Editorial: Reshaping the World through Customer and Actor Engagement

Dr Matthew Alexander[1], Dr Jaylan Azer[2], Prof. Jodie Conduit[3]

1 – University of Strathclyde, 2 – University of Glasgow, 3 – Adelaide University

There is growing consensus that social science researchers have a key role in finding ways for societal actors to make decisions that are more responsive to environmental challenges (Webster and Lusch, 2013). In an era of mounting global challenges—from pandemics and geopolitical conflicts to climate change, economic instability, and deepening social inequalities—finding solutions that foster resilience, sustainability, and social well-being has never been more critical. Addressing these pressing issues requires not only institutional interventions but also active participation of individuals, businesses, and communities. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) provide a structured framework for addressing these challenges in a coordinated manner, emphasizing the need for inclusive economic growth (SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth), social equity (SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities), and environmental preservation (SDG 13: Climate Action) (UN-SDGs, 2022). However, achieving these ambitious goals will be challenging without widespread societal acceptance of the challenges embedded therein. In this context, engagement, a central concept in marketing and service research (Brodie et al., 2019), offers a powerful lens for understanding how societal actors can be motivated to contribute to solutions that extend beyond commercial interests and drive meaningful societal change (Alexander et al., 2018). By leveraging engagement as a mechanism for collective action, we can explore how individuals and organizations co-create value not only for businesses but also for society at large.

Traditionally, engagement research has focused on how customers interact with firms, co-create value, and enhance organizational performance (e.g., Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2022; Storbacka et al., 2016; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). However, recent research increasingly recognizes engagement as a broader phenomenon extending beyond the customer-firm dyad, influencing entire ecosystems, shaping institutions, and driving societal transformation (e.g., Azer and Alexander, 2022; Brodie et al., 2021; Karpen and Conduit, 2020). Engagement—whether cognitive, emotional, behavioral, social, or even spiritual—can serve as a catalyst for mobilizing individuals and organizations to tackle complex societal issues (Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020; Azer et al., 2021). Yet, while engagement has been studied extensively in business contexts, its potential to drive

change in domains such as healthcare, education, social justice, and environmental sustainability remains in its infancy.

As global crises disrupt fundamental cognitive and emotional processes, they often lead to disengagement, apathy, and a diminished willingness to act (van Grunsven, 2020; Azer et al., 2021). This disengagement can have detrimental effects on well-being (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020; Mele et al., 2022), further exacerbating societal challenges. However, when engagement is directed toward issues of social good—whether through activism, collaborative problem-solving, or pro-environmental behaviors—it can become a powerful force for change. By fostering actor engagement at a systemic level, we can harness collective efforts to reshape markets, institutions, and policies in ways that contribute to a more sustainable and equitable world (Fehrer et al., 2020).

Our Special Section contributes to understanding of how engagement can contribute to the UN SDGs. Our three insightful articles address different facets of engagement's role in reshaping societies by: revealing engagement as a catalyst for addressing global challenges and reinforcing the need for coordinated, multi-actor participation in tackling UN SDGs (Azmat et al., 2024); reinforcing the importance of multi-actor engagement in addressing global challenges, offering a pathway for bridging market-driven and societal objectives in pursuit of the UN SDGs (de Matos et al., 2025); and underscoring the importance of recognizing nature as an active participant in shaping sustainable futures (Muñiz-Martínez, 2025). Alongside the articles, our editorial also offers future research directions to expanding the engagement discourse beyond its traditional boundaries, unlocking new pathways for research that have meaningful global impacts.

First, the article "Does actors' engagement with capacity-building training programs enable delivery of SDG-aligned public services? The case of senior public officials" by Fara Azmat, Ahmed Shahriar Ferdous, Faisal Wali, Mohammad Badrul Muttakin, and Mohammed Ziaul Haque highlights the transformative role of engagement in advancing sustainability through SDG-focused capacity-building programs for senior public officials. Using a longitudinal qualitative approach, the research demonstrates how cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement with specialized training programs enables focal actors to mobilize networks of stakeholders—within and across sectors—to deliver SDG-aligned public services. The findings reveal that such engagement fosters systemic impact at multiple levels: micro (individual transformation of public officials as T-shaped professionals), meso

(organizational adoption of sustainability initiatives), and macro (societal improvements such as youth clubs and schools). Drawing on service mechanics theorization and collective engagement, the study underscores the importance of cross-sector collaboration in resource-constrained environments, where shared knowledge and capacities drive societal change. By linking engagement with the successful implementation of sustainability-driven public services, this research offers valuable insights into how training interventions can empower actors to co-create long-term societal value.

The second article "The dual role of customer-citizen engagement for sustainability" by Manuel Aires de Matos, Lia Patricio, and Jorge Teixeira advances the discourse on engagement by integrating the traditionally distinct literatures of customer and citizen engagement to develop a comprehensive framework which clarifies the dual role of customer-citizen engagement for sustainability. Through a systematic review of 126 articles, the research highlights the dual role of individuals as both customers—engaging with brands and firms—and citizens—engaging with communities and society. By broadening the scope of engagement beyond commercial contexts to societal and planetary levels, the study reveals how engagement processes can contribute to sustainable service ecosystems. This integrated perspective aligns with our focus on leveraging engagement for societal change, demonstrating how businesses, policymakers, and individuals can co-create value that extends beyond economic transactions to environmental and social well-being. The findings also offer managerial insights, emphasizing the need for firms to recognize customers as active citizens whose sustainability values shape their engagement and consumption behaviors. By fostering collaboration between brands and citizen initiatives, organizations can enhance their role in driving sustainable transformation.

The third article "Extending Actor Engagement: Human-Environmental Engagement in Multilevel Socioecological Systems" by Norberto Muñiz-Martínez builds on the concept of engagement as a mechanism for societal change, extending traditional human-centric understandings of actor engagement to encompass human-environmental interactions within socioecological systems. Through a case study of the Colombian Coffee Cultural Landscape, the research introduces the notion of *bioactors*—non-human biological entities that actively contribute to ecological and cultural sustainability. Using a framework of Nature's Contributions to Humans (NCHs), the study identifies three forms of human-environmental engagement—regulating, material and cultural, and mindful engagement—highlighting the

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of these interactions. By demonstrating how human and non-human bioactors co-create value within socioecological systems, the paper challenges the traditional division between the social and natural sciences, advocating for an integrated approach to sustainability. This multilevel perspective reveals how engagement at the micro-level (individual actors) influences macro-level sustainability practices, aligning with the broader goals of the UN SDGs.

Collectively, these discussions underscore the multifaceted nature of engagement, illustrating a spectrum where its potential to drive social impact, inclusivity, and sustainability coexists with challenges related to ethical concerns, unintended consequences, and varying levels of actor participation. By demonstrating the role of engagement in shaping socioecological systems, enabling SDG-aligned public service delivery, and integrating customer and citizen engagement for sustainability we extend the traditional understandings of engagement. The transformative potential of engagement set against its inherent complexities means it remains a tantalising challenge for academics and society at large with the research in this issue helping us better understand how it can be harnessed to address global challenges while recognizing barriers that hinder its effectiveness. As we introduce our discussing future research directions, it is essential to reflect on how we can leverage engagement across multiple levels—individual, organizational, and systemic—to foster collective action, ensuring that its applications align with the UN SDGs and contribute to a more equitable, resilient, and sustainable world.

Future Research Directions

Despite recent advancements, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how engagement can be leveraged to address societal challenges. Prior research has explored engagement as a driver of social and societal innovation (Alexander et al., 2018; Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020), yet there is limited knowledge on how engagement fosters large-scale social transformation. Future research should seek to both examine and test the mechanisms through which actor engagement translates into enduring societal change through, for example, more collective endeavour (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2019). For example, what drives individuals, businesses, institutions, and collectives to engage meaningfully in societal issues, and how can these engagement processes be sustained over time. Understanding the dynamics of engagement will also be crucial for designing initiatives that move beyond short-term involvement toward long-term impact.

Similarly, digital platforms and AI-driven engagement have reshaped the ways individuals and organizations interact (Azer and Alexander, 2024; Wirtz et al., 2023) offering large-scale mobilization for social good (Sigala et al., 2024). However, while digital technologies have enabled unprecedented connectivity, their ability to cultivate deep, lasting engagement in addressing global challenges remains uncertain (Floridi and Cowls, 2019; Huang and Rust, 2024; Kolomaznik et al., 2024). Future research should investigate how AI-driven engagement can be leveraged to foster meaningful, long-term commitment rather than passive or ephemeral participation. For instance, explore design principles and governance mechanisms that can ensure such engagement contributes to sustained social impact rather than performative or short-lived interactions.

An additional gap exists around the development of robust methodologies for measuring and assessing long-term impact, particularly in relation to UN SDGs. While existing studies have established frameworks for measuring customer engagement in commercial contexts, evaluating the broader societal impact of engagement initiatives presents unique challenges. Future research should explore how to capture both the immediate and downstream effects of engagement across multiple levels. This includes developing metrics that can track individual behavioral changes, organizational transformations, and broader societal shifts resulting from engagement initiatives. Longitudinal studies are particularly needed to understand how engagement effects evolve, persist or wane over time, especially given the complex, interconnected nature of sustainability challenges. Additionally, researchers should investigate how to measure and account for unintended consequences and spillover effects of engagement initiatives, as actions targeted at one SDG may have ripple effects—both positive and negative—on others.

Additionally, the ethical complexities of engagement remain an underexplored yet critical area of inquiry. While engagement has been positioned as a means of empowerment, scholars have raised concerns about the potential for exclusionary practices, performative activism, and the commodification of social causes (Monje-Amor et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2022). Future research should explore how engagement initiatives can be designed to be both inclusive and equitable. How organizations and policymakers can prevent engagement-driven efforts from reinforcing existing inequalities or exploiting marginalized communities.

Conclusion

This special section marks a significant evolution in our understanding of engagement's role in addressing global challenges. Our three distinct, yet complementary, perspectives collectively advance engagement theory and practice in several crucial ways. First, they reveal engagement as a more nuanced and powerful mechanism for societal transformation than previously understood. Second, they demonstrate how engagement operates simultaneously across multiple levels—from individual behavior change to organizational transformation to systemic impact—while highlighting the intricate interplay between human and non-human actors in creating sustainable futures. Finally, the special section also underscores a crucial insight: effective engagement for societal change requires careful attention to both process (how engagement is facilitated) and context (where and with whom engagement occurs).

The future of engagement research holds immense potential within marketing, service research, and beyond, extending into fields such as behavioral science, public policy, sustainability, and social innovation. As global challenges become increasingly complex and interconnected, the frameworks and insights presented in this special section provide crucial theoretical foundations and practical guidelines for leveraging engagement in pursuit of the UN SDGs. Our collective insights lay the groundwork for further exploration of engagement's applications, challenges, and ethical considerations in pursuing societal transformation. The papers in this special section represent not just academic contributions but stepping stones toward a more engaged, sustainable, and equitable world. As we look to the future, we hope these discussions catalyse new research that advance both theoretical understanding and practical impact, ultimately contributing to the urgent task of building a more resilient and socially responsible global society.

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