

SUSTAINABILITY MESSAGING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CONSUMER PERCEPTION AND BUYING BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

With growing global concerns over environmental degradation and social responsibility, companies are increasingly employing sustainability-oriented messages in their marketing communications. This conceptual paper investigates how sustainability messaging (i.e., the content, framing, and delivery of messages regarding environmental and social responsibility) influences consumer perceptions (trust, attitudes, perceived product value) and ultimately buying behaviour (intention → purchase). Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and the Social Cognitive Theory, a conceptual framework is proposed that positions sustainability messaging as a stimulus that shapes internal psychological processes (organism) which then lead to responses in the form of purchase behaviour (S-O-R model). The paper offers propositions, managerial implications, and directions for future research.

Keywords: *Sustainability Messaging, Consumer Perception, Buying Behaviour, Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)*

I - Introduction

In recent years, sustainability has emerged as a strategic differentiator for firms seeking long-term competitiveness and brand legitimacy (Kumar, Manrai & Manrai, 2017). Consumers are increasingly exposed to sustainability messaging such as eco-labels, corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports, green product claims, and packaging cues (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Testa et al., 2021). These messages are intended to communicate firms' commitment to environmental and social responsibility and to influence consumers' attitudes and trust (Rodríguez, Cheah & Jayasinghe, 2022). However, despite heightened awareness, a persistent "attitude-behaviour gap" remains in sustainable consumption—consumers often express positive attitudes toward sustainability yet fail to translate these into purchase behaviour (Joshi & Rahman, 2015; Johnstone & Tan, 2015). This paper seeks to examine the role of sustainability messaging in bridging this gap by influencing how consumers perceive brands and products and how that, in turn, drives buying behaviour (Wijekoon & Sabri, 2021; Mishal et al., 2017).

II - Literature Review

2.1 Sustainability Messaging - Definitions and Types

Sustainability messaging is described as one of the strategic communication of the

environmental, social and governance (ESG) brand promises, including product origin information, material information, labour practices, environmental impact information, social value information and certifications. It may be introduced in terms of advertising, packaging, and digital/ social media, brand tales, labels, etc.

2.2 Sustainability of Purchase behaviour and Consumer Perception

The perception (attitude, trust, perceived value, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control) of the consumers has also been discovered to be essential in purchasing sustainable products. Effective Sustainability Messages Triggering Consumer Emotion and Action: An Application of the Social Cognitive Theory and the Dual-Process Model (2022) in the research, the framing of messages influenced the consumer emotion and sustainable purchase behaviour.

Similarly in the article Purchasing behaviour for environmentally sustainable products: A conceptual framework and empirical study (Kumar, Manrai and Manrai, 2017) it was shown that the attitude between environmental knowledge and purchase intention as a mediating variable.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) are the majority of the widespread theoretical concepts.

III - Theoretical Foundations

3.1 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB): posits that Attitude, Subjective Norms, and Influence Perceived Behavioural Control Intention that in its turn has an impact on Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

3.2 Social Cognitive Theory (SCT): deals with behavioural determinants of cognitive and behavioural behaviour (Bandura).

3.3 Stimulus- Organism- Response (S-O-R) model: Messaging (Stimulus) - internal processing (Organism) - Behaviour (Response).

3.4 Combination of these give us our postulation that sustainability messaging is a stimulus that creates a perception on the consumer (organism) and as a result, results in sustainable buying behaviour (response).

IV - Conceptual Framework and Propositions

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined above, this paper proposes a conceptual framework illustrating how sustainability messaging influences consumer perception and buying behaviour (Figure 1). Drawing from the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, sustainability messaging is conceptualized as the stimulus that triggers internal psychological processes (organism), which then result in behavioural responses (purchase behaviour).

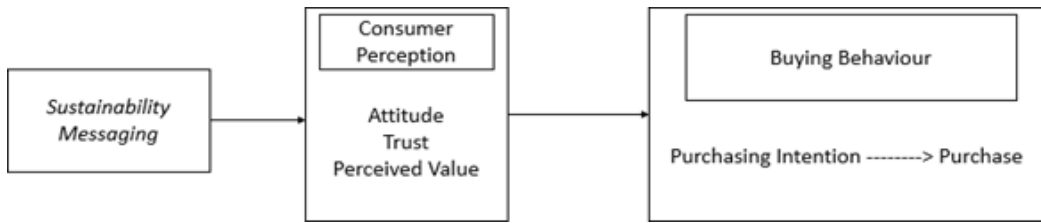


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Sustainability Messaging Influence on Consumer Behaviour

Based on this Framework, the Following Propositions are Offered

Proposition 1 (P1): Sustainability messaging positively influences consumer trust. The positive image of corporate integrity and responsibility through sustenance statements and large amounts of transparency sends sends consumer confidence in the brand. The perceived risk is also reduced by the high trust and increases the intention to purchase sustainable products (Rodriguez, Cheah and Jayasinghe, 2022).

Theory (P2): The messages about the sustainability can have a positive effect on the consumer attitude to the sustainability products.

Frame messaging aids in the augmentation of the positive attitudes, which includes highlighting the environmental benefits or the social impact that are one of the key factors of purchase intention according to the TPB (Ajzen, 1991; Kumar, Manrai and Manrai, 2017).

Proposition 3 (P3): Sustainability communications do raise product value perceptions. Customers are increasingly aware of the benefits with the products both in their functionality and ethical and environmental benefits. Clear sustainability communication would add perceived value to the product and the price premium would be justified (Delmas and Burbano, 2011).

Proposition 4 (P4): The consumer perceptions (trust, attitude, perceived value) are related between sustainability messaging and the purchase behaviour.

However, despite the sustainability messages being relayed to consumers, the psychological processing of sustainability messages will define the likelihood of the messages to result in behavioural changes, which is the attitude-behavioural gaps in the case of sustainable consumption (Joshi and Rahman, 2015).

Proposition 5 (P5): Sustainability messages moderate and indirectly influence the purchase behaviour through behavioural intention.

According to the TPB, positive consumer perceptions, which are created due to the process of messaging, increase intention to buy sustainability products, which, in turn, results in the purchase behaviour.

V - Managerial Implications

The proposed framework will come up with several viable recommendations to managers and marketers:

Strategic Message Design: The companies should ensure that they come up with sustainability messages that are understandable and realistic, and aligned with actual practice. Any boasting diffused may bury trust and bring scepticism.

Multichannel Communication: Different touchpoints will be employed including social media, packaging, advertising, CSR reports etc; through this the sustainability message will be reinforced and more consumers will be exposed to the message, which will increase the saliency of the message.

Framing Emotional Engagement: Messages capable of eliciting social and environmental effect would have the capacity to appeal to emotions that may result to greater potential to change attitude to purchase behaviour.

Targeted Segmentation: The different segments of the consumer will be susceptible to the cues of sustainability in various ways. Segment-specific motivations are the impact of price sensitivity, focus on environmental friendliness, or social responsibility, which can be explained in a better manner to enhance message effectiveness.

Monitoring and Feedback: All the consumer perceptions should be reviewed based on the periodical polls, social media analytics and sales information to ensure the message is enticing and designed to meet the emerging needs of the consumer.

VI - Directions of Future Research

This theoretical paper gives the background of the empirical testing of the given framework. As a future research opportunity, it can be:

Effects of Message Framing: Investigate the influence of different strategies of framing (e.g. gain vs. loss, social vs. environmental) on consumer perceptions and behaviour.

Cross-Cultural Analysis: Test the cultural mediation of the efficacy of sustainability messages. The social responsibility cues can be used as an

example, whereby the social responsibility cues might not be responded to in the same manner among collectivists and individualist societies.

Longitudinal Studies: Test the effect of the long-term effect of a continuous exposure to sustainability messaging on consumer trust, brand loyalty, and purchase behaviour.

Digital Influence: Compare how social media, influencers and UGC will help to amplify or reduce the sustainability messages.

Closing the Attitude-Behaviour Gap: Learn about psychological, social and situational factors that most probably mediate the translation of positive attitude into sustainable purchase behaviour.

VII Conclusion

Sustainability communication has emerged as a fundamental strategy tool of influencing consumer attitudes and causing environmentally and socially sustainable purchasing behaviour. This paper will present a conceptual model by integrating Theory of Planned Behaviour, the Social Cognitive Theory and S-O-R model to position the sustainability messages as a motivator that prompts the inner thinking and emotional procedures and hence will create behavioural reactions. The proposed propositions provide an empirical testing observable basis, and the managerial implications could assist companies in developing an effective sustainability communication. Lastly, the paper identifies the significance of well-defined, credible and engaging sustainability communications in closing the attitude-behaviour gap and sustainable consumption.

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