Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to challenge business and marketing to think beyond the dominant Western worldviews and value systems, and thus contribute to the change from consumerism to a holistic ‘sustainability’. In particular, we believe that shifting to a sustainability-oriented economy and, in particular, ‘sustainable marketing’ can meet the overarching aim of social business - enhancing the long-term well-being of humans and nature.

This paper, which is conceptual in nature, presents a critique of conventional ‘sustainability’ based on a review of literature relating to the detrimental consequences of the consumerist society and the hyper-consumption it perpetuates, the concept of ‘sustainability’ as it is lived in different social contexts and ages, and the role of marketing for achieving a sustainable society.

Compared to dominant Western worldviews such as anthropocentrism, dualism, and individualism, traditional Eastern philosophies and values such as holism represent important references for re-envisioning the long-term relationship between humans and nature, and mutually enhancing the welfare of all.

As a means to achieve both a sustainability-oriented economy and society, marketing needs to promote a transformative change of the prevailing socio-cultural construct of ‘sustainability’ by adopting a more holistic perspective that supports the mutuality of human and nature well-being.

Keywords: Sustainability, Sustainable Marketing, Consumerist Society, Western Worldview, Humans and Nature

Introduction
The consumerist economy that is dominant in most pre/affluent societies is popularly regarded as the basis for enhanced well-being and increased social welfare. However, there is growing concern among scholars from across a range of disciplines that the consumerist economy has moved from being dangerously unsustainable to being blatantly destructive. Macroeconomist Maxton (2011) states unequivocally that “we are destroying more than we build” (p. 1): the annual growth of the global economy is estimated to be more than USD 1.5 trillion compared to annual damage to the planet of USD 4.5 trillion.

A capitalism imperative shapes the consumerist economy based on market exchange (Kilbourne et al., 2009; Speth, 2008). This capitalist ideology has failed to support the long-term well-being of business, human society, and nature. The move to a sustainability-oriented economy requires business and marketing practices that respect and protect interpersonal and human-nature relationships. In terms of sustainable business practice, we face the very real risk of tipping from ‘green-washing’ into widespread ‘sustainability-washing’ as more businesses implement token changes that are made ostensibly in the interests of sustainability but are negligible in their impact on bettering human, society, and/or environmental welfare. Ironically, research finds that such changes seldom contribute to long-term business success. For example, the success of ‘green marketing’ is increasingly compromised by consumer distrust (Bonini & Oppenheim, 2008), ineffective marketing (Ottman, Stafford, & Hartman, 2006), and higher prices (Moisander, 2007).
Towards A Holistic 'Sustainability' For the Mutual Enhancement of Humans and Nature

Focussed on sustainability as one of the key subject areas of social business, this paper contributes to the critique of conventional sustainability by looking outside the Western value system and dominant worldview. We explore the potential of holistic approaches based on relationships of respect for others and our shared environment as a sound base for supporting sustainable well-being for humans and nature. The overall goal of our critical inquiry, to contribute to the long-term enhancement of human welfare, rests on our conviction that in re-envisioning marketing as a social business practice - rather than as a means to fulfil private profit-making interests - the marketing discipline can play a meaningful role in re-humanising business theory and practice.

Overview of the Consumerist Society

Society based on a consumerist economy promotes materialism and consumerism as central cultural tenets. People living in this type of socio-cultural environment are supported both in their overconsumption and in their reliance on consumer goods and services for self-identity and life-meaning (Speth, 2008). Thus, because people define themselves by what they consume, living is tied inextricably to consumption. Western economic thinking and business practice, founded on the industrial logic of “private profiting through producing for exchange” (Varey, 2012, p. 431), fuel this ‘consumption mania’. In a consumerist society, consumption is typically perceived to be an indicator of personal and social welfare on the basis that a higher level of consumption results in higher quality of life for individuals and increased prosperity for society in general (Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011).

This consumption-dominant lifestyle is not viable. Scholars warn that consumerism is detrimental to personal well-being and life satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and leads to a marked decrease in personal happiness (Binswanger, 2006), and elevated levels of financial and physical stress (Quelch & Jocz, 2007). Finally, overconsumption triggers environmental risks such as deforestation, water, land and air pollution, and climate change (Sheth et al., 2011), which pose additional threats to human welfare.

Polonsky (2011) holds that although society relies on nature and natural resources, nature itself does not rely on human beings, which implies that the relationship of humans and nature is not mutually inter-dependent. Varey (2010) extends this when he notes that the dominant Western worldview encourages humans to treat the natural environment as a resource to enhance material well-being. Hence, consumerism is inherently self-defeating and, at this point in history, regardless of how well-intentioned they are, micro-level shifts in individuals’ consumption patterns will not be sufficient to address today’s global environmental problems.

From a macromarketing perspective, Varey (2010) urges marketing scholars to reconsider the taken-for-granted relationships between economic growth, consumption, and life quality on the grounds of the compelling evidence that consumerist society is not (indeed, cannot) delivering genuine well-being to individuals and societies. Moreover, the “expansive modern capitalist system generates ever-larger environmental consequences beyond the capacity to manage them” (Varey, 2010, p. 121). According to Varey (2010, 2012), the way out of the degenerative consumption inherent in mainstream economic growth lies in moving thinking and action outside of the system itself, because it is the system that perpetuates social deterioration and environmental crisis. In this paper, we respond to Varey’s call for transformative change of the prevailing value system in order to halt further social and environmental degradation and to repair damage that has already occurred.

The dominant Western worldview, which is founded on Enlightenment thinking, is characterised by various scholars as anthropocentric, materialistic, individualistic, dualistic, contemporocentric, rationalistic, and nationalistic. Chen and Miller (2011) distinguish Eastern cultural traditions as being based in a relationship philosophy that promotes integration, balance, and harmony, whereas Western cultural traditions derive from an analytical philosophy that promotes comparison and distinction. Contrasting Chinese Confucianism in particular and the West’s Enlightenment value-orientation, Tü (2000) summarises the primary differences as equality versus freedom, sympathy versus rationality, civility versus law, duty versus rights, and human-relatedness versus individualism.

Taking an outside view of the Western system, Tü (2000) observes that the modern West’s dichotomous worldview separates spirit from matter, mind from body, physical from mental, creator from creature,
subject from object. Thus, the Western worldview is "diametrically opposed to the Chinese holistic mode of thinking" (Tu, 2000, p. 201). Compared to Western dualism, for instance, which encourages the separation between human and nature, Chinese holistic thinking emphasises 'immanence and unity' that maintains a more harmonious relationship between the two (Chen & Miller, 2011). This effectively ensures that humans and nature are mutually and reciprocally interdependent.

More specifically, the insistent focus in our consumerist economy on the human-as-consumer is built on mechanistic, reductionist thinking that separates human from human and human from nature. From this perspective, when an individual is viewed solely as a consumer, s/he has no duty, responsibility, or obligations to other consumers (De Graaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2002). Thus, the individual consumer is not expected (nor able) to take (co)responsibility for social and environmental welfare or betterment (Valor, 2008). Paradoxically, then, although Western economies rely on the natural world for resource-provision, the Western worldview not only sets humankind and nature apart but places humans in the superior position of control over the environment with minimal responsibility. Along with consumerism, as a dominant social paradigm in Western societies, this anthropocentrism also shapes belief systems regarding 'making progress'. In particular, the complex and mutual reinforcement of technological, political, and economic dimensions of the Western worldview has its natural consequence in "the necessity for economic growth and the evolution of materialism" (Kilbourne et al., 2009, p. 264).

**Sustainability: Backwards and Forwards**

Similarly, the contempocentrism of consumerist society, which puts the individual in a superior position over the group, accounts for the lack of a long-term focus and the narrow preoccupation with individual self-interest over the collective human and biospheric communities (Hempel, 1996). This lack of an historical context - and a global context (as a result of nationalism) - for 'sustainability' further limits our grasp of the complexity of sustainability and consequently limits our responses to the issues caused by growth-based commercial profit maximisation. 'Sustainability' is widely treated as a post-modern construction, regardless of its global and historical contexts. This is another powerful reflection of the dominant social paradigm that underpins its construction in today's consumerist economy.

Berkes and Folke (2002) counsel us to 'go backwards' in history and study ancient indigenous wisdom on sustainability in order to 'go forwards'. For instance, in Europe, sustainability was practised in 13th century forestry, when woods were purposefully managed to avoid deforestation (NOP, 2012). In North America, the Iroquois have a centuries-old tradition called the Seventh Generation Philosophy, which ensures that decisions made at any time consider the needs of seven generations (Gibson, 2011). And in ancient China, Taoism taught the unity of humans and nature, so that humans were viewed as an integral, organic part of nature rather than separated from the environment (Lin, 2007). Therefore, while sustainability might well seem to be a modern-day phenomenon, numerous cultures have been actively acknowledging the importance of respecting and inter-relating with their environments for centuries. At a time when Western science-based cultures are failing to manage the interdependent relationship between humans and nature, indigenous wisdom and understanding of the natural world can provide valuable insights to sophisticated long-term, local-level alternatives (Berkes & Berkes, 2009).

Moreover, sustainable lifestyles are not the 'privilege' of modern Western citizens only. For instance, many of the Tibetan production methods, lifestyles, concepts and customs followed today maintain sustainability principles and values that have been part of Tibetan 'living wisdom' for more than a thousand years. For instance, fuel for fires comes from the collection of horse, camel, and cattle dung instead of using woods from logging. As a consequence of this custom through the centuries, most natural forests have been preserved. Tibetan Buddhism required more than half of Tibetan males to spend most of their lives serving in temples as monks - the prohibition against monks having offspring effectively restricted the growth of Tibetan population, thereby preventing the excessive use of natural resources from over-population. The active adherence to traditional sustainable living practices like these has helped to ensure the continuance and prosperity of the Tibetan civilization (Chen, 2014).
In the West, Kotler (2011) notes the emergence of ‘less is more’ lifestyles among American households since the recent Great Recession, due mainly to either the decrease of income and/or the increase of family environmental commitment. Similarly, Gerzema and D’Antonio (2011) recognise a ‘New Thrift’ movement among American people who prefer “a pared-down lifestyle with fewer possessions and less emphasis on displays of wealth” (para. 12). More than 20% of American consumers classify themselves as being ‘LOHAS’, people who deliberately choose to live Lifestyles Of Health And Sustainability (Kotler, 2011). In the context of modern America then, an increasing number of people are committing to sustainable lifestyles that encourage reduction in individual and family consumption and are devoted to more balanced, healthier living.

Marketing and Sustainability
Marketing for a sustainable society elevates the purpose of marketing to the pursuit of well-being and human flourishing (Varey, 2013). The makemarkeing concept of ‘sustainable marketing’ embraces the concept of sustainable development and requires changes in the behaviours of both producers and consumers (Belz & Peattie, 2009). However, in general, mainstream marketing continues to be ‘marketing as usual’ and tends simply to add an extra sustainable feature or two to conventional marketing activities. For instance, the fast fashion industry promotes organic, green, or ethical shopping as the ‘new black’ business model for achieving sustainability (Whitehead, 2014). These claims lose their credibility against exposure of the unethical practice of hiring child labour in garment production and revelations that the fast fashion industry now has 52 micro-seasons (instead of 2 fashion seasons), which encourage consumers to buy new garments as quickly as possible.

While fast fashion giants such as H&M, Zara, and Forever 21 might attempt to persuade customers that their activities are sustainable, their marketing continues to be based on stimulating consumption (the instrumental means to the end of increased commercial profit), rather than creating a sustainable society, when marketing can be understood as the organic means to the end of sustainability that achieves the mutual well-being of humans and nature (the authentic ends). The means and ends of such so-called ‘sustainable marketing’ are ultimately incompatible for creating a sustainable society. When marketing is practised as the instrumental ends for supporting the ‘longevity’ of consumerist society, regardless of a significant opportunity by viewing marketing as the organic means and sustainability as the real-life ends for achieving the betterment of human society. Taking an alternative holistic approach to sustainability in general requires a transformative shift from marketing to increase consumption and profit to marketing for human betterment in principle (the ends) and for sustainability in practice (the means).

Sustainable marketing inherits fundamental flaws from the prevailing managerial marketing philosophy; notably, the lack of humanistic and holistic perspectives. For example, when people are viewed as consumers - “exchanger[s] of money for goods and services” (Varey, 2011, p. 77) - it is common for marketers to employ marketing’s “bag of tricks” to target them as “sitting ducks” (Sheth & Sisodia, 2006, p. 4). This mind-set disregards human dignity and well-being. Sustainable marketing, which has the goal of bettering human well-being, requires a holistic approach that is focussed on realising human survival, integrity, and prosperity.

Conclusion
Marketing, which is partly responsible through over-consumption for causing the global environmental crisis (Fisk, 1974), has been vilified for decades as ‘a major villain’ for causing individuals’ ever-growing wants. Today, more scholars and commentators recognise that marketing has an important role to play in addressing the social and environmental problems human beings are currently facing. However, as Peattie (2001) argues, the underlying principles (e.g., futurity, equity, and an emphasis on needs) of sustainability “provide a significant challenge to the marketing discipline and our established social and economic systems” (p. 140). We join those scholars who are committed to post-industrial concepts of business and marketing that conceive the purpose of business and marketing from the viewpoint of a sustainable society - a “whole-system understanding” (Varey, 2012, p. 429) - instead of the reductionist micro-focus of the consumerist economy. The immediate challenge facing the marketing discipline, as one of the major fields in social business, is to support the development of an emerging sustainability-oriented economy that promotes the mutual enhancement of humans and nature.
We look outside of the social and business systems that underpin this economy and consider insights into sustainability that might be had from other socio-cultural worldviews. For instance, given the distinctive differences between the West’s Enlightenment value-orientation and traditional Eastern philosophies and values, the latter could well be critical references for re-envisioning the long-term relationship between humans and nature, and mutually enhancing the welfare of all. Finally, just as alternative worldviews have the potential to transform the socio-cultural construct of ‘sustainability’, holistic and humanistic value-orientations also have significant implications for business philosophies and practices that are ready to put human welfare ahead of the pursuit of economic growth.

References


