



Green as the New Status Symbol:  
Examining Green Signaling Effects among Gen Z and Millennial Consumers

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Introduction: Green signaling refers to the notion that environment-friendly purchases signal consumers' prosociality and willingness to pay more for societal well-being, thus enhancing their social status (Rahman et al., 2020). Driven by Gen Z and Millennials, green signaling is prevalent on social media. An increasing number of fashion brands (e.g., Rothy's, Stella McCartney) started to harness social media as a channel to drive sustainable movements through influencers (Zhao et al., 2022). Therefore, the key research problem investigating the effect of green signaling and how brands can better promote their sustainable values via social media should be addressed. To examine this emerging trend, this study investigates the green signaling phenomenon on social media based on the costly signaling theory.

Theoretical Background: Costly signaling theory explains that apparently wasteful behaviors, such as conspicuous consumption, can function as a reliable signal of desirable individual qualities, as the cost involved in producing the signal guarantees its reliability (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997). Similarly, green signaling is another form of a costly signal as it involves considerable time, energy, money, or other valuable resources to be able to afford organic products and signal prosociality (Elliott, 2013; Griskevicius et al., 2010).

By conceptualizing organic apparel as clothing made from recycled materials by utilizing an ethical manufacturing process, this study examines the effect of green signaling by testing whether organic apparel will signal a higher status compared to conventional apparel. First, organic apparel features distinct visual certificates that make counterfeit products risky to fake (Puska et al., 2016), and offers unobservable yet desirable quality such as health benefits (Han & Chung, 2014). This characterizes organic apparel as a costly signal. Thus, consumers likely imagine that influencers wearing organic apparel are conscious of environment-friendly choices denoting their prosociality as well as their wealth in valuable resources (e.g., time, money, energy) to manage such sustainable lifestyles (Yildirim, 2021). Accordingly, consumers will perceive higher status toward an influencer wearing organic apparel, as they perceive them to have great taste, knowledge, and ethical values in green consumption. Moreover, it will lead to higher purchase intention as the impression of expertise and attractiveness leads followers to purchase that product (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Thus, it is postulated that,

- H1. Consumers will perceive higher status on organic (vs. non-organic) apparel.*
- H2. Consumers will show higher purchase intention toward organic (vs. non-organic) apparel.*
- H3. Perceived status mediates the relationship between apparel greenness and purchase intention.*

This study also examines the moderating effect of a brand label and brand authenticity. Costly signaling theory notes that the extent to which the signal is socially visible influences the effectiveness of the signaling (Griskevicius et al., 2007). Luxury brands are known to be pricier than mass-market brands, thus eliciting an impression that buyers have a higher status (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). Accordingly, the more expensive the organic apparel product is, the stronger it signals the status because it explicitly signals that he/she can afford it. Therefore, the increased social visibility derived from luxury brand labels would lead consumers to perceive higher status toward influencers.

Lastly, this study hypothesizes that authenticity aroused from verifiable information such as labels of the origin, age, ingredients, and performances lead to stronger favorable responses. In green marketing, credibility is the key element for a successful strategy. The inauthentic message leads to lower credibility and less favorable attitudes as well as decreased purchase intention (Newell, Goldsmith & Banzhaf, 1998). Therefore, if an influencer denotes that the brand has a long history in building green culture, consumers likely show favorable responses and perceive higher status toward influencers. Hence, we hypothesize that,

**H4.** (a) Brand label and (b) brand authenticity moderate perceived status.

**Methods:** To test the hypotheses, a 2 (organic vs. non-organic) x 2 (luxury vs non-luxury) between-subjects design was conducted in Study 1. The apparel greenness was manipulated by providing a short description (e.g., “This environmentally friendly sweatshirt is certified and made of 100% sustainably-sourced, 100% organic cotton”). H&M and Louis Vuitton were selected to manipulate the brand label as a result of a pre-test. In Study 2, a 2 (organic vs. non-organic) x 2 (high vs. low brand authenticity) between-subjects design was conducted. Brand authenticity was manipulated by delineating the brand's foundation year, history, and production system (Huang & Guo, 2021). The participants in both studies were actual Instagram users younger than 40 years, who represent Gen Z's and Millennials. All measurements were adopted from previous studies and were scored on a 7-point Likert scale. SPSS 26.0 was used for testing the two-way MANCOVA, follow-up ANCOVA, and Haye's PROCESS macro (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Model 4).

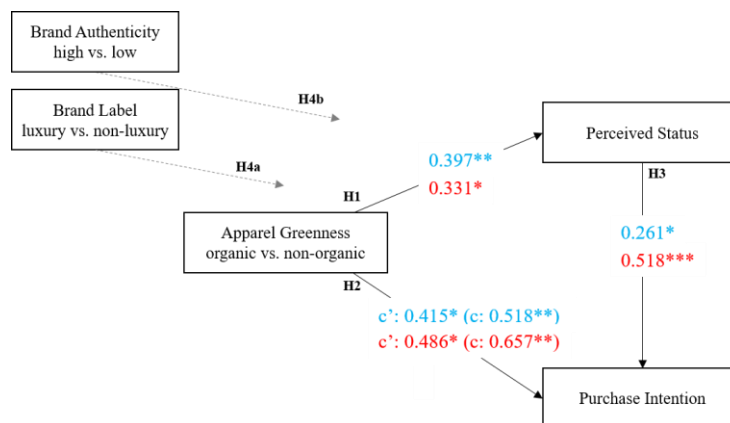


Figure 1. Hypotheses testing results

Note. Blue font indicates the results from Study 1; red font indicates the results from Study 2. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Results and Discussions:** The overall study findings confirmed the green signaling effect of organic apparel in the social media marketing context, thus supporting H1, H2, and H3. Consumers perceived the influencer wearing organic apparel to have a higher status ( $M_{\text{study1}}=5.117$ ,  $M_{\text{study2}}=5.098$ ) than the non-organic condition ( $M_{\text{study1}}=4.690$ ,  $M_{\text{study2}}=4.767$ ), and showed higher purchase intention to the organic apparel ( $M_{\text{study1}}=3.018$ ,  $M_{\text{study2}}=3.338$ ) than the non-organic apparel ( $M_{\text{study1}}=2.497$ ,  $M_{\text{study2}}=2.680$ ). As many fashion retailers attempt to signal sustainable values in social media, this finding proposes that it is effective to promote organic apparel as a status symbol that requires significant resource investments. Further, consumers perceived the luxury organic brand to have a higher status than mass brands [ $F_{1,178}=61.526$ ,  $p=.000$ , partial  $\eta^2=.257$ ], but no differences in purchase intention. This implies that the effect of green signaling is powerful enough to apply to any brand, regardless of the brand level at least in signaling status. On the contrary, for brand authenticity, consumers did not perceive the differences in status but showed higher purchase intentions toward the highly authentic and organic brand [ $F_{1,144}=7.749$ ,  $p=.006$ , partial  $\eta^2=.051$ ]. This affirms the previous findings that consumers value brand's genuine information in green marketing (Akbar & Wymer, 2017).

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