

How can we see the big picture if it is constantly changing?

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## **How can we see the big picture if it is constantly changing?**

**Abstract:** In an interconnected world where change is fast-paced, constant, and unpredictable it is hard to see the big picture. Technology and consumer expectations are changing faster than marketing organizations, as managers try to cope with social, economic, and technological developments. Acronyms like VUCA or BANI are ways to structure the unstructured and the indefinite. A shift in perspective and change of focus is required in order to work with the fundamentals and get ready for the unknown. The combination of sustainability marketing and technology has significant benefits in terms of productivity and efficiency thus offering a positive impact to organizations.

**Keywords:** sustainability marketing, twin transition, VUCA

## Introduction

In a world where technology and consumer expectations are changing faster than marketing organizations, the marketing landscape has evolved tremendously over the last decades. But when change is fast-paced, constant, and unpredictable it is hard to see the big picture. And is even more difficult when it involves the areas of business and marketing in particular that have always been about future – readiness. Marketing managers must balance talent, a huge amount of data and processes, and multiple communication channels and platforms, so they can align their message in the most creative way. At the same time, they must achieve brand consistency, adaptability in implementing each strategy, and all that at an enormous speed. This requires the parallel application of basic rules but also the creation of multiple scenarios that drive business growth. But nowadays, even the most organized organizations with the most detailed plans are often not future-ready (Gilbert, 2021; Close et al., 2022). The study is a conceptual paper that provides new insights into the marketing field by combining selected sources of information. It adds to the existing literature by providing an overview of the turbulent environment of modern societies and the fundamental changes that have shaped marketing strategy as a way to respond to these world challenges. It focuses on the concepts of sustainability marketing and digital innovation. The final section contains the concluding remarks.

### 1. The environment

Change is the only constant and is fast approaching. And that is a natural state as nothing ever remains stagnant. Even though is not a new phenomenon, factors like global interconnectedness and the continuously increasing pace of change in contemporary societies, hamper the work of managers as they try to cope with social, economic, and technological developments.

In addition, nowadays the term VUCA has gained increased popularity (Mack et al., 2016). In April 2023, a simple internet search of “VUCA world” brought up 3.610.000 results (Google, 2023). The acronym stands for *Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity*. These are essentially four distinct types of challenges that require four different approaches (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014), including numerous overlapping issues that ultimately describe what could be characterized as an “unpredictable” or an “uncontrollable” environment (Kraaijenbrink, 2018). In more detail, Volatility is referred to the velocity and turbulence (e.g., in nature) which can be frequent and also unpredictable without a single trend or pattern. Unlike volatility where the available knowledge makes changes intelligible, in Uncertainty, lack of information creates a gap between what is expected and the actual outcome, but also whether a specific event may constitute an important cause. This should not be confused with absolute uncertainty but with the degree of difficulty for a future prediction regarding the development of things. Complexity, on the other hand, is attributed to the intricacy of technology and science as well the interconnected complex systems of different actors. Especially in the economic sector, it also describes its vulnerability to the influences of the external environment and the instability it presents to constant changes. In a complex case, is difficult to understand the reasons and details of a problem. Ambiguity is the absence of what could be described as fundamental/basic rules or the lack of cause and effect. Instead, there are many possible scenarios of events, different situations, and consequences to be considered (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014b; Popova et al., 2018; Stein, 2021; Taskan et al., 2022).

The concept has a military background and was used to outline a post-Cold War era. It was then applied to the business environment in order to describe unstable global economic

conditions, financial market crises, technological developments, and changing consumer behaviour. It became more popular after the global financial crisis of 2008, where the term was used not only to describe chaotic economic phenomena, but also social and environmental issues, and crucial matters in several other fields (e.g., climate change, extreme weather, migration, extreme nationalism, crises of state authority, rising debt, austerity, unemployment, etc.) (Stein, 2021; Taskan et al., 2022). Obviously, there were times when things were challenging but there was always room for an adjustment plan or a revised investment model. And then came the global health crisis of COVID-19 during which there was intense uncertainty, pandemic restrictions, lockdowns, and disrupted supply chains. It has been described as one of the most substantial recent challenges. Some business categories and their workforces faced massive operational disruptions or even survival issues (Ogilvy, 2022). Technological achievements contributed significantly to solving many problems, but that could not be applied to all industries or all products like for example cultural organizations and respective products (Timokhovich and Filenko, 2022). And in case one thought that the pandemic was not challenging enough, other upheavals followed such as political chaos in the US (Global Times, 2023), protests in Hong Kong, and the aftermath of Brexit thus, creating a suffocating wave of intense uncertainty and insecurity to the citizens of the world and the global economy. One could certainly claim that difficulties existed in every era and that the essence of business is all about managing uncertainties, taking risks, and dealing with turbulence but then would have missed the meaning and significance of the VUCA concept. It is a metaphor for describing the changing world and it's the dynamics that make the difference (Ogilvy, 2022).

And since we referred to how fast things are changing, perhaps we should mention that VUCA is probably considered trivial by some, or possibly outdated by others since the term "BANI world" appeared. Cascio (2020) considered the changes brought about by the pandemic and tried to explain the current world situation with a new acronym for *Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible*. Brittle would replace Volatility in the previous framework. According to the author, our world nowadays is not only volatile. Fast changes have major consequences especially if a system is inflexible. It could seem stable, reliable, or even unbreakable, and it may actually be, but up to a specific breaking point. Nonetheless, it could have been built on fragile foundations right from the beginning. Unfortunately, the breaking point cannot be pre-determined. Brittle systems are vulnerable to unexpected and sometimes catastrophic disasters. It should be pointed out that brittleness is obviously not a new development. The problem is attributed to years of one-sided practices and policies based on single factors without any provision for an alternative. One such example is a region's or an entire country's attachment to a particular natural resource when suddenly it is considered useless, harmful to the environment, or obsolete technology. Furthermore, the world has become more brittle because of its multi-level interconnectedness (economic, geopolitical, and technological). Formerly a disaster was limited where it had occurred without expanding much. But today a catastrophic event can affect the entire planet. "A" stands for Anxious which in fact reflects uncertainty. An uncertain system, like the one for example described above, could create immense anxiety. In an anxious world, citizens start to feel helpless, as they fear that any available option could potentially be wrong and that makes them unable to make a decision so they become passive. Such a practice even flirts with depression and think about missed opportunities. People wait for the next catastrophe to happen (Mitzkus, 2022; Srivastava, 2022). "N" is for non-linear. We live in a world with complex systems, where the link between cause and effect is not always specified and appears disconnected. Actions taken cannot be linked directly to the result in what used to be a recognizable or predictable way. Therefore, big efforts could ultimately have no effect and insignificant decisions could have a massive impact. Finally, "I" stands for incomprehensible. Non-linear results and decisions often seem to lack

any kind of logic or purpose, and make no sense which makes them incomprehensible (Grabmeier, 2020).

But no matter the acronym the problem remains the same: the external environment changes fast, constantly, and unpredictably. And why is the changing environment so important and so frustrating for organizations and stakeholders? First, we should take into account that organizational purposes and goals require the cooperation and coordination of many systems just like a biological being. And second, many strategic decisions involve the interpretation of complex data and information in order to assure organizational success. Data come from a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous, and unforeseen environmental system (Taskan et al., 2022). This applies to strategic marketing as well. Managers find it challenging to appreciate the wide range of risks within and outside their organizations and discover effective and resourceful methods to address them. Furthermore, existing research lacks the way businesses should cope with the unpredictable nature of events (Behl et al., 2023).

The above approaches do not provide solutions, they just put the problem on the table (Grabmeier, 2020). It makes sense that unpleasant developments and frustrating environments could have a destructive impact but they should not be considered as an obstacle. They may serve as an incentive for further change and development in order to improve company efficiency. Since there is a lack of clarity that would enable an organization to proceed with confidence, multiple scenarios should be taken into consideration. This requires the evaluation of all changes and all available alternatives (Popova et al., 2018; Mitzkus, 2022).

## **2. The changes in marketing strategy**

According to the aforementioned, the reasonable question that arises is how the marketing community can cope with these world challenges. As is well known, in the last decades the concept of sustainability has gained great importance. But many consider sustainability principles and marketing to be an oxymoron. In many cases, the marketing concept is perceived as the opposite of sustainability which is seen as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Besides, sustainable development “requires an integrated approach that takes into consideration environmental concerns along with economic development” (UN, 2017).

The incompatibility of these two concepts arises mainly from the misunderstood generalization that marketing only leads to consumption (Vaile, 1940) and the intense criticism that it is more manipulative than oriented toward the real needs of consumers (Baker and Hart, 2008). So, let us go back to the basics. What is marketing? According to the American Marketing Association (AMA, 2017), it is “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large”. Although there are many related definitions and respective interpretations, we could say that two opposite concepts exist. According to the first point of view, marketing encourages or urges consumers to buy products they may not need. The second view, which is also the academic perspective, considers marketing to play an essential role in identifying and satisfying customer needs, in a way that makes a profit. In other words, it is a fundamental business philosophy that places customers and the satisfaction of their needs at the center of an organization's business activities (Jones et al., 2008).

In 2015, the United Nations agreed on seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that work as a blueprint to accomplish a more sustainable future. This plan includes global challenges such as poverty, hunger, health and well-being, education, affordable and clean energy, reduced inequality, climate action, and more. In essence, the 17 SDGs underline the interconnected three core aspects of sustainable development: environmental protection,

social inclusion, and economic growth. These are considered vital elements for the well-being of societies and individuals (Bolton, 2021). According to McCann-Erickson (2007) sustainability “is about consuming differently and consuming efficiently”. Despite the fact that the concept of sustainability is widely accepted by the global business and academic community, it too has received some criticism. For some, the term expresses just a boring idea (a modest or even unappealing buzzword) but is mostly characterized as quite shallow and vague that adds no substance to the conversation nor solution to the problem. Some critics point out that the worsening environmental and climate conditions simply state that it is too late for sustainable development (Dernbach and Cheever, 2015).

The field of marketing strategy has undergone many changes with time, and the focus has shifted to becoming consumer-oriented, as companies always tried to follow customer requirements in order to achieve competitive advantage. More specifically, marketing evolution has undergone through the concepts of production, product, selling, marketing, and societal marketing. The marketing concept in particular adopted a consumer-centric approach that was based on creating value, while the societal notion brought social and ethical consideration into marketing activities. With a key feature of adapting to developments, it was almost impossible for marketing to ignore the concept of sustainability and its criteria. Consequently, companies should create and communicate sustainability-based value to consumers and differentiate their strategy in order to achieve and maintain profit, public interest, and ecology (Kumar et al., 2012). Instead of using the term sustainable marketing Belz (2006, p. 139) suggested the broader term of sustainability marketing and defined it as “building and maintaining sustainable relationships with customers, the social environment and the natural environment.” Sustainability marketing aims at creating customer, social, and ecological value by integrating these elements throughout the whole marketing process and practices. Consequently, companies had to adopt sustainability in strategic marketing and therefore in the marketing mix. But, on the other hand, integrating sustainability into marketing strategy is itself a unique objective as it involves building long-term relationships with customers, which is in turn more beneficial for society. In 2009, Belz and Peattie converted the traditional 4Ps of the marketing mix to the 4Cs in order to include sustainability criteria in marketing thinking. This way they retained the old memorable approach and became more customer oriented. The 4C’s included *Customer solutions*, *Customer cost*, *Convenience*, and *Communication*. Customer solutions basically refer to the reason we buy a product or service and the factors that determine a sustainable product. In traditional marketing, the purchase of a product is directly linked to meeting a need or solving a “problem”. From the sustainability perspective, products and services should solve both customer and socio-ecological problems. In that sense, sustainable products are “those that offer satisfying solutions to customer needs and significant improvements in social and environmental performance along the whole product life cycle in comparison to conventional or competing offers”. The cost or otherwise the price paid by the consumer to acquire a product is replaced nowadays by the overall costs of acquiring, recycling or disposing of the product. Total “consumer cost” includes the financial consumption process and the non-financial value of time and effort paid for its acquisition and use (price, purchase cost, use costs, post-use costs). In this framework, the traditional “place” of the Ps has been replaced with the key element of consumers which is convenience. From this perspective, it includes all efforts from the companies’ side to bring customers a variety of products and services in a way that would make them extremely available and easily accessible. It can easily be understood that “place” has become understated as the process of consumption has been transferred to the online environment. The outdated “promotion” has long been replaced by two-way and effective communication between organizations and consumers. From the sustainability view, marketing managers should develop communication campaigns that address the needs of modern consumers without succumbing to cases of “greenwashing”

(Peattie and Belz, 2010). On the same wavelength is the issue of sustainable consumption which contributes to meeting the needs of current and future consumers without damaging the environment (Bolton, 2022).

Under these circumstances, the essence of marketing will have to move from the old consumption orientation to a proactive sustainable direction. From this perspective, marketing, should not just respond to market needs but will have to change them. This represents the macro-marketing viewpoint where organizations can influence the societies and environments in which they operate (Dahlquist and Lehnert, 2023). But this contradicts the opposing view which proposes that marketing has a secondary and not a primary role in promoting sustainability agendas within companies. Nonetheless, the concepts of marketing and sustainability are not opposites but have much to offer to each other, and in fact, sustainable development could be the most important, intriguing, as well as most difficult problem that marketing has to face (Jones et al., 2008). This is attributed to the difficulty of implementing sustainability marketing strategies due to the various issues and challenges that emerge. For example, according to sustainability principles, there is a need to preserve the available resources and consume less. However, according to the marketing principles companies should sell more, which ultimately means increased production and therefore more resource consumption. Managers should therefore find the right balance between the two concepts in order to raise profits and reduce environmental impact. It should be noted that apart from the defenders of “sustainability marketing” there are also those who strongly criticize it by arguing that in fact, companies are promoting a sustainable profile in order to attract environmentally and socially conscious consumers, and also to differentiate themselves from the competition so as to gain a competitive advantage without actually implementing sustainable practices (Kumar et al., 2012).

In addition to sustainability, there is another pillar that in recent years has radically shaped the marketing strategy of organizations: technology. The leaps and bounds of technology combined with sustainability have led to the development of the so-called *twin transition paradigm* (Korucuk et al., 2022). The consolidation of these two elements has the vast potential to promote sustainability goals. According to this perspective, digital technology and sustainability should not be treated as two separate factors acting independently of each other. In the twin-transition approach, their combination has significant benefits in terms of productivity and efficiency thus offering a positive and “greener” impact to organizations. It is essentially a digital transition without overlooking the circular economy, the environment, or the sustainable criteria. Nonetheless, it should be clarified that a digital transition is not always a green transition. Digitalization may sometimes have a significant carbon cost that should be eliminated (Blum, 2022).

Digital transformation or the 4th industrial revolution or simply Industry 4.0 has been characterized by the implementation of Key Enabling Technologies in various economic sectors. They mostly include Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), Research and Development (R&D), and highly skilled employment. The most important technologies are the Internet of Things (IoT), Big Data and analytics, cloud computing, Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), simulation, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Additive Manufacturing (AM), System Integration, Robotics, and Cybersecurity (Ortega-Gras et al., 2021). The effects of the twin transition on both the economy and the environment include the reduction of operating costs, increased productivity, safety enhancement, creation of new market opportunities, enhancement of energy efficiency, and reduction of electronic waste so as to make organizations more efficient and environmentally sustainable. The impact of digital technology on the creation of digital marketing and the huge possibilities they offer in communicating with consumers should also not be ignored. The Internet has provided a digital platform that enables companies to reach consumers at the lowest possible cost, while collecting

large amounts of data and therefore altering marketing strategies. Data science techniques could also support companies in identifying patterns and trends that could easily assist in predicting future market fluctuations and therefore reduce uncertainty (Korucuk et al., 2022).

## **Conclusion**

In a world full of change it is always wise to return to the basics. Or maybe not...Marketing is marked by continuous change. Going back to basics is certainly a way to review facts, but in a world where it is difficult to see the big picture (as it is constantly evolving) adaptation, resilience, and persistence are the elements that can lead to survival. The business world has been characterized as unstable due to global economic conditions, market crises, and massive technological developments that reshaped the marketing landscape and changed consumer behaviour. But under no circumstances can anyone ignore environmental issues, climate change, and the recent health crisis. Within this unpredictable environment, marketing will have to fundamentally change its strategy towards sustainability and not because it is a popular buzzword but because it is now necessary. The rise of digital technology will also contribute to this direction. But only by relying on both pillars will be able to cope with present and future challenges. A shift in perspective and change of focus is required in order to work with what we know and get ready for what we do not.



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