



Sincerity or Ploy? The Effects of Brand Image and Message Source on Consumers' Perceptions toward Brand-Cause Campaigns

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Purpose/Rationale: *Cause-related marketing (CRM)* initiatives have become increasingly popular among fashion apparel brands (Nan & Heo, 2007). Most recently, several fashion brands have initiated in-store apparel recycling programs in an effort to reduce the environmental impact of their operations and position themselves as more sustainable (Beeler, 2017). For example, H&M's 'Close the Loop' program features an in-store garment collecting service to encourage consumers to donate unwanted garments, and promoted as being reused or recycled (Wright, 2017). However, as the apparel industry increasingly faces scrutiny for its negative impact on the environment (Beeler, 2017; Lee, Seifert, & Cherrier, 2017), it is unclear whether these brand-cause campaigns are perceived by consumers as trustworthy and authentic, or as a ploy to favorably craft the brand image and increase purchase. Given that consumers' perception of CRM campaigns vary according to brand characteristics (i.e., brand image as sustainable vs. disposable) (Doorn, et al., 2017) and the source of message (i.e., website vs. news article) (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2017), this experimental study tests whether brand-cause campaigns (i.e., an in-store apparel recycling program) produce varying effects on consumers' brand trust and perceived campaign authenticity. Further, to test whether these CRM campaigns are effective in motivating consumers to take action, this study also examines the effect of brand trust and perceived campaign authenticity on consumers' willingness to participate in the campaign.

Conceptual Framework/Hypotheses Development: According to the *system justification theory* (Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010), consumers have a social psychological propensity to defend and bolster the status quo, and attempt to see it as fair and legitimate. That is, when consumers perceive a brand with a sustainable image to promote a cause-campaign, they will see it as consistent with their position, which can enhance its legitimacy. Therefore, in brand-cause campaigns, *when consumers perceive a brand's products to be sustainable (vs. disposable) they experience greater levels of a) brand trust and b) perceived campaign authenticity (H1)*. In addition, prior literature has suggested that consumers evaluate information based on its source types (Babutsidze, 2012; Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2017). That is, brand-controlled messages, such as the brand website, is often considered less credible (Xingyuan, Li, & Wei, 2010). On the other hand, third party (i.e. news article) may be perceived more legitimately (Dean & Biswas, 2001). Therefore, the effects of brand image (i.e., sustainable, disposable) on brand trust and perceived campaign authenticity can vary depending on the source types (i.e., website vs. news article). Specifically, we expect that *consumers' trust (a) and authenticity (b) toward sustainable or disposable fashion brand's CRM campaign will be greater when the campaign is initiated from a news article (vs. website) (H2)*. Additionally, as consumers' confidence in brand

messages is strengthened, it can enhance satisfaction and brand use (Lee, Sohn, & Lee, 2008). In this case, *a) brand trust and b) perceived campaign authenticity will positively influence consumers' willingness to participate in the brand-cause campaign (H3).*

Research Design/Procedure: A pre-test (n= 82) with college students was conducted to select existing brands to use in the main study. Based on Dall'Olmo et al. (2013), brands were selected that were significantly different in terms of sustainable vs. disposable brand image and were not significantly different in terms of familiarity. Based on the pre-test, Patagonia was selected as the sustainable brand and H&M was selected as the disposable brand. The main experimental study utilized a 2 (brand image: sustainable vs. disposable) x 2 (campaign source: brand website vs. news article) between-subjects factorial design where the visual experimental stimuli portrayed a brand and cause campaign. College students from two Southeastern Universities (n=134) were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: sustainable brand-cause campaign promoted through the brand's website (n=33), or promoted through a news article (n=37), or a disposable brand-cause campaign promoted through the brand's website (n=36), or promoted through a news article (n=28). After exposure to the experimental stimuli, participants responded to measures of brand trust (e.g., <Brand> has high/low integrity), perceived brand authenticity (e.g., I think <brand> stays true to itself), perceived fit between brand and cause (e.g., A clothing donation campaign is appropriate for <brand>), consumers' brand attitude (e.g., unfavorable/favorable) and demographic variables. Based on previous studies, all our variables were measured on 7-point semantic differential or 7-point Likert scales.

Results: Controlling for consumers' perceived brand-cause fit and consumers' brand attitude, separate ANCOVA was used to test H1-H2 and multiple regression was used to test H3. Results indicated that in brand-cause campaigns, brand's that are perceived as sustainable result in greater levels of brand trust ($M_{\text{sustainable brand}}=6.441$, $M_{\text{disposable brand}}= 5.275$; $F=31.235$, $p=.000$) and perceived brand authenticity ($M_{\text{sustainable brand}}=5.610$, $M_{\text{disposable brand}} = 4.357$; $F=50.758$, $p=.000$) compared to brand's that are perceived as disposable. Thus, H1a and H1b are supported. Furthermore, results showed that there is no significant interaction effect between brand image (sustainable vs. disposable) and source type on brand trust ($M_{\text{website}}= 6.458$, $M_{\text{news article}}= 6.420$, $F=.044$, $p=.834$) and perceived campaign authenticity ($M_{\text{website}}= 5.806$, $M_{\text{news article}}= 5.360$, $F= 3.153$, $p= .081$). Therefore, H2a and H2b are not supported. Multiple regression results ($F=5.662$, $p=.001$) indicate that brand trust ($\beta= .064$, $t=.447$, $p=.656$) does not influence willingness to participate in the brand-cause campaign, but perceived campaign authenticity does ($\beta= .410$, $t=2.732$, $p=.007$). Thus, H3a is not supported and H3b is supported.

Discussion and Implications: Results indicate that CRM campaigns, particularly, in-store clothing donations, may be more suitable for brands that have been founded on sustainable practices (e.g., Patagonia). When brands that are considered disposable (e.g., fast fashion brands) employ CRM practices, consumers are less trusting and doubtful of their behaviors. It is possible that consumers perceive it as a scheme to favorably change their disposable image. Interestingly, message source did not impact consumers' brand trust or perceived campaign authenticity. This implies that the brands' original image (sustainable vs. disposable) is even more critical than the message source, which gives additional support to the importance of the brands' original foundations. According to this result, brands may use either their own website or third-party media to favorably craft their image without relying on third parties. Lastly, to motivate consumers to participate in CRM store campaigns, brands need to first gain consumers' perceived authenticity of their efforts.

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