

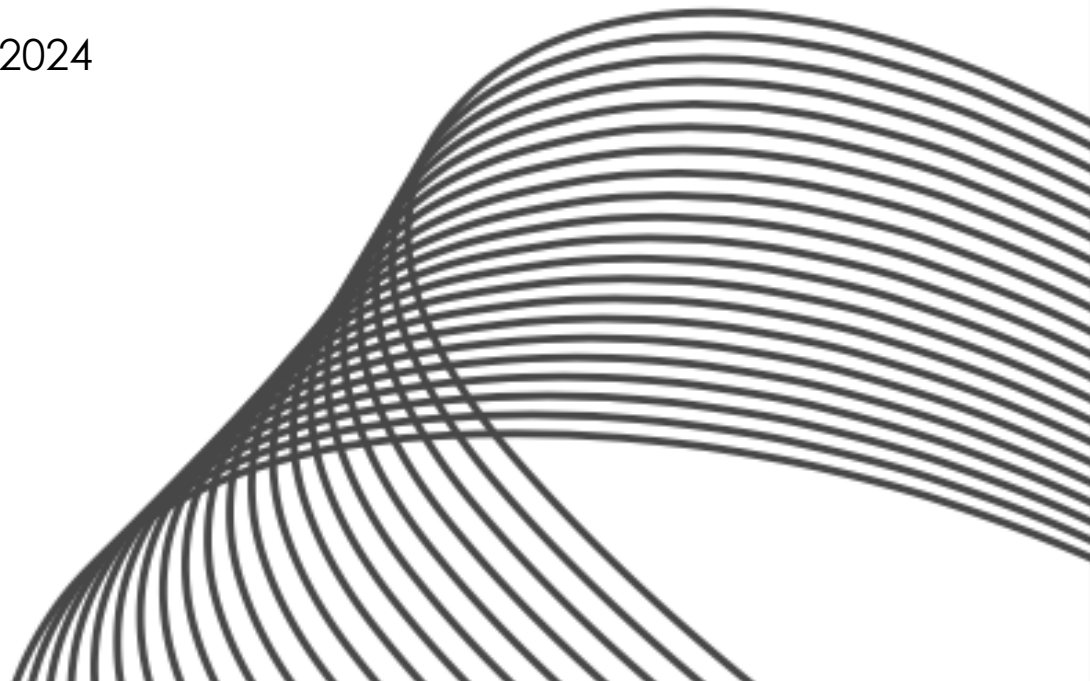
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Adopting demarketing as provocation and challenge

Exploring demarketing with commercial marketeers for a society beyond growth.

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Abstract

This article reports on a Participatory Action Research with marketing practitioners with whom we collaboratively explored marketing to address overproduction and overconsumption, since there is a notable lack of co-inquiry with marketing practitioners from commercial companies imagining marketing's role in a post-growth era. In this project, researchers and marketers from a range of practice contexts, with various levels of experience, met as co-inquirers around *demarketing*. Results indicate that the professional marketers who participated in this study are genuinely concerned about the adverse effects of their profession and are seriously looking for alternatives. Partly thanks to them, we have concluded that demarketing as a term has the potential to question current marketing theory and practice at a fundamental level. Demarketing is described as a process to fundamentally reform marketing as the world needs marketing to reform: questioning endless growth of demand as the function of marketing, questioning the market as a utopian organising principle, and questioning the power of marketers to control consumer behaviour. As such, demarketing can co-evolve with degrowth and deconsumption to address social violations and ecological overshoot.

Introduction

What is the relevance of marketing in a society in which we need to produce and consume less to stay within planetary boundaries? More than ever before, the state of the world demands from us that we not only ask this question but also look for answers. Indeed, in

the mid-twentieth century, marketing authors began to raise concerns about the neglect of social and environmental impacts in marketing practice (Katrandjiev, 2016). In 1971, the *Journal of Marketing* published an article by Harold Kassarian, the first marketing article that explicitly engaged with environmental issues (Lloveras et al., 2022). It triggered the birth of various marketing streams concerned with the future of our living environment, such as ecological marketing, green marketing, and environmental marketing (for an overview, see Lloveras et al., 2022). Nevertheless, marketing has not been able to shift towards even the slightest degree of sustainability. On the contrary, it has continued to stimulate consumption, in most cases at the expense of people and the planet. The transformation of marketing needs a far more significant proposition than what passes for responsible marketing today.

The fact that marketing has such a poor record in improving social and ecological conditions is hardly surprising: *“Historically, modern marketing thrived in a world dominated by expansive capitalism and its promises of boundless consumption [and economic growth]. In such a world, considerations of ecological limits to growth have been an afterthought at best, and, at worst, were simply absent”* (Lloveras et al., 2022, p. 17). Times have changed, however, and crises have deepened. Climate change and biodiversity loss are intensifying, and their impacts are becoming more evident. When drafting this article, we have had the warmest July ever (Ogasa, 2023), and ice-regrowth has seen an anomaly scientists find difficult to explain (Gilbert & Holmes, 2023). In California, it has become exceedingly difficult to insure a house against wildfire because the chance of occurrence has become too big (Lin, 2023). Many species are threatened with extinction, which is why some researchers say that our planet has entered the sixth mass extinction (Ceballos et al., 2015). In addition to ecological collapse and the climate emergency, we are increasingly aware of the injustice: much of Western material prosperity has not benefited everyone equally, and negative externalities have often fallen on those who have not benefited from progress in its entirety. Production capacity mainly benefits shareholders, and cheap products and services are at the core of overconsumption, which means people are exploited, especially in the global South. Moreover, the global North has

made communities elsewhere dependent on an economic system and a way of life of which the negative externalities are making their living areas uninhabitable first.

As a response to an increase in environmental awareness, collective efforts under the name of *green growth* - aimed at making our growing consumption and production system more energy and material efficient - have led to products and services that are more sustainable than some years ago. The environmental benefits of technological developments are apparent in products like electric cars, LED lighting and more energy-efficient household products. However, the original energy efficiency advantage of many consumption goods is cancelled by the growth in consumption resulting from it, an effect known as Jevon's paradox; when things get more energy efficient, people tend to use more of them or use them more often. Additional attempts to save energy and raw material throughput are often sought in the circular economy. In a perfectly circular economy, all resources are completely reused, waste does not exist, and resources are not depleted. Unfortunately, according to last year's circularity gap report (Circle Economy, 2023), there is no progress whatsoever in the circularity of the economy. On the contrary, more virgin materials than ever are being used.

What is left out of scope by green growth proponents are the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, driving our societies to overshoot planetary boundaries and ignore social injustice (Polewsky, Hankammer, Kleer, & Antons, 2024). Therefore, the provocative term degrowth was introduced to demand recognition of these contradictions and to raise awareness about the existence of objective limits to growth and human activity that need to be addressed democratically and fairly: "*Degrowth - décroissance- was initially and remains at its core a provocation*" (Pineault, 2019, p. 251). Kallis and March (2018, p. 326) elaborate: "*The purpose of using a negation for a positive project is not to frighten but to overcome a fear (...) [It is] the fear of a future without growth that has to be confronted if the discussion for a future outside of capitalism is to open up*". As could be expected, degrowth is often criticised as vague, politically improbable, and unappealing (nobody wants less) (Parrique, 2019) and often hyperbolised with the accusation of suggesting going back to living in caves. Yet, the degrowth movement is rapidly growing larger. For an illustration of

this movement, see the mentioning of the terms in English literature in Figure 1. From an obscure topic a couple of years ago, the last Beyond Growth conference held at the European Parliament in 2023 was attended by thousands of people who found themselves in an echo chamber of proponents searching for the ‘how’ and not the ‘whether’, going beyond degrowth as a provocation, embracing degrowth as a challenge, like Pineault (2019) proposed.

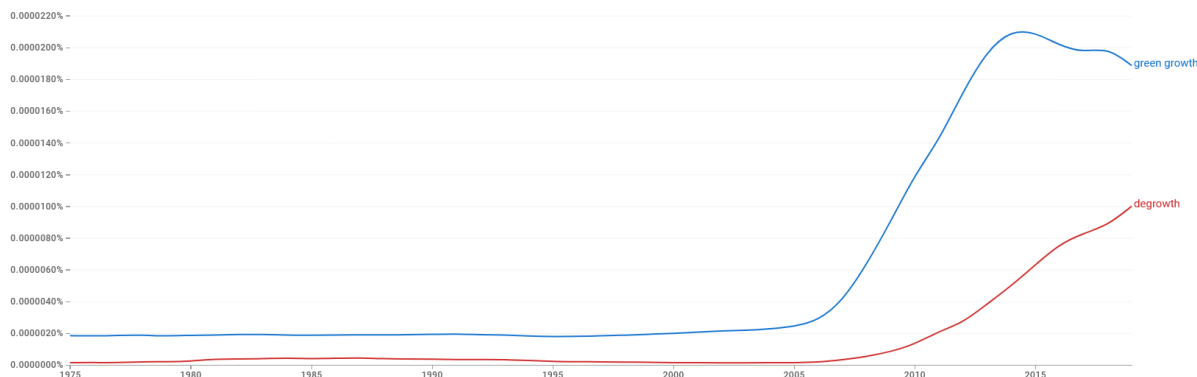


Figure 1: Google Ngram of 'green growth' (blue) and 'degrowth' (red)

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=green+growth%2Cdegrowth&year_start=1975&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3

As an accompanying social movement, anti-consumption, minimalism, and other forms of *voluntary deconsumption* are gaining attention and followers. Voluntary deconsumption is the act to voluntarily (though it can be questioned how voluntary it feels in the face of anticipated catastrophe) consuming less or not at all. Experienced proponents, considering themselves a small but significant opposition, try to convince others to reduce unnecessary consumption by bringing forward the positive consequences: an elevated state of being (e.g., feeling more freedom, more purpose and less stress), reformulated and realigned non-materialistic self-identities and feelings of inclusion into meaningful movements of positive change (Dugar, 2017).

Although the debate between proponents of economic growth and degrowth is far from completed (Polewsky, Hankammer, Kleer, & Antons, 2024) and the economic growth discourse is still predominant in everyday life, it is obvious to us that marketing scholars and practitioners cannot stay sidelined in this debate. As a bare minimum, they need to

think about the consequences of degrowth and deconsumption for marketing. Fortunately, we notice that various marketers *want* to take a proactive role in transforming the imaginary of endless growth and accompanying ‘malpractice’ in marketing. However, we do not see such rethinking taking place in any substantial and coordinated way in practice. Therefore, we decided to start this research of which the first stages are presented in this article. We report the results of a Participatory Action Research with marketing practitioners in the Netherlands. These marketers volunteered to participate because they were convinced that current- day marketing is problematic and will not be fit for the future. By participating, they hoped not only to develop new insights about marketing, but to gain a new perspective for their professional careers as marketers.

As a theoretical starting point for our exploration of the role and relevance of marketing for degrowth, we turned to the concept of *demarketing*, which Kotler and Levy introduced in the early seventies. The reason for turning to demarketing is that, like *degrowth*, it was introduced as a provocation of the idea that marketing should always grow demand. However, as we will explain in the next section, demarketing never successfully challenged marketing theory and practice, probably because it was never meant as an actual provocation. Introduced by ‘the establishment of marketing’ itself, it did not question the fundamentals of marketing, business as usual, and capitalism as *degrowth* does. If demarketing is to help us open a fundamental discussion, reflection, and profound search for alternatives in the way *degrowth* does, the concept needs to be further developed.

Conceptualising demarketing

The first proposal for defining the term demarketing in the literature is described in an article by Kotler and Levy published in Harvard Business Review in 1971. “*This instructive and sometimes amusing analysis answers [...] questions that have never before been raised in HBR.*” the magazine headlined. It challenged existing beliefs about marketing. The article explicitly broke with the idea that marketing is only about growing demand. They defined demarketing as: “*that aspect of marketing that deals with discouraging customers*

in general or a certain class of customers in particular on either a temporary or permanent basis". (Kotler & Levy, 1971, p. 75)

The article was published at the time of 'the great inflation' and 'the third consumer movement'. Spurred by a growing public concern, companies and governments pledged to protect the environment more. If marketing were only about growing demand, it would logically become superfluous and undesirable. Contrary to what critical non-marketers claimed, marketing would remain valuable, according to Kotler and Levy. They claimed that marketing was as relevant to the 'problem' of demand growth as it was to reduction. The marketing mix remained relevant to manage demand for a supply-demand balance. The central issue that the marketer could continue to work on was maintaining customer relationships, whether demand needed to grow or shrink. They concluded the article with the statement that the term demarketing was not necessary because demarketing practice is marketing 'as usual'. The term was only meant to "*dramatize semantically*" (Kotler & Levy, 1971, p. 80). It is fair to say that Kotler and Levy's definition and analysis did not indicate an intended contribution to a more sustainable and more equitable production-consumption system. It was (merely) a response to questions about the relevance of marketing in times of scarcity.

After the publication of the article, some reports appeared on applications of demarketing, such as reducing the pressure on public facilities with demarketing, demarketing of tobacco products and alcohol, and demarketing of places that suffer from over-tourism (Lawrence & Mekoth, 2023). While concerns about the environment and the limits to economic and population growth continued to increase initially, deregulation, market-based mechanisms and technological innovation became central to environmental policy and quite effectively swept away concerns about limits to growth. Logically, green, sustainable, and social marketing emerged to match this green growth zeitgeist.

A new branch: green demarketing

More recently, demarketing has been linked to (social) sustainability in literature (see (Lawrence & Mekoth, 2023) for a literature review). In an article about reinventing marketing

in the context of sustainability, precisely 40 years after the publication of his first article, Kotler explicitly advised the use of demarketing for this purpose (Kotler, 2011). Another six years later, when for many, the consequences of our climate and ecological crisis became highly noticeable, and the debate about the limits to growth flared up again, Kotler even welcomed the world into “*the age of demarketing*” (Kotler, 2017, p.124). In this chapter of his autobiography, Kotler presented demarketing as a strategy that governments could apply with social support to be able to consider earthly limits.

But what about demarketing in commercial companies? Is it not a waste of time and energy - and frustrating to the bone for the ‘responsibilised consumer’ (the active creation and management of consumers as moral subjects where social, financial, and environmental problems are framed as matters of their individual market choice to (de)consume) (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) - when demarketing for sustainability is adopted by governments, while commercial marketers remain unquestionably growth-oriented?

Fortunately, there are some notable exceptions of demarketing by commercial marketers, but they are not always found under the term demarketing. In a literature review, Gossen, Zieseimer, & Schrader (2019) analysed reasons and potential practices for commercial marketers to promote *sufficiency* (i.e., a feeling of enough) *in consumption* which also contradicts the growth-oriented purpose of marketing, but lingually in a less provocative manner. Reasons to promote sufficiency in consumption (not necessarily sufficiency in market share and profits) are: (1) society demands companies to adopt more responsibility, and thus not shift the burden to consumers alone; (2) companies can have altruistic motives to respond to social and ecological overshoot; and (3) companies promote sufficiency in consumption as a strategic response to stay in business now that the voluntary deconsumption movement is growing larger.

Adopting demarketing as provocation and challenge

The original conceptualization of demarketing as a provocative thought to enhance the relevance of marketing in times of economic inflation, has only recently been expanded to include reduction of demand out of ecological and social concerns. Also, other

fundamental contradictions, besides growing demand as main function, of current day marketing are not addressed. There is still much more work to do before we understand how demarketing can be employed as a serious alternative to destructive current-day marketing. The Participatory Action Research presented in this article was designed to engage in in-depth dialogues with Dutch marketing professionals as co-researchers. The researchers wanted to let common sense emerge, infused with practical experience, to explore what demarketing should provoke, according to concerned practitioners in commercial companies, to increase the possibility of a transition to a fairer and more sustainable production and consumption system and what hinders and eases accepting demarketing as a challenge. Therefore, there were three main questions for the dialogues: (1) which negative consequences of current day marketing should demarketing reverse, (2) which fundamental contradictions of current day marketing could demarketing provoke and (3) what is it like for a commercial marketer to embrace demarketing as a challenge in practice?

Methodology

Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007) was adopted as most appropriate for this research seeking to contribute to a transformation of marketing practice. A sensitizing phase and two reflective workshops were at the heart of the research design and will be discussed in detail below. The researchers participated in the workshops as co-inquirers, reflecting and acting as part of the collective learning process, whilst also analysing and interpreting the data.

Participants

The researchers wrote an inviting blog post for the Dutch Marketing Association (NIMA) asking for volunteers. The signups that followed (n=20) and some direct invitations offered us eleven (n = 11) marketing practitioners willing and able to join the first session. They were working within a range of practice contexts in commercial companies, employed in a variety of roles with a variety of years of experience (Table 1). Fourteen people, including

the authors, joined the first session. Of the eleven participants who started the project, six could not participate in the second workshop, but indicated that they were interested in staying informed of the outcomes and follow-up. The second workshop was held with ten people, including a business partner of one of our participants and a fellow marketing researcher. All participants indicated that they cooperated out of an interest in contributing to a more ethical and sustainable practice and to address an issue with marketing that they felt deeply.

Pseudonym	Current context	Current role	Started working in	Joined the 2 nd session	Main reason(s) to participate
1: Imme	Sustainable marketing agency	Owner	1998	Yes	Would like to contribute to more sustainable marketing
2: Jamie	Systemic marketing agency	Owner	2004	Yes, as a facilitator of 2 nd session with business partner	To integrate earth as a partner in marketing practice
3: Fen	Blinds reseller	Marketing manager	2006	Yes	Interested in how to change the mindset internally of selling as much as possible (instead of repair)
4: Stevie	Energy and oil company	Interim growth marketer	2010	No	Concerned about how marketing is practiced
5: Jacky	Interior design for health institutions	CEO	1998	No	Wants to introduce more sustainability into the company
6: Lenny	Social job search agency	Manager marketing & communication	1987	No	Feels uneasy with the title marketer as it is not social enough. Looking for alternatives.
7: Jaël	Energy supplier	Brand manager	2014	No	Frustrated by greenwashing and other malpractice
8: Billy	Commercial economics faculty	Graduate intern	-	No	Upon direct invitation, being noticed as a student who challenges the status quo of marketing
9: Mees	Commercial economics faculty	Graduate intern	-	No	Upon direct invitation, being noticed as a student who challenges the status quo of marketing
10: Savi	Marketing Strategy agency	Owner	1997	Yes	It fits the desire to reposition as a professional
11: Misha	Product based company	Marketing & retail specialist, product launch specialist	2005	Yes	Upon direct invitation, being known by one of the researchers as a marketing professional with a holistic view of societal/ecological impact

Table 1: Overview of participants

Action reflection cycle

The data generation methods consisted of a sensitizing booklet and two four-hour reflective face-to-face workshops over a three-month period. Participants received the

sensitizing workbook with exercises during the summer break prior to the first workshop. The idea behind the sensitization exercises, commonly used in design research, is that it can bring unconscious beliefs into conscious awareness and thereby make these beliefs available for sharing during the first workshop (Sanders & Stappers, 2012). Questions in the workbook helped participants analyse how we got where we are today and made them reflect on the possible contribution of demarketing in a more desirable marketing practice. They were asked to answer questions in a way that matched their preference: a collage, timeline, catchy statement, or something else. The workbook started by asking to formulate issues to which they thought demarketing could be an adequate response. Furthermore, they were asked to report on their personal process of becoming aware of this issue, what attempts they had seen to address the issue, and their ideas about why the issue persists. The workbook ended with a conclusion: a formulation of a central deadlock, surrounded by supporting beliefs visualised in a map.

The first workshop included an introduction to the aim and to collective learning (based on (Wierdsma, 2012) and (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000)), after which participants shared their reflections on the central deadlocks as prepared in the sensitizing assignment. Participants then developed new perspectives on demarketing and were asked to reflect on a small tilt they could make in their daily practice. We wrapped the session up with a conversation about the follow-up.

One of the participants, a trained (by the Hellinger institute) and experienced facilitator of systemic constellations saw a match with her work on systemic exploration and offered to organize the second workshop with her business partner. A systemic constellation creates a dynamic model of a system, using individuals who represent different elements of the system (e.g., actors, places) to reveal and transform its patterns and dynamics that remain otherwise hidden (Ritter & Zamierowski, 2021). Systemic constellations were initially applied in therapy known as family constellations, but practice and literature have expanded to also address organizations, societal transformation contexts and multi-stakeholder issues (Ritter & Zamierowski, 2021). The systemic constellation provided the research community with a unique way of engaging in dialogue and collecting insights.

To prepare the workshop on constellations, the facilitators co-designed the session with the authors. In the second workshop, before starting the constellations, participants reflected on their experiences since the previous workshop and the first outcomes were shared and discussed. Then one of the authors - who is vocally advocating a transformation of marketing through teaching and authoring books and blog posts for several years now - brought a question to the table as a starting point for the constellation: What is the role of marketing research in the bigger picture? With help of the facilitators, he decided which elements of the system to include in the constellation (earth, the consumer, marketing practice, marketing theory, organizations and affected communities) and who was to embody these elements in three rounds: past, present, and future. As representatives, participants were invited to find a position in the room that felt right, and they were asked to respond spontaneously, sharing each felt experience from that place. They were told not to play a role but to become present and available to any sensations, images, and thoughts. They were also invited to move if they felt the need. Directly after the constellation, the whole group engaged in dialogue and shared experiences and thoughts building on the feeling-as-information principle (Livotova & Livotov, 2015).

Data generation and evaluation of outcomes by participants

The generated data, meeting minutes and products of exercises were first analysed by means of several rounds of open coding to let themes emerge, followed by focused coding to support abductive reasoning (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022). The themes that emerged were then shared with the participants for validation and evaluation. The first draft of this paper was also shared, and feedback was processed in the definitive version.

Findings and discussion

In this section, findings from the data analyses will be presented and discussed in relation to existing literature and structured according to the three questions for dialogue introduced before.

Research question 1: which negative consequences of current day marketing should demarketing reverse?

Based on both sessions, the consensus was that both marketing practice and theory play a key role in fuelling: (1) dissatisfaction; (2) overconsumption; and (3) hyper individualism. Demarketing should reverse these negative consequences of the marketing discipline. These three topics will be elaborated on in separate paragraphs, after which we will zoom in on how participants became aware of these issues and wrap up with a short reportage of the systemic constellations on the issues and the role of marketing and how it contributed to our dialogues.

Negative impact of marketing and consumption on people's happiness and quality of life by fuelling dissatisfaction with the status quo

First, the marketing professionals that participated in this research referred to the direct negative impact of marketing on people's happiness. Marketers, brands, and companies offer false promises of happiness through consumption, appealing to the attraction of the new. There is an unhealthy addiction to consumption in Western societies, stemming from a permanent feeling of dissatisfaction that is fuelled by companies, and calmed by a purchase, but only briefly.

“In Western countries, there is little satisfaction that people try to compensate for by consuming. This is fuelled by companies.” (Jaël)

“A purchase often serves to fill a void, but it only fulfils for a very short time.” (Jacky)

“Marketing contributes to this, because everything (your phone, car, house, vacations, clothes, etc.) must be nicer, faster, and newer.” (Jamie)

These reflections are consistent with older ideas about conspicuous consumption where people seek status through consumption, but never manage to end this search, resulting in a permanent feeling of having to keep up (Veblen, 1899). Also, more recent research addresses the link between happiness and advertising specifically. A large quantitative

study, using longitudinal data from 27 European countries linking an increase in advertising spend to a reduction in life satisfaction (Michel, Sovinsky, Proto, & Oswald, 2019).

As an alternative, demarketing should promote a feeling of enough and increase the appreciation for and the repairability of the stuff that has already been bought, contributing to lifespan extension, as Gossen, Ziesemer, & Schrader (2019) also summarised in their review on marketing to promote sufficiency in consumption.

"Demarketing could focus on getting the most out of products that have already been sold. For example, by promoting lifespan extension and setting up a good customer journey for repair or replacing parts yourself." (Fen)

Negative effects of marketing and overconsumption on fair distribution of costs and benefits and the (long-term) liveability of our planet (for communities elsewhere)

Secondly, the marketing practitioners in this study expressed that marketing also has a negative impact on quality of life because it encourages overconsumption which threatens the viability of the planet in terms of biodiversity loss, pollution, waste, climate change and depletion of natural resources, which is also acknowledged in literature in which marketing is put forward as one of the main drivers for overshoot (e.g. Merz et al., 2023). In addition, marketing contributes to the exploitation of people.

"It drives overconsumption resulting in the depletion of natural resources, exploitation of people, global warming, loss of biodiversity, etc." (Imme)

"Overconsumption: the depletion of the earth's natural resources. And, of course, all pollution at the micro and macro level caused by overconsumption. The urgency is becoming clearer, as problems become increasingly clear (PFAS, forest fires and myopia, for example)." (Stevie)

"This is precisely what is relevant to keep the earth habitable in the coming decades and for future generations." (Savi)

What demarketing could do in this regard is support the deconsumption movement and contribute to changes at the symbolic level of consumption, where we move away from fostering materialism to a focus on long-term well-being for people and the planet.

“The use of marketing skills/tools to combat overconsumption and materialism with the aim of long-term well-being for people and planet.” (Imme)

“Demarketing can help to contribute to - or provide insight into - changes in personal needs” (Jacky)

Negative effects of marketing on our social fabric due to a hyper-focus on the individual and advertising as a business model for polarising platforms

Lastly, the deterioration of our 'social fabric' is a recurring theme among the participants. They see increasing polarization and less room for dialogue. The way we organize our economy is linked to the exploitation of people and an unfair distribution of resources, and marketing contributes to this trend through a hyper-focus on the individual. At the same time, these individuals are only addressed as potential consumers. Some authors in marketing (and industrial design) have proposed that individuals should be addressed as human beings instead; marketing should not only be concerned with short-term hedonistic wants but address long-term interests as well (e.g. (Russell & Buck, 2020).

“The problem is that our society, and our marketing, is focused on the individual, while we are connected to each other and connected to nature.” (Misha)

Another observed problem is that marketers are sponsoring social media platforms that are failing to take responsibility for preventing the spread of fake news and polarisation by spending advertising budgets on these platforms. Demarketing could address this issue by reducing the use of social media for their activities and turning towards (local) newspapers and other trusted news platforms instead, accepting a decrease in effective targeting, that social media platforms enable. In addition, companies could support the social fabric by spending advertising money on (local) clubs and initiatives, making it easier for these initiatives to be economically viable.

“But I totally agree, because you just mentioned marketing and the use of Meta and Google, for me that's also a bit of the same social trend as what I was referring to, that you foster that conflict to ensure that people continue to consume and stay active on the socials. So that's also a thing that we, as marketers, have to try to get rid of. That gives a whole new palette of challenges.” (Fen)

Becoming aware of issues

Most participants reported that their awareness of the abovementioned issues of marketing and the pursuit of growth in general grew slowly. Some also mentioned specific events that spurred their awareness, such as the COVID crisis, changing jobs, coming across a specific insight in a course or book, or becoming a parent.

“It's a gradual process for me, that I became aware of the one-sided approach to economic growth.” (Savi)

“Also, insights that sustainable growth is an oxymoron, and that the greatest shortcoming of the human race is man's ability to understand the exponential function.” (Jacky)

“Corona made me much more aware. When planes stopped flying and the air became cleaner. When the shops were closed, and we could finally wear our full wardrobe and we found out if the car is superfluous. When our health and personal lives came first, and all material things became less important.” (Jamie)

For everyone, becoming more aware affected both their private decision-making (e.g., what stuff to buy, having children or not) and their professional decision-making as a marketer (e.g., how to develop oneself, the right company to work for). Becoming more aware often resulted in a search for meaning in one's work and a parallel feeling of alienation from business as usual.

“Even my desire to have children one day is affected” (Billy)

“I wanted to delve more into this, and I also noticed that launching new products no longer made me happy, and I wanted to contribute to stimulating overconsumption no longer, and

wanted work with more meaning. That's when I decided to learn more about sustainability and combine it with marketing.” (Imme)

“It made me aware and that it is important to work from my heart. That's where the real satisfaction lies.” (Jamie)

Exploring issues and the role of marketing by systemic constellations

The systemic constellations contributed to deepen awareness and gave an opportunity to reflect on the role of marketing theory too, which remained unexplored in the first dialogue. In reporting the experiences in the constellations, we will refer to every representative with a capitalised first letter.

In the constellation on the past, Marketing practice had no contact with Earth, as it was not considered important. The attention of Marketing practice was vested into Organizations and The consumer, but it was also difficult to see The consumer for Marketing practice. The attention of Marketing theory went to Marketing practice. Marketing theory considered herself as a neutral actor in this constellation. After an invitation to move, Organisations felt happy that The consumer was in better sight. Marketing theory now wanted to see The consumer and Organisations too. She felt seen and wanted to be seen, perhaps suggesting the institutionalisation of the marketing discipline (Hunt, 2020). When in a last move, the Affected communities reported to feel a stomach-ache, there was a sudden awareness with Marketing theory that marketing theory is not neutral, but catalyses the effectiveness of Organisations and Marketing practice, which is also causing harm to Affected communities.

In the constellation of the present, Earth remained seated. He did not seek to join in into this violence. The consumer was now called The human being, but it felt fake to her, suggesting that a change of words from customer/consumer to human (being), as mentioned earlier, is not enough. She felt deeply sad and severely nauseous, perhaps reflecting the negative consequences on consumers as discussed before. Marketing theory felt restless, which might reflect a current struggle of relevance and fragmentation (Hunt, 2020). Marketing practice has difficulty contacting The human being, and The human being wanted to get away from Marketing practice, perhaps reflecting social movements like anti-

consumption as brought forward in the introduction. The human being was invited to make a move and moved next to Earth. This move felt of vital importance to have a future. Marketing practice was happy that The human being moved next to Earth. *“Now I can couple them. This is how I want to earn my money. If human beings make this move, I can start right away.”* However, to The human being, Marketing theory felt like a crucial support to make the actions of Organisations and Marketing practice bearable. Affected communities remained quiet and distant; she had no contact at all. *“No one cares about me. I feel like I have been sidelined.”* An awareness rose that The human being in this constellation was more properly called “western consumer”, as Affected communities remained disconnected. This constellation raised awareness amongst participants that affected communities are often left out of the sustainability transition, also by marketing theory.

In the constellation of the future, Earth walked away from a forming circle loudly laughing. She experienced a lot of irritation. Marketing practice and Organisations felt disappointed by this reaction. They had such good intentions. Marketing practice started wondering whether there was still a place for him. Marketing theory considered herself a step ahead of Marketing practice having a more macro perspective on the discipline. She wanted to share knowledge but did not know how and Marketing practice felt sceptical towards her. As part of an intervention to see what would happen, Marketing practice was removed from the constellation. Immediately, Marketing practice was missed: Organisations shrugged and concluded that they had to do marketing themselves, but this deeply concerned The consumer, and Marketing theory started wondering: *“So, what am I still doing here?”* Then Earth made an inclusive gesture to get Marketing practice back in. By the time Marketing practice came back, a deep transformation had taken place. There was a connection between the various elements - where this was not the case in the past and present. Marketing practice indicated that he remained totally confused as to why he had been removed from the system in the first place. He was unaware of any negative consequences of his presence and mostly focussed on his good intentions.

Systemic constellations work does not give conclusive answers and reproducibility remains underexplored (Livotova & Livotov, 2015) and we have experienced that translating constellations to words and recognize what was felt as information is a challenge. However, this experiment with constellation work, made possible by one of our participants, did bring additional insights to our dialogue, it did deepen awareness of known issues by providing a bodily experience and it did bring forward important, yet somewhat uncomfortable questions that will linger in our research community for a while that perhaps have an even more fundamental negating power than what we will present as answers to our second question ‘what should demarketing provoke?’ in the next paragraph: Will marketing practice (and in extension marketing theory because one does not exist without the other), despite good intentions, have a place in the future? How to increase awareness of catalysing destructive consequences of business as usual by marketing research? And how can academics play a much bigger role in transforming the marketing discipline, helping practitioners to become more aware - or more caring about - of undesired macro-consequences, like those destructive consequences for the easily neglected communities elsewhere and help shape alternatives?

Research Question 2: which fundamental contradictions of current day marketing could demarketing provoke?

Exploring the negating power of demarketing, we find that the word demarketing was indeed experienced as provocative by our research community - as once intended by the redaction of HBR, Kotler and Levy. The capacity to make room for transformation and discarding non-serving theories and models to become more future-proof was acknowledged.

"Demarketing is the process of getting rid of what is no longer appropriate and subservient within how marketing is, so that the understanding and execution of this discipline becomes and remains future proof. Re-marketing is also needed: the development of new (strategy) tools and processes." (Misha)

One participant doubted whether demarketing was still capable of helping to make room for the kind of rethinking that is needed, because it has already been coined and charged with meaning. It was also questioned whether demarketing is the right term for the kind of marketing we should be doing. This is a familiar issue for degrowth, because the term asserts uncomfortableness, yet the negation is perceived as powerful for confronting anxiety: a world without growth (Kallis & March, 2018), and in our case a world without marketing.

“And on the other hand, we are also stuck with what is already defined before, because as we take a word like demarketing, that Kotler has already defined in a certain way, does it help us to break free?” (Jamie)

"Demarketing doesn't cover what I long for: I don't want less but more value" (Lenny)

For demarketing, we identified three specific negations that demarketing could and perhaps should serve: (1) reducing demand (and making the remaining more conscious); (2) reducing markets; and (3) discarding manipulation, which will be discussed in separate paragraphs again.

Reducing demand

The first and most dominant negation, both in the dialogue, in literature, and in practice, is that demarketing should be about reducing demand for (some) products and services. This should not be done from an organizational perspective to match supply and demand when it is difficult to increase supply, as Kotler and Levy (1971) argued in their initial demarketing article, but from a social or ecological perspective, as more recent literature suggests (Lawrence & Mekoth, 2023). In other words, demarketing is aimed at consuming less and especially less harmful, by increasing people’s awareness of the consequences of consumption and their general motivation *not* to buy.

" In my view, the current definition of demarketing has a commercial connotation: the thought or intention to reduce or stop demand is done in the interest of the company. Decrease demand when a company (e.g. due to the production process) cannot meet

demand. Or reducing demand due to a low profit margin (in certain regions, segments, etc.)" (Jacky)

"Where marketing stands for increasing interest in a particular product or service, demarketing stands for raising awareness when buying." (Jamie)

"Making certain products or services less attractive with the idea of reducing demand" (Lenny)

"In other words, consume less and consume 'better': sustainable products, products that last longer, circular products. Influencing people to make sustainable choices, thus stimulating sustainable behavioural change." (Imme)

"In my opinion, demarketing should have a social connotation or purpose: in connection with world scarcity and the environment, producing some goods is no longer desirable and demarketing should contribute to the realization that we do not actually need everything we buy. This applies to goods and services!" (Jacky)

Reducing markets

Demarketing was also imagined contributing to the creation of a different socio-economic system. A system that relies less on market (forces), that 'demarkets' certain parts of our society. If marketers can create and develop markets over time, referred to by Kotler (1986) as *megamarketing*, they might be able to do the reverse. Participants showed an interest in this function of demarketing as they see the free market as an organising principle that does not work (anymore) in our time nor for the challenges we face. Moving towards fundamentally different organising principles is a process, and demarketing is part of that process. Herenboeren was mentioned as an example. Herenboeren in the Netherlands is an initiative that is copied by several communities to collectively produce and share food, which is a customary practice related to voluntary deconsumption as a response to increased awareness of unsustainable provision systems (Pocas Ribeiro, 2023). These reflections on demarketing certain parts of our society are consistent with other academics seeking alternatives to a free-market logic resulting in ideas described by,

among others, the foundational economy (Bentham et al., 2013), universal basic services (Coote, Kasliwal, & Percy, 2019), and commoning (Bollier, 2020).

"Demarketing is a derivative of the social/societal/political conviction that the world can no longer go on like this, both economically and ecologically, and that different systems thinking is necessary." (Jacky)

"Telling the other story can "demarket" our society" (Imme)

Discarding manipulation

The third negation of demarketing that was explored was that demarketing should be about letting go of manipulation, telling honest stories, transparency, integrity, and trusting consumer decision-making. To clarify, influencing becomes manipulation if the methods used undermine the decision-making process of the other person (Susser, Roessler, & Nissenbaum, 2019). When marketers 'hinder' consumer's ability to make good decisions (social, for themselves and/or for the ecology) in favour of the organization for which they work – for example, by providing wrong, incorrect information, by deliberately omitting less attractive information, or by using opaque seduction methods – consumers are being manipulated. Because the abovementioned practices are common, our participants noticed that, as marketers, they are not viewed as credible by others and that marketing activities are seen as manipulative. This image of marketing is recognised when they look at some fellow marketers, but it is not the image they want to identify with.

"Yet I also get it, those prejudices and the fear of being misled by those beautiful stories of marketers." (Lenny)

"From a corporate perspective, it [demarketing] represents integrity and honesty; As a company, do you dare to be honest about what you sell?" (Jamie)

"Don't impose choices, but act on the basis of trust" (Jaël)

“And what would it be like if big clothing brands were honest about the production process or waste they create? Wouldn't consumers have to make more conscious choices?”

(Jamie)

Research Question 3: what is it like for a commercial marketer to embrace demarketing as a challenge in practice?

Barriers to employing demarketing

Although participants would like to see more (de)marketing to address issues as just defined, they also feel stuck in the current socio-economic system, of which marketing is a part, making it impossible to employ a genuine demarketing strategy overnight. A system in which financial goals such as profit and growth are leading, opposes the way practitioners would like to put demarketing to use. The societal definition of business success is one-sided, and even our governments are governed by financial parameters. Everyone acknowledges that in a world where profit and growth are loudest, it is difficult to produce a different voice.

“Governments and corporations have become addicted to growth.” (Savi)

“More profit is always better.” (Imme)

Convinced as they are that change can only happen collectively, participants experience that changing as an individual in a complex system is not only hard but also feels useless or counterproductive. If you stop doing ‘bad’ things, someone else (e.g. a competitor) will take advantage of the situation. Moreover, the diversity of interests and actors makes it unclear who is responsible for addressing societal challenges and who should make a move. Every effort is likely to be countered: actors in power maintain the current system because they benefit from it, which is self-authorized by a low moral standard.

“What do we leave behind? I feel powerless.” (Fen)

“It is difficult to change and to accept the disadvantages of less consumption (for all parties) Also, the urgency may not always have felt high.” (Stevie)

“If our business stops with..., someone else will take over.” (Stevie)

“Many brands engage in greenwashing. Companies are not always honest and transparent about the value they add and do not take responsibility for value destroyed.” (Jaël)

Participants feel that there is little room for long-term thinking. There seems to be a lot of attention paid to the short-term among companies, and little attention is paid to the long-term consequences. Moreover, organisations focus on the interests of the organisation itself and its customers, but there is a lack of awareness of interdependence.

“In my [company name] time, [company name] gave revenue, growth, and a reduction of the footprint as main objectives for the company. These were not integrally linked to each other in models and processes. No need to guess which of the two will die under pressure of the other at the end of the fiscal year.” (Misha)

“We have forgotten the earth as a partner. We need to reconnect. Also, as marketing. Think and act more relational.” (Jamie)

Finally, there are practical obstacles for those who want to do things differently. For example, more circular business operations require people who are trained differently and who are not readily available. Repairs are often more expensive than new products, and repairable products are not always available. In a competitive market, operating truly sustainably might mean going out of business.

“Replacement is also more interesting for our entrepreneurs [than repair], more cash, better margins and relatively few assembly hours. You will get more out of your assembly team in times when staff is scarce.” (Fen)

“If I go really sustainable, I'll be overtaken by a competitor.” (Misha)

Reflecting on the role of marketing in the bigger picture, participants are bothered by marketing's reputation. Marketers are not trusted. Marketing is only focused on financial gain. Marketing misleads. The deep distrust in what marketing does and causes makes it difficult for marketers who want to do things differently, because if marketing produces novel ideas or views, they are likely to be viewed with suspicion. Moreover, marketing lacks the theory, models, and resources to really do things differently.

"A distrust that is so ingrained that when I took a course on CSRD last year, amid financials, the lecturer told the group that 'you always have to watch out for those marketing people'".

(Lenny)

"Patagonia came up with the message 'don't buy this jacket' to activate consumers not to buy anything they don't need. A notable example of demarketing, right? Or is it just clever marketing?" (Mees)

"There are no proven holistic marketing tools, which makes it difficult to steer towards higher goals than sales and fulfilling individual needs." (Misha)

The barriers to implementing demarketing we found in our study are quite consistent with the ones that are reported in the review study on marketing for sufficiency (Gossen, Ziesemer, & Schrader, 2019). They made a distinction between systemic (growth paradigm, consumerist culture, freedom of consumer decision-making) and organisational barriers (orientating on sales and profits, short-term shareholder value, image). We also found some additional barriers, such as the current image of marketing or the shortage of qualified personnel.

Opportunities for employing demarketing

Whereas the review study on marketing for sufficiency identified barriers and not opportunities (Gossen, Ziesemer, & Schrader, 2019), participants in our study observed several hopeful developments, despite the challenges we face and the complexity of these challenges. First, they see a general trend in society that people, more than before, dare to challenge long-held views and are actively involved in the dialogue about change.

"I believe we need to look and think bigger. And that we must be willing to let go of existing ideas, theories and working methods. That we need to look more at the desired result. What do we really want? When will marketing make sense again? The solution lies elsewhere."

(Jamie)

"Many people are already struggling with the problems of hyper-consumerism, the rat race, individualization, and digitization. Some even show the desire to leave society" (Jacky)

“I don't recall that the problem has been tried to solve to this extent or scale before. Maybe on a small scale by activist or intrinsically motivated entrepreneurs, but not to the extent that it is now getting attention and more followers” (Imme)

This trend is supported by top-down change in terms of laws and regulations, most notably the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). Secondly, participants are also hopeful when it comes to bottom-up change from economic actors. They see consumers with changing preferences and entrepreneurs becoming more ambitious when it comes to achieving positive impact, although expectations for the transformation of larger companies remain low.

“Recently, I visited an accountancy firm to investigate how I, as a marketer, can contribute to raising awareness among clients that the introduction of the CSRD offers opportunities. Opportunities to add value as a company and to make a positive contribution to the impact on people, the environment and society through business operations. Integrated reporting is not an end, but a means aimed at creating a regenerative and meaningful society.”
(Lenny)

“When consumer behaviour changes, the consumer society changes” (Mees)“.

“I believe in entrepreneurship as part of the solution”. (Savi)

“I believe that start-ups and scale-ups and SMEs with owners or investors who are focused on the long term and growth in the broadest sense of the word can best bring about disruption in business operations, including a new status quo in marketing. To discover and develop strategies with new norms and values within these companies. Large companies can then change too” (Misha)

Thirdly, employing demarketing could offer commercial companies a long-term competitive advantage, as we have seen with the use of demarketing in previous research (Armstrong Soule & Reich, 2015).

“Starting on time can also give you an advantage over competitors. Sustainability will also be a factor in the choice of more consumers.” (Fen)

Finally, as society changes, participants also draw hope from an opportunity for profound transformation in marketing: a co-evolution. Marketing can foster relationships within (e.g. with financials) and outside the organization and shift its focus to societal relevance, going beyond marketing as a consumer interface to marketing as a societal interface (Sodhi, 2011).

“It is a change of era. This requires existential choices about how we deal with political, social, economic, and ecological issues. Also in the field of marketing.” (Misha)

“So, it [marketing] is about relationship, relevance and listening” (Lenny).

“I believe that in close cooperation with the other business disciplines, an integrated approach is most sustainable and contributes to a reliable and honest brand. It is not reserved for the marketers in an organization.” (Lenny)

Experiences of employing demarketing

As is to be expected when you step outside the box and blaze new trails, participants confessed that it did feel lonely. It can be scary to speak up about concerns and ideas for change, especially if the proposed direction is still vague, ill-defined, difficult to measure and if tools and frameworks are still lacking. Moreover, sustainability as a topic often evokes strong reactions. Trying to contribute to a transformation can be a frustrating experience when faced with resistance and can create feelings of powerlessness about true impact. It requires a lot of commitment and perseverance to change the system. Having to say yes to ‘business as usual’ due to financial or peer pressure, for example, can lead to distress of conscience because deeply held values are at stake (Weintrobe, 2020). It helps to be working in a mission-driven company with colleagues from different disciplines who are supportive of a change of (marketing) paradigm.

“I feel a lot of guilt. I want to do it right. I want to be a value director.” (Lenny)

“I feel a lot of frustration as an individual. The feeling of getting stuck, but also a lot of energy.” (Stevie)

“What I noticed, was that I was looking ridiculously hard for models, strategies, KPIs to be able to show: hey, this is what I have achieved. [...] if the objective is long-term well-being for all, we don't really have that yet. We must create, design, and develop that future together. So then I thought, yes, I should let go of that. We are so used to wanting to quantify everything or be able to proof it or throw it into fixed states.” (Imme)

“I am now also exploring the interim path, which is new to me, so that already indicates that there is pressure. And then, of course, I try to find sustainable, socially responsible assignments. But a friend who is going to think along with me who works for a company that delivers directly to the offshore. “Yes, one day a week and it's right up your alley. You've already done this at other companies, haven't you?” [...] And especially if you are going to make a kind of shift, that you first stood for something, as a marketer, or as a human being. Of course, that image is constructed. And then you must rebrand that. Trying to reinvent yourself. But of course, that also takes time for people to get used to that. And then you must be clear: what is it that you're bringing?” (Savi)

“You can endure a shit storm, if you believe in what you're doing” (Jaël)

Reflections on joining the dialogues

The time between the two workshops was considered too short to reflect on any real change, apart from some obvious suggestions not to boost sales as much as possible. Yet, the marketing professionals indicated that participation in the research project had set something in motion inside of them. The workshops contributed to the feeling of not being alone in the chaos. Noticing a sense of urgency for change and searching for a transformation of marketing together with other concerned professionals, gives hope and breaks with the idea that other generations would not worry about this.

“Seeing another generation really concerned gives me hope” (Billy)

Participants showed a great willingness and desire to move forward and participate in initiatives to come. Not only as being part of this research community but also to make more noise in general, start small experiments, and reach out to other disciplines.

“I’m excited to start my new job and to discuss that sustainability/CSR/reducing consumption goes beyond just marketing. I feel proud that I can do that organization-wide in my new job. I feel like I’m going to add positive value that way.” (Mees)

“As a result of the first session, I immediately asked if we could look at it from a systemic perspective. So yes, the first session did set something in motion in me.” (Jamie)

“I think it’s really interesting, it just takes time. I would like to be there again next time.”

(Savi)

Conclusion

The marketing professionals who participated in our research shared the sense of urgency Lloveras et al. 2022 (p.17) put forward: *“further work is urgently needed to put this [degrowth] agenda at the centre of marketing thought and praxis, so that marketers can begin to contribute towards this paradigm shift both within and beyond academia.”* A radical decrease in material and energy throughput is needed, which is not delivered by more efficiency and cleaner technology alone. However, current-day marketing falls short in concepts and practical tools that would enable us to effectively mitigate the crises that we face. Since its introduction in the seventies, demarketing - the first concept in marketing that questions demand growth – has failed to challenge business as usual. On the contrary, demarketing was presented as a counterstrategy for governments to deal with environmental and social issues caused by problematic consumption in the free market. A peculiar presentation and a strategy unlikely to be effective given the fact that governments hardly produce or sell goods, nor do they have large enough marketing budgets to be a productive counterforce. Moreover, moral decision making is a burden given away to the end of the value chain: the consumer. For demarketing to be truly effective in such a way that our production and consumption system can function within social and planetary boundaries, it needs to be redefined accordingly. Demarketing as presented in this paper, goes beyond demarketing as demand management (Lawrence & Mekoth, 2023) and beyond sufficiency (Gossen, Ziesemer, & Schrader, 2019) because it brings forward new

ideas: some products and services should not be exchanged on a market or/and be brought (back) to other forms of social production and distribution, and when is power over consumer behaviour justified? Whereas more social definitions of marketing are formulated that propose marketing to have “*value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large*”, in this example by the AMA (2017), the meaning of marketing practice in the public opinion seems to have become synonymous to manipulating consumer behaviour for organisational purposes and propositions for transforming marketing until now seems to be focussed on changing organisational purposes to be more social or sustainable (e.g. Merz et al., 2023), but little attention goes to the accumulation of ‘power over’, through increasing knowledge of consumer behaviour and advancing technologies enabling that power to accumulate and whether that is justifiable.

What began as an exploration of the meaning of demarketing with practitioners became an inquiry into a transformation of marketing by practitioners and researchers who experience severe discomfort with their own discipline. Building on Hirschman (1972), we have several options to act on this discomfort: (1) exit, which entails finding another job, not as a commercial marketer; (2) loyalty, which means leaving ethics at the front door to accommodate business as usual; or (3) voice, which means speaking up and trying to contribute to transformation. Participants in our study clearly opted for the latter and agreed that their discipline is still worth their effort. And they believe that transformation is possible because something needs to change for marketing to have a future. In general, something needs to change in the socioeconomic system for humanity to have a future. They also see that change is already underway. People are increasingly getting involved in the dialogue about change. New legislation that supports the desired change is becoming effective. Consumer awareness is rising, preferences are changing, and voluntary deconsumption movements are gaining momentum. More entrepreneurs are taking significant steps to become more ecologically and socially sustainable and concrete efforts for other forms of organising production, distribution and consumption are undertaken. Overall, the feeling is that the group of people who want change and who are working on change is growing, and their influence is increasing. It helps those who are

worried about the future of marketing not to feel alone in their attempt to change it, something our action research seems to have achieved simply by bringing concerned professionals together.

Future research

Our research has just begun. We expect that there will be more fundamental contradictions in current day marketing that need to be re-examined than the three themes that emerged in the study reported here. As a research community of practitioners and academics, we wish to invite other interested and concerned marketing professionals, as we believe there are more marketers with good intentions but without adequate alternatives. In the meantime, we have received other applications for joining our research community. Our sample presented in this paper was dominated by marketers who chose 'voice' as the strategy to cope with their concerns, but it might be interesting to expand our exploration to those who recently chose to 'exit' or the ones who choose 'loyalty.' The latter group could provide us with insight into effective strategies to make them choose 'voice' too.

Finally, participants expressed a desire for more experimenting (muddling) in practice, which we did not do in these first steps. In terms of the model on collective learning of Wierdsma (2012), we descended to the underlying principles of marketing using constellation work and the negating power of demarketing, but the exploration of the consequences of being a marketer or marketing researcher according to new principles for our ideas about marketing, insights, rules, and behaviour needs to be continued. Through further research with our community on demarketing, we plan to give further substance to the great need for a drastic overhaul of marketing theory, models, and tools (Lloveras, Marshall, Vandeventer, & Pansera, 2022).

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