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# How green marketing works: Practices, materialities, and images

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## KEYWORDS

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Socio-material;  
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**Summary** There are surprisingly few empirical studies of green marketing practices, and when such studies are carried out, they tend to take a simplistic approach. In this paper, the need to develop more complex and critical analyses of green marketing practices is addressed through the development of a practice theory approach to green marketing. Drawing on an ethnographic study of the Nordic Nature Shop, this paper explores the marketing of green outdoor products. Through various marketing practices, the Nordic Nature Shop presents the purchase and use of green outdoor products as a way to carry out outdoor practices while simultaneously protecting a fragile outdoors and thereby enabling consumers to be good both in and to nature. The analysis shows that not only are green products marketed through practices, but they are also marketed as practice-enablers, that is, tools in the accomplishment of environmentally problematic practices.

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## Introduction

In the managerially oriented studies that dominate the field of green marketing, the focus is on understanding how to accomplish the marketing of green products in an efficient and profitable manner (see also Åhlström, Macquet, & Richter, 2009; Kilbourne, 1998b; Meriläinen, Moisander, & Pesonen, 2000). These studies set out to profile the green consumer (e.g., Baker, Thompson, & Engelken, 2004; Burke, Milberg, & Smith, 1993; Dickson, 2005; McDonald, Oates, Alevizou, Young, & Hwang, 2012; McEachern & McClean, 2002; Megicks, Memery, & Angell, 2012) and to explore

how green consumers make purchasing decisions (e.g., Carrihan & Attalla, 2001; Harper & Makatouni, 2002; Leonidou, Leonidou, & Kvasova, 2010; Schröder & McEachern, 2004). Discussions within this body of work revolve around how to communicate with green consumers (e.g., Banerjee, Gulas, & Iyer, 1995; Lord & Putrevu, 1998; Zinkhan & Carlson, 1995), as well as if and how to design and implement green-marketing strategies and programmes (for a more comprehensive overview of green-marketing research, see Chamorro, Rubio, & Miranda, 2009; Charter & Polonsky, 1999; Fisk, 1998; Grove, Fisk, Pickett, & Kangun, 1996; Nair & Menon, 2008; Peattie, 2002; and, e.g., Wong, Turner, & Stoneman, 1996). While these studies generate important and useful insights into the character of green consumers and provide valuable discussions concerning the design of green-marketing programmes, they have two important limitations.

First, although the matter of how green marketing should be carried out is often discussed, there are relatively few

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studies of how green marketing is actually carried out in practice. That is, there are surprisingly few empirical studies that examine how green marketing is accomplished in the day-to-day practices of corporations.

Second, when empirical studies of green marketing are carried out, those that are produced are highly abstract (often at a general industry level), linear, and rational accounts of green marketing (see, e.g., Grove et al., 1996; Iles, 2008). Following the marketing-management approach (for a critique of the marketing-management approach, see Svensson, 2003), in these studies green marketing is presented as merely a matter of adapting traditional marketing techniques and ideas to environmental issues. The favoured strategy is referred to as green niche marketing (Crane, 2000), and to market green products, a company needs only to find a suitable green consumer segment, develop a green offering that will align with this segment's ethical values and attitudes, and then communicate the benefits of its green products effectively (e.g., Chamorro et al., 2009; McEachern & Willock, 2004; Tsakiridou, Bout-souki, Zotos, & Mattas, 2008).

Neither have these limitations been addressed properly by sociocultural green marketing studies. Studies within this subfield frequently discuss green marketing but do so for the most part in conceptual terms (see, e.g., Burroughs, 2010; Kilbourne, 1998a, 2004; Prothero & Fitchett, 2000; Prothero, McDonagh, & Dobscha, 2010). Furthermore, when empirical studies are conducted, they tend to take a discursive approach, addressing green marketing primarily as discourse (see, e.g., Binkley, 2003; Burgh-Woodman & King, 2012; Kadirov and Varey, 2013).

However, although green marketing practices as such have not received the attention they deserve, there are several sociologically informed studies of green marketing that stress both the importance of examining actions/doings and the social complexity involved in accomplishing green marketing. Crane (1997), for example, develops a cultural approach and analysis of how green products are developed and marketed. Through a qualitative and inductive case study of a large, established UK manufacturing and retail company he refers to as ABC, the author explores several of the cultural and political organization processes that are involved in developing and marketing green products. He shows, among other things, that the greening of the organization in this case also involved a de-moralization of greening, in which green issues are made part of the existing non-green organizational culture. In a similar vein but drawing on recent developments in the market practice research stream (Araujo, Kjellberg, & Spencer, 2008; Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006, 2007), Reijonen and Tryggstad (2012) examine the "greening" of markets through a study of the development and commercialization of a "polyvinylchloride-free" and "environmentally friendly" urinary drainage bag in the medical market. By tracing this process of market making and product qualification, the authors show that sociotechnical arrangements play a crucial role in defining what counts as environmentally friendly and in what way or ways. Finally, working along the same lines but broadening the scope, García-Rosell, Moisander and Fahy (2011) propose and illustrate a multi-stakeholder perspective on creating and managing strategies for sustainable marketing. Drawing on a study of a network of female, rural,

and small tourism entrepreneurs and their development of sustainable tourism services, the authors show some of the social complexities involved in integrating sustainability issues in day-to-day business practices.

What these studies demonstrate is that there is much to be gained by drawing on social theory and examining the actions/doings/micro practices involved in green marketing. These studies indicate that green marketing involves and draws on complex social processes that include both discursive and material elements.

Against this background, I argue that there is a need to further develop theoretical and methodological approaches to green marketing that acknowledge and "unpack" the complexity of this specific form of marketing. Taking a step in this direction, the goal in writing this paper is to contribute to sociocultural studies of green marketing by developing a *green marketing as practice* approach and analysis. More specifically, the aim of this paper is twofold: first, to formulate a practice-based approach to green marketing and, second, putting that approach to work, to develop a practice-based analysis that explains some of the social mechanisms involved in green marketing.

In what follows, this is undertaken in two steps. First, drawing on practice theory, a conceptual framework of green marketing as practice is outlined. From a practice theory perspective, practices are complex units of analysis involving and depending on understandings, know-how, feelings, and material artefacts. Practice theory advocates argue that the social consists of a nexus of practices (Schatzki, 2001) and that it is by thinking and studying practices – arrays of doings and sayings – that we can trace the continuous making of social entities, (Reckwitz, 2002). Within marketing, practice theory informed studies have shown that marketing involves more than mere technique. Marketing practices are complex and performative. The marketing of any product or service involves a range of different elements, such as knowledge, artefacts, a specific understanding of the world, and so on, and transforms these elements (Araujo, 2007; Cochoy, 1998). Marketing plays an active and, sometimes, important role in constructing the entities of the world, both economic and non-economic. From this perspective, green marketing cannot be expected to be a simple and linear endeavour. Nor can it be delimited to fulfilling the (already-existing) needs and wants of green consumers. Instead, one can assume that green marketing is performative; it is about enacting a reality and about presenting green products and services as meaningful alternatives to consumers. Furthermore, the practices that are involved in accomplishing this can be expected to be complex and to include various elements.

Second, the "green marketing as practice" framework is put to use in a specific empirical context. Drawing on an ethnographic study of the Nordic Nature Shop and its marketing work, I explore a specific example of green marketing. The analysis that follows examines the marketing practices carried out at the Nordic Nature Shop outlets. It demonstrates how the practices of window dressing, decorating, and trail-making carried out by shops' assistants work to frame outdoor products as "green" in different ways and construct a purpose for these products.

The analysis developed will show that green marketing is indeed a practical matter. The marketing of green products, the paper argues, is both accomplished through practice and

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