



## Do I Know You? Impact of Consumers' Brand Schema and Brand Familiarity on Brand Affect and Attitude for Pro-Environmental Messages

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Today's consumers are increasingly vocal about pro-environmental (PE) issues, making it imperative for retailers to be transparent about how their products are made (WGSN, 2017). To inform consumers about brands' PE initiatives and influence their decision-making, several apparel brands have started to not only undertake PE initiatives but also communicate their efforts through marketing communications. In this light, research indicates that consumers often evaluate brands and their communications based on their existing expectations (also known as schemas) about the same (Bhaduri, 2017; Mandler, 1982). These schemas act as heuristics to help consumers make decisions (Sjödin & Törn, 2006), and can influence consumer evaluations (Lee & Schumann, 2004; Bhaduri, Ha-Brookshire, & Leshner, 2017).

Research suggests that brand messages congruent to consumers' schemas reinforce their existing expectations, and evaluated positively. Conversely, consumers consider incongruent messages as disturbing, leads to greater cognitive elaboration to resolve incongruity, and may result in greater affect (Koo et al., 2006). Thus, compared to congruity, resolution of incongruity leads to less favorable evaluations while non-resolution leads to least favorable evaluations (Mandler, 1982). In spite of the potential impact of consumers' existing brand schemas on the effectiveness of brands' PE initiatives, little empirical research exists on the topic. To fill this gap, we hypothesize that consumers' brand affect (H1) and brand attitude (H2) are highest for congruent claims, followed by incongruity resolution and least for incongruity non-resolution. In this light, brand affect is the brand's potential to elicit positive emotional response in consumers (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and attitude toward brand is the predisposition to respond favorably to a brand in general (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). In addition, research indicates that brand schemas differ based on brand familiarity, with schemas for familiar brands being stronger and more personal to consumers, while those for unfamiliar ones (although present) might be unstructured and not as strong (Dahlén & Lange, 2004). However, due to absence of substantial literature, in this study, empirical data is gathered for both familiar and unfamiliar brands. The impact of brand familiarity is especially relevant, since the current business environment has seen a surge of start-up apparel brands that promise to offer consumers with PE choices.

A 3 (schema: congruity/ incongruity resolution/ incongruity non-resolution) x 2 (brand familiarity) x 2 (brand replications) mixed model online experiment was conducted using 402 adult US consumers recruited through a national research firm. Schema (measured) and brand replication (manipulated) were between subject while brand familiarity (manipulated) was within subject. Since the aim of the study was not to restrict the study findings to one particular brand or message but generalize to brands' PE messages in general, two familiar brands (brand replication) and 2 unfamiliar brands were used. Based on existing research using familiar brands in the U.S., two familiar brands names were identified (NIKE® and Adidas®) (Bhaduri et al., 2017) since the brands offer a wide range of merchandise and cater to a wide target market. Second, for unfamiliar brands, researchers identified two brands based in India with no international presence, namely Jabong® and Myntra®. Next, 88 students

enrolled in a public US university rated (1: not familiar at all to 5: extremely familiar) NIKE (mean = 4.65, SD: 0.57), and Adidas (mean = 4.55, SD: 0.68) as familiar, while Jabong (mean = 1.11, SD: 0.39) and Myntra as (mean = 1.09, SD: 0.33) as unfamiliar, deeming the brands suitable for the study.

Schemas about the brands' PE efforts (5 items) (Kozlowski et al., 2012), and attitude toward brand (4 items) (Spears & Singh, 2004) were measured before (pre) and after (post) exposure to stimuli. In addition, after exposure to stimuli, participants answered questions pertaining to brand affect (3 items; Chowdhury & Holbrook, 2001). All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1: Strongly Agree to 7: Strongly Disagree). Based on schema scores, three categories were created (a) schema congruity before (pre-schema >4) and after stimuli exposure (post-schema >4), (b) schema incongruity before (<=4) but resolved after stimuli exposure (>4), and, (c) incongruity before (<=4) and *not* resolved after stimuli exposure (<=4).

MANOVA results indicated that schema significantly impacted affect and post-brand attitude ( $p < 0.001$ ). According to ANOVA, there was main effect of schema on affect [ $F(2, 396) = 62.52, p < 0.001$ ] and post-brand attitude ( $p < 0.001$ ). Affect was most positive for schema-message congruity ( $\bar{x} = 5.34, SD = 1.04$ ), followed by incongruity resolution ( $\bar{x} = 4.40, SD = 1.16$ ) and least for incongruity non-resolution ( $\bar{x} = 3.69, SD = 1.03$ ), supporting H1. Similarly, post-brand attitude was most favorable for congruity ( $\bar{x} = 6.27, SD = 0.91$ ), followed by incongruity resolution ( $\bar{x} = 5.44, SD = 1.22$ ) and least for incongruity non-resolution ( $\bar{x} = 4.31, SD = 1.09$ ), supporting H2. Additionally, change in brand attitude (post-brand attitude – pre-brand attitude) was different across groups ( $p < 0.001$ ). Interestingly, change in brand attitude was most favorable for incongruity resolution ( $\bar{x} = 0.94, SD = 1.18$ ), followed by congruity ( $\bar{x} = 0.39, SD = 0.93$ ) and least for incongruity non-resolution ( $\bar{x} = 0.15, SD = 1.02$ ). In addition, there was main effect of brand familiarity [ $F(1, 396) = 4.74, p = 0.03$ ] on affect. Affect was slightly less positive for familiar brands ( $\bar{x} = 4.53, SD = 1.33$ ) than for unfamiliar brands ( $\bar{x} = 4.64, SD = 1.15$ ). There was no interaction effect of schema x brand familiarity on affect [ $F(2, 396) = 1.28, p = 0.28$ ]. Moreover, there was no main effect of brand familiarity [ $F(1, 396) = 1.05, p = .31$ ] or interaction effect of schema x brand familiarity [ $F(2, 396) = 0.25, p = .78$ ] on post-brand attitude. In addition, there was main effect of brand familiarity on change in brand attitude [ $F(1, 396) = 11.23, p < 0.001$ ]. For familiar brands, change in attitude was less ( $\bar{x} = 0.37, SD = 0.93$ ) than for unfamiliar brands ( $\bar{x} = 0.84, SD = 1.23$ ). Finally, there was also interaction effect of schema x brand familiarity on change in attitude [ $F(2, 396) = 3.48, p = 0.03$ ]. Change in attitude was most favorable when incongruity was resolved for unfamiliar brands ( $\bar{x} = 1.23, SD = 1.25$ ), and most unfavorable when incongruity was not resolved for familiar brands ( $\bar{x} = -.04, SD = 0.95$ ).

The study results indicated that when participants expected a brand be PE (or not), affect and attitude towards brand were more (or less) favorable. Therefore, undertaking PE initiatives might be beneficial for brands which already have the image of being PE but not otherwise. The results were true for both familiar and unfamiliar brands. This suggests that, although not as structured and formalized, consumers do rely on their unfamiliar brand schemas and their ability to resolve incongruity for decision-making. Moreover, change in brand attitude, although observed for both, was less for familiar than unfamiliar brands. This indicates that pre-brand attitude for familiar brands are stronger and more resistant to change than unfamiliar brands. Specifically, for unfamiliar brands the change in brand attitude for incongruity non-resolution was positive, indicating that consumers evaluated unfamiliar brands more leniently and favorably than before message exposure, even when they did not believe that the brand

undertook PE initiatives. On the contrary, familiar brands' brand attitude became less favorable (negative) when they failed to convince consumers about their PE initiatives. Thus, familiar, more than unfamiliar brands have to be extra cautious to make sure that they either have congruent PE-related brand schemas or that their PE messages are able to resolve incongruity and turn incongruent brand schemas to incongruent ones, else risk negative brand evaluation.

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