ‘make a difference’, higher education providers can join with – and enhance the power of – the broad coalition of forces driving the demand for meaningful brand activism (Rutherford & Cownie 2022).

Embedding the strategies for devising sustainable messages therefore has a third important benefit. Doing so will not only protect both the viability of university advertising programs and the future of the industry, but doing so will enhance students’ understanding of the essential relationship between persuasive communications – and its influence on the ways in which audiences ‘mentally picture’ their role and responsibilities in the world.

The first thing we teach students about effective digital advertising is that its core objective is to shape the perceptions of diverse audiences. In the same way that students’ mental picture of what

learning ‘is’ and how it happens informs their assumptions and behaviors in the learning environment, by exploring the relationship between the design of advertisements – and the way in which audiences ‘picture’ the benefits of brands and products – will enhance students’ understanding of the practice of advertising. In doing so, academics are demonstrating leadership which “envisions a better future and exemplifies the changes they hope to see in the world” (Shiel 2013: 128).

Final thoughts

Digital advertisers must put sustainability high on their list of priorities. By drawing from the SDG framework and investments in their own understanding of, and commitment to sustainability, the narrative power of affective visual images enables digital advertisers to make a genuine and meaningful impact on the sustainability agenda. Their commitment to authentic sustainability messaging and their rejection of greenwashing and purpose-washing will build trust in both digital advertising content and the brands who commit to this. Digital advertisers have the power to generate positive impact on the world through both the messages they craft and the means by which these messages are delivered to audiences who are desperate to use their purchasing power for good.

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