Impact of User-Centric Advertisement Appeals on Consumers’ Emotional Responses and Sustainable Apparel Purchase Intentions
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Background and Literature Review
Despite the significance of consumers’ concerns (e.g., affordability, style, self-expression, protecting environment) in influencing sustainable apparel consumption (SAC; Harris, Roby, & Dibb, 2016; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Ramirez, 2013) there exists a literature gap in how those concerns could be leveraged by the apparel brands in encouraging SAC. Currently, the advertisements used by the sustainable apparel brands (e.g., Patagonia, Reformation, TenTree) either primarily focus on protecting environment or fail to capture the other aforementioned consumer concerns holistically. Therefore, we explored the efficacy of a user-centric advertisement appeal (UCAA) strongly focusing on the aforementioned consumers’ concerns for apparel consumption in fostering positive affective response (ARSA) toward and purchase intentions (PI) for sustainable apparel. The theoretical framework of Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984) is used to explain the mechanism behind developing hypotheses. High issue-involvement is associated with processing message arguments centrally (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984). As such, individuals highly involved with an issue elaborate extensively on informational messages (e.g., textual messages, Braverman, 2008). Peripheral cues in advertisements (e.g., visuals and attractiveness) lead to effortless elaborations among individuals with low issue-involvement (Braverman, 2008). In the absence of central cues, self-generated issue-relevant thoughts are processed centrally, after being exposed to the peripheral cues among high-involvement individuals (Chang, 2011). Peripheral cues along with central cues can enhance the level of involvement leading to central processing of advertisements (Hennessey & Anderson, 1990). High message elaboration results in positive thoughts about the object being evaluated (Chou, Lien, & Liang, 2011). Advertisements with high sensational value (e.g., visual images) can evoke high affective response (Kang et al., 2006). Consumers form favorable perception about advertisements when they find the message argument and peripheral cues credible, thereby leading to positive PI (Lord, Lee, & Sauer, 1995). PI for sustainable products could be enhanced through both visual and textual cues on sustainability, even among consumers with low involvement with environmental issues (Magnier & Schoormans, 2015).

Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Irrespective of individuals’ involvement with environmental issues (InvEnv), textual cues (H1) and textual with visual cues (H2) in the UCAA will increase central processing of the advertisement; when individuals have low vs. high InvEnv, visual cues in the UCAA will increase peripheral (H3) and central processing (H4) of the advertisement, respectively; central (H5) and peripheral (H6) processing of UCAA will positively influence favorable ARSA; UCAA exposed through both textual and visual modality will evoke higher favorable ARSA, compared to when the advertisement is exposed through only textual or only visual modality (H7); Routes of persuasion mediates the relationship between message modalities for UCAA and ARSA (H8); ARSA will positively influence the PI for sustainable apparel (H9) and; textual with visual messages in the UCAA will result in a higher PI toward sustainable apparel than advertisements with only textual or only visual messages (H10).

Method and Data Analysis
A between-subjects experiment (UCAA in textual vs. visual vs. textual with visual modalities) was conducted through an online Qualtrics platform. Female millennials (born between 1981 to 1996) of
the U.S. were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (n = 344). The participants were randomly assigned to one of the three modalities. Extant measurement scales were adapted to measure InvEnv (D’Souza, Gilmore, Hartmann, Apaolaza Ibanez, & Sullivan-Mort, 2015; Kim, Kim, Oh, & Jung, 2016), central processing (Reynolds, 1997) and peripheral processing (Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005; Lee & Lee, 2015), ARSA (Batra & Holbrook, 1990), and PI (Hwang, Lee, Diddi, & Karpova, 2016). All the research variables were measured in 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). All the measurement scales were valid (Average Variance Extracted > .50) and reliable (composite reliability and Cronbach’s alpha > .70). The hypotheses were tested through Structural Equation Modelling in Mplus (version 8); the model fitted the data well ($\chi^2 = 823.31, df = 357, p < .001; \chi^2 / df = 2.3; \text{RMSEA} = .062; \text{CFI} = .92, \text{TLI} = .90, \text{SRMR} = .068$).

Discussion and Conclusion

The significance of UCAAs is promising. Despite not having a direct effect on PI, UCAAs can evoke favorable ARSA and decrease unfavorable ARSA which in turn, positively influences PI for sustainable apparel. Interestingly, irrespective of InvEnv and the advertisement modalities, UCAAs are primarily processed centrally. This is a significant finding which strengthens our argument that if consumers are convinced that sustainable apparel are able to meet their concerns for buying affordably, styling, and self-expressing, their PI for sustainable apparel could be enhanced because the advertisement appeal is not asking them to sacrifice their needs to protect environment, thereby compelling them to get engaged with the advertisement message and evaluate it extensively. In fact, the effect of UCAAs in textual or textual with visual modalities on ARSA will be influenced by central processing of the UCAA. Therefore, we strongly recommend the sustainable apparel brands to design UCAAs to encourage PI for sustainable apparel, rather than focusing just on the appeals for protecting environment.
References


