



Believing in Change: The Role of Implicit Theory on Consumer's Perception of the Fashion Brand's CSR Message

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Introduction

The ethics of the fashion industry have been called into question with the social, ethical, and environmental problems from production to inventory processes (Yoon et al., 2020). Thus, many fashion brands (e.g., H&M, ZARA) are promoting their goals through corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. Despite the importance of CSR communication in the fashion industry, research on how consumers perceive CSR messages across different types of fashion brands is lacking. Moreover, the implicit theory (i.e., the malleability of characteristics) is yet to be applied in this context despite its potential as powerful a viewpoint that affects consumers' attitudes towards the brand's message (Yorkston et al., 2010). Filling this gap, the purpose of this study is to examine how consumers' perception of the brand's CSR message differs according to the brand type and consumers' implicit mindset.

Theoretical Background & Hypothesis Development

A fast fashion business model has been criticized for its negative social, environmental, and ethical impact due to a shortened cycle of manufacturing, the usage of synthetic materials, and low labor production (Wei & Jung, 2021). On the other hand, a slow fashion business model takes into consideration its impact by pursuing long-lasting quality production on a smaller scale, using eco-friendly materials, and improving the workers' labor. In the context of CSR, consumers' perceptions of authenticity and skepticism are major drivers to the success of a brand's CSR initiatives (Beckman et al., 2009; Forehand & Grier, 2003). When the CSR aligns with what the firm sells, brand concept, or the interest of the target market, the fit between CSR and the brand increases, heightening authenticity and decreasing skepticism of the CSR message (e.g., slow fashion). When there is a mismatch between the brand and its CSR message, people are likely to be skeptical and feel inauthentic about the message (e.g., fast fashion) (Alhouti et al., 2016). Thus, *H1. Perceived fit of the CSR message is higher for slow fashion brand than for fast fashion brand. H2. (a) Perceived fit will increase the perceived authenticity of the brand's CSR message; (b) Perceived fit will decrease the skepticism of the brand's CSR message.*

Prior literature indicates that perceived authenticity heightens consumers' favorable attitudes and attachment towards the company (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). It is also known to increase positive WOM, prompting consumers to express their satisfaction with the brand's CSR activities (Joo et al., 2019). Conversely, skepticism weakens the consumer-company relationship and reduces the value of the retailers in consumers' minds (Mohr et al., 1998). Hence, *H3. Higher authenticity will increase (a) brand reputation, (b) attitude, and (c) WOM.*

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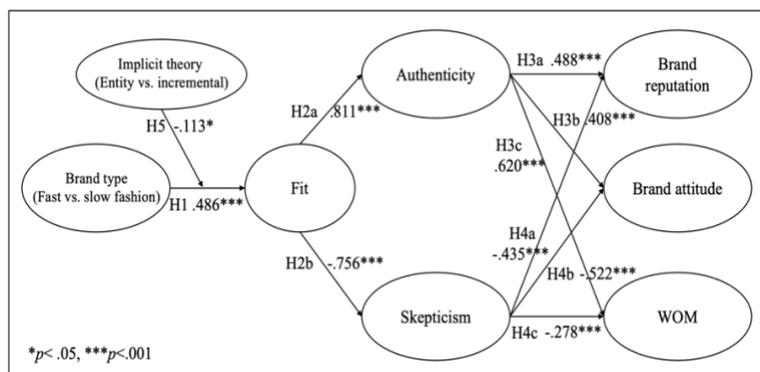
H4. Higher skepticism will decrease (a) brand reputation, (b) attitude, and (c) WOM.

The implicit theory (Levy et al., 1998) explains how people use personality traits to interpret, explain, and predict human behavior according to two types of implicit mindsets: entity and incremental mindsets. Entity theorists believe that personal qualities are difficult to change and fixed, focusing on initial trait information. People's interpretation of personal traits can extend to the dimension of a brand's traits (Yorkston et al., 2010). Entity theorists were found to perceive a brand's characteristics as less malleable and therefore reluctant to accept messages that are inconsistent with a brand's identity. On the contrary, incremental theorists view personal qualities as capable of being developed and malleable, thus highlighting a person's needs, future goals, or intentions (Park & John, 2011). Hence, although the perceived fit between fast fashion brand and its CSR goal may be low, incremental theorists are likely to believe that the brand is capable of change and thus narrow the perceived gap. However, a high match between the slow fashion business model and CSR goal will lead to high perceived fit regardless of the implicit mindset. Therefore, *H5. Incremental versus entity theorists moderation effect: Consumer's perceived fit of the fast fashion brand's CSR message will be higher for incremental theorists than entity theorists, but not in the slow fashion brand.*

Methods

A single-factor (fast vs. slow fashion) between-subjects online experiment was conducted (n=204, US consumers aged +18). Participants, recruited from Prolific, were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. A fictitious brand was explained as the fast fashion brand in one condition and the slow fashion brand in the other condition. Then, they were provided with the brand's CSR initiatives and completed the questionnaire. All measurement items were adapted from the previously validated instrument and measured on a 7-point Likert scale. Psychometric properties (e.g., reliability, discriminant validity, etc.) of the measurement scales were ensured. Data were analyzed through the PLS path modeling technique using SmartPLS software.

Results & Discussion



Results demonstrated that the participants in the slow fashion brand condition felt higher fit than the participants in the fast fashion brand condition ($\beta = .486^{***}$; $M_{\text{fast}} = 4.19$, $SD = 1.67$; $M_{\text{slow}} = 5.84$, $SD = 1.05$; $t = -8.39$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Perceived fit positively affected authenticity ($\beta = .811^{***}$), while negatively affected skepticism of the CSR

message ($\beta = -.756^{***}$; H2 supported). Then, authenticity positively affected brand reputation ($\beta = .488^{***}$), brand attitude ($\beta = .408^{***}$), and WOM ($\beta = .620^{***}$; H3 supported). Skepticism

negatively affected brand reputation ($\beta = -.435^{***}$), brand attitude ($\beta = -.522^{***}$), and WOM ($\beta = -.278^{***}$; H4 supported). Notably, the implicit theory moderated the relationship between brand type (fast vs. slow fashion) and perceived fit ($\beta = .113^*$). The moderation result revealed that the incremental theorists perceived a fast fashion brand as having higher fit with its message of CSR goals than entity theorists, but not in the slow fashion brand (H5 supported).

This research highlights the importance of the fit between a brand's business model and its CSR goals in strengthening brand value. The findings suggest that consumers' perceptions of a high match between the slow fashion brand and its CSR goals can further heighten the positive evaluation of a brand's message and attitudes towards the brand. For fast fashion brands, consumers' beliefs about the malleability of a brand can lead them to be more accepting of its CSR message. The findings suggest that marketers should prime consumers to have malleable mindsets (i.e., highlight how brands are capable of change) to effectively communicate their CSR initiatives. As one of the first studies to examine the relationship between consumers' implicit theory and attitude towards the brand's CSR efforts, the findings of this study also extend the literature body of the fashion brands' CSR communication.

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