

Really, for the Greater Good? Impact of Message Frames and Reference Points related to Packaging of Apparel Products on Brand Attitude

Michelle S. Park Kolacz and Gargi Bhaduri
Kent State University, USA

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With the mounting public awareness of environmental harm caused by packaging materials, an increasing amount of research has been conducted on new materials or processes to decrease waste (Bashore, 2020). However, these may only be suited to particular companies and can be expensive and/or time consuming to develop. Furthermore, products or packaging marketed as environmentally friendly are often associated with a price premium. Without a perceived personal benefit and clear understanding of the impact of eco-friendly packaging, consumers are often unwilling to pay the premium and/or support such packaging initiatives (MacCarthy, 2017; White, Hardisty, & Habib, 2019). Therefore, this study seeks to understand how messages related to brands' environmentally friendly packaging initiatives can be communicated to consumers to elicit positive brand evaluations.

Based on Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1981), literature suggests that framing of marketing messages impacts consumers' decision-making when it comes to environmentally friendly choices (Cheng, Woon & Lynes, 2011). While some consumers are motivated to take environmentally friendly actions to prevent harm (loss frame), others take actions to promote goodwill (gain frame). Therefore, we hypothesize (**H1**): Message framing (loss vs gain) related to brands' environmentally friendly packaging initiatives will impact consumers' brand attitude.

Literature shows that consumers often fail to form positive opinions towards brands' sustainability initiatives and/or support the brands' initiatives when they are unable to see any personal benefit(s) from the same (Copeland & Bhaduri, 2019). In particular, research suggests that message framing often acts in conjunction with message reference, such as whether the message highlights the personal benefits or societal benefits obtained from a particular initiative (Loroz, 2007). For example, Loroz (2007) found in promoting recycling behavior, that loss (rather than) gain frames were more persuasive and produced more positive attitudes towards recycling when combined with references to personal (rather than societal) benefits derived from recycling. However, empirical research on the effect of perceived benefits in a pro-environmental apparel packaging scenario has been limited. Therefore, we hypothesize (**H2**): Message reference moderates the relation between message framing and brand attitude, such that loss frame with personal reference leads to most positive brand attitude. Further, Cheng and Woon (2010) found that gain framing was more effective for those who already engaged in environmentally sustainable behavior since those customers tend to have higher green consumer values (Haws, Winterich, & Naylor, 2013). In this light, green consumers value is defined as the importance that consumers place on the environmental impact of acquiring goods or engaging in consumption related behavior (Haws, Winterich, & Naylor, 2013). Thus, we hypothesize (**H3**):

Green consumer values moderate the relation between message frame and brand attitude.

A 2 (frame: gain/loss) \times 2 (reference: personal/societal) \times 2 (green consumer value: high/low) between subject online experiment was conducted using 300 adult U.S. consumers recruited through a research firm. Messages were displayed in the form of a static online webpage showing a shopping cart at online checkout process for a pair of jeans. At checkout, the message indicated the benefits of environmentally friendly packaging options (manipulating the two levels of frame with two levels of reference). Jeans were selected as the item being “purchased” in each scenario as they are purchased and used by consumers from a broad range of age, gender, and available at multiple price points. However, participants were not given an image of the jeans, to protect from any confounding effects of stylistic preferences (Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2016). To prevent from further confounding effects, no brand names were used (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2017). Participants then answered questions about brand attitude through 5 items (Spears & Singh, 2014) on a 7 point semantic differential scale and green consumer values through 6 items (Haws, Winterich, & Naylor, 2010) on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Out of the 281 participants, 147 were categorized as having low green consumer values (mean = 4.11), 134 had high green consumer values (mean = 5.31).

Three-way ANOVA results indicated there was a significant main effect of frame ($F[1,273]=6.94, p=.01$), supporting H1. Those who were exposed to messages with loss frame had more positive brand attitude (mean = 5.84, S.D. = 1.34) than those who had been exposed to the gain frame (mean = 5.47, S.D. = 1.18). Second, there was a significant two way interaction effect of frame \times reference on brand attitude ($F[1,273]=2.91, p=.05$), supporting H2. Those who saw the message with the loss frame and personal reference had a higher brand attitude (mean = 6.00, S.D.=.98) than those who saw the messages with the loss frame and societal reference (mean = 5.69, S.D. = 1.32), the gain frame with a societal reference (mean = 5.55, S.D.=1.26), and the gain frame with a personal reference (mean = 5.40, S.D.=1.41). However, there was no significant main effect of reference on brand attitude ($F[1,273]=.09, p=.77$). Third, there was a significant two-way interaction effect of frame \times green consumer value on brand attitude ($F[1,273]=5.05, p=.03$), supporting H3. Brand attitude was most favorable for loss frame with high green consumer values (mean = 5.88, S.D. = 1.10), followed by loss frame with low green consumer values (mean=5.79, S.D. = 1.26), gain frame with low green consumer values (mean = 5.73, S.D. = 1.15) and least for gain frame with high green consumer values (mean=5.16, S.D. = 1.48). However, there was not a significant interaction effect of reference \times green consumer value on brand attitude ($F[1,273]=.40, p=.61$).

The study results indicated that the message frame impacted brand attitude with loss (compared to gain frame) leading to more positive brand attitude. Thus, brands might benefit from highlighting the damage that is caused to the environment when consumers do not make pro-environmental packaging choices to garner positive brand attitude. Specifically, loss frame combined with personal reference generated most positive brand attitude. This was consistent with findings found by Loroz (2007). Therefore, marketers encouraging pro-environmental choices for apparel companies might consider informing the consumer how they would

personally be harmed by not making pro-environmental packaging choices. In addition, consumers green values impacted how well message framing worked. Particularly, consumers with high green values expressed more favorable brand attitudes in response to loss framed message than gain framed. On the other hand, for consumers with low green values, both frames worked equally. In addition, it is to be noted that overall the mean attitude toward brand was always over 3.5 (on a 7 point scale), regardless of frame, reference, and level of green consumer values. This suggests that when given the option, and when not given the burden of increased price, consumers are not opposed or resistant to sustainable packaging initiatives, but receptive. Thus, companies who have target markets with either low green consumer values, high green consumer values, or both might consider offering sustainable packaging options as a new way to satisfy customers and increase their competitive edge (such as brand attitude), while reducing waste. Overall, this research contributes to message architecture, insight on consumer behavior, and adds to the business case for sustainability in the context of packaging initiatives for fashion/apparel companies.

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