Positive and Negative Advertising Images as Effective Sustainable Consumer Stimuli

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Within the competitive environment of the apparel industry, encouraging consumers to purchase sustainable apparel products can be challenging. Well-designed advertisements, however, can motivate consumers to increase their awareness of sustainability issues and change their shopping behavior (De Boer, 2003). Efforts should be made to educate consumers about sustainable consumption, and advertisements can be a great promotional tool. Utilizing visual elements such as distinct colours and images may attract general consumers' attention and increase affirmative perceptions of the advertisements.

Ha-Brookshire and Bhaduri (2014) found that the apparel business' distrustful messages affect more consumer's purchase intention that trustful messages. Dam and Jonge (2015) reported similar findings. Negative messages on labelling more directly influenced consumers' attitudes toward products than positive messages. Authors concluded that this might be because consumers are willing to spend their money in order to avoid challenging ethical issues. As these two studies are limited to using messages in their studies, the purpose of this study is to examine whether positive (or negative) images were more effective at retaining consumers' attentions.

Based on the purpose of the study, this study developed two hypotheses as follows:

> **H1:** *Participants' responses to positive images will be statistically different than their response to negative image*
> **H2:** *Participants' heart rate during exposure to positive images will be statistically different than exposure to negative images*

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model has been employed to guide this study (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). According to the S–O–R model, human behavior is initiated by environmental stimuli and physiological states. Based on this model, different images featured in advertisements were used as environmental stimuli. The four images were (1) wind power plants on grassland, (2) Citarum River (known as the most polluted river in the world), (3) image from the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) organization website, and (4) green plant in human's hand. Participants' self-reported survey and their heart rate were collected as participants' responses. An instrument was created to measure consumers' feelings and 8 items were adapted from Feltham (1994). Items Cronbach's *alphas* for variables were highly acceptable (.88-.96) and factor analysis was performed to determine dimensionability of

the scale. One factor was generated after data were reduced using principal components analysis with varimax rotation.

Faculty, staff and students at a Midwestern university were recruited to participate. Thirty-four usable data were collected. Subjects were all right handed and 29 females and 5 males were included. Age range was from 19 to 44 with mean of 22.03 years (SD = 6.38 years). Participants' heart rate was measured with NeXus – 32 Biofeedback sensors. Sensors were placed on their fingers. After the session, participants were asked to complete the questionnaire about their feelings (i.e. stimulating, stirring, and moving) related to four images as well as their demographic information.

Independent samples t-tests were used to test hypotheses. Results revealed that negative images (mean = 37.90) were more stimulating that positive images (mean = 24.19) (t = -11.34, p = .00). Also, participants' heart rate was lower during exposure to negative images (Z-score mean = .24) than positive images (Z-score mean = -.23) (t = 3.61 p =.00). Therefore, H1 and H2 are supported as seen in two previous studies.

This study has unique contributions to the limited body of research on how to develop effective advertisements in sustainable apparel products with implications for marketers and managers. Findings add empirical evidence that uncomfortable and inconveniencing images will attract consumers' attention more than peaceful and optimistic images. Future studies about whether consumers will remember negative images better than positive images and how memory will impact their purchasing behavior are needed.

References

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