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Effect of Eco-Friendly Retail Visual Congruence on Trust

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Abstract

Growing environmental awareness around the world has made environmental issues increasingly important in business. While most past research has focused on consumers' sustainable morals and lifestyles as the main motivations for eco-friendly consumption, few studies have examined the effect of traditional marketing programs on sustainable consumption. In this study, the author posited that delicate visual cues in store retail environments, particularly visual cues of the store interiors, affect the ways consumers evaluate the brand. The author specifically tested the effect of visual congruence, or the perceived fit between brands and visual cues in retail atmospheres, on perceived brand image and trust. The results of the online survey of 622 U.S. consumers indicated that visual congruence has a significant positive effect on consumer trust in the brand. The author also hypothesized that environmental concerns would moderate the relationships. consumers' subjective environmental concerns do not moderate the positive effect of visual congruence on trust in the brand.

Keywords: Visual congruence, eco-friendly, retail, consumer trust

1. INTRODUCTION

With the widespread awareness of the environmental and social issues, sustainability has become one of the most crucial marketing topics [1]. Past perspectives have mostly highlighted that individual morals are the main drive of sustainable consumption [2] and that the relatively high level of retail prices of sustainable production from the additional manufacturing processes could be justified [3]. By contrast, more recent research questions this perspective, suggesting that individual morals and ethics are not sufficient to drive sustainable consumption [4] and the dynamics of marketing fundamentals should be carefully discussed also within the context of sustainable consumption [5]. Specifically, research argues that retail contexts may significantly affect sustainable consumption [6]. Consumer morality and ethical judgment are highly malleable, prone to bias, and informed by intuition and implicit associations at the purchasing point [7] and can be often frustrated by myriad sensory inputs in retail settings [8]. However, the relevant empirical examination has been scarce [7,8].

This study tests the effect of visual congruence, or the level of image fit between visual cues of a retail store and the brand's image, on consumer trust in sustainable consumption. Consumer trust is essential in sustainable marketplaces, given their inherently high expectations regarding ethical production processes [9]. In addition, the study tests the moderating effects of consumers' environmental concerns [10]. Past research has emphasized the crucial impact of individual characteristics in the context of sustainable consumption [11].

Individuals tend to respond differently to sustainable marketing stimuli based on their pre-established psychological tendencies and research has found evidence of this tendency in sustainable consumption contexts [12]. In total, this study aims at contributing to a growing body research regarding the effects of traditional marketing on sustainable consumption by empirically testing the effect of visual cues in retail atmosphere on consumer attitudes regarding sustainable consumption [13].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

(1) Eco-Friendly Visual Congruence in Retail

Visual congruence refers to the extent to which the visual cues in a retail atmosphere match store and company images [8]. Past cognitive psychology-based studies have noted that consumers have certain typical and stereotypical images that correspond to detailed marketing cues in each product/service category, and these images inform consumers' cognitive awareness of cue congruence [14,15]. Maclnnis and Park [15] tested the effect of advertising cues like music and pictures on consumer perceptions of appropriateness. Several studies have provided empirical evidence of the effect of cue congruence in retail contexts [16,17]. Areni and Kim [16] examined the effects of congruence in a retail setting and reported experimental results showing increased approach behaviors among shoppers subjected to classical background music. They suggested that appropriate background music likely helps create generally appealing store atmospheres. Given consumers' inevitably high expectations for authenticity from sustainable brands and products, visual congruence likely has particularly salient effects on sustainable consumption and consumer evaluations of retail stores [17].

(2) Consumer Trust

Consumer trust concerns the degree of credibility consumers perceive in products, capturing consumers' trust in a store's abilities and expertise to deliver products/services that satisfy their sustainable consumption demands [18]. Trust also serves as an indicator of a company's ability to introduce quality products in the future [19]. The degree of uncertainty or risk that a buyer feels about product functions inversely to his/her confidence in making a purchase [20]. For sustainable products, consumer trust plays a crucial role in firms' abilities to build and manage their brand equity [19, 20].

Visual design cues in retail settings presumably impact consumer trust for sustainable fashion brands. Research has shown that retail atmosphere is a crucial determinant in consumer trust for brands [21]. Specifically, past studies have highlighted the critical importance of congruence between retail atmosphere and brand image. Using sustainable-colored interiors directs consumers' visual attention towards sustainable products and signals valid assertion of sustainable products [8]. Studies of the effects of retail prototypes and harmony have developed a relevant theoretical explanation [22]—that a prototype of retail atmosphere, formed through prior marketing activities, exists in each product category [23]. Retail stores that reflect such prototypical store atmospheres will positively affect consumers [24]. The categorization approach (Clark & Fiske, 1982) to consumer behavior suggests that consumers' prior knowledge plays an important role in determining the evaluation processes that mediate their final judgments. People naturally divide the world of objects around them into categories, enabling an efficient understanding and processing of their environments. If a person can categorize a new stimulus (e.g., a retail store environment) as an example of a previously defined category (e.g., sustainable products), he or she can quickly retrieve the affect associated with the category and apply it to the stimulus. The associative memory network model also provides justification for the importance of congruence in retail atmosphere on sustainable consumption [19]. On the basis of the literature, the following is suggested:

H$_1$: High visual congruence in retail will increase consumer trust in the sustainable brand.
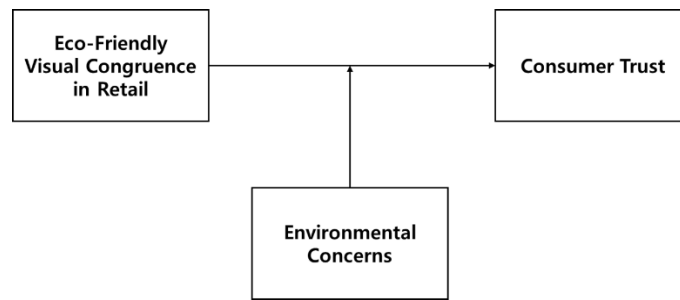
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

(3) Environmental Concerns

Consumer environmental concerns significantly moderates the effect of visual congruence on sustainable consumptions. The effects of visual congruence in sustainable consumption should vary by consumers' subjective green self-identities. Aesthetic pleasure, consumer emotion, and perception of brand images stem from retail settings, yet these factors are highly subjective and their effects on consumer judgments vary according to individual as well as contextual characteristics. Since the sustainable consumption is highly dependent on consumer moral beliefs and attitudes regarding eco-friendly issues, consumers' processing of relevant marketing information also varies. The author posited that consumers with high levels of environmental concerns would likely exhibit increased sensitivity to green colors and visual congruence in sustainable retail atmospheres. Therefore, the following is hypothesized:

H_2: Environmental concerns moderate the effect of visual congruence on consumer trust in sustainable brands.

3. METHOD

(1) Data Collection

For the main study, the author set two URLs each of which reflected a low or high visual congruence condition. The author manipulated the level of visual congruence by colors used in the retail store interior designs. Once participants logged on to the survey URL, the author randomly assigned each of them either to the low or high congruence condition. The author then asked the participants to self-report their evaluation of the store in the image by completing the online survey.

(2) Manipulation Checks

The author performed checks for congruence manipulation in the pretest. The author measured perceptions of the retail spaces as high or low congruence contexts using the following single seven-point Likert-type scale item: "The retail store environment in the above image well matches the 'Ocean Green' company described in the scenario," anchored by 1 = "not at all" and 7 = "very much." The survey results showed that participants perceived the high congruence brand image featuring green and brown colors as having a significantly higher level of congruence than the low congruence brand image ($M_{Low-Congruence}$= 3.27, $M_{High-Congruence}$ = 5.31, t = 6.30, p < .001), indicating that the visual congruence manipulation check was successful.

(3) Measures

The author constructed the survey instrument mainly on the basis of established measurement constructs

from prior research, with some modifications. Consumer trust is measured using five items [3,19,25]. Participants' environmental concerns are measured using six items from prior studies [9,26,27]. The responses for all measures were given on five-point Likert-type items using scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

Table 1. Factor analysis

Constructs and Items	CFA		α
	λ	t	
<u>Environmental Concerns</u>			
How products may affect the environment is important to me.	.87	11.93	
It is important to me whether products cause the depletion of forests.	.88	18.40	
I think of myself as someone who is concerned about environmental issues.	.75	13.93	.85
I think of myself as a 'green' consumer.	.87	16.44	
I will feel totally satisfied with myself if I buy eco-friendly products.	.76	.14.08	
<u>Consumer Trust</u>			
If the store is available in reality:			
the store will be interested in more than just selling me goods and making a profit.	.82	19.52	
The store will be genuinely committed to my satisfaction.	.95	19.02	.88
The store will be very reliable.	.94	18.73	
the products in this store will be trustful.	.88	18.72	
the store will be true to their customers.	.82	18.02	
the store will be trustworthy.	.87	18.59	

(4) Participants

The author conducted an online survey with a total of 622 U.S. shoppers (n Low-Congruence = 382, n High-Congruence = 340). An international research company recruited the respondents. The average age of participants was 47.21 years: 14.9% were 29 years old or younger, 19.4% were 30-39 years old, 21.6%, were 40-49 years old, 26.7%, were 50-59 years old, 12.4% were 60-69 years old, and 5.1% were 70 years or older. 47.6% of participants had college graduate or post-graduate degrees, while 45.7% were high school graduates. Regarding annual household income, 21.5% of the participants answered that earned $29,999 or lower, 21.1% earned $30,000-$49,999, 19.7% earned $50,000-$59,999, 18.1% earned $60,000-$89,999, and 17.5% earned $90,000 or higher. 89.2% were Caucasian, 5.4% were African-American, 2.9% were Hispanic, and 2.5% were Asian.

4. RESULTS

(1) Reliability and Validity

The author subjected the resulting measurement scales to a commonly used validation process to assess their reliability, validity, and unidimensionality. First, reliability coefficients of Cronbach's alpha for the variables ranged from .76 to .96, which is considered satisfactory [28]. The author tested the convergent and discriminant validity of the measures using factor analysis (CFA). The results of the CFA showed an acceptable model fit on the basis of established indices (Hair et al., 2006): $\chi^2(161)=472.93$, RMSEA=.068, CFI= .96, RFI=.93, and NFI=.95. Average variance extracted (AVE) from the constructs met the required levels of .7 and .5 [29] and all AVEs were larger than any squared correlations among the constructs, showing that the author achieved discriminant validity [29].

Table 2. Construct means, standard deviations, and correlations

Model Constructs	Mean	SD	Correlations		
			1	**2**	**3**
1. Visual congruence	0.47 [a]	.49	*n/a*		
2. Consumer Trust	5.12	1.43	.046	*.71*	
3. Environmental Concerns	4.54	1.78	-.013	.425***	*.63*

Notes: a. Visual congruence is coded as dummy variable (low-congruence = 0, high-congruence = 1).

　　　　b. The diagonal matrix is average variance extracted (AVE).

　　　　c. *** $p < .001$.

(2) Hypothesis Testing

　　Hypothesis 1 predicted that a high level of visual congruence would positively affect consumer trust for stores. The author tested this hypothesis using hierarchical regression analysis, with trust as the dependent variable. The author coded the level of congruence as a dummy variable and used it as the independent variable (Table 1). The author computed a variance inflation factor (VIF) score of 1.68 for the model, indicating that multicollinearity had no effect on the estimates [30]. The second step of the regression analysis showed that congruence had a significant positive effect on trust in store (H_1: $\beta = .073$, t= 2.017, p < .05), supporting H_1.

　　Hypothesis 2 predicted that consumers' level of subjective knowledge of fashion would moderate the effect of congruence on consumer trust in sustainable brands (Table 1). Again, the author included interaction terms between congruence and the independent constructs to test the hypothesis [31]. The results showed that environmental concerns had an insignificant moderating effect, with no statistically significant interaction terms between congruence and environmental concerns for trust (H_2: $\beta = .125$, t = .819, p > .05). Thus, the findings failed to support H_2.

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Model

Step	Independent Variables	Dependent Variable: Consumer trust			
		β	t-value	R^2 (Adj. R^2)	F Value
1	**Age**	-.191***	-5.055	.092 (.084)	12.041***
	Gender	.012	.340		
	Marital status	.038	.885		
	Annual household income	.162***	4.413***		
	Ethnicity	-.132**	-3.356**		
	Educational background	.003	.077		
2	Age	**-.185***	-4.893	.097 (.088)	10.946***
	Gender	**.021**	.584		
	Marital status	**.032**	.742		
	Annual household income	**.163***	4.442		
	Ethnicity	**-.122**	-3.075		
	Education	**.010**	.239		
	Visual congruence	**.073***	2.017		
3	Age	-.091**	-2.886	.383 (.377)	55.351***
	Gender	.034	1.114		
	Marital status	-.085*	-2.346		
	Annual household income	.081**	2.642		
	Ethnicity	-.106**	-3.221		
	Education	-.046	-1.376		
	Visual congruence	.042	1.407		
	Environmental concerns	.564***	18.186		

4	Age	-.093**	-2.921	.384 (.376)	49.253***
	Gender	.036	1.188		
	Marital status	-.086*	-2.381		
	Annual household income	.082**	2.663		
	Ethnicity	-.105**	-3.194		
	Education	-.044	-1.304		
	Visual congruence (A)	-.050	-.428		
	Environmental concerns (B)	.490***	5.132		
	A X B	**.125**	**.819**		

Notes: a. Dummy variables are used for visual congruence (0=low-congruence, 1 = high-congruence) and gender (1 = male, 2 = female).
     b. * $p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

5. DISCUSSION

(1) Conclusion

The results of this study have several theoretical implications. This study contributes to extant research on visual environments in retail, by applying previously developed notions to the sustainable consumption context. While past studies addressed the role of visual cues in sustainable consumption, they mostly focused on packaging. This study adds to the extant literature by addressing the concept of visual congruence as the main consumer-perceived quality of retail store environment as sustainable marketing tools. The found importance of visual cues also the results provide statistical support for the important positive role of perceived congruence in visual cues in eco-friendly branding. Although green and brown have long been used to represent green (in an environmental sense) images in environmentally friendly marketing, past research has not empirically supported this approach. The results provide empirical support for the symbolic cognitive meaning of color and, with this initial step, the research contributes to the relevant literature [32].

The findings align with the past research regarding the effects of store-related attributes on sustainable product purchases [8,19,33] and retail congruence perceptions impacting consumer attitudes [22,34]. The results of the analyses provide empirical support for the effect of visual congruence on consumer trust—tone of the most important factors in sustainable consumption [5]—and thus contribute to the relevant literature by highlighting the importance of visual congruence in sustainable retail contexts. The results are particularly relevant in relation to Magnier et al.'s [35] finding that the aesthetic factors of design elements significantly affect the perceived quality of green products. The results are also relevant in relation to Gauru's [6] finding that consumers desire harmonious environments that promote understanding. In expanding relevant findings, the findings help explain the sources of congruence in retail atmospheres by empirically testing interior colors as primary visual cues.

The results of the study imply that sustainable stores can increase consumer trust by carefully designing in-store retail contexts. Trust in stores is built from rational as well as non-rational mechanisms in retail atmospheres [24,36], yet most past research focused on building trust via rational mechanisms in marketing contexts. Indeed, past research has highlighted the rational appeals brands can use to attract consumers and to increase their perceived credibility [8]. The approaches taken in these studies reflected the widespread notion in business that sustainable consumption is based on rational values [11]—a notion that recent research has somewhat undermined [7]. Consistent with past research regarding trust in sustainable consumption, the author found that in-store visual cues are influential. The findings bolster the notion that the effects of emotional, experiential, or non-rational marketing appeals on sustainable consumption warrant increased attention [21]. By further elaborating specific retail design cues and how they affect trust, the results of the analysis also support Murray et al.'s [24] finding that design cues in retail contexts significantly impact brand trust.

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