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Marketing Sustainable Consumption within Stores: A Case Study of the UK's Leading Food Retailers

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Abstract: Sustainable consumption is a core policy objective within the UK Government's Sustainable Development Strategy and there is a growing awareness that retailers have a vital role to play in promoting more sustainable patterns of consumption. This paper explores how the UK's top ten food retailers are communicating sustainable consumption agendas to their customers within stores in the towns of Cheltenham and Gloucester. The findings reveal that while these retailers are providing customers with some information on sustainable consumption the dominant thrust of marketing communication within stores is designed to encourage consumption. The paper concludes with some reflections on how sustainable consumption fits into the large food retailers' business models.

Keywords: sustainable consumption; UK food retailers; marketing communications

1. Introduction

Sustainable consumption is a core policy objective within the UK Government's Sustainable Development Strategy yet Cohen [1] has argued that 'sustainable consumption is the most obdurate challenge for the sustainable development agenda'. In examining 'the role of business' in 'mainstreaming sustainable consumption', the World Business Council for Sustainable Development

(WBCSD), 2008 [2] has stressed the importance of ‘using marketing communications to influence consumer choice and behaviour’. The WBCSD, 2008 [2] report further argues that marketing ‘can help consumers to find, choose and use sustainable products and services, by providing information, ensuring availability and affordability, and setting the appropriate tone through marketing communications’.

There is growing awareness that retailers have a vital role to play in promoting more sustainable patterns of consumption. In March 2009, for example, the European Commission and a number of the UK’s leading retailers along with several of their European counterparts launched a ‘Retail Forum’ as part of a drive to promote more sustainable consumption and Tesco, the UK’s leading retailer, claims to be leading the sector ‘towards sustainable consumption’ [3] while Kingfisher [4] emphasises its ‘commitment to go beyond legal compliance and position the company as a leader in sustainable consumption’ [4]. Retailers are the active intermediaries between primary producers and manufacturers on the one hand and consumers on the other and as such they can be seen to be in a singularly powerful position to drive sustainable consumption in three ways namely through their own actions, through partnerships with suppliers and through their daily interactions with consumers.

Food retailing is by far the largest sector within the UK retail economy and Mintel [5] estimated that in 2007 total UK consumer spending on food and drink was running at £106.5 billion with 71.7% being spent on food and non alcoholic drinks and the remaining 28.3% being spent on alcoholic drinks and tobacco products. In many ways food retailing is in the vanguard in promoting sustainable consumption in that food retailers collectively account for almost 50% of all retail sales [5] and the vast majority of consumers visit food retail outlets on an almost daily basis. At the same time UK food retailing is extremely concentrated with a very small number of major players dominating the marketplace so much so that the top ten food retailers accounted for 83% of all food retailers sales and just four of these, namely Tesco, J. Sainsbury, Asda and Wm. Morrison had a massive 63% market share (See Table 1). Some, though not all, of the major food retailers have extended their product range to include a seemingly ever wider range of goods and services which includes clothes and footwear, electrical and household goods, telecommunications products and services, home entertainment, toys, books and magazines, pharmaceutical products and financial services.

Within the UK government policy plays a significant role in the production, safety and distribution of food and such issues have been steadily moving up the political and media agenda. During the past decade the role of the major food retailers within the food production and distribution system has attracted increasing and often heated debate and discussion. On the one hand the marked concentration within food retailing in the UK has increased the power of the large retailers within their supply chains [6] and on the other hand it has brought them into daily contact with a large number, and a wide cross section, of consumers. The former has given the large food retailers greater power over producers and suppliers while the latter keeps them well attuned to consumer behaviour and allows them to develop sophisticated marketing and brand loyalty strategies. Moreover the large food retailers are widely recognized as having a significant impact on the environment, economy and society. However, to date, despite growing opposition from a variety of organizations and pressure groups the major food retailers have proved to be very successful in avoiding/resisting strict government regulation and in driving forward continuing business expansion. As an integral part of their strategies designed to resist statutory regulation the major food retailers have been increasingly keen to emphasise their commitment

to sustainable development to government, shareholders, customers and the general public. Such commitments are publicly captured and promoted, for example, in the annual Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility reports the large food retailers post on the Internet. Within these reports the major food retailers catalogue a wide range of initiatives and achievements typically embracing climate change, waste management and recycling, packaging, sustainable sourcing, animal welfare, supplier relationships, supporting local communities and economies, charitable donations, ethical trade and Fairtrade products, healthy eating and healthy lifestyles, diversity and inclusion in the workplace and flexible working arrangements. However if the UK Government's policy approach to sustainable and consumption is to work 'with the grain of markets' [7] then the large food retailers would appear to have a more specific and central role to play in delivering more sustainable patterns of consumption. This paper explores how the top ten food retailers within the UK are communicating sustainable consumption agendas to their customers within stores and offers some reflections on how sustainable consumption fits into the large food retailers' business models.

Table 1. Market Share of Top Ten UK Food Retailers 2007.

<i>Company</i>	<i>% Market Share</i>
Tesco	31.5
J. Sainsbury	16.1
ASDA	15.1
Wm. Morrison	11.7
Co-Operative Group	7.2
Marks and Spencer	3.8
Waitrose	3.4
Spar	2.3
Londis/Budgen	1.9
Iceland	1.6

Source: Mintel (2008) [5].

2. Sustainable Consumption

The origins of the term sustainable consumption are usually traced back to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and since then it has become an increasingly important policy element in national sustainable development strategies. Currently there is little consensus in defining sustainable consumption and it is widely recognized to be a contested concept [8] which embraces 'competing discourses' [9]. While some authorities and individuals offer definitions others draw attention to the intrinsic difficulties in constructing such a definition. A number of definitions of sustainable consumption mirror mainstream definitions of sustainable development. The United Nations Environment Programme [10], for example, defines sustainable consumption as 'the use of services and related products that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations'. More simply Dahl [11] suggests that 'sustainable consumption refers to the need to stay within the global sustainability of resources'. However the UK Sustainable Development

Commission [12] has recognized ‘the difficulty of defining sustainable consumption. Marchand and Findeli [13] for example, have argued that sustainable consumption ‘is a goal with uncertain boundaries’ and that it has ‘no clear definition, nor are its implications well understood’. Dolan [14] claims that existing definitions of sustainable consumption are prescriptive in that they do not describe what consumption is but what it should be and Schaefer and Crane [15] have called for a re-examination of existing conceptualisations of sustainable consumption in order to incorporate the social and cultural functions that consumption fulfils.

Jackson [16] summarises a variety of definitions but notes that adopt different positions not only on ‘the extent to which sustainable consumption involves changes in consumer behaviour and lifestyles’ but also on whether sustainable consumption implies ‘consuming more efficiently, consuming more responsibly or quite simply consuming less’. Jackson further argues that ‘the dominant institutional consensus’ is that sustainable consumption ‘is to be achieved primarily through improvements in the efficiency with which resources are converted into economic goods’. More generally a distinction can be made between ‘weak sustainable consumption’ and ‘strong sustainable consumption’. The former has been defined as ‘choosing products and services that either are less resource consuming, or less burdening for the environment, or less destructive for those people actually producing them’ [17], while the latter embraces ‘increases in the (eco-)efficiency of consumption (often via more efficient production patterns or an efficiency friendly design) and fundamental changes in consumption patterns and reductions in consumption levels in industrialized countries’ Fuchs and Lorek [18]. For the purposes of the current paper the authors have adopted the ‘strong’ definition of sustainable consumption as an operational yardstick against which to measure the how the major food retailers are marketing sustainable consumption within their stores.

3. Sustainable Consumption Messages within Food Stores

In an attempt to gain some insight into how the UK’s leading food retailers are currently trying to engage customers in sustainable consumption within their stores two of the authors undertook a basic observational survey. The survey was undertaken in the largest store operated by each of the UK’s top ten food retailers namely Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Asda, Wm. Morrison, Co-operative Group, Marks and Spencer, Waitrose, Spar, Londis/Budgen and Iceland [5] within Cheltenham and Gloucester during two periods, namely the first week of April and the first week in June 2009. The stores varied considerably in size, with the Tesco and Sainbury’s stores, for example, having some 50,000 square feet of shopping space and offering a wide range of food and non-food goods while the Iceland and Budgen stores had less than 1,000 square feet of floor space and concentrated exclusively on a relatively narrow range of foodstuffs. More specifically the ‘walk through/visual observation and recording’ survey systematically explored the extent to which sustainable consumption messages were being used in marketing communications on banners, posters and television screens, on the shelves and shelf edges, on the products themselves and on information leaflets and promotional leaflets and flyers. While the survey methodology was rudimentary it did capture an accurate picture of the ways in which messages about sustainable consumption were, or were not, being presented to customers within store. The collection and analysis of the survey data revealed some variation in the extent to which the top ten retailers communicated messages about sustainable consumption. However the aim of the survey was not to

provide a detailed comparison of the retailers but to identify broad themes and to explore how retailers are currently trying to engage customers with sustainable consumption agendas at the point of sale.

Three general themes emerged from the survey. Firstly the dominant sets of messages were concerned with encouraging customers to consume rather than to restrain from consumption or to promote sustainable consumption. All of the top ten food retailers advertised 'Buy 1 Get 1 Free' offers. The Co-op, for example was offering a 'Buy One Get One Free' on four packs of Grolsch and Carling bottled beers. In the Tesco store the same offer was available on Pepsi, a variety of chocolate biscuits and Quaver Crisps. The Sainsbury's store had 'Buy 1 Get 1 Free' offers on branded ranges of sun tan lotion, shower gel, deodorant, tooth brushes, toothpaste, shampoo and conditioner and baby wipes and a large note at the entrance to the Morrison's store advertised a 'Buy 1 Get 2 Free' offer on large bottles of Tango orange drinks. While such promotions were not all pervasive they can be seen to be setting the tone for customer expectation.

The majority of the top ten retailers also advertised a variety of 'multiple purchases at reduced prices', offers such as 'Buy Any 4 for £3', 'Any 2 for £2' and 'Buy Any 3 for £5'. In the Asda store, for example, such offers were widely advertised and included 'Any 2 for £4' offers on fish fillets, smoked mackerel, smoked salmon and prawns. Prominent posters advertised 'Any 3 for £10 on up to 50 leading wines, 'Any 2 for £5' offers on a range of packs of cold meats and 'Any 3 for £3' offers on bread. In the Tesco store prominent signs advertised 15 can packs of John Smith's beer and Carling lager and 15 bottle packs of Becks beer which were on sale at £12 each as 'Any 2 for £16' and 'Any 3 for £20' and bottles of wine individually on sale at between £4.49 and £6.99 were advertised as 'Any 3 for £10' and 'Any 6 for £19'. While the retailers can claim that such price reductions provide value for money for their customers they can also be interpreted as stimulating consumption. This may be particularly true for food retailers given research which indicates that an estimated 6.7 million tons of food waste (roughly a third of all food purchased) is produced annually in the UK, most of which could have been eaten [19]. More generally the Co-op displayed a number of posters and shelf edge labels for a range of products exhorting customers to 'Try Me I'm Truly Irresistible'.

Secondly and more positively, though less obviously, there are a limited number of messages with sustainable consumption themes. Marks and Spencer used a number of posters to stress its general commitment to move to sustainable consumption. In focusing on climate change for example, a prominent poster carried the messages 'We aim to make our UK and Ireland operations carbon neutral within five years' and 'We'll maximize our use of renewable energy and use offsetting only as a last resort'. Within the food section of the Marks and Spencer's store shelf edge labels asked 'Did you know over 70% of our M&S food packaging is widely recycled' and exhort customers to 'Look out for the symbol on packs to learn more'. A large hanging banner in the Morrison's stores advertised the company's 'Great Taste Less Waste' campaign and included direction to a website. This campaign includes advice on 'planning', which encourages customers to organize meals to make the appropriate shopping lists, 'storing' food correctly so that it will last longer and on how to 'create delicious meals from leftovers.' At the checkouts a number of the top ten food retailers also deployed posters and displays to encourage customers to use reusable carrier bags. A sign at all the checkouts at the Co-op store, for example had the message 'Bags are for life not just for one shopping trip' while a large poster prominently displayed within the store advertised 'The Co-operative Bag' as 'The UK's first

supermarket Fairtrade cotton carrier bag and reminded customers that ‘An environmental alternative to a plastic carrier is always available’. In a similar vein posters at the checkouts at Sainsbury’s simply encouraged its customers to ‘Remember to re-use your bags’ and the Company thanked them ‘for helping us to reduce carrier bag usage by over half’.

A number of the major food retailers also drew attention to two other elements often associated with sustainable consumption, namely their Fairtrade range of products and the importance they attach to locally sourced produce. A leaflet in the Co-op, for example, announced that the company had ‘extended our support for Fairtrade by adding a host of new products to our ever growing range of goods carrying the Fairtrade mark’ and exhorted customers to ‘Purchase Fairtrade today and make a difference to lives across the world’. In a similar vein a prominent poster in the central escalator well in the Marks and Spencer’s store proclaimed that ‘By being a Fairtrade partner we’ll help to improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in our worldwide supply chain and local communities’. Within the Co-op store the posters which advertised ‘A great deal locally’ were pervasive and an information leaflet described the company’s policy of sourcing products ‘from within 40 miles of our store, showing our commitment to your local community’.

A number of retailers used sustainable consumption messages about specific products. Behind the wet fish counter in the Asda store, for example, a poster informed customers that ‘Our fresh fish outlets have been certified to sell produce from well managed and sustainable fisheries which meet the environmental standards of the Marine Conservation Society’ and a similar poster in Waitrose carried the message ‘We sell fish from well managed fisheries using responsible fishing methods’. The packaging on the branded Young’s Mariners Pie in Iceland carried the message that ‘We’ve developed our fish for life programme to ensure that all of our fish is responsibly sourced’ and customers wanting to know more about the company’s work ‘to help conserve fish for future generations’ are directed to a website. In a similar vein Waitrose provide a leaflet described its ‘Timber sourcing policy for garden furniture’. The company claimed that ‘Our timber sourcing policy has been specifically devised to provide our suppliers with the necessary guidance and support to move towards Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) certification in a progressive and systematic manner’ and suggested that ‘In 2009 83% of the garden furniture we purchase will be FSC certified’. A number of retailers also print sustainable consumption messages on the packaging of their own brand toilet and kitchen tissues. The packaging on Morrison’s own brand tissues, for example, carries the message ‘For every tree we use we replant 3’, ‘100% recycled environment friendly’ and ‘With your help we can look after the world’s forests’ and the packing on Spar’s own label kitchen and toilet tissue informed customers that these products are from well managed forests, controlled sources and recycled wood fibre’. The Co-op also used posters and shelf edge labels to encourage customers to ‘Choose Eco-Friendly’ as part of the promotion of its range of washing and cleaning materials.

The third issue revealed by the survey is the lack of messages and information about sustainable consumption available at the point of sale within stores. In all the stores visited for the survey the overwhelmingly dominant messages concerned money saving offers and bargains. Almost equally worryingly messages about sustainable consumption on shelf edges and more particularly on packaging are often written in small print underneath or at the side of the product. While such information may be located and read by committed consumers who positively look for products with sustainable

consumption credentials it seems unlikely that this approach will engage those customers who currently have little awareness or concern for such issues.

4. Reflections

The findings of this exploratory survey of the top ten food retailers' stores within Cheltenham and Gloucester revealed mixed messages in that while the leading food retailers are providing customers with some information on sustainable consumption the dominant thrust of marketing communication within stores is designed to encourage consumption. The paradox is captured in a 'Doing the Right Thing' display in the Marks and Spencer's store which informs customers that if they 'Donate your old Marks and Spencer's clothes and soft furnishing to Oxfam and you'll get a Marks and Spencer's voucher for £5 when you spend £35 or more on clothing, home and beauty'. A number of issues merit discussion.

Firstly it is important to recognize that though the major food retailers are offering customers only limited information on sustainable consumption within store they are addressing a number of themes including climate change, renewable energy, recycling and re-use, waste reduction, marine resource conservation, forestry stewardship and Fair Trade. These themes are generally communicated to customers in store at an operational level for example, via packaging information, shelf edge labeling and leaflets. However these issues are generally addressed in isolation, and with the possible exception of Marks and Spencer, who advertise their 'Plan A' strategy within store, there little sense of a coherent and coordinated approach to communicating sustainable consumption messages or of the retailers' strategic commitment to sustainable consumption to customers in store. In some ways this stands in marked contrast to the strategic commitments made in many of the major food retailer's CSR reports. Tesco, for example, stress that 'our aim is to mobilize collective action amongst customers, suppliers and employees, to help protect the environment and to generate a mass movement of green consumption' while Sainsbury's 'aim to be environmentally responsible in the way we run our business and we also want to make it easy for our customers to be environmentally responsible' and Asda claims to be 'doing everything we can to make sure the environment is looked after for future generations to enjoy'.

Secondly while a wide and complex set of factors influence food buying behaviour the mixed the survey particularly draws attention to the tension between price offers designed to encourage consumption and the more limited messages designed to foster sustainable consumption. Price is always likely to be an important factor for the majority of customers, particularly during a recession, but as Shell [20] argues, discounted prices may prove to be unsustainable in that they can drive down wages, stifle innovation and lead to irreversible environmental damage. Nevertheless the major food retailers in the UK have been very successful in developing marketing strategies built around competitive pricing. However much less is known about how consumer concerns about sustainable consumption influence food buying behavior. On the one hand the major retailers report that customers have growing concerns about a range of environmental issues, particularly climate change, and about the source and methods of production of food and that they are increasingly looking for retailers to take significant responsibility for addressing such issues. More independently Ipsos/Mori [21] argue that retailers 'point to increasing awareness, interest and even excitement among the mainstream public on sustainability issues'.

Ipsos/Mori [21] also suggest that there is evidence that customers 'are hungry for information on the sustainability of the products they buy. On the other hand focus group research [22] conducted for DEFRA suggested that 'sustainable consumption and production of food are not the kinds of issues which participants think about'. Consumer Focus [23] report that the majority of consumers 'find it difficult to know which products are better for the environment' and conclude that in order to have more confidence in green claims customers need 'clear and unambiguous language and imagery'; 'realistic, accessible, verifiable and endorsed claims'; and 'simple, meaningful and like-for-like comparisons'. In a similar vein Owen, Seaman and Prince [22] report that the participants felt that food retailers should not only 'make sustainable choices clear' and 'affordable' but they should also 'reduce bad offers'.

This begs the question about the most effective way retailers can use marketing communications within stores to encourage customers to make sustainable choices. Reisch, Spash, and Bietz, for example, warn 'sustainability communication is a highly complex and even risky activity that needs careful strategic planning and genuine stakeholder input [24]. Research undertaken amongst a number of major European retailers [25] suggests that messages designed to promote sustainable consumption need 'to take into consideration the average customer awareness on sustainability issues' and that 'the message will be more successful if it conveys clear feel of a direct usefulness and advantage provided to the customer by the sustainable products compared to unsustainable ones'. More specifically, the authors in [25] identify three key elements as being essential for retailers' marketing communications campaigns for sustainable consumption namely 'segmentation and target information'; 'visibility of products and of communication'; and the need to 'use changing routines to capture attention'. The first focuses on the need to 'target very precisely the information' a retailer wants 'to provide to the right group of customers': the second emphasises the 'visibility of products and communication' with the accent being on 'ensuring that products and communications are placed in visible spots, easily accessible and available'; while the third stresses the importance of changing marketing communication messages regularly to continually capture customers' attention.

However within a constantly changing and fiercely competitive business environment realistically there have to be limits to the information about sustainable consumption the major retailers can provide in store on the vast range of products they offer for sale and their ability to verify such information when they are sourcing products from a large number of suppliers and producers drawn from often wide geographical areas. Furthermore there are dangers that providing accurate and verifiable information for all products 'drowns out the ability of consumers to make like-for-like comparisons and ceases to provide them with any useful means of comparison' [23]. A more realistic approach for the major food retailers might be to pursue choice editing, for example by not stocking environmentally damaging products or by continuing to develop labeling policies, for example, with labels indicating the carbon footprint of all products within their stores. This latter approach would be consistent with the UK Government's recent call for the development of sustainability indicators which could see all foods carry labels detailing their environment impact [26]. At the same time it is important to recognize that the act of consumption is often divorced from the product that is being consumed and Dolan [14] argues that conventional approaches to sustainable consumption 'center on the notion of the rational individual and his or her needs and wants, and neglect the significance of consumption practices as embodying the

relations between individuals' and warns that 'the development of sustainable consumption as a widespread practice within societies is more complex than change in individual values and practices'.

Thirdly while many retailers stress their commitment to drive a sustainability agenda throughout the supply chain the limited information on sustainable consumption available to customers within stores suggests that retailers may be concentrating their efforts on their sourcing and distribution activities and on the physical operation of their stores. Here they have greater control and here too they can more easily align and monitor sustainability and resource efficiency goals. In outlining its Matrix of Action Points as part of its contribution to the European Retail Forum [27] ASDA, for example, provides a number of detailed and time constrained targets for the reduction of energy consumption within its stores and water usage within its distribution depots under the 'How We Sell' action point while simply citing the company's free magazine as the only method of providing information for customers under the 'how we communicate' action point. If consumers are to be made more aware of sustainable consumption choices then as Doreen Fedrigo, European Union Policy Coordinator for the European Environment Bureau, argues 'visible change is needed on supermarket and shop shelves and in advertising messages' [28].

Fourthly there are issues about the power of the retailers in constructing sustainable consumption agendas. While some of the major food retailers explicitly stress their commitment to sustainable consumption and others imply such commitment, they can be seen to be collectively constructing their own definition of the concept. Such a definition is built around business efficiency and the search for competitive advantage and is driven as much by business imperatives as by a concern for sustainability. In many ways this position was epitomized by Sir Terry Leahy, the Chief Executive Officer of Tesco, in his 'Foresight' contribution at the start of a Global Coca Cola Retailing Research Council Forum report [29], who argued that his company 'is seeking to create a movement which shows that it is possible to consume, to be green and to grow'. Such a construction certainly resonates with Jackson's [16] emphasis on improvements in efficiency and makes little or no mention of consuming less. While the major food retailers might claim to be pursuing agendas that are socially ascribed, in that such agendas generally, but not universally, strike a chord with consumers, they favour voluntary action and consistently baulk at, and often actively resist, statutory regulation. At the same time while all the major retailers generally claim to be listening and responding to their customers, the survey suggests that some retailers are reluctant to provide customers with the detailed information at the point of sale that would allow them to take responsibility for sustainable consumption through their individual purchasing decisions. Thus the UK's major food retailers echo the sentiments of European Retail Forum that sustainable consumption is about 'showing leadership on environmental sustainability' while 'ensuring innovation and competitiveness' and about 'how best to advance sustainable consumption, whilst ensuring innovation and competitiveness of the sector' [27].

Finally this in turn raises broader and more fundamental issues about the efficacy of promoting sustainable consumption while maintaining growth and about economic growth itself. On the one hand the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [7] suggests that 'the central challenge' of the UK Governments Sustainable Development Strategy is 'to break the link between economic growth and environmental impacts'. On the other hand Reisch, Spash, and Bietz [24], for example, note that although moving towards sustainable consumption is a major policy agenda, 'Growth of income and

material throughput by means of industrialization and mass consumerism remains the basic aim of western democracy'. These authors [24] further argue that 'rather than controlling consumption, recycling materials and increasing production efficiency have tended to be the dominant means supposed to decouple environmental degradation from economic growth' and they conclude that 'the policy agenda on sustainable consumption is in danger of becoming a merely rhetorical reflection of concern'. Jackson [30] emphasises the importance of distinguishing between 'relative' and 'absolute' decoupling with the former referring to the decline of resource impacts relative to growth and the latter signifying an absolute decline in such impacts. While the major retailers generally claim to support the relative decoupling through their commitments to efficiency, they currently show little enthusiasm for absolute decoupling which Jackson [30] believes 'is essential if economic activity is to remain within ecological limits'. Jackson [30] concludes his discussion of 'The Myth of Decoupling' arguing that 'it is entirely fanciful to suppose that deep emission and resource cuts can be achieved without confronting the structure of market economies'. This, in turn, echoes Dolan's [14] belief that 'the goal of sustainable consumption needs to be seen as a political project, recognising the power relations between social groupings and between cultural value system' and his warning that 'this is the context within which the idea of sustainability will stand or fall'.

5. Conclusions

The exploratory survey reported in this paper reveals that the UK's top ten food retailers are currently offering their customers limited information in store to enable them to engage with sustainable consumption or to allow such information to guide their shopping behavior and this, in turn would seem to suggest these food retailers are, at best, pursuing a 'weak' model of sustainable consumption. However in some ways despite the major food retailers' public commitment to sustainable consumption this model is consistently being undermined by the dominant thrust of their marketing messages within stores which are designed to encourage consumption. At the same time the paper argues that the major food retailers' definitions of, and commitments to sustainable consumption (and sustainable development) can be interpreted as being driven as much by business imperatives as by commitments to sustainability. More specifically it might be argued that the major food retailers are constructing and disseminating sustainable consumption agendas, which are driven by their own commercial goals. More generally the major food retailers' strategic management thinking and decision making is consistently informed, and increasingly driven by the need to move to sustain their business in a competitive and increasingly difficult trading environment. Thus the accent is upon efficiency gains across a wide range of economic, social and environmental issues rather than on maintaining the viability and integrity of natural ecosystems and on reducing demands on finite natural resources. More critically the authors suggest that the large food retailers' commitments to sustainable consumption are couched within existing business models centred on continuing growth and that they are little more than genuflections to sustainable consumption and that they effectively and conveniently ignore the fact that the present patterns of consumption are simply not sustainable. As such the UK's major food retailers seem likely to continue to attract potentially increasingly vocal and sustained criticism from those who are exercised about what Jackson [30] has described as 'an emerging ecological crisis that is likely to dwarf the existing economic crisis'.

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