

Say it loud! How the amount of product-oriented sustainability information affects consumer responses

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Abstract

Drawing upon signaling theory, this paper investigates the impact of the amount of product-oriented sustainability information on consumer responses. We propose that the presence of product-oriented sustainability information produces positive effects on consumer response, and that this effect is explained by a reduction of consumers' perception of information overload. Based on a mixed method design (i.e., a content analysis and ongoing experimental studies), this research studies the effect of product-oriented sustainability information on consumer responses assessing the mediating role of information overload. Results emphasize the importance of carefully balancing sustainability information to prevent information overload and foster positive consumer responses.

Keywords: Product-oriented sustainability information; information overload; signaling theory; consumers responses; experimental design.

1. Context and aim of the research

The fashion industry has faced scrutiny for its employment practices and labor standards across its extensive supply chains, along with the detrimental environmental effects stemming from the production, usage, and disposal of raw materials and finished goods (e.g., Crane and Glozer, 2016). In response to criticisms, the fashion industry is becoming more eco-friendly, with companies constantly improving their sustainability strategies moving towards sustainable practices (Wang et al., 2019), promoting their social or environmental credentials, and incorporated green practices into their operations. Research has extensively explored the engagement of fashion companies in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities (e.g., Acuti et al., 2022), examining the primary communication channels they utilize to disseminate information about environmental and social initiatives (e.g., CSR reports, corporate websites). However, there appears to be reluctance to integrate sustainability themes into product-oriented communication. Drawing upon signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973), this research investigates how and why the amount of sustainable product information affects consumers' responses.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

While existing research provides valuable insights into the communication of sustainable product attributes, there remains a gap in empirical research concerning the effect of the quantity of sustainable product information on consumer responses in the

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fashion industry (Amatulli et al., 2021). In this study, signaling theory is employed to elucidate the relationship between the amount of product-oriented sustainability information and consumer responses. Brands play a pivotal role in shaping consumer opinions and decisions through the signals they convey (Javornik et al., 2020), reducing information asymmetry (Connelly et al., 2011). In this context, the information conveyed by brands is crucial, as consumers base their inferences, opinions, and ultimate decisions on this information. We thus propose:

H1: High (vs. low) amount of product-oriented sustainability information has a positive impact on consumer responses (i.e., attitude towards the product and willingness to purchase the product)

In this research, we assume that information overload can further elucidate the relationship between the amount of product-oriented sustainability information and consumer responses, working as a mediator of this relationship. However, we suggest that given the positive effect of the presence (vs. absence) of sustainability signals on consumer responses, a high amount of product-oriented sustainability information reduces the information overload perceptions, leading to positive consumer responses.

H2: Information overload mediates the relationship between the amount of product-oriented sustainability information and consumers' responses

3. Methodology and preliminary results

This study adopts a mixed-method design with an exploratory phase and an experimental phase to uncover the effect of the amount of product-oriented sustainability information on consumer responses.

Exploratory phase (content analysis). Preliminary results show that when talking about sustainability related to the product, brands usually refer to environmental sustainability, but also to social sustainability (e.g., work conditions). Also, brands mention the impact of the product on the environment (i.e., product sustainability), their corporate sustainability initiatives, sustainability throughout the supply chain in terms of transparency, and information regarding how consumers can take care of the environment by taking care of the product. *Study 1*. 202 UK and Irish respondents ($M_{age}=41$, 68% female) were recruited on Prolific. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four product-oriented sustainability information conditions (absent vs. low vs. medium vs. high). A mediation model using the PROCESS macro (Model 4; 5,000 bootstrapped samples) was tested. Overall results show that a high (vs absent, vs low, vs medium) amount of product-oriented sustainability information has significant and positive effect on consumers' responses. Results also reveal that information overload significantly and positively mediates the relationship between the high amount of product-oriented sustainability information and consumers' responses.

4. Conclusions and implications

This study advances research on sustainable communication in the fashion context, by investigating whether, how, and why the amount of product-oriented sustainability information influences consumer responses. Managerially, the study helps fashion brands understand how they should communicate sustainability in the context of product information, by showing the potential impact on consumers' perceptions.