A Content Analysis of Online Retailers' use of Environmental Claims in Apparel Product Descriptions

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It is important to understand the environmental claims that retailers use to describe their apparel offerings for a number of reasons. Increasingly, consumers are searching for information about the environment in the marketplace. Almost half (45%) of consumers purposefully search for information about the environmental impact of the products they buy (Cone, 2013). Furthermore, literature shows that retailers' environmental claims affect perceptions of ad credibility, consumers' attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention (Kim & Damhorst, 1999; Yan, Hyllegard, and Blaesi, 2012). The majority of studies that investigate the effects of environmental claims on consumers' attitudes and purchasing behavior create fictional ads with environmental claims (intention (Kim & Damhorst, 1999; Kim, Lee, & Hur, 2012; Yan, Hyllegard, and Blaesi, 2012), but this study conducts a content analysis to investigate actual environmental claims that retailers are currently using in the marketplace to persuade consumers to purchase their goods. A solid understanding of the environmental claims retailers are currently making in the marketplace is essential for designing further research studies in this area. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the environmental claims that retailers are making in their apparel product descriptions on their websites. Information Integration Theory provides the theoretical foundation for this study (Anderson, 1971). According to Anderson (1971), consumers are continuously exposed to multiple stimuli and they integrate this information with existing knowledge to form an attitude. Along with other product description information, product pictures, and product reviews, environmental claims would be an example of the stimuli consumers are exposed to and integrate to form an attitude or make a purchasing decision.

A content analysis of product descriptions for eco-friendly apparel items on retail websites was conducted. Ten websites were randomly selected from among the 25 retailers that sell apparel on the 2014 National Retail Federation's Stores Magazine's list of Top 100 Retailers. The randomly selected retailers were Target, Kohl's, Nordstrom, Dillard's, Dick's, QVC, Costco, Neiman Marcus, Belk, and Gap Inc. (including Gap, Banana Republic, Old Navy, Athleta, Piperlime, and Intermix). A total of six retailers, including QVC, Target, Banana Republic, Gap, Intermix, and Old Navy had no eco-friendly apparel offerings. The product descriptions on the remaining retailers' websites were analyzed for all eco-friendly apparel items in the men's, women's, children's, and infant categories. The total number of product descriptions analyzed was 313.

Since this is an exploratory study an inductive approach was used to analyze the data. The researcher and an assistant first collected the product description information from the retailers' websites to be examined for emerging themes. First, each piece of information in the

product descriptions was divided into a discrete unit for coding. One of the researchers read through a third of the product descriptions to develop the coding categories (Hennik, Hutter, and Bailey, 2011). Two independent coders assigned each piece of information in the product description a category. Inter-coder agreement was 95%. Any disagreement in coding was resolved through discussion. The themes that emerged were general eco terms, eco-friendly materials, eco-term in the product name, eco-term in the product color, and eco-certification. The most frequent general eco terms were eco-friendly (n= 64) and eco-conscious (n=18). Recycled polyester (n=72) was the most commonly used material followed by organic linen (n=63) and organic cotton (n=52). Bluesign certification was used to describe 21 products. A total of 20 products had the word eco in their product name (Eco drawstring jacket, Savane Eco Start Trail Cargo Shorts) and 15 had the word eco in the product color (e.g., eco true navy, eco grey).

The product descriptions were also analyzed to assess the quality of information they provided. Three descriptions contained misleading information (e.g., naturally occurring rayon, eco-conscious linen, and eco-conscious bamboo fiber). Additional product descriptions (n=15) were vague and did not explain why the product was eco-friendly. For example, some descriptions used a term like eco-friendly wash or made from recycled materials with no additional explanation. On the other hand, there were five descriptions that did an exceptional job of explaining why the product was eco-friendly, "Using recycled materials, The North Face is stopping the flow of materials to landfills; eliminating waste and saving valuable resources. Polartec® Eco-Engineering: These materials are made from 90 percent post-industrial waste and 10 percent post-consumer waste, stopping the flow of materials to the landfill and creating valuable materials from waste." Results from this study indicate that retailers sometimes use vague or misleading terminology in the marketplace and may need to be educated on what constitutes an environmentally friendly product. Future research should survey consumers to see if they understand the terms and explanations that retailers are using to describe their goods.

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