

Is Sustainable Positioning the New Path to Achieve eWOM and Brand Loyalty? An Investigation on the Gen Z Market of U.S. Apparel Brands

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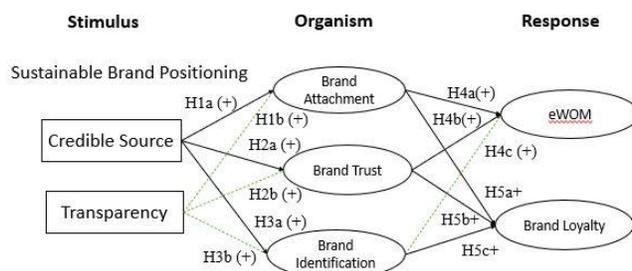
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Introduction: The fashion industry is under growing pressure to establish sustainable practices as consumer awareness of environmental and social concerns is increasing day by day. Moreover, apparel brands emphasize sustainable branding to appeal to environmental and socially concerned consumers (Chang & Jai, 2015). However, Gen Zers are raised during the "fake news" era, they are able to spot deceit fast and do not believe the hype. Because of this, Gen Zers may be resistant to sustainable branding. Studies found that high information transparency (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2015) and support from reliable sources (Sahin et al., 2020) in sustainable branding might overcome this problem. With this view, this study was conducted to investigate the effects of sustainable positioning with credible sources and transparency on customer brand attachment, trust, identification, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and brand loyalty.

Literature Review: Sustainable disclosures can significantly affect brand attachment, trust, identification, eWOM, and brand loyalty (Kim & Ha, 2020; Park & Kim, 2016; Ma et al., 2021). Based on the stimulus-organism response (S-O-R) theory (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), Chang and Jai (2015) examined the role of sustainable positioning and found it can achieve consumers' positive attitudes. Moreover, consumers' opinions can be influenced by credible sources (Sahin et al., 2020) and high transparency (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2015). Thus, based upon the S-O-R theory, this study proposed brand attachment, brand trust, and brand identification as internal organisms, and eWOM and loyalty as external responses. The following hypotheses were proposed: consumers exposed to sustainable brand positioning with credible sources will have a higher degree of brand attachment (**H1a**), trust (**H2a**), and identification (**H3a**) than those exposed to no credible source. Moreover, consumers exposed to sustainable brand positioning with high transparency will have a higher degree of brand attachment (**H1b**), trust (**H2b**), and identification (**H3b**) than those exposed to low transparency. Furthermore, this study examined: a higher level of brand attachment (**H4a**), trust (**H4b**), and identification (**H4c**) will increase electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Additionally, a higher level of brand attachment (**H5a**), trust (**H5b**), and identification (**H5c**) will increase brand loyalty (Figure 1).

Methodology: This study collected data from the online participants' recruitment site Prolific in January 2022 by developing an online experiment on Qualtrics. This research had eight conditions and used a 4 (i.e., No Credible Source / EPA as Credible Source / Social Influencers as Credible Source / Celebrity as Credible Source) by 2 (Low Transparency vs. High Transparency) between-subject design. One of the eight stimuli was randomly assigned to the

participants and asked questions on brand attachment (Lacoeuilh, 2000), brand trust (Gurviez & Korchia, 2002), brand identification (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), eWOM (Duarte et al., 2018), and brand loyalty (Kim & Ha, 2020). This study utilized a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) to measure participants' responses. After data cleaning, a total of 245 responses were analyzed in this study. All responses passed condition-specific manipulation check questions. All the variables of this study had excellent internal reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha scores ranging from .91 to .96.



Analysis and Results: Using SPSS 28, the impacts of eight experimental conditions were examined using a MANOVA analysis. The results suggest that the effect of credible sources was significant on brand attachment ($F(3,237) = 5.00, p = .002$), trust ($F(3,237) = 3.18, p = .025$), and identification ($F(3,237) = 4.56, p = .004$).

These results concluded that H1a, H2a, and H3a were supported. However, the study could not find a significant impact of transparency on any dependent variables. Thus H1b, H2b, and H3b were not supported. Moreover, this study found that sustainable positioning with the EPA logo and low transparency achieves higher brand trust and identification, whereas social influencers and low transparency conditions' impact was higher on brand attachment. Then, linear regression analyses were conducted to assess the impact of brand trust, identification, and attachment on eWOM and brand loyalty. The results suggested that brand attachment and trust were significant predictors of eWOM and loyalty. Thus, hypotheses H4a ($\beta = .29, p < .001$), H4b ($\beta = .55, p < .001$), H5a ($\beta = .23, p < .001$), and H5b ($\beta = .48, p < .001$) were supported. However, brand identification only had a significant impact on Brand loyalty but not on eWOM. Thus, H5c was supported ($\beta = .16, p < .05$), while H4c was not.

Findings and Implications: This study's findings contribute considerably to a deeper understanding of consumer behavior regarding sustainable positioning with credible sources and transparency (Mim et al, 2022). This study uncovered the relationship of source credibility and transparency with brand attachment, trust, and identification. Moreover, this study discovered the connection the brand attachment, trust, identification on eWOM, and brand loyalty. From a practical point of view, this study suggests apparel brands may communicate sustainable information with credible sources, but have to be tactical about information disclosure adequacy. Future research could build upon our findings to investigate transparency with different presentational formats and dialogues and their impacts on consumer acceptance.

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