Green Advertisement with Sustainability Claims -Message Credibility and Design Trendiness-

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Abstract

Sustainability is a significant change that fashion industry has undergone. Marketers and brands are looking for guidance in green advertising to most effectively motivate consumers to purchase sustainable fashion products. This study aims to reveal environmental and cultural sustainability claims on message credibility and purchase intention regarding product trendiness. We performed mediation and moderation analyses, using a 2 (sustainability message: environmental and cultural) x 2 (product design: classic vs. trendy) between-subjects experimental design. The PROCESS MACRO was used for the analysis. Results indicate that environmental claim must appear credible to consumers to motivate them to purchase a product. On the other hand, cultural claim, with and without credibility, affected consumer's purchase intention. Moreover, cultural claim and trendy design together influenced message credibility and purchase intention, showing a moderated mediation effect. The study indicates that brands should broaden their perspective regarding sustainability by considering cultural factors when providing sustainability claims. Environmental claim should be clear and transparent to avoid green skepticism. Also, it is important to focus on product's design aspect: making trendy designs. It is difficult to change consumer behavior based only on sustainability value. Thus, brands must coney their consideration of design trends. Theoretical and managerial implications also are discussed.

I. Introduction

The fashion industry has been criticized for unsustainable products and actions that negatively affect the environment and human well-being. In order to address these problems, the fashion industry has started to focus on sustainable fashion, creating an eco-fashion movement (Han, Henninger, Apeagyei, & Tyler, 2017). Sustainability is one of the most significant changes in the fashion industry. Sustainable fashion is difficult to define succinctly but can include organic and eco-friendly materials, fair working conditions, sustainable business models, tractability, and cultural diversity (Kong, Witmaier, & Ko, 2021). As the importance of sustainability increases, it is becoming more of a focus for brands and consumers. Consumers are requiring more transparency across the value chain (Gazzola, Pavione, Pezzetti, & Grechi, 2020). Brands reorient their vision and business models to be more sustainable and focus on ethically made products (Seibel, Santos, & Silveria, 2020). Advertising messages that convey the advantages of sustainable products over non-sustainable ones, so called "green advertisements," have been utilized for decades (Jager & Weber, 2020). However, sustainable messages in green advertisement are often not or not easily verifiable by consumers, highlighting the importance of product claim credibility (Ganz and Grimes, 2018). However, compared to its importance, the credibility of the claims is not well researched (Jager & Weber, 2020). Because of this, sustainable fashion brands communication with consumers is becoming increasingly important. Conveying sustainability message is linked not only with credibility, but also with other diverse aspects such as brands, products, and consumers. Currently, many studies have concentrated on brand level; how sustainable brand image or brand equity affects purchase intention (Jung, Kim, & Kim, 2020). Also, studies have focused on product traits, especially price. However, there is a lack of study that focuses on one of the most fundamental product attributes: product design. Also, sustainability is a broad concept, and there is insufficient study on sustainability dimensions and their differences.

When sustainable claims are emphasized, it is important to reveal whether the same effect will occur depending on the product design and message type.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the effects on environmental and cultural sustainability claims on message credibility and purchase intention regarding product design. Sustainability claims were focused on environmental and cultural claims. Environmental sustainability is the most prominent sustainability dimension that is constantly applied in the fashion business and is well known by consumers. In case of cultural claim, recent changes in consumer behavior and market environment have made cultural dimension important (Kong et al., 2021). This study will first explore whether message credibility has a mediation effect on a relationship between sustainability claim and purchase intention. Second, it analyzes whether the relationship between sustainability claim and message credibility is moderated by design trendiness. Finally, it analyzes whether the mediation effect of message credibility on the relationship between sustainability claim and purchase intention is moderated by design trendiness. This research has specialty, since it divides sustainability claims into environmental and cultural claims and studies their differences, taking holistic approach. Moreover, it also shows two types of product design and how they interact with sustainable messages.

The results of this study will provide academic as well as practical implications. Fashion marketers can utilize this research in designing marketing strategies that will increase sustainable efforts and position themselves as agents of sustainability along increasing consumer demand for eco-friendly brands. Furthermore, this study examines environmental and cultural sustainability claims to emphasize and utilize different sustainability messages in different types of product design.

II. Theoretical Background

1. Sustainable fashion conceptualization

Sustainability extends throughout the supply chain

management process, from raw materials to sourcing, production, distribution, retailing, and consumption. Sustainable fashion does not have a single definition but can broadly refer to a range of business actions to correct a variety of perceived wrongs in the fashion industry including animal cruelty, environmental damage, and worker exploitation (Lundblad & Davies, 2016). Sustainable fashion's manufacturing processes must meet current environmental, economic, and social needs without compromising future generations. In addition, adherence to local tradition, heritage, exchange, and diversity is also important in sustainable fashion (Kong et al., 2021). Studies have shown that 70% of consumers are inclined to purchase products of environmentally conscious companies rather than those of environmentally irresponsible companies. Also, consumers who are aware of sustainability issues are more inclined to purchase sustainable products. In this way, the fashion industry is able to use sustainability as leverage when developing effective communication strategies (BeckerOlsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006). Sustainability has become a critical new driver in consumer purchasing decisions (Gazzola et al., 2020).

2. Sustainability Dimension

In order to promote successful sustainability marketing, it is essential to understand consumer perceptions of sustainability include environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions (Kagawa, 2007). Sustainability messages usually include contents such as quality; timeless design; production of quantities tailored to consumers; and use of ethical labor, familiar materials and manufacturing processes. Sustainability includes four dimensions: environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions. The environmental dimension explains the use of natural resources, ecosystem integrity, and carrying capacities. The social dimension involves social mobility, participation, empowerment, and cultural preservation. The economic dimension considers household needs, labor's usage, and industrial and agricultural growth. Last, the cultural dimension includes preservation of art,

knowledge, heritage, and cultural diversity. Originally, there were three dimensions of sustainability: environment, social, and economy dimensions. However, changes in consumer behavior and market environment have made the new cultural dimension in sustainability (Kong et al., 2021). Sustainability is gaining importance and evolving in concept in society, with culture becoming an important vehicle to interpret, discuss, and relate to change in the meaning and role of sustainable development (Soini & Birkeland, 2014). Thus, this study focuses on the environmental dimension, as it is the most prominent and frequently applied, and the cultural dimension, the most recent of importance. As environmental advertisement is traditional and prominent compared to the more novel cultural advertisement, comparison between them is important. Sustainable messages were adapted from Kong et al (2021).

3. Message credibility

Message credibility is the judgment of veracity of the content of communication. Information deemed credible by an individual can result in an attitudinal change that subsequently drives behavior (Appleman, Alyssa, & Sundar, 2016). The role of message credibility is especially important in green advertisement, since sustainable products, regarded as credence products, often are not directly verifiable or definable. Therefore, consumer belief in green advertisement claims is the an important first step in sustainability. Research by Ganz and Grimes (2018) highlights the relationship between sustainability claims and message credibility. For example, the credibility of advertised sustainability claim is influenced by the characteristic of the claims. The perceived credibility of sustainability advertisement is also a key antecedent of consumer attitudes. As lack of trust in sustainable products is a barrier to their use, credible messages are important to increase sustainable purchase behavior (Jager & Weber, 2020). Several studies (Kim & Damhorst, 1999; Phau & Ong, 2007) have shown that message credibility increases consumer positive attitude towards a sustainable product, which then drives

purchase intention (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). Thus, credibility has important influence on purchase intentions (Pornpitakpan, 2004) and is an essential mediator in terms of sustainability and purchase information.

H1. Message credibility has a mediation effect on a relationship between sustainability message and purchase intention.

4. Trendiness of a product design

Fashion is a unique field that involves timeliness, styles, and trendiness (Moon, Youn, Chang, & Yeung, 2013). Classic and trendy are two contrasting concepts in style positioning (Zhang, 2011). The term classic is especially used in fashion design in order to designate clothing designs that are timeless, long lasting, and universal (Casto, 2015). On the other hand, the term trendy is used to describe a design that is up to date but can fade or be replaced. Trendy design can be also defined as unique design (Kloskowski, 2004). Among the various attributes of a product, product design is one of the most traditional and representative traits of apparel (Miller, Yan, Jankovska, & Hensely, 2017). In sustainable fashion systems, product quality that affects customer involves physical and design aspects. (Johansson, 2010). In other words, design of the product affects customers' perception and behavior when they try to perceive the quality of the clothing. Design of a product is essential and critical factor affecting consumer purchase intention (Younus, Rasheed, & Zia, 2015). Classic style has been considered sustainable. (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013) as it can be timeless and long lasting rather than restricted to a single or specific generation (Johansson, 2010). However, sustainable design is not limited to classic styles. One Swedish brand highlights sustainability and produces trendy women's clothing. Also, ecological apparel can be both timely and trendy, and trendy design is not a negative concept (Johansson, 2010). Even though sustainability can be pursued in both situations, targeted product designs can vary. In this situation, consumer perception and behavior, such as credibility

and purchase intention, can differ depending on trendiness of a product style. Thus, we expect the trendiness of a product style to affect the relationship between sustainability claim and message credibility. Formally stated,

H2. The relationship between a sustainability claim and message credibility is moderated by design trendiness.

H3. The mediation effect of message credibility on the relationship between a sustainability claim and purchase intention is moderated by design trendiness.

5. Green skepticism

General advertising skepticism describes the tendency to not trust claims in advertisements (Haag, 2022). Specifically, green skepticism represents consumers' inclination to doubt the environmental benefits or performance of a green product and marketers' claims regarding environmentally friendly products and performance. (Haag, 2022; Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017). Even though fashion consumers are becoming more environmentally conscious, few of them are willing to pay for eco-friendly products, creating a sustainable fashion paradox (Han, Seo, & Ko, 2017). Consumers are confused about green messages and distrust them. Especially, environmental claims have lower credibility than other claims, and they are often miscomprehended and viewed skeptically. For example, environmental claims such as 'environmentally friendly' or 'eco-friendly' are not legally protected nor explicitly verified, resulting in consumers skepticism towards environmentally friendly products (Haag, 2022). This skepticism, which arises from a lack of credibility of the source of information and message, leads to the lack of positive purchase intention (Bhaduri & Kopleland, 2020). Thus, if information or a message in environmentally responsible-related claims is not persuasive, it is unlikely to affect consumers' consumption behaviors and choices. Especially, when consumers face unfamiliar brand compared to familiar brands, their schemas are not as extensive (Bhaduri & Kopleland, 2020). In such a situation, in the absence of a credible message, consumer
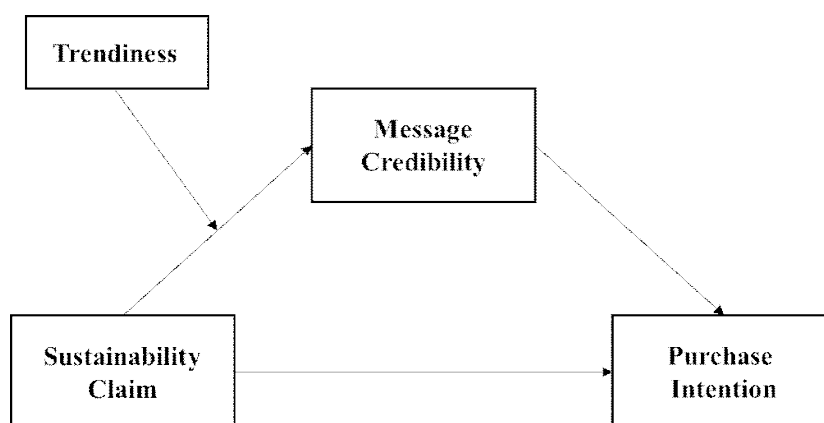
Figure 1. *The Research Model*
(drawn by author)

skepticism affects decision-making for unfamiliar brands.
Overall, Figure 1 shows our research model.

III. Research Method

1. Method

Analysis of consumer responses to sustainability message included moderated mediation analysis and additional analysis using 3 (sustainability message: control, environmental, cultural) x 2 (product design: classic vs. trendy) between-subjects design.

2. Stimuli

There were six stimuli. The analysis involved three types of messages: environmental claim, cultural claim, and control with no claim information. The tested environmental claim was, "This trench coat contributes to eco-friendly production use of recycled materials." The cultural claim was, "This trench coat contirbutes to local tradition and heritage exchange and diversity." Both of these claims were adopted from research by Kong, Witmaier, and Ko (2021). A trench coat was selected as a stimulus. as it is one the most representative classical

fashion items. However, a trench coat can be also considered as trendy based on its modification and variant styles according to new fashion styles (Kim, 2007). Especially, by trench coat appearing on 22 S/S and F/W runways, it was recognized as top fashion trends of 2022. Modified and trendy designs of modern trench coats include cut-outs and twisted design. (Pieri & Fritton, 2022; Franjulien, 2022). There were two versions of a trench coat design: classic or trendy design. Except for the sustainability claims manipulation and design of the trench coat, the post stimuli were constant. In order to avoid any brand effect, an imaginary brand called 'For You and Me' was proposed.

3. Participants

A total of 270 participants was recruited from the United States via an Amazon MTurk online survey for a small monetary award. In order to eliminate an age difference effect, subjects were in their 20s and 30s. Such consumers were chosen because they are most likely to intake messages delivered by brands and to be influenced in behavioral intention and attitude toward sustainable fashion products (Kong, Ko, Chae, & Mattila, 2016). Also, they tend to pay more for products that have a

positive influence on the environment and have higher knowledge of and interest in sustainable clothing compared to older consumers (Kim & Oh, 2020). After consenting to the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions and provided a brief scenario describing the brand advertising its product and message. Attention check excluded 24 participants, leaving 246 responses for the final analysis, with a population of 48% males and age ranging from 22 to 39 years (M= 32.57 years, SD = 3.806 years). Upon providing consent, participants were asked to provide their identified sex.

4. Measures

After viewing the stimulus from the brand post, participants were asked to answer trench coat design was either classic or trendy. Then they provided attitudinal and behavioral responses to queries related to the post, indicated their sustainability attitude, and reported their demographic information. All items were rated using a five-point Likert-type scale. Manipulation check was performed by based on the answer to the design of the coat as either classic or trendy on a three five-point Likert-type scale adopted from Kim and Ko (2010). Message credibility was measured with three items based on an overall message credibility scale (Jaeger & Weber, 2020) using five-point semantic differentials anchored by opposing adjectives (very unbelievable/very believable, wrong/correct, not trustworthy/trustworthy). Purchase intention (Tih et al., 2016) was measured using three five-point Likert scale questions ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely). One attention check item was mixed with other questionnaire items in order to identify and eliminate irrelevant random responses.

IV. Results

1. Manipulation check

The results of independent t-test confirmed that both a

classic trench coat and a trendy trench coat were perceived as such by participants. The scores of classic design ($M_{classic}$=4.3, SD=0.54) and trendy design (M_{trendy}=3.79, SD=0.88) were greater than 3(*moderate*), indicating successful manipulation.

2. Measurement reliability

To evaluate the internal and precision consistency of responses, factor analysis and reliability tests were managed for all measurement items in prior hypothesis testing. All items showed Cronbach's alpha greater than .700. Items for purchase intention showed factor loadings above .764 with a Cronbach's alpha of .889. All items for message credibility showed factor loadings above .638 with a Cronbach's alpha of .769. All items for design shoed factor loadings above .651 with a Cronbach's alpha of .742. This indicates a satisfactory level of measurement reliability (Table 1).

3. Moderated mediation effect

A moderated mediation effect is a mixture of a moderate and a mediated effect; the mediated effect, located between an independent variable and a dependent variable, varies relying on the value of the moderating variable (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). This study examined whether the mediation effect of message credibility on the relationship between sustainability message and purchase intention is moderated by design trendiness. First, the mediation effect of message credibility between a sustainability claim and purchase intention was tested by conducting the PROCESS procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) using Model 4 (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% reliability). The model showed that sustainability claim increased purchase intention, mediated by message credibility. An environmental message positively affected purchase intention, mediated by message credibility (indirect effect = .3637, 95% Boot Cl = [.1874 to .5697]), but did not have a valid direct effect on purchase intention (direct effect = .203, 95% Boot Cl = [-.1212 to .5272]). Message credibility showed full

Table 1. *Result of Factor Analysis*

Factor Name	Item	Factor Loading	Variance Explained %	Cronbach's α
Purchase intention	I am willing to buy the product.	0.894	28.034 (28.034)	0.889
	I want to buy this product.	0.891		
	The product is worthy buying.	0.764		
Message	This message is very believable.	0.874	23.960 (51.994)	0.769
	This message is correct.	0.834		
	This message is trustworthy.	0.638		
Design	This product's design is classic.	0.868	22.414 (74.408)	0.742
	This product's design is traditional.	0.846		
	This product's design is moderate.	0.651		

mediation between an environmental claim and purchase intention. A cultural claim positively affected purchase intention, mediated by message credibility (indirect effect = .2439, 95% Cl = [.448 to .4721]), and also had a direct positive effect on purchase intention (direct effect = .3904, 95% Cl = [.0645 to .7163]). Message credibility showed a partial mediation effect between a cultural claim and purchase intention. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is supported.

Next, the moderated effect of design trendiness between sustainability message and message credibility was tested using Model 1. The effect of an environmental claim on message credibility did not vary depending on design trendiness (β = .349, t=1.6417, p>.05) and did not show moderation effect. However, the effect of a cultural claim on message credibility varied depending on design trendiness (β = .6351, t=2.9265, p<.01), verifying a moderated effect. Thus, hypothesis 2 is supported.

Finally, to verify all hypotheses simultaneously with moderated mediation model, Model 7 was used (Preacher

& Hayes, 2008). We performed the anlysis with a sustainability claim as the independent variable, message credibility as the mediator, design trendiness as the moderator, and purchase intention as the dependent variable. The 95% biased-corrected bootstrap (with 5,000 samples) confidence interval (CI) verified that the mediation model was moderated by design trendiness. With an environmental message, the mediation effect of message credibility controlled by design trendiness was not significant (index of moderated mediation = .317, bootSE = .187, Cl = [−.0411 to .6985]). Specifically, an environmental claim and classic design did not have a significant effect (effect = .2027, bootSE =.1265, Cl = [−.355 to .4618]), but environmental claim and trendy design had a significant effect (effect = .5197, bootSE =.1419, Cl = [.2588 to .8094]). For cultural claim, the mediation effect of message credibility controlled by design trendiness was significant (index of moderated mediation = .5769, bootSE = .2072, Cl = [.1982 to 1.0026]). Specifically, cultural message and classic design did not have a significant effect (effect = −.0461, bootSE

=.1618, CI = [−.3636 to .2767]), but cultural message and trendy design had a significant effect (effect = .5308, bootSE =.1354, CI = [.2756 to .8067]). Therefore, hypothesis 3 is supported; the mediation effect of message credibility moderated by design trendiness, in case of cultural message and trendy design (Table 2 and Table 3).

V. Conclusion

This study examined the effects of sustainability claim on purchase intention, focusing on message credibility. In this process, the moderated mediation was verified according to product trendiness. This study has the following implications.

First, cultural claim directly and positively influenced purchase intention and indirectly and positively affected purchase intention by mediating message credibility.

However, environmental claim positively affected purchase intention only when it mediated message credibility. It seems that an environmental claim itself does not have a strong relationship with purchase intention. Credibility towards a claim was required when consumers faced an environmental claim. This seems to be related with green skepticism. Even though an environment claim can be familiar to customers and common in fashion, many consumers hesitate to purchase eco-friendly products because they distrust green messages that are not explicitly verifiable. They rather develop skepticism towards product that highlight environmentally friendly features (Haag, 2022). In this situation, credibility of the information and message acts as an important factor in purchase intention (Bhaduri & Kopleland, 2020). Claims made in advertisement should be persuasive and credible in order to affect consumers' consumption choices and behaviors. Thus, message

Table 2. *Path Analysis Results*

Path	Beta	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
			LCCI	ULCI
Environmental claim → message credibility	.2231	.1504	-.0731	.5193
Cultural claim → message credibility	-.0508	.1542	-.3545	.2529
Environmental claim x trendiness → message credibility	.3490	.2126	-.0698	.7677
Cultural claim x trendiness → message credibility	.6351**	.2170	.2076	1.0625
Environmental claim → purchase intention	.2030	.1646	-.1212	.5272
Cultural claim → purchase intention	.3904*	.1654	.0645	.7163
Message credibility → purchase intention	.9084***	.0955	.7204	1.0965

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 3. *The Results of Bootstrap Analysis*

Path	Effect	Boot SE	95% Confidence Interval	
			Boot LCCI	Boot ULCI
Environmental claim → message credibility → purchase intention	.3637	.0985	.1874	.5697
Cultural claim → message credibility → purchase intention	.2439	.1085	.0448	.4721
Environmental claim x classic design → message credibility → purchase intention	.2027	.1265	-.0355	.4618
Environmental claim x trendy design → message credibility → purchase intention	.5197	.1419	.2588	.8094
Cultural claim x classic → message credibility → purchase intention	-.0461	.1618	-.3636	.2767
Cultural claim x classic → message credibility → purchase intention	.5308	.1354	.2756	.8067

credibility is required for environmental claim. This result is also related to brand. "For You and Me" is an imaginary brand that participants do not know. Bhaduri and Kopeland (2020) reveals that a credible message is more important for unfamiliar brands in terms of consumer skepticism and decision-making; transparency is the most essential element of a credible message. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that message credibility is especially important in environmental claim, which should be transparent and detailed to invoke consumers trust. In this way, it is possible to reduce consumer uncertainties and doubts.

Furthermore, a moderated mediation effect was also discovered for a cultural claim met with a trendy design with an increased. When cultural claim and trendy design are combined together, they boosted the effect of message credibility in purchase intention. Some existing studies suggest that designs related to sustainability should be far from being trendy (Casto & DeLong, 2019). However, in the present study, cultural claim was linked not with classic design but with trendy design. This seems to be related to current trends: in highlighting design factor even in sustainable products. The trendiness of a product has been one of the factors that most limit sustainable consumption. In order to solve this problem, the design of sustainable products is perceived as another new approach in production development (Moon et al., 2013). Since sustainable clothing have been perceived as old fashioned, sustainable fashion brands have started to design appealing and trendy clothing (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018). Also, in fashion, culture has become an important factor, influencing fashion trends (DuBreuil & Lu, 2020). Thus, a cultural claim and trendy design are inked with each other and affect message credibility and purchase intention.

In a way, environmental sustainability acted as a prototype of green advertising; however, this study provides insight that cultural sustainability is a novel and important dimension that requires future attention in future studies on sustainable communication. Also, design aspect should not be neglected even for sustainable clothing. Consumers will not purchase clothing just because it is sustainable; they will also consider its design and trendiness. Some existing studies highlight traditional environmental sustainability and how sustainable design is related to timeless design. However, by showing how trendy design can also be effective in highlight sustainability, this study can broaden the range of design in sustainability. Compared to prior research, this study show its specialty by the dividing sustainability dimension, reflecting a specific product design aspect, and focusing on message and its credibility.

Our experimental study also provides marketers practical implications of green advertisement strategy. This can provide an ordinary insight to marketers when creating sustainability communication. When they construct an environmental claim, it is important to make it specific and credible to encourage consumers to believe the message and purchase the item. This helps limit customer skepticism towards the claim. Also, it is important to highlight the cultural aspect, since culture factors such as diversity, heritage, and traditions are becoming important. Thus, marketers should strategically develop sustainability claims that can support their intention.

This study has some limitations and opportunities of further research. Although the experiment was carefully designed, the exploratory nature of the research may prohibit the examination of the respondents' actual responses. People in their 20s and 30s were targeted in this study. Even though the sample represents the target for the study, further research can be conducted with more diverse populations to address their similarities and differences and increase external validity. Moreover, not only age, but also in terms of participants, green-self-identity, one's overall recognized identification with a typical green consumer, can be an additional

moderator because it is a well-recognized and general motivational root of some eco-friendly actions. Also, in terms of product, price can be an additional moderator.

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