



Inner drives: Is the future of marketing communications more sustainable when using backcasting?

Alexandra Köves ^{a,*}, Gábor Király ^b

^a Corvinus University of Budapest, Institute for Business Economics, Department of Decision Sciences, H-1093 Budapest, Fővám tér 8. E143, Hungary

^b Budapest Business School, Future of Higher Education Research Centre, H-1055 Budapest, Markó utca 29-31, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

In 2018 a marketing communications firm decided to do a participatory backcasting project involving all their local members of staff to see what the future might bring in marketing communications. The exercise led to a unique knowledge accumulation process that has substantial research relevance. Unintentionally, this backcasting revolved around the role of marketing communications in transforming business to an ecologically sustainable and socially just modus operandi. While presenting the results of this action research, on the one hand this paper aims to provide inputs to reorienting marketing communications from its undignified status in sustainability efforts to something that supports sustainability transitions in society. On the other hand, it aims to contribute to the methodological discourses on backcasting. While it has been long established that backcasting is an adequate tool to address sustainability issues, this project suggests that participatory backcasting as a methodological framework has its own inner drives that lead to responsible and sustainable mind-sets even without such framings. These inner drives may have to do with the nature of utopian thinking, and the psychological safety and intellectual independence it provides.

1. Introduction

In scientific circles it is no longer debated that sustainability and the current patterns of consumption are not compatible in the long run. Needs, wants, desires are ought to be reassessed and we must find a way to reconcile our own way of living with ecological barriers and social justice. From this argument, it may seem straightforward that the marketing communications industry in its current form needs to reinvent itself if it does not want to take the blame for ruining the planet and taking humankind down with it. Nonetheless, even if climate strikes were on the rise and more and more cities declared a state of climate crisis even before COVID-19, the marketing industry seemed to be happily maintaining the impetus of the consumer society.

This paper presents how using backcasting as a framework in an action-research based consultancy project (Eden & Huxham, 1996) induces sustainability-oriented thinking even without framing the topics to gear towards such issues. When given the freedom to design the future of their own profession, in a multi-method backcasting framework people working in marketing communications constructed visions and transformative steps that take into account ecological and social issues. This engagement of academics in the marketing communications industry was never meant to be on sustainability. The backcasting project presented in this paper was launched well before the climate strikes and nowhere near the coronavirus epidemic as an action-research based consultancy project

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: alexandra.koves@uni-corvinus.hu (A. Köves), kiraly.gabor@uni-bge.hu (G. Király).

that focused on a co-creation process involving all the employees of a company. This was during a time of mergers and change and the project was aimed to enable them to envision their own, their company's and their industry's future. Therefore, it was supposed to help to identify themselves with the global corporation's logo "Let's make the future". However, the local management of the company was willing to allocate resources and freedom of mind to run the complete backcasting exercise and face what may come of it. The authors of this paper were brought in as external researchers whose role was never to frame the topics of discourse but to facilitate the process itself.

As its origins were to provide an adequate tool for addressing sustainability issues, plenty of research has substantiated in the last decades that backcasting as a framework sits well with sustainability questions (Vergragt and Quist, 2011; Robinson, Burch, Talwar, O'Shea, & Walsh, 2011; Svenfelt et al., 2019; Vähäkari et al., 2020). Backcasting is a scenario-building research method that uses the envisioned normative future to identify potential intervention steps that lead current trends towards that desired future (Robinson, 2003). Working its way back from the ideal future to the present, it enables scarcely surfacing thoughts, concepts and logics to theorise the road to such an outcome. It can be used on the levels of organisations, geographical regions, industries and whole societies. Our presented case indicates that not only is backcasting a good tool to discuss sustainability issues, but it also works the other way round: when applying backcasting, sustainability issues start dominating the discussions even in environments where it is least expected.

Based on their experience with backcasting (e.g. Géring et al., 2018; Király, Pataki, Köves, & Balázs, 2013; Köves, Király, Pataki, & Balázs, 2013), the initial interest of the researchers was more of a methodological nature, namely how to organise and manage such a process in a corporate environment involving all employees. The commitment of the staff, the direction of the thematic framing, the depth of the dialogue and the complexity of the results surprised both the management and the researchers. In this action-research project, backcasting was chosen as a methodological framework as it facilitated letting go of past experiences and moving beyond the path dependencies of the present and turn towards the future "with a clean sheet of paper". This being a participatory exercise, participants could freely frame their topics and as it turned out they opted to search for an image of their industry that serves ecological and social goals. This was accompanied by an in-depth reflection on how they perceive their own roles in current society. The surprising nature of these results led us to the question whether it is the methodological framework of backcasting that in itself drives the emergence of a more radical, responsible and sustainable future vision of an industry. Hence, the aim of the paper is to contribute to a discussion on the method of backcasting as the initiator of sustainability mindsets without the intentions of such framings. Presenting our case shows how the method itself steered the dialogues around marketing communication towards transforming the field to remain relevant in the evolving socio-economic milieu.

The article first introduces the project and the multi-methods used in the backcasting framework. The next section introduces the process of data analysis and the resulting vignettes to capture the essence of the results. Later these are briefly compared to the ongoing academic dialogues. In the discussion part of the paper, the researchers reflect on the key insights on how the results and the backcasting framework may have interrelated. Finally, in the conclusion the main messages are exposed.

2. Applied multi-methods backcasting framework

As opposed to forecasting, backcasting does not try to extrapolate current trends to come up with possible scenarios of the future but envisions a normative future in order to identify what can be done today in order to move trends and tendencies towards a more desirable outcome (Robinson, 2003; Vergragt and Quist, 2011; Robinson et al., 2011; Svenfelt et al., 2019; Vähäkari et al., 2020). The future date of the vision must lie far enough in the future in order to get rid of the path dependencies and lock-in effects of the present to enable participants to leave them behind in their envisioning but close enough for the participants to feel that it matters to them or their children (Köves, 2014). The year 2035 was chosen as a time span for the vision considered that in the life of a company 17 years already feels implausibly far, while in the life of their employees this is still a tangible distance.

It is worth mentioning that in this project we attempted to create a synergy between consultancy and research activities. In line with this, our research strategy was consultancy-based action research in which we strived to maintain both relevance for the clients and methodological rigour. Although, initially we were invited as methodological consultants to the project, we did not cease to be researchers having an eye on the wider, scientific implications of the process and the results. So, our interest at the beginning was inherently practical, that is, we wanted to experiment methodologically with the adaptation of the backcasting framework (which in our experience is ideal for a group of 10–15 people) to a middle-sized company. However, when the first results came in, we turned our attention to broader questions concerning the interrelationships of data and the methodological framework applied.

This is in line with Eden & Huxham's argument that the discussion of results in action research projects need to deliberately focus on the interrelations between the specific experience of the given intervention and the design of the tools utilised (Eden & Huxham, 1996: 79). The investigation of this dynamic relationship between tools, experience and results can also instigate theory development in consultancy-oriented action research projects. Action research may not be the best available choice for rigorous theory testing due to contingencies and idiosyncrasies, or to put it more simply, due to the fact that each consultancy project is different. Nevertheless, it can be considered suitable for theory generation (Eden & Huxham, 1996: 80), especially in relation to the issue of how the methodological design affects participant experience, which in turn, affects the results of the project. Focusing on the 'inner drives' of our methodological framework, namely, backcasting, we also intend to contribute to this type of theory generation aim.

Another important aspect connected to action research strategy was participation. At the most general level this meant that we designed the backcasting framework with the intention to ensure the widest possible engagement of the company staff. Apart from this general participatory orientation, participation was also key element in this project in the sense that several members of the organisation actively contributed to the process as facilitators having a direct stake in its success. Moreover, apart from the researchers, the

inner Project Team also involved two chief executives from the company, namely the HR manager and the manager for strategy development. With them, we made decisions about process design and planning in a collaborative manner. So, boundaries between traditional roles such as client, participant and researcher have been blurred and renegotiated in the inner Project Team. This helped to create relevance for the company, while also maintain the scientific rigour due to the presence of university-based consultants (Huffman & Benson, 2021).

It is not just the motivation of the researchers that contributes to the understanding of this case. It is important to highlight that the aim of the project was significantly different on the part of the involved parties. The CEO primarily wanted to ease the transitional concerns of the merger on the part of employees by enabling a process where all staff members coming from previously distinct firms create common grounds. From this perspective, it was meant to be a team-building exercise that also creates narratives around the global corporation's logo "Let's make the future". In line with scientific suggestions of backcasting as a good strategic management tool in a VUCA world (Thorén & Vendel, 2019), the strategic manager wanted to realise the potential of backcasting itself on long-term strategy building. At the same time, - beyond the team building perspective - the HR manager focused on the in-house, organic learning capacity the project implied and saw the opportunity of key staff members to try themselves in new roles such as facilitators. For inner Project Team members involved in the in-depth preparation; analysis and thinking the vision further (details will follow), this project was an opportunity to stand out. For other staff members it first seemed just a compulsory exercise to take part in but when they realised that during the envisioning day their perspective was to hypothetically work in the future, they used the opportunity to indirectly communicate their desires and expectations towards the firm.

The challenge of this backcasting project in terms of methodological design was that the management wanted to involve all 138 staff members employed in January 2018 while obviously time constraints on allocating all their efforts to this task remained highly relevant. The solution to this was to set up a team of 15 people who worked closely on the project (we call them the Project Team) and organise an "Envisioning Day" where the whole company was present. The researchers worked closely with the Project Team and facilitated their work, providing the methodological framework but making sure that the rules of participatory research are obeyed, and any thematic framing is being done by the participants. (They may have succeeded with that as it was only at a meeting 18 month after the closing of the project when members of the Project Team realised that one of the researchers is an ecological economist who has thoughts of her own on the issue they discussed all along.) The Project Team members were not only the ones discussing and drafting results but also served as facilitators on Envisioning Day for others. Therefore, in the case of the envisioning we were working with a full sample.

As mentioned, the management decided to select 15 young professionals whom they deemed the most outspoken, capable of facilitating the discussions of other colleagues and worked in different segments of the company's activities. Although they participated in the discussions, they made a conscious effort in order not to influence the openness of the dialogues. (The same holds true for all other members of the management during Envisioning Day. They were explicitly asked to act as themselves rather than the manager of a given unit.)

A backcasting research normally consists of four main stages: 1) framing the topic; 2) building a normative future scenario; 3) identifying intervention steps (backcasting them from the future to the present); and 4) finding synergies and controversies between

Table 1

The backcasting process and its outputs.

Backcasting task	Internal methodology	Facilitator	Participants	Outputs
Framing	Imagination games and workshop techniques	Researchers	Project Team	10 topics and kick-off questions for Envisioning Day
Preparation for facilitation	Facilitator training methods	Researchers	Project Team	Facilitation Guidelines
Envisioning Day	World Café (Brown & Issacs, 2005)	Project Team members	All 138 members of staff	10 mindmaps 10 on-the-fly drawings 10 debriefing videos Audio recordings 1 video on the "News from the future" 10 "pre-vision" texts (each around half a page long)
Finalisation of the complete vision	Encoding pre-vision texts and rearranging thematically	Researchers	Project Team	6-page long vision (3264 words)
Identification of backcasting focuses	Participatory systems mapping (Király, Köves, Pataki, & Kiss, 2016)	Researchers	Project Team	Systems map on the vision with 33 variables – 10 of them (the most central variables) chosen as focuses for backcasting (finally 3*2 related ones merged – giving us 7 focuses)
Identification of intervention steps (backcasting)	Modified futures wheel (Glenn, 2009)	Researchers	Project Team	7 charts on the backcasting steps (around 15–25 steps each)
Synergies and controversies	Workshop techniques	Researchers	Project Team	8 groups of interventions were identified that can each be considered a project within the company – members of the Project Team volunteer which one they were willing to advocate
Evaluation of the process	Six thinking hats (De Bono, 2018)	Researchers	Project Team	6 mind maps around the 6 hats

the interventions. [Table 1](#) shows how this backcasting process was organised.

The project ran between December 2017 to March 2018. A project report was drawn up by the Strategic manager by May 2018. Most of the projects identified during the backcasting research are still being implemented. The company management decided that based on the commitment of the staff, they need to build on the backcasting and share the vision with clients and other actors in the industry. They commissioned a sci-fi writer to use their vision to write a novel ([Szélesi, 2018](#)). They published the book together with the full version of the vision just before Christmas 2018 and sent it as presents to their business partners.

3. Elements of the envisioned future of marketing communications

3.1. Data analysis of the project outputs

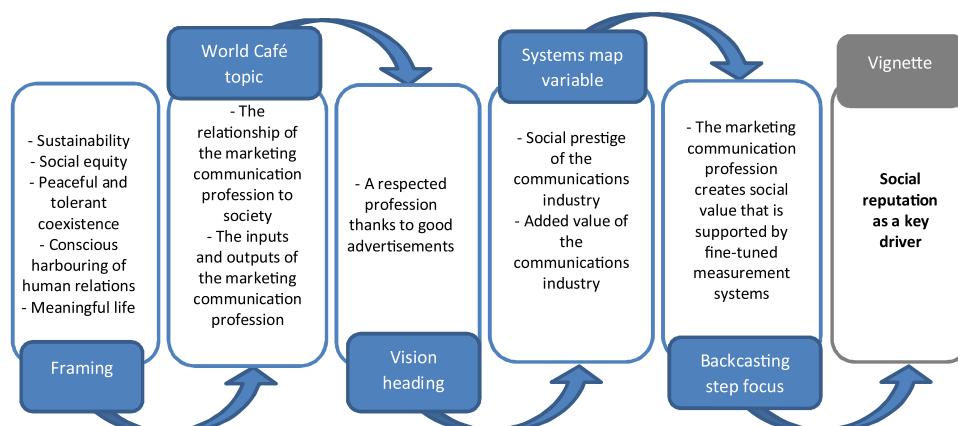
As [Eden and Huxham \(1996\)](#) emphasise consultancy-oriented projects tend to generate rich, contextual, and multifaceted pieces of data. To complicate matters further, in a multi-phase and multi-method project these data can come from different data gathering tools from different points in time. Triangulation in action research, therefore, has a slightly different meaning than in other research contexts. Since data gathering can be cyclical not only data from different methods can be compared and connected, but changes in interpretation, meaning and sense-making processes can also be analysed ([Eden & Huxham, 1996: 83](#)). In line with this, [Fig. 1](#) shows how we attempted to connect data from different phases in order to follow the path of the different themes through the collective thinking and deliberation process, as well as to document what elements were lost in the translation between methods and phases.

[Fig. 1](#) is one example how a topic evolved during the backcasting process. This figure also shows how the vignettes were distilled from different discussion streams.

As an illustration, [Fig. 1](#) demonstrates the process through the following example. During the framing process, the Project Team members described the world they want to live in 2035. Buzzwords like sustainability or social equity were used when planning the topics for the ten world café tables. However, the table topics were a lot more technical (like the relationship of the marketing communication profession to society) and hence the value-laden framings of the Project Team were not carried forward to influence world café discussions. On Envisioning Day all staff members discussed these topics and introduced their own values into the dialogues. As Project Team members acted as facilitators, they refrained from expressing their own framings discussed previously. The thoughts articulated around the tables were distilled into short paragraphs and rearranged into the vision with headings. In the example ‘A respected profession thanks to good advertisements’ contained all the normative thoughts gathered around the tables for the industry’s future in 2035 regarding the social respect for their profession.

Based on the key notions of the vision, a systems map was drawn by the Project Team that showed how these highly different issues interrelate. Two illustrative variables relevant to this stream are social prestige and added value. The systems map was then analysed and the central variables with the most relationships were turned into focuses that served as the aim of the designed backcasting intervention steps. The example shows how this was more specific than previous steps as it already included the need of the industry to create social value and to do this through fine-tuned measurement systems. (These measurement systems covered not just their success in creating value but also other perspectives such as the well-being of individual consumers.) These outputs provide the raw data of the backcasting project. Such identified streams served as data inputs for research analysis and were labelled as vignettes by the researchers presented in the next section.

Our approach of processing the data can be described by three steps in qualitative data analysis, that is, (1) the condensation, (2) the categorisation, and (3) the structuring of meanings phase ([Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, 491](#)). As a first step we attempted to summarise (condense) our findings. In a practical sense that meant that we identified the most important streams running through the process based on observational data, project outputs (vision text; backcasting steps; systems map; notes and photos from workshops) and our reflective notes. The next step of analysis was the categorisation of meanings in which we scanned through primary and



[Fig. 1](#). The evolution of topics during the backcasting process – an example stream.

secondary project documents again and grouped together relevant data elements in their respective streams. As for the structuring phase of data analysis, we focused on the salient features of these streams. With this analytical intention in mind, we utilised the so-called vignette technique (Langer, 2016; Reay, Zafar, Monteiro, & Glaser, 2019) for representing qualitative data based on all the content generated, as well as on the reflexive accounts of the authors.

Vignette technique for representing qualitative data is a middle ground between the objective style of describing facts and the presentation of research results by subjective and personalised accounts (Langer, 2016). Vignettes are often used to render the complexity and multi-layered characteristics of qualitative data into readable and credible segments while maintaining the richness and depth of the findings (Reay et al., 2019). While the vignettes aim to capture the essence of the whole thinking, the quotes used in this section come from the vision.

3.2. Vignettes

3.2.1. Social reputation as a key driver

The discourses around the future of marketing communications revolved around finding a relevant mission of the industry to society. This was generated by the desire to work in an industry that the members of that community can be proud of and the notion of accountability towards future generations (i.e., their children not being ashamed of either their parents' jobs or their role in the climate crisis). Therefore, the social prestige of the marketing communications industry was a highly visible driver behind the search for change and also became a central focus in the systems map itself.

3.2.2. The corporation as a social construction

The motivation to redress the social value of their industry framed the dialogues in an environment where sustainability and caring for the well-being of all members of society is commonplace. Already the second sentence in the vision states that such notions as growth, consumption and material products are no longer seen as ultimate goals. In such a setting, economic actors are considered social constructs who have a role to serve social purposes.

3.2.3. Well-being maximalisation as the new profit maximalisation

In line with the previous vignette, economic actors no longer seek only profits even if money is still an indicator. However, it is an indicator of the produced social value rather than mere shareholder value. The overarching goal of seeking well-being rather than material wealth is the leading concept throughout the backcasting process. Well-being maximalisation is the new profit maximalisation. Even though at first it may seem just as anthropocentric, all along the participants handled the awareness (and constant measurement via technological advances) of individual and collective human environmental impact and the respect for the limiting factors of ecological boundaries as default.

However, this topic became the most divisive in the discussions and not due to the controversies and trade-offs between human-happiness and ecological boundaries but because of the dilemmas on just how happy exactly humans want to be. Placing a lot of emphasis on the well-being perspective (this time not through material needs solely but through fair work, meaningful life, deep social connections) induced many debates on just how realistic that was or whether it is possible to take human sufferings and the shortcomings of human nature out of the picture altogether. It also raised the question whether this would take the edge away from competition deemed necessary for progress. (This dilemma then provided the main tension in the sci-fi novel based on the vision.) Nonetheless, as one of the subtitles of the vision says "*the race is on for higher rates of well-being*" where a company's social utility, i.e., its value contribution to overall well-being is the main indicator of achievement.

3.2.4. The upgrading of the homo oeconomicus

In 2035 humans are no longer just the rational, utility-maximising, self-interested homo oeconomicus. They are considered conscious decision-makers who are capable of prioritising environmental sustainability and the "common good" above their own wealth. "*Getting rich easily, unfairness and excessive financial wealth are no longer status symbols, let alone ideals.*" Consumption is restricted to serving well-being that is being fulfilled also by other means to material consumption. Shopping just for the fun of it without careful consideration of its impact is a thing of the past. Being useful to society and the ecosystem gives humans "*tremendous amounts of energy*". (It is interesting to note how this suggests that they are now tired of being just a hindrance to both.) Competition (deemed inherent to human progress) still exists but it is "*based on real values, social utility and well-being*".

3.2.5. Marketing communications as the value-broker

Such conscious individuals carefully pick their sustainable consumption based on values. They buy from producers that share their values and it is marketing communication that is a matchmaker for consumer and product based on individual and social well-being and the matching values. To be able to do that for those who knowingly and voluntarily opt into their services (i.e., share their personal data and preferences with them) they also act as "quality assurances" for the products they advertise. Hence, the logic turns around: their clients are no longer the producers or service providers who want to generate demand for their products or services but the individuals who want to maximise their well-being taking into account values that are important to them without the hassle of background checking each decision. Hence, instead of selling anything and everything to as many as possible, the agencies discretely serve the individuals' well-being by providing personalised suggestions that a) the consumers themselves seek; b) matches their value-preferences; c) are checked for being socially and ecologically responsible all along the value chain; and d) serve their well-being. "*Agencies are not the voices of brand owners but instead act as filters and consultants to consumers.*"

3.2.6. In the service of individual well-being

In 2035 technology enables individuals to measure their well-being through their well-being index. The system accounts for the fact that “*different things make different people happy*” according to their personality, circumstances, relationships, physical and mental needs. If someone decides to share some aspects of these traits, they can receive personal assistance in what may have the highest impact on their well-being with the lowest impact on the environment. This system is created in such a way that it then monitors and reports back on the rate of satisfaction iterating towards a routine whereby those products that have high impact on the environment, or low impact on personal well-being or an unacceptable ratio of the two are automatically driven out of the system by not appearing in the recommendations.

3.2.7. Giving back the autonomy and control to the individuals regarding data and ads

Many of the discourses revolved around being able to provide full transparency and data protection to individuals. It is the individuals who own the data but in 2035 it is absolutely clear to them what technology allows to be collected on them; how easy it is to opt out of such data collection; what advantages there might be when opting-in. Data handling is decentralised, the regulators are open source. Despite the heavy technological advances envisioned, the vision makes it explicit that “*In spite of these developments, we make sure to keep human thought in the foreground* (when suggesting recommendations to consumers). *Keeping in mind the importance of people, and never giving full control to algorithms have been the key to our progress.*” It is also remarkable how much emphasis there was on reducing ad noise and enabling people to live ad-free if they wish to do so while providing a real service that makes opting in worthwhile.

3.2.8. Coopetition

Even if competition is still an accepted way of driving innovation and improvements in the envisioned future, it is transparent and fair, and results in higher social values. The market ideology is not transcended in the vision, it is just the values that replace money as the driver. At the same time the vision talks of “*organic collaborations*” that share technology, knowledge and base themselves on mutual trust. When talking of marketing communication agencies, there are companies of many different sizes making up networks that often cooperate. Even “*freelance-type cloud marketing agencies bid together on favourable tasks*”. An open-source rating system enables partners and consumers to see what quality an agency represents.

3.2.9. Working in the industry

In 2035 most work is being done by technology. Nonetheless, “*competitive edge itself depends on human factors*”. Even though many tasks are automated, the time saved through this enables the human workforce to strive for innovation and the further improvement of the system in terms of social benefits. Technology enables people to do meaningful work, to obtain knowledge and to access work from different places. The choice is no longer between a steady employer and freelancing as working for the company full-time provides the flexibility and the work-life balance, while freelancing can also provide the much-needed security. However, working is about achieving socially useful results in a diverse team, considering oneself as part of a convivial community who share common values, and create value together. Tasks are distributed according to skills and preferences, making the most of individual talents while contributing to well-being through meaningful work. People still meet up in the physical or virtual world each day to organise and discuss their work but otherwise working conditions are flexible and make sure they only provide a “*comfortable workload without overburdening workers*”. As phrased in a subtitle of the vision “*employee well-being is in the interest of the company*”.

3.2.10. Techno-optimism

The vision reflects a highly techno-optimistic scenario where technology is developed to support human goals. However, the adversities and inherent controversies of technological development in terms of sustainability and equity were not reflected on at all.

4. Comparing the results to the academic discourses

Those working in the marketing communication industry seem to be fully aware of the tendency to blame marketing for consumerism ([Heath & Chatzidakis, 2012](#)). In the age of climate crises, scapegoating is a phenomenon that enables consumers to point to the inaction of companies, companies to point to the inaction of nation states, nation states to global organisations and everyone back to individuals who fail as consumers to force economic actors to respect ecological boundaries and social justice. They also fail as citizens to demand decision-makers to lift the obstacles of lock-in effects and path-dependencies. However, putting the pressure on people to become decent ecological citizens ([Dobson, 2003](#)) and transferring the moral imperative merely on individuals to lead sustainable lifestyles overlooks the momentum of the global economic system and the dire need for fundamental change and collective action ([Karlsson, 2012](#)). Hence, the slogan of the Climate Movement: System change, not climate change ([Empson, 2019](#)).

While there is a definite need to move away from consumer scapegoatism ([Akenji, 2014](#)) and radically transform mainstream economic thinking and systems ([Sekulova, Kallis, Rodríguez-Labajos, & Schneider, 2013](#)), it is essential to design fast and drastic interventions in the present as well. In mainstream neoclassical logic, markets will only respond to environmental challenges if either demand shifts through the rise of the sustainable consumer or through being forced to change through legislative pressures. However, this latter proves again difficult unless the electorate (through the rise of the ecological citizen who is at the same time likely to be the sustainable consumer) puts enough emphasis on such issues to influence politicians’ chances to stay in power ([Király, Köves, & Baláz, 2017](#)). Therefore, the issues on the appearance of the sustainable consumer can hardly be circumvented.

The sustainable consumer may fall into three different categories: responsible consumption (where social, environmental and

ethical concerns are built into consumption choices), anti-consumption (where consumption is averted, abandoned or avoided whenever possible), and mindful consumption (where consumers have a sense of care toward the self, community and nature) (Lim, 2017). The discourse throughout the process covered all three of such consumers all along by providing support in expressing concerns; providing opt-out choices for the anti-consumers; and even though mindfulness was never mentioned during the process, a year later the company introduced the “Mindfulness Week” as part of their concrete efforts to induce changes.

Throughout the process it was always emphasised how necessary it is to provide an environment where the shift from materialistic satisfaction of needs can be supported towards finding meaningful ways of improving well-being. This echoes Hamilton's (2010, p. 575) findings:

“Instead of confronting consumers with the facts of environmental decline and thereby hoping, against the evidence, that rationality will prevail over the demands of market-based self-creation, a more powerful approach is to ask them to reflect on whether the aspirational lifestyle actually makes them happy. The evidence indicates that many people are open to a conversation about happiness and the role of materialism. Large majorities believe that a radical change in values is needed; nine in ten Americans believe their society is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on shopping.” (Hamilton, 2010)

The dialogues were in line with the imperative of a cultural transformation in achieving sustainability, that is to find “*alternative sets of aspirations and reinforce this through cultural institutions and drivers*” (Assadourian, 2010, p. 186) that revolve around ecological restoration and social equity. While references on ecological boundaries were often made during the backcasting process, social equity was mentioned in the framing process but not explicitly reflected upon in the progression of the method.

Values and value-changes were in the focus of attention in almost all phases of the backcasting process and they mostly reflected post-materialistic values (Welzel & Inglehart, 2010) such as autonomy, control, self-determination, ecological sustainability, social equity, social justice. In line with Welzel and Inglehart (2010) there was a strong belief that humans are capable to adapting their strategies in life in order to improve their well-being and they achieve that through inherent value shifts. They are fully adept to find opportunities that enable them to thrive and those who believe they have the capability to act (agency) and the possibility to change the courses of action around them (control) can lead social transformations.

According to the backcasting vision, the role of marketing from giving meaning to life through consumption in the postmodern consumer society (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993) shifts toward supporting the individual in leading a meaningful life through value-driven consumption choices. At first the difference seems minor. Meaningful life is in the centre of attention in both cases, but as Frankl (1959) states finding logos in our lives is a precondition to human well-being. However, in the current case marketing tries to serve this logos on a platter while being paid by corporations driven by the mere motivation of profit-maximisation, while in the vision it is the individuals who find their own logos and determine their own values and decide whether to pay for marketing to reduce the time and effort necessary to find products and services that reflect such values and assure them that those had been respected by the producer or provider throughout the value chain. It is noticeable how this new perspective also shifts power from the corporations to individuals. It also spins the power relations of marketing communication agencies from being a mere contractor doing what is demanded by the corporations to be a “quality auditor” that enforces them to make their value-choices explicit and respect them along the whole value chain. In such a way, this vision not only addresses the consumption side but also the production side of the economic processes.

From the first appearance of the Limits to Growth (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972), there has been extensive literature on how to reform marketing and how to call for more responsible marketing (Pantelica, Sakalb, & Zehetnerc, 2016). The main concern with marketing is driving consumerism and unsustainable consumer practices via creating unrealistic expectations of fulfilment, inducing needs and wants not existent before (Pantelica et al., 2016). The findings of this research resonate with some of the directions of Marketing 3.0, so-called Value-based marketing (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010) that progresses Product-centric marketing (1.0) and Consumer-oriented marketing (2.0). Value-based marketing comes around with the advancement of technology where consumers themselves create narratives and values within a globalised network that result in the co-creation of products and services.

However, while Marketing 3.0 remains within the realms of economic self-interest (Varey & McKie, 2010), the vision creates the presumption that it is somehow possible to transcend this mainstream pillar of economic thought. The Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) manages to bring in ways to cut chords with the materialistic mindset by moving away from goods- and manufacturing based models toward value-in-use models. The S-D logic also emphasises the existence of service ecosystems (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) – a wide network of actors - where beyond the classical set-up of firms and consumers, wider institutional arrangements such as social norms, rules, and beliefs also influence value creations, “*transcending view of markets and marketing and more broadly human exchange systems*” (p. 20). The vision also attempts to move towards value-in-use models by proposing technology to provide a direct feedback loop between the service provided to enhance individual well-being, the real fulfilment gained through that use and the values created or - in the case of negative impacts – lost in the process.

The deliberations on the future of marketing very much reflected the dominant discourses of macromarketing. Macromarketing is an interdisciplinary field of study within marketing research that takes into account the interlinkages of marketing and society covering aspects like distributional justice, peaceful coexistence, quality of life and sustainability (Layton & Grossbart, 2006). In the Developmental School of macromarketing researchers argue that marketing is a tool for advancing human well-being and can be used for advancing sustainability, while in the Critical School scholars draw our attention to the detrimental effects of marketing to ecology and society (Mittelstaedt, Shultz, Kilbourne, & Peterson, 2014). The vision resonates with both schools. It aligns itself to the Developmental School inasmuch as believing that marketing can add to human well-being, instigate institutional changes, and influence socially responsible behaviour. It also reverberates the criticisms made by the Critical School that the unquestioned advancement of consumption leads to the violation of ecological limits. However, the participants never questioned the potential of technological fixes

the way the Critical School does ([Mittelstaedt et al., 2014](#)).

When researching the perceptions of Austrian, Serbian and Swedish marketing students on the potential role of marketing as change agents, it was found that there was consensus among future marketers on the capacity of marketing to induce change both on the consumption and the production side ([Heath & Chatzidakis, 2012](#)). Most participants (and certainly all in the Project Team) shared this sentiment.

5. Discussion: the inner drives of backcasting

5.1. The inner drive of utopian thinking

As the title of our paper demonstrates, the most important message of this paper is that there is an inherent relationship between our methodological framework, namely, backcasting and the participants' viewpoints on their own profession. The backcasting framework is a very powerful tool opening up space for reflection and imagination and, in turn, allowing alternative futures to emerge. Before this project, we had thought that in marketing industry people strongly adhere to the norms and values of the consumer society since their job is to persuade people to consume and spend more. Therefore, it was a reasonable presupposition that the future vision they create would also conform to this worldview.

Nevertheless, it seems that the backcasting also has its own 'inner drives', in other words, it drives people to confront their everyday lived present reality with the contours of a future in which they would like to live and work. Although we cannot state this as a fact, we are most certain that these results would not have surfaced if we had used any other 'customary' methodological tool such as survey, interviews or focus groups. However, processes juxtaposing current conditions and future possibilities instigate a reflective assessment of the marketing industry and make it more responsible and sustainable. We would like to argue that backcasting, by providing space for normative envisioning, invokes individual and collective moral reasoning leading to socially engaged, responsible and compassionate thinking. While the compatibility of backcasting to sustainability issues is well documented in the literature ([Vergragt and Quist, 2011](#); [Robinson et al., 2011](#); [Svenfelt et al., 2019](#); [Vähäkari et al., 2020](#)), yet it is less obvious that the application of this logic and framework leads to a more reflective, responsible and sustainable future vision. This can even happen in social and organisational contexts, such as the marketing industry being the very heart of the consumption-based capitalist economy, in which we would least expect this to happen.

One of the reasons behind this inner drive of the backcasting framework is because of its connection to utopian thinking. Being utopian means that we have a clear direction in our common life and we also know how to take steps, however small, to move towards a normative ideal elaborated beforehand. It can be even said, that being utopian is an essential part of being human, since without an imagined future reality, however pre-reflective this may be, we would not be able to decide between alternatives and act in the present ([Quarta, 1996](#)). In line with this, Wright argues that we need to develop real utopias ([Wright, 2013](#)) which can serve as alternatives for the present operation of our societies and social practices. Real utopias point to those social experiments which aim to transcend the contradictions of current reality while taking into account their own constraints and possible unintended consequences ([Wright, 2013](#)).

As it was mentioned above, one of the most important results of this project was that it showed how employees of the marketing company were discontent about their work in terms of its social influence. While this tension in relation to their role in society had not emerged before in the everyday operation of the organisation, the backcasting framework strengthened their voice and allowed their values and priorities to enter the scene. This also points to the fact that individual voices are more often than not too weak or too dispersed to have any real impact on the organisation. In contrast to this, a common elaboration of a normative future vision allows the emergence of the issues which employees feel relevant, their most important values and their understanding of the common good. In line with this, these issues were not focusing on individual remedies and benefits but touched upon basic questions of what kind of world they want to live in. This led to a collective thinking and deliberation process about how they can transform their activities, their company, as well as their profession in general in such a way so that they can catalyse the transformative powers towards the world they envisioned.

So, the participatory nature of this project provided the necessary intellectual space for employees to discuss issues relevant to them and find their own voice. They utilised this opportunity to raise their concerns about the nature of their work, and about the inner tensions they feel in relation to the social impact they have. This also points to the fact that while many of them work day to day in order to instigate (often unnecessary) consumption, they do not agree with the logic of the society and economy to which they contribute to.

5.2. The inner drive of psychological safety

So far, we have argued that the backcasting framework is a powerful tool both in opening up a space for normative and moral reasoning. We would also like to acknowledge that backcasting depends on certain conditions. Of course, there are many prerequisites, but here we would like to focus on two which were particularly relevant in the context of this project. These are the creation and maintenance of an open communicative space inside the organisation, and psychological safety provided by senior staff as well as the methodological framework itself.

Firstly, as Barry points it out, arenas for public deliberations are not brought forth by and exist in themselves but need to be carefully constructed and continuously maintained ([Barry, 2001](#): 179). In this project, the leaders of the company not only allowed a free and unfettered communication space to be constructed inside the very walls of the organisation but also maintained this arena of

ideas even after discontents, tensions and contradictions surfaced. Not shutting down or shorten the project when the “these beast” (i.e., these discontents) appeared and started to freely roam the corridors of the office took considerable courage and insight from the management.

Secondly, as it was mentioned above, two senior managers (one responsible for HR and one for strategy development) was directly involved in the Project Team. Their continuous presence and involvement clearly signalled to employees that this project is an important and valuable collective exercise. Furthermore, both of them were open and supportive throughout the project validating the viewpoints, opinions and interpretations of employees, even if they expressed inner tensions between their values and their job or came up with “wild” ideas about the future. Their presence and personality contributed to the atmosphere of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018) throughout the process which, in turn, allowed for experimentation and self-expression on behalf of the employees.

However, this psychological safety may come from the methodological framework of backcasting itself. As the discussion takes place in a hypothetical future, expressing present discontent is indirect and does not target specific persons or organisational practices. It is up to later considerations how far the management, the company, the industry or society is from these ideal scenarios and this gives considerable psychological safety in expressing opinions. Therefore, aspirations and desires can appear in a format where nobody feels threatened or inadequate. It is also the normative nature of backcasting that enables conflicting views or values to be articulated not in a negative framework criticising current conditions but in a positive, affirmative light to aim for higher achievements. Therefore, deliberations are around whose concept bring greater benefits rather than who ruins the chances of current advances. This may also add to the psychological safety of participants to self-express even critical thoughts.

5.3. The inner drive of intellectual independence: Theory in practice – theory in science

In our opinion, the results of this project show that we really need to incorporate the explicit and tacit knowledge, opinions, or even the wisdom of everyday employees if we look for real utopias with the potential to transform the operation of present social and economic systems. It may be true that compared to employees, social theorists and empirical researchers have a higher level of intellectual independence. This partial distance from the necessity of being ‘directly useful’ in a practical sense allows them to hammer out their ideas about social alternatives without the need to constantly take into consideration current social and economic influences.

Backcasting, however, facilitates the explicit expression of value choices as participants decide on what should be done rather than what can be done. It also demands moral and ethical standpoints to surface not only with regard to their own habits and actions but also in terms of social, ecological and intergenerational justice. Their feelings manifested the widespread consensus that marketing communications is an industry that sustains a level of consumerism that is becoming seriously irreconcilable with ecological boundaries and social equity. This shows that people working at the very heart of the capitalist consumer society do have the capacity, knowledge, and willingness to do think like social theorists if we give them the opportunity to do so.

This case shows that such participatory projects can provide ample deliberative space for this to happen. The third inner drive of backcasting is that it enables participants to express their thoughts in a structured, intellectually independent manner without the pressure to rely on external academic knowledge. It also distances them from everyday hurdles, so they can think as lay theorists about their jobs and industry. The added value of this is that it induces inner transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) within the organisation instead of bringing in knowledge imposed on them. Instead of focusing on the implementation of scientific theories, new theories of practice emerge through the key insights of this learning process. These have the advantage of being transferred back into their everyday lives and practices. While these insights at many points reflect the scientific discourse on the current and potential social roles of marketing, in certain aspects they also go beyond and take a more radical stance than the current academic thinking. Therefore, such projects can also add to theory in science through idea generation and opening up new practice-based avenues for further research.

6. Conclusions

The action-research consultancy project discussed in this paper is unique in the sense that it led to concepts that may add to the scientific dialogue of redesigning the future of marketing communications into a more sustainable modus operandi without it ever intending to do that. It has uncovered that given ample space, time and methodological support, marketing professionals can turn their feeling of alienation from their industry - where they confront the harmful impact their activities have on society and the environment while wishing to do their job well – into a creative tension that elaborates visions and steps that may lead to a more environmentally and socially conscious future. This suggests that it might be worthwhile to conduct in the future more action-research projects that aim at harvesting such creative tensions in an industry in order to co-design socio-ecological transitional paths.

As opposed to their everyday reality, their concepts revolved around economic actors who consider themselves social constructs and have significant responsibility both towards society and the ecological environment. This also meant transcending the sole aim of profit maximisation and replacing it with value creation. For the marketing industry this translated into a service they could provide that no longer just benefits other for-profit corporations but achieves higher human well-being by providing adequate, filtered, quality-controlled and tailor-made information to individual members of society. This matchmaking function places marketing in a position where they have impact not just on consumers as currently perceived but also on producers driving them towards declared value choices. Without assuming their academic background knowledge, their deliberations significantly resembled the academic dialogues of macromarketing, trying to find the connections between marketing and society. Their overall aim was not just to reform their current industry but to radically transform it and some credit for this is due to the methodological framework of backcasting. A

potential future research could investigate how these valuable marketing-oriented ideas could develop in a project that specifically frames dialogues around sustainability.

However, these unexpected outcomes may not just come from nowhere. This paper has established assumptions that it might have been the inner drives of a backcasting framework that led to a more value-laden, ethicality-driven direction than previously expected. While the suitability of backcasting to tackle sustainability issues have long been acknowledged, we have pointed out that the connection may also work the other way round. Thinking about the normative future and working backwards from that ideal future vision made real value choices more explicit and unearthed the conflicting values participants face in their day-to-day environment in a psychologically safe space. Moreover, the knowledge they create based on their practical knowledge adds value to the academic community. In terms of future research, it would be valuable to validate that such inner drives exist in other similar projects as well. For futures studies, this experience indicates that it is worthwhile establishing frameworks where the methodological design itself may result in impacts on the participants that shape deliberations and judgements toward more responsible outcomes.

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