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Paving the way for responsible retailing

1. Foreword by the Editor-in-Chief

In today's increasingly complex and disruptive marketplace, retailers face mounting pressures from rising costs, shifting consumer expectations, and heightened regulatory scrutiny. Given these challenges, one might question whether this is the right time to focus on responsible retailing. However, this perspective often stems from a narrow and misguided view of responsible retailing as merely an added cost rather than a strategic imperative. Responsible retailing is not a short-term financial burden but a multifaceted framework that fosters long-term benefits for both businesses and society. Rather than postponing responsible retailing for more favorable economic conditions, the need for its adoption is more pressing than ever. Understanding how and why responsible retailing works is critical to ensuring its effective implementation in today's retail landscape.

To further this understanding, I have invited the founding scholars of the Center for Responsible Retailing at Maastricht University's School of Business and Economics to offer their insights. As pioneers in the field, they provide a comprehensive perspective on the concept, its impact, and its relevance in both academic research and retail practice. Their contributions in this guest editorial not only clarify misconceptions but also serve as a catalyst for further scholarly exploration, equipping retailers with the knowledge needed to integrate responsible retailing into their business models effectively.

Katrijn Gielens, *Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Retailing*

2. What is responsible retailing?

The retail industry plays a crucial societal role, as the nexus connecting manufacturers and consumers. The reach of the industry is large, with the EU retail industry serving 450 million customers. Similarly large is the impact of the industry on daily lives and our surroundings, with U.S. retailers employing and providing income to more than 15 million people, retail stores shaping the physical area of many cities, retailer assortment decisions determining what consumers buy where, and retail distribution taking substantial shares of road, train, shipping, and air networks. Unsurprisingly, the retail industry ties up a large amount of global natural and human resources, and thus has a say over and influence on how these resources are allocated. With such power also comes the responsibility to bear it well.

In the Oxford dictionary, responsibility is defined as "a duty to deal with or take care of someone or something, so that it is your fault if something goes wrong." As such, it is something that you feel you must do because it is your ethical or legal obligation, for which you can be held accountable. Hence, embedded in this definition is that responsibility comes from "an ethical obligation (or even duty) to act", and that you can be "held accountable" for these actions. In retail, responsibility relates to concepts such as sustainability (Vadakkepatt et al. 2021), corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Kim et al. 2024), and corporate digital responsibility (CDR) (Lobschat et al. 2021). Sustainability in retail encompasses economic, environmental, and social practices oriented towards current and future generations, also referred to as the Triple Bottom Line model, which adapts sustainability to the business environment and consists of three pillars: the social, the environmental, and the economic dimension (Elkington, 1998). CSR integrates social and environmental concerns in business operations and considers stakeholder interactions instead of only considering economic profits. CDR, the result of new technological advances, represents the inclusion of responsibility in digital contexts focusing on digital technologies and related ethical issues for business.

Against this backdrop, retailers have recognized their ethical obligation to society, and under the term '*responsible retailing*' adopt a wide range of actions that seek to do justice to the societal role that retailers have. For food retailer SPAR this consists of a focus on

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healthiness and sustainability of the products they sell, and care for their employees and the communities in which their stores are located. Its competitor REWE extends the playing field of responsibility to the digital space, balancing digitalization activities with privacy protection to minimize customer and societal harm while enhancing customer experience. In sum, current concepts guide retailers in balancing economic profit with social, environmental, and digital responsibility and hence support shaping responsible retail practices.

Yet, while these concepts cover the width and depth of the deliberations that retailers make with regards to their societal role and stakeholders, it does not seem to fully cover the emotional or ethical obligation retailers have. At a recent Responsible Retailing symposium organized by our Center for Responsible Retailing at Maastricht University (CRRUM)[1], one of the retail executives put forth: "We need to care for the impact we make." Translating this to retailing, a true responsible retailer should show an "enterprise-wide commitment to behaving responsibly[2]". This mindset or orientation eschews potential profit implications and starts from the ethical obligation (= responsibility), while existing concepts like sustainability and CSR always – more prominently – refer to economic consequences as well. In our view, responsible retailing should be seen as a *company orientation*, one that permeates all facets of the retail business, and thus exists beyond the strategic – or sometimes even only tactical – decision making in the board room. We thus postulate that responsible retailers commit to *an ethical obligation to act responsibly, embedding this principle into the retailer's culture, operations, and stakeholder relationships.*

In the next sections, we will delineate why firms (should) care for their impact (and increasingly so), discuss some of the major challenges we identified, and highlight some important observations when it comes to responsible retailing and how it can be fostered.

3. Why retailers care about responsible retailing

Clearly, engaging in responsible retailing can serve as a competitive advantage in highly competitive settings like the retail industry (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2011) and lead to increased firm performance (Atz et al. 2021), as many stakeholders value it. First, 93% of *customers* worldwide expect companies to take social and environmental actions (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021), and consumer demand for sustainable and healthy products is increasing. Second, *employees* seek employers that share their values. Over half of Gen Zs (55%) and millennials (54%) say they consider a brand's environmental impact and policies before accepting a job from them (Deloitte, 2023).[3] Third, (*institutional*) *investors* and *shareholders* also increasingly ask for action on this front. Financial regulators are demanding more disclosure and transparency with the trend of sustainable finance, and the requirement to consider ESG (environmental, social, governance) factors in investment decisions. Shareholders use ESG to assess the sustainable development of companies. Finally, retailers also increasingly consider responsibility in their business operations due to the changing market *environment*. Resource depletion and rising costs of raw materials provide economic incentives to ensure the survival and viability of retailers.

Next to the fact that stakeholders increasingly value and ask for responsible retailing, *legislation* to foster responsible retailing is also proliferating. A landmark example is GDPR and equivalent privacy laws, that set rules on responsible use of (customer) data. Other examples include the recent European Corporate Social Reporting Directive (CSRD) that sets guidelines on how companies should report on environmental, social and governance dimensions, the Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA) regulating online platforms and services, and different 'sin' taxes on tobacco, alcohol, sugar, and fat. Encompassing legislation like CSRD steers retailer conduct about responsibility across all dimensions discussed before, while narrower legislation such as the E.U.'s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Digital Service Act (DSA) focus on sub dimensions such as Corporate Digital Responsibility (Lobschat et al. 2021).

That these economic, social, and legislative dimensions should be seriously considered by retailers is also suggested by organizational legitimacy theory (Dowling and Pfeiffer 1975), which states that organizations obtain legitimacy by aligning with the "social values associated with or implied by their activities and the norms of acceptable behavior in the larger social system of which they are a part" (p. 122). Failure to do so results in penalties in one or multiple of the aforementioned areas, and thus poses a threat to the organization's further existence. The most straightforward way to achieve organizational legitimization is by adapting the outputs, goals and/or methods used by the organization (Dowling and Pfeiffer 1975), setting retailers necessarily on a path to responsibility.

4. Challenges on the path to responsibility

Given that responsible retailing is required to retain organizational legitimacy, what explains the differences in the extent of responsible retailing that we observe in the industry? The first challenge that retailers face is *how to balance* doing good with the economic consequences of their decisions. With the risk of backlash when changes are too severe, responsible retailing initiatives are often incremental rather than radical. For example, to stimulate healthier consumption, manufacturers and retailers simply make existing products healthier by reducing salt or sugar levels and positioning these options more prominently on their shelfs. To really stimulate healthier consumption, more drastic actions would be required, such as reordering store assortments to exclude unhealthier products completely, as recently suggested by a Dutch coalition of doctors and health organizations[4]. Also, stakeholders are not always equally convinced of the value of doing good, putting retailers in a difficult position to take a stance. Shareholders, for example, like

[1] https://www.responsibleretailing.nl/.
[2] https://www.retailtouchpoints.com/topics/customer-experience/responsible-retail-how-purpose-becomes-performance.
[3] https://deloitte.wsj.com/sustainable-business/gen-zs-and-millennials-look-to-employers-to-address-climate-concerns-c1cddbe8.
[4] https://www.thequestionmark.org/project/superlist-health-the-netherlands-2024.

sustainable investments, but only if they lead to increases in firm value. Consumers may not always be willing to pay more for a firm's good deeds. Does that mean one should not do it? Retailers may deliberate whether responsible retailing fits their current positioning. Responsible practices may impact corporate reputation and brand image. As discounters differentiate themselves by price are they more cautious about investing in this area than conventional retailers? There is a clear balancing act going on to achieve positive returns on responsible retailing while heavily limiting the risks.

This is linked to a second challenge, namely, *how to evaluate* responsible retailing. Marketers learned the hard way that they need to prove the accountability of their actions (e.g., Verhoef and Leeflang 2009). So, when evaluating stand-alone initiatives, it is not surprising that retailers look at metrics to measure the sustainability and social impact of these initiatives (e.g., via ESG scores). However, we know that measuring impact is often not straightforward; the impact might be delayed, it might be indirect, hard to quantify, or the data to measure the impact may not be available. A pitfall is that "what gets measured gets managed" even if what gets measured is not a perfect indicator, or even a misleading one. Moreover, especially in the context of possible conflicting goals, the question remains which indicator managers should rely on to measure the success (or failure) of initiatives aimed at more responsible retail practices? Should one instead of evaluating specific actions, not focus on the value of a company strategy, business model, or orientation as a whole? Also, for responsible practices, positive attitudes and intentions do not always translate into favorable consumer behavior, as shown by the privacy paradox (i.e., discrepancies between expressed privacy concerns and actual online behavior) as well as the intention-behavior gap (i.e., consumers' intentions to purchase ethically not translating into actual buying behavior). Both serve as a hurdle to evaluate and justify the impact of responsible practices. Kate Heiny, Director Sustainability at fashion retailer Zalando: "Our customers tell us that they care deeply about sustainability, but they really struggle to translate their values into actions when they go into stores or shop online. There is a gap, which we need to close if we are serious about making the industry more sustainable" [5].

Finally, a lot of responsible retailing behavior is the result of legislation and hence *reactive* (e.g., sugar reductions in response to sugar taxes, improved labor circumstances in clothing production after modern slavery laws) whereas according to the Net Positive Manifesto (Polman and Winston 2021) companies should lay a *pro-active* role in solving such large 'shared' challenges. If companies need an incentive to act responsibly – be it profits, financial value, or legislative repercussions – responsible retailing might soon pass. Even if responsible retailing actions start from an intrinsic *motivation* of wanting to do good, but are evaluated using metrics, they become extrinsically rewarded instead. Such extrinsic motivation may have adverse effects, one of them being 'the overjustification effect', i.e., the tendency to become less intrinsically motivated to partake in an activity when offered an external incentive. When an extrinsic motivator is presented, it might become the only reason we are performing an activity. By understanding exactly if and how incentives and its side-effects manifest itself in responsible retailing, one can more efficiently decide how and when to incentivize retailers, e.g., to rely on external rewards or abide to regulations. While legislation provides incentives for change, we can also question whether these are the *right* incentives from a societal point-of-view. Research on GDPR (Dubé et al. 2024) and nutrition regulation (e.g., Keller et al. 2024) shows that legislation can lead to unintended side-effects harming consumers because not all companies are equally affected, consumers change their behavior in unexpected ways or not at all, or companies reallocate their investments away from areas affected by legislation. How to design legislation to avoid these pitfalls requires a multidisciplinary approach, with marketing scholars supporting legal and political science scholars to design effective policies.

5. Responsibility on a global and local scale

While we observed that many responsible retail actions remain at the tactical level without strategic consideration, it is not to say that retailers are not concerned about the major *global* challenges of this age. Retailer initiatives have focused on reducing climate impact, stimulating environmental protection, enhancing nutritional quality, and addressing economic uncertainty, amongst others. For example, Walmart and Lidl have set and reached ambitious CO2 reduction goals throughout their supply chain; Tesco, Aldi and Woolworths sped up the protein transition by increasing plant-based alternatives in their assortments and reducing prices of plant-based products; and many manufacturers actively reduce fat, salt, and sugar contents in their products. Retail research already investigates the impact of these and other actions on consumer behavior and retailer performance, showing mainly positive impact on firms and consumer outcomes. However, beyond evaluating these singular tactical initiatives, we should also strive to develop more comprehensive frameworks to guide strategic positioning and help future-proof retail organizations. For example, does a 'climate orientation' reminiscent of earlier work on market orientation exist?

A facet of responsible retailing that received fewer attention is the *local* impact of retailers. Our interviews with retailers uncovered great care by retailers for local communities, which comprise of both the customers they serve as well the employees that work for them. Local involvement is for example shown by sponsorship of events and sports clubs and carrying and prominently promoting locally produced products. These activities allow retailers to connect and favorably interact with communities. At the same time, these activities support local economies both financially and socially. Measuring the impact of these activities requires a view beyond direct economic impact and a consideration of social outcomes as well. Implementation of local strategies is also not effortless. It requires retail organizations flexible enough to sense and implement what local strategies are needed, such as the franchise model. Furthermore, local sourcing is more effortful to implement logistically, as it benefits less from economies of scale than centralized sourcing practices. Novel business models and automation might provide solutions that can address challenges such as these.

[5] https://corporate.zalando.com/en/our-impact/sustainability/sustainability-reports/attitude-behavior-gap-report#consumer-attitudes-seven-key-themes.

6. Teaming up for responsible retailing

With stakeholders pushing for responsible retailing, retailers have an obligation to act and be held accountable. But *they cannot do so alone*. Retailers, by definition, purchase goods from a manufacturer or a wholesaler and sell these goods to consumers. Such 'purchased goods' currently make up about 12% of the footprint of an average Dutch person.[6] Most of the environmental impact of products occurs before they are purchased, packaged, delivered to someone's house, and used or consumed. Hence, for a responsible retailer it is crucial to partner with *suppliers* and set specific targets to reduce CO2 emissions and track supplier reduction efforts via tools like e.g., CDP and ImpactBuying. Lidl, for example, recently raised climate targets for suppliers and aims to close the wage gap across its banana supply chain.[7,8]

Retailers should also team up horizontally with *other retailers*. They can start collaborations to transform from a linear business model to a circular business model, promoting refurbished, secondhand, and rental products. For example, Dutch e-retailer Bol bundled forces with a thrift store that is selling products and returns too damaged for Bol to sell, but still deserving of a second life. Another example is several large food manufacturers teaming up to develop a 'healthy choice' label to help consumers make healthier choices (Maesen et al. 2022). Through these collaborations, retailers can also establish industry-wide standards which help promote more responsible practices amongst other retailers.

Beyond the retailer's direct network of stakeholders, retailers need to understand their role and position in the interconnected natural ecosystem in which they operate which also includes governments, and e.g. NGOs. Better understanding and collaborating with these actors in a broader retail ecosystem can help retailers establish more responsible strategies which are efficient from a business model perspective, but also beneficial for consumers and society at large (Bolton 2019). *Governments* play a dual role for responsible retailing, such as that they serve as regulators enforcing ethical standards and as enabler providing incentives for responsible retail practices. In the context of corporate digital responsibility, the German government is actively engaging with retailers (including the Otto Group, a globally operating e-commerce and service group) to establish a suitable regulatory framework for CDR balancing the industry's self-commitment towards more responsible practices and legislation[9]. An example for a retailer collaborating with an *NGO* in the context of responsible retailing is IKEA partnering with the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF). This collaboration has led to considerable environmental and societal impact including the formal protection of nearly 400,000 hectares of forest in Central and Eastern Europe[10] as well as community support projects, such as a project in the Oaxaca region in Mexico where women receive assistance on the commercialization of their small businesses[11]. Through this broader ecosystem perspective and collaborations with governments and NGOs, retailers can leverage knowledge, influence, and resources to address systematic and complex challenges like climate change more efficiently.

7. How to bring attention to responsible retailing initiatives?

Retailers' responsible practices have been part of their overall communication strategy for the last 30 years, predominately in the form CSR reports mainly aimed at investors. However, especially in recent years with increasing consumer interest in retailers acting more responsibly, retailers are trying to not only provide information to interested stakeholders, but actively use their responsible practices as a differentiator in brand messaging. With 70% of consumers agreeing that retailers have a special responsibility for helping make the world a better place, "*do good and talk about it*" has become more imminent to increase the visibility of ethical business practices and consumer trust. French food retailer Carrefour promotes sustainable food production through their 'Act for Food' initiative and uses blockchain technology to provide traceability on food products, allowing customers to scan QR codes and verify product origin[12]. To fight the issue of food waste, U.S. grocery retailer Kroger Co. actively promotes its Zero Waste | Zero Hunger initiative via TV and radio ads. With the food bank network Feeding America, it donates unsold food to reduce hunger in local communities thereby positioning itself as a responsible retailer.[13]

While such actions can improve brand attitudes, this effect is mitigated by the quantity of green messages, such that if a retailer makes too many green claims, brand attitude might decrease (Olsen, Slotegraaf, and Chandukala 2014). Retailers have also received criticism for alleged greenwashing, i.e., "selective disclosure of positive information about a company's environmental or social performance, while withholding negative information on these dimensions" (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011, p. 9). A 2022 Quartz report revealed that the environmental product scorecards fashion retailer H&M provided on its website included false and deceptive information, thereby overstating the sustainability of its assortment.[14] Such greenwashing can have a detrimental impact for firms (e.g.,

[6] De verborgen impact – Babette Porcelijn.
[7] https://www.retaildetail.eu/news/food/lidl-raises-climate-targets-for-suppliers/.
[8] https://www.freshplaza.com/north-america/article/9650739/lidl-gb-to-launch-industry-first-tool-to-close-living-wage-gap-in-banana-supply-chain/.
[9] https://cdr-initiative.de/en/.
[10] https://partnerskapwwfse.cdn.triggerfish.cloud/uploads/sites/2/2023/05/25100413/Forest-Factsheet-CEEurope-WWF-IKEA.pdf.
[11] https://wwfeu.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/factsheet_partnership_20140903_1.pdf?.
[12] https://www.foodnavigator.com/Article/2019/04/16/Nestle-Carrefour-unveil-blockchain-initiative-to-improve-transparency/.
[13] https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanpearson/2018/11/05/food-waste-is-the-new-sales-driver-4-ways-kroger-walmart-are-changing-shopper-thinking/.
[14] https://qz.com/2180075/hm-showed-bogus-environmental-higg-index-scores-for-its-clothing.

Sajid et al. 2024). Regulatory scrutiny (e.g., E.U. Green Claims Directive[15], FTC guidelines[16]) also forces responsible use of such green claims. Hence, providing transparency (in the right amount) and steering customers towards sustainable buying behavior while keeping up with regulatory frameworks remains a balancing act for retailers. One solution might be the use of technologies like blockchain or AI – like the Carrefour example shows – to enable real-time data provision to support responsibility claims. However, also these technologies need to be applied responsibly to avoid privacy issues or discrimination.

8. Measuring the impact of responsible retailing

Building on the challenge of evaluating responsible retailing, another critical issue is how to meaningfully capture its impact *beyond scattered initiatives and short-term metrics*. A meta-analysis by the NYU Stern Center for Sustainable Business[17] shows a positive relationship between ESG investments and firm performance (incl. stock price, ROE, ROA) for nearly 60% of the studies, with positive effects more likely to appear in the long-term. However, while ESG scores, CSR reports, and compliance indicators provide some structure and stock prices serve as a reliable measure for a firm's financial performance, responsible retailing is a more holistic and complex concept – one that does not always align neatly with conventional measurement approaches.

First, since responsible retailing requires embedding ethical practices into every aspect of the business, assessing its impact solely through short-term financial indicators does not capture the broader impact of this company orientation. This is where consumer attitudes become crucial—while financial metrics fail to capture the long-term customer value of responsible retailing, such as brand trust, customer loyalty, and reputation resilience. For example, Ailawadi et al. (2014) show that the environmental friendliness of a retailer, its community support, its focus on locally sourced products as well as its employee friendliness have positive effects on consumers' attitude towards the store as well as on consumer loyalty. Such metrics can for example help justify investments in local initiatives mentioned earlier.

Second, many companies fall into the trap of assessing responsible retailing efforts as isolated CSR projects, sustainability campaigns, or charitable donations – often treating them as sunk costs rather than value-generating activities. With nearly 85% of C-level managers claiming they will increase their investments into more responsible practices and nearly 50% of them transforming their business model to address sustainability[18], the retail industry leans towards a more holistic commitment towards behaving more responsibly. However, this industry shift also comes with the expectation of accountability and impact measurement. To address this request and cope with the attribution issue resulting from the multi-dimensional nature of responsible retailing, retail managers need to move beyond assessing isolated initiatives, but start integrating measurement across all responsible retailing efforts. This allows for potential synergetic effects, adopting a more long-term impact perspective, and should leverage the input from consumer perception studies to allow for the indirect and potentially delayed effects of responsible retailing.

9. Where will the path of responsible retailing lead?

As the retail industry continues to evolve, responsible retailing has emerged as both a societal obligation and a strategic necessity. With retailers shaping consumer behavior, influencing global supply chains, and impacting environmental and social systems, the call for responsibility extends beyond compliance – it requires a company-wide orientation that permeates all aspects of retail decision-making.

Retailers face increasing pressures from consumers, employees, investors, and regulators to act responsibly, yet challenges remain. Balancing ethical commitments with financial performance, overcoming the intention-behavior gap, and measuring impact beyond short-term financial metrics complicates the transition. Too often responsible retailing efforts are treated as isolated projects, failing to capture the long-term value they generate in consumer trust, brand equity, and competitive differentiation.

A pressing question is: does the impact of responsible retailing become negligible if attention does *not* translate into purchases which are necessary for the retailer to maintain its business model, or is the transition to responsible retailing a differentiator in the market in the long run which will keep the retailer in business with the task to close the intention-behavior gap? This question is at the heart of the debate around responsible retailing, differentiating between the intrinsically motivated, proactive retailers aiming for long-term brand equity gains and the reactive, compliant retailers who do not see the potential of this industry transition.

Despite these challenges, the industry is shifting. Investments in responsible retailing are rising, and companies that embed responsibility as a core business principle rather than a reactive strategy will shape the future of the industry. The key question should not be *whether* responsible retailing is necessary, but *how* retailers can fully integrate, measure, and leverage it. Those who succeed will set new standards for ethical business, proving that responsibility and profitability are not opposing forces but essential partners in securing long-term success.

In all, we hope that this editorial serves as a catalyst for a (re)new(ed) wave of academic inquiry into responsible retailing, sparking fresh perspectives and deeper engagement with this critical topic.

The *Journal of Retailing* welcomes your contributions and looks forward to advancing this important conversation together.

[15] https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/circular-economy/green-claims_en.
[16] https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/attachments/press-releases/ftc-issues-revised-green-guides/greenguides.pdf.
[17] https://www.stern.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/assets/documents/NYU-RAM_ESG-Paper_2021%20Rev_0.pdf.
[18] https://www.deloitte.com/global/en/issues/climate/cxo-sustainability-report.html.

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