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Sustainability and social media communication: How consumers respond to marketing efforts of luxury and non-luxury fashion brands[☆]

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ABSTRACT

German and South Korean cultural groups are examined in two studies to demonstrate the link between media communication about sustainability and its impact on eWOM and purchase intentions in luxury and non-luxury contexts. A mediation brand attitude model is used to compare groups across cultural, economic, environmental, and social sustainability dimensions, with trust as a moderator. Results indicate that sustainable communication is more effective for non-luxury brands in a cultural setting that features high awareness of needs for sustainability. The study indicates that luxury and non-luxury fashion brand advertisers should carefully consider cultural settings when providing sustainability information. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Growing consumer awareness of sustainability and desires to purchase sustainable products has caused fashion companies to make sustainability a priority and core management objective (Kim & Hall, 2015). To meet consumer demands for attention to social and environmental issues, brands now advertise their efforts to develop sustainable products (Han, Seo, & Ko, 2017; Jang, Ko, Chun, & Lee, 2012) and to show corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Aoki, Obeng, Borders, & Lester, 2019; Fineman, 2001; Minton, Lee, Orth, Kim, & Kahle, 2012).

In the last several years, fashion brands have recognized that social media channels are valuable for interacting with consumers, building brand-consumer relationships, and facilitating consumer decision making (Kim & Ko, 2010; Pentina, Guilloux, & Micu, 2018). By motivating consumers to interact with brands, social media channels create brand equity, positive word-of-mouth, brand loyalty, and purchase intentions (Ko & Megehee, 2012).

Sustainable fashion studies have generally focused on luxury and fast fashion brands in observing processes involved in purchase decisions, knowledge sharing, education, environmental and social practices, and sustainable behavior such as CSR (Cervellon & Wernerfelt,

2012; Chan & Wong, 2012; Di Benedetto, 2017; Gogichaishvili, Ko, & Kim, 2019; Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, & Chan, 2012; Kong, Ko, Chae, & Mattila, 2016). Using sustainability as a marketing approach, fashion businesses have redesigned messages to reduce consumption, often termed *demarketing*, such as Patagonia's "Don't buy this jacket" campaign (Kim, Ko, & Kim, 2018; Peattie & Belz, 2010; Reich & Soule, 2016).

Given that cultural differences affect social media behavior, marketers who diffuse information about sustainable fashion on social media must consider that consumers from developed countries have greater appreciation for sustainability and are more willing to pay premium prices for green products in comparison with consumers from less developed countries (Minton et al., 2012). Thus, brands must consider knowledge levels and cultural backgrounds in ascertaining consumer interest in green goods and advertising appeals (Paul, Modi, & Patel, 2016).

Luxury is associated with pleasantness, superficiality, and ostentation (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013). In contrast, sustainability is related to altruism, moderation, and ethics. Although luxury consumers have not been well informed about sustainability activities (Bray, Johns, & Kilburn, 2011), and despite the conflict, luxury fashion brands such as Armani, Cartier, Chanel, and Gucci are committed to sustainable

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marketing communication (Janssen, Vanhamme, Lindgreen & Lefebvre, 2014). Consumers tend to have more negative perceptions about the non-sustainability of non-luxury brands rather than luxury brands (Davies & Ahonkhai, 2012).

Culture affects attitudes toward luxury and non-luxury brands, their use of sustainable advertising on social media (Chang, Jang, Lee, & Nam, 2019), and attitudes toward sustainable purchase behavior. When making purchase decisions and forming attitudes about sustainable products, Western consumers tend to be more influenced by their individual attitudes rather than by social norms (Hiller Connell & Kozar, 2012), while Eastern consumers tend to be more influenced by social norms (Kong & Ko, 2017). Thus, in the two studies reported here, South Korean and German consumers were examined regarding purchase intentions and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) related to a luxury and a non-luxury brand.

The objective was to explore sustainability claims on social media to identify cultural, economic, environmental, and social sustainability effects on brand attitudes, eWOM, and purchase intentions regarding luxury and non-luxury fashion brands. Study 1 involved a contrast between a luxury and a non-luxury brand in Germany, where sustainability awareness is relatively high (RobecoSAM, 2018), to observe how sustainability claims affect consumer perceptions. Study 2 replicated the Study 1 research design but extended the comparison by considering effects in South Korea, where sustainability awareness is relatively low (RobecoSAM, 2018).

Fashion marketers can use the results to design marketing strategies that will promote sustainable efforts and to position themselves as

agents of sustainability among increasingly aware and demanding consumers. Furthermore, the studies examine environmental, social, economic, and cultural sustainability claims to identify which is most effective in social media advertising for influencing consumer behavior in South Korea and Germany. Fig. 1 shows the conceptual framework for sustainable perception, brand attitude, and consumer behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainability, fashion, and consumer behavior

Consumers tend to prefer brands that are known for sustainability and CSR (Lai, Chiu, Yang, & Pai, 2010). Sustainability extends throughout supply chain management processes, from raw materials to sourcing, production, distribution, retailing, and consumption (Peattie & Belz, 2010). For fashion apparel to be sustainable, its manufacturing processes must meet current environmental, economic, and social needs without compromising future generations (Brundtland, 1987). In addition, sustainable fashion adheres to local tradition, heritage, exchange, and diversity needs (Na & Lee, 2013; Soini & Dessein, 2016).

Fast fashion now dominates the fashion industry and has drawn particular concerns regarding sustainability (De Brito, Carbone, & Blanquart, 2008) as consumers become increasingly aware that their purchases have environmental impacts. Thus, demands are increasing for green sustainable brands (Tanner & Wölfling Kast, 2003; Tey, Brindal, & Dibba, 2018). Indeed, 70 percent of consumers are more likely to purchase from environmentally conscious rather than from

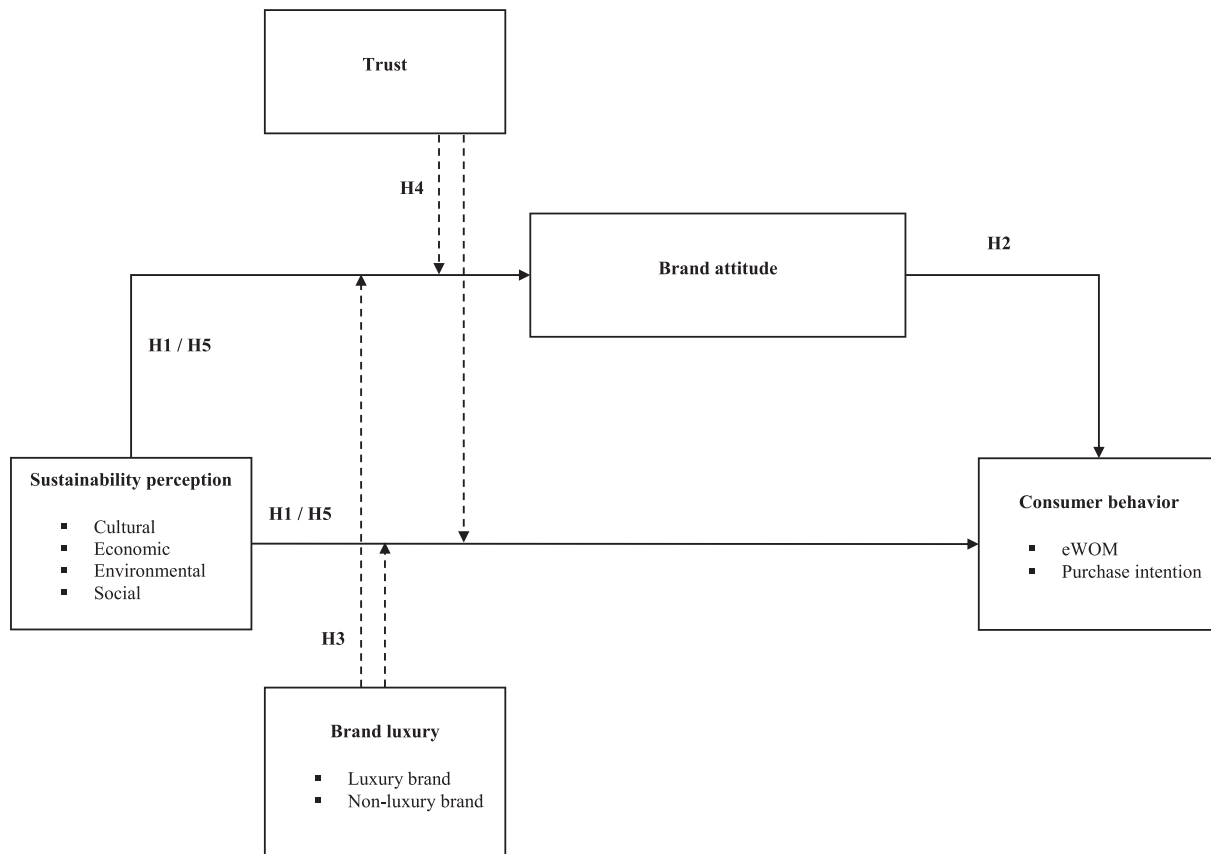


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

environmentally irresponsible companies (Gardyn, 2003). However, most green consumers rarely purchase sustainable apparel (Kim & Damhorst, 1998). Strangely, no definitive explanations have been provided to explain the well-researched attitude-behavior gap regarding the incongruence between environmentally friendly attitudes and actual behavior (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Nevertheless, consumers who know about sustainability issues are more likely to purchase sustainable products. Consequently, the fashion industry can use sustainability as leverage when developing effective communication strategies.

2.2. Importance of social media marketing in sustainable fashion business

Social media marketing differs from traditional marketing in that it requires little financial effort to provide two-way communications that cater to consumer preferences for sustainability (Kahle & Valette-Florence, 2014). Social media marketers can easily access and target consumers (Minton et al., 2012) and are thus potentially better able to promote green advertising through user interactions, networking, interpersonal relationships, and the spread of positive eWOM (Hung, Li, & Tse, 2011).

Social media can help reduce the gap between corporations and consumers and break major barriers preventing sustainable behavior, such as lack of interest, insufficient knowledge, and skepticism. Consumer decision-making processes vary across product categories (McDonald, Oates, Alevizou, Young, & Hwang, 2012). As social media has increased impacts on consumers, fashion businesses must understand consumer receptiveness and response to sustainable, green advertisements on online platforms.

In addition, social media online contexts encourage interactions and social relationships (Srinivasan, Anderson, & Ponnaolu, 2002) including sharing, advocating, socializing, and co-creating (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). As users interact with brands, brand attitudes and emotional engagement are strongly impacted (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002).

2.3. Brand attitude, electronic word-of-mouth, and purchase intention

To promote successful sustainability marketing, it is important to understand that consumer perceptions of sustainability include long-term environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions (Kagawa, 2007). Environmental issues include energy saving, conservation, environmental friendliness, green production, organic materials, and recycling. Sustainability perceptions (SP) include perceptions of brand efforts, losses, and gains in sustainability efforts (Kim, Yun, Lee, & Ko, 2016). Consumer beliefs and purchase intentions are strongly associated with brand attachments and perceptions of CSR (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006). When green products evoke high trust and positive brand attitudes, consumers tend to form positive purchase intentions (Chen & Chai, 2010) because they feel that the products meet their environmental needs (Netemeyer, Maxham, & Pullig, 2005). Transparent and socially responsible brand efforts strongly affect consumer trust, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, which then encourages positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and eWOM more effectively than traditional marketing tools (Bailey, 2005; Chatterjee, 2001; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Katz, Lazarsfeld, & Roper, 2017; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003). Social media marketers now use online platforms as an effective communication channel for user interaction, networking, and interpersonal relations that trigger eWOM behavior (Minton et al., 2012). Those considerations suggest the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *Consumer perceptions of brand efforts for sustainability will positively influence a) brand attitudes, b) eWOM, and c) purchase intentions.*

Overall brand evaluations are the basis for brand attitudes, which influence purchase decisions (Teng, 2009). Brand attitudes and purchase intentions are enhanced when brands indicate environmentally friendly, appropriate efforts (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Rios, Martinez, Moreno, & Soriano, 2006), especially among consumers who have high environmental awareness (Yan, Ogle, & Hyllegard, 2010). Consequently, brand attitude may mediate effects on purchase intentions, as research has shown (Yan et al., 2010).

Consumers tend to trust interpersonal communication more than they trust marketer-generated contents (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) and will rely on eWOM for making purchase decisions when they believe sources are credible. However, brand attitude is expected to have a stronger mediating effect for purchase intentions than eWOM because sustainable fashion is a recent phenomenon. Social media contexts fulfill needs to belong to groups; group norms may be more persuasive than sustainability concerns (Ho & Dempsey, 2010). In contrast, purchase intentions are private decisions rather than social statements. Therefore:

Hypothesis 2. *Brand attitude more strongly mediates the effect of sustainability perception for purchase intention rather than eWOM.*

2.4. Sustainability and brand luxury

Luxury brands advertise their sustainability and CSR to enhance brand evaluations (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013; Chang et al., 2019; Torelli, Monga, & Kaikati, 2011). To reiterate, luxury is associated with pleasantness, superficiality, and ostentation, while sustainability is associated with altruism, moderation, and ethics (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013). Despite the conflicting concepts, luxury fashion brands such as Armani, Cartier, Chanel, Gucci, and Stella McCartney are using sustainable marketing communications (Janssen et al., 2014). However, luxury consumers prioritize quality rather than sustainability (Steenkamp, Van Heerde, & Geyskens, 2010). Instead, they are more influenced by CSR activities because they appear to be congruent with core business goals to maintain brand evaluations and reputations (Bhattacharya, Sen, & Korschun, 2011). However, a study of luxury fashion products that used recycled materials showed that consumers might also negatively evaluate sustainable efforts (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013). Moreover, consumer responses to sustainability differ across brand types and luxury perceptions (Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2017). Thus, favorable attitudes toward luxury brands do not necessarily evoke actual sustainable behavior (Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2017). Hence, in luxury fashion contexts especially, attitudes about sustainability conflict with behavior.

Sustainability is more congruent with non-luxury brands, particularly because fast fashion production has heavy economic effects (Sun, Kim, & Kim, 2014) and luxury brand images are dissonant with eco-friendliness (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013). Consequently, mass-market fashion brands are more likely than luxury brands to advertise sustainability (Jestratičević, Rudd, & Uanhoro, 2020). Moreover, a study of the green marketing of a luxury brand showed no significant effect on satisfaction of consumers who frequently purchased luxury products, but a significant relationship was confirmed for infrequent luxury purchasers (Park, Ko, & Kim, 2010), indicating a reverse relationship between brand luxury consumption and response to sustainability. Therefore:

Hypothesis 3. *Sustainability perception has stronger impacts on brand attitude and consumer behavior for non-luxury rather than luxury brands.*

2.5. Trust

When consumers form trust, they are willing to rely on a brand “to perform its stated function” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82). Social responsibility and brand transparency strongly affect perceptions of accountability and trust, which then predicts brand loyalty and purchase intentions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Trust also determines whether green product information is perceived as credible and accurate and whether it enhances consumer behavior (Quelch & Harding, 1996; Young, Hwang, McDonald, & Oates, 2010). Thus, companies thought to be reliable and honest create positive brand reputations through CSR (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001) and commitment to environmental and social issues (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Osburg, Akhtar, Yoganathan, & McLeay, 2019). Hence, appropriate sustainable marketing activities that convey trustworthiness can create positive attitudes (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000). However, if sustainable advertising misleads consumers or transmits confusing information about products and actual sustainability attributes (Schmuck, Matthes, & Naderer, 2018), consumers might perceive that the brand is dishonestly “greenwashing” (Laufer, 2003) and lacks legitimacy (Olsen, Slotegraaf, & Chandukala, 2014). In addition, sustainability efforts must be transparent and honest if consumers are to develop favorable attitudes and intentions (Osburg et al., 2019). However, consumers who highly trust a brand and expect it to act in their best interest may form negative brand evaluations if the brand appears to greenwash its activities (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Schmuck et al., 2018). Hence:

Hypothesis 4. *Trust negatively moderates the relationship between sustainability perception and brand attitude.*

2.6. Sustainability dimensions

Originally, sustainability included environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Caniato, Caridi, Crippa, & Moretto, 2012; Peattie & Belz, 2010). The environmental dimension included natural resource use, carrying capacities, and ecosystem integrity. The social dimension included participation, empowerment, social mobility, and cultural preservation. The economic dimension included household needs, efficient use of labor, and industrial and agricultural growth. Changes in consumer behavior and the market environment have added the cultural dimension, including the preservation of art, heritage, knowledge, and cultural diversity (Soini & Birkeland, 2014; Soini & Dessein, 2016). This study takes a holistic approach to examine consumer perceptions of environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions of sustainable marketing activities.

Environmental advertising is probably the most prominent sustainability dimension and the most frequently applied in the fashion business (Kim & Damhorst, 1998; Minton et al., 2012). Consumers are highly aware of environmental advertising, so they are likely to have positive perceptions of eco-friendly claims about efforts to prevent detrimental environmental impacts (Gogichaishvili et al., 2019; Olsen et al., 2014; Polonsky, Carlson, Grove, & Kangun, 1997), but only when the claims align with their thoughts and beliefs (Ruiz & Sicilia, 2004). Most studies on environmental marketing claims have examined how online eco-friendly advertising messages affect purchase intentions (Kim & Lennon, 2008), such claims have been shown to positively affect attitudes toward advertising, brand awareness, brand attitudes, and

eWOM (Gogichaishvili et al., 2019; Kim, Chun, & Ko, 2017). In addition, environmental labeling has been shown to stimulate purchase intentions (Polonsky et al., 1997). The fifth hypothesis is based on those arguments and on the fact that consumers are most frequently exposed to environmental sustainability claims:

Hypothesis 5. *Marketing claims focused on environmental sustainability rather than on economic, social, and cultural sustainability, will more strongly influence a) brand attitudes, b) eWOM, and c) purchase intentions.*

2.7. Cultural differences

Germany and South Korea have different cultural orientations (Hofstede, 2001). South Koreans score high on collectivism, indicating a focus on group-oriented goals, conformity, and social interaction (Triandis, 1995). In contrast, Germans score high on individualism, indicating a focus on self-reliance, freedom of choice, individual actions, and cost-benefit analysis in behavioral intentions (Hofstede, 2001). In addition, they view recycling as having long-term value and are more likely to share their beliefs supporting cooperative environmental protection (McCarty & Shrum, 2001).

Individualism versus collectivism may generate different cross-culture perceptions of advertisements (de Mooij, 2004). In individualistic cultures, low-context communications with explicit expressions are more effective (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010), so consumers will rely more on information acquired through media and friends. In collectivistic cultures, high-context, indirect communications will be more effective, and personal experience will be the most reliable basis for making decisions (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). Consequently, when luxury brands use green advertising, responses should differ across individualistic versus collectivistic countries (Park et al., 2010). Consequently:

Hypothesis 6. *Sustainability perceptions about luxury and non-luxury brands will be more persuasive for individualistic German consumers rather than collectivist South Korean consumers.*

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

Study 1 was an analysis of consumer responses to social media ads endorsing sustainability. The analysis included mediation and moderation analysis, and additional analyses using a 2 (brand luxury: non-luxury vs. luxury) \times 5 (sustainability dimension: control, cultural, economic, environmental, social) between-subjects design.

3.2. Stimuli

Participants viewed five versions of a brand post; four using cultural, economic, environmental, or social claims; one, the control condition, used no claims. To appeal to participants of both genders, a unisex shirt was the stimulus. The frame indicated that the ad was distributed on a social media platform. Except for the sustainability manipulation and different names for the non-luxury and luxury brand manipulation, the ad stimuli were constant (Appendix A). The selection of brands for the stimuli was based on a pretest where participants rated to what extent they consider a set of ten different fashion brands (i.e., Abercrombie & Fitch, Calvin Klein, GAP, Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, Armani, Burberry, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Prada) to be a luxury brand. Gucci (i.e., luxury brand) and Tommy Hilfiger (i.e., non-luxury

brand) were selected for the experimental design due to their discriminative properties.

3.3. Participants

A total of 429 participants recruited from Germany were randomly assigned to the treatment and control groups (age, $M = 28, SD = 8.16$; gender, 65.0% women; education, 2.6% incomplete high school education, 28.9% complete high school education, 34.3% undergraduate university education, 29.1% graduate university education, 4.0% postgraduate university education, 1.2% other education; occupation, 58.5% student, 33.1% employee, 3.8% employer/self-employed, 4.7% other employment).

3.4. Measures

After viewing the ad from the brand post, participants were asked to name the brand they had just viewed. Next, they completed attitudinal and behavioral measures related to the brand, indicated their social media use, and reported their attitudes toward sustainability. All items were tested using a 7-point Likert-type scale. Brand attitude was measured with three items based on an overall brand attitude scale (Grohmann, 2009) using 7-point semantic differentials anchored by opposite adjectives (negative/positive, dislike/like, unfavorable/favorable). Purchase intention was measured using two seven-point semantic differentials anchored by opposite adjectives (unlikely/likely, improbable/probable) adopted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). eWOM was measured with two items anchored by strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (7) adopted from Alexandrov, Lilly, and Babakus (2013).

Table 1
Moderated mediation analysis of the effect of sustainability perceptions on eWOM and purchase intention for Study 1.

| Variables | Brand attitude | | eWOM | | Purchase intention | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|------|---------|------|--------------------|------|
| | β | SE | β | SE | β | SE |
| Sustainability perception (SP) | 0.44*** | 0.11 | 0.01 | 0.13 | 0.11 | 0.14 |
| Trust | 0.54*** | 0.09 | 0.06 | 0.11 | 0.13 | 0.12 |
| SP \times Trust | 0.11*** | 0.03 | 0.06* | 0.03 | 0.02 | 0.03 |
| Brand luxury | 0.33 | 0.25 | 0.06 | 0.28 | 0.39 | 0.30 |
| SP \times brand luxury | 0.13 | 0.07 | 0.09 | 0.08 | 0.24** | 0.09 |
| Ad attitude | 0.09* | 0.04 | 0.41*** | 0.05 | 0.02 | 0.05 |
| Familiarity | 0.13*** | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.18*** | 0.04 |
| Authenticity | 0.16*** | 0.04 | 0.08 | 0.05 | 0.09 | 0.05 |
| Desirability | 0.31*** | 0.04 | 0.02 | 0.05 | 0.30*** | 0.05 |
| Willingness to pay price premium | 0.02 | 0.05 | 0.02 | 0.06 | 0.19** | 0.06 |
| Ownership | 0.11 | 0.14 | 0.29 | 0.16 | 0.33 | 0.17 |
| Resonance | 0.02 | 0.06 | 0.05 | 0.07 | 0.22** | 0.07 |
| Social media engagement | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.19** | 0.06 | 0.014 | 0.06 |
| Sustainable social media engagement | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.05 | 0.05 |
| Sustainable buying | 0.06 | 0.05 | 0.08 | 0.06 | 0.16* | 0.06 |
| Brand attitude | | | 0.06 | 0.06 | 0.18** | 0.07 |
| Explained variance | 0.64 | | 0.51 | | 0.72 | |
| N | 343 | | 343 | | 343 | |

Note. Brand attitude: $F(15) = 38.38, p = .00$; eWOM: $F(16) = 20.93, p = .00$; Purchase intention: $F(16) = 52.58, p = .00$. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

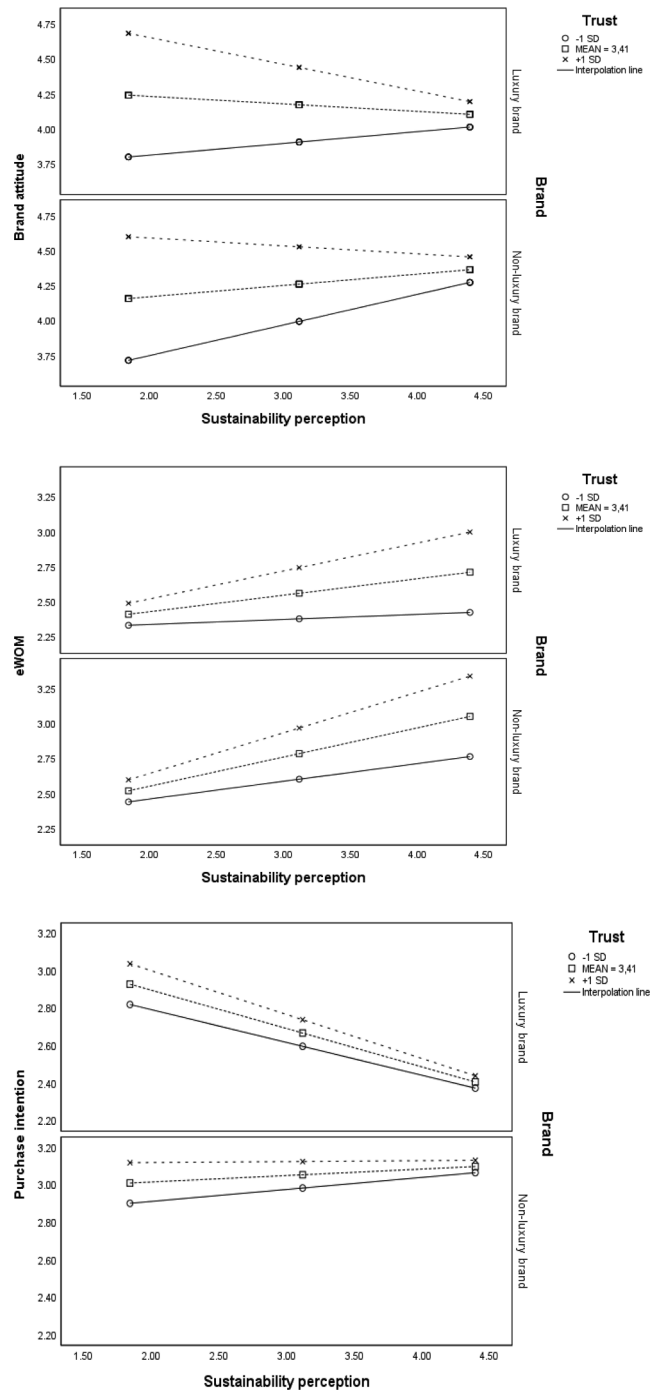


Fig. 2. Sustainability perception \times trust effect on brand attitude, eWOM, and purchase intention.

3.5. Manipulation checks

Three manipulation checks were performed. To ensure that participants paid attention, they were asked to choose among six alternatives to identify which brand was featured in the ad. Those who had incorrect recall were excluded from the sample. Sustainability perception was measured across four dimensions with the statement “The

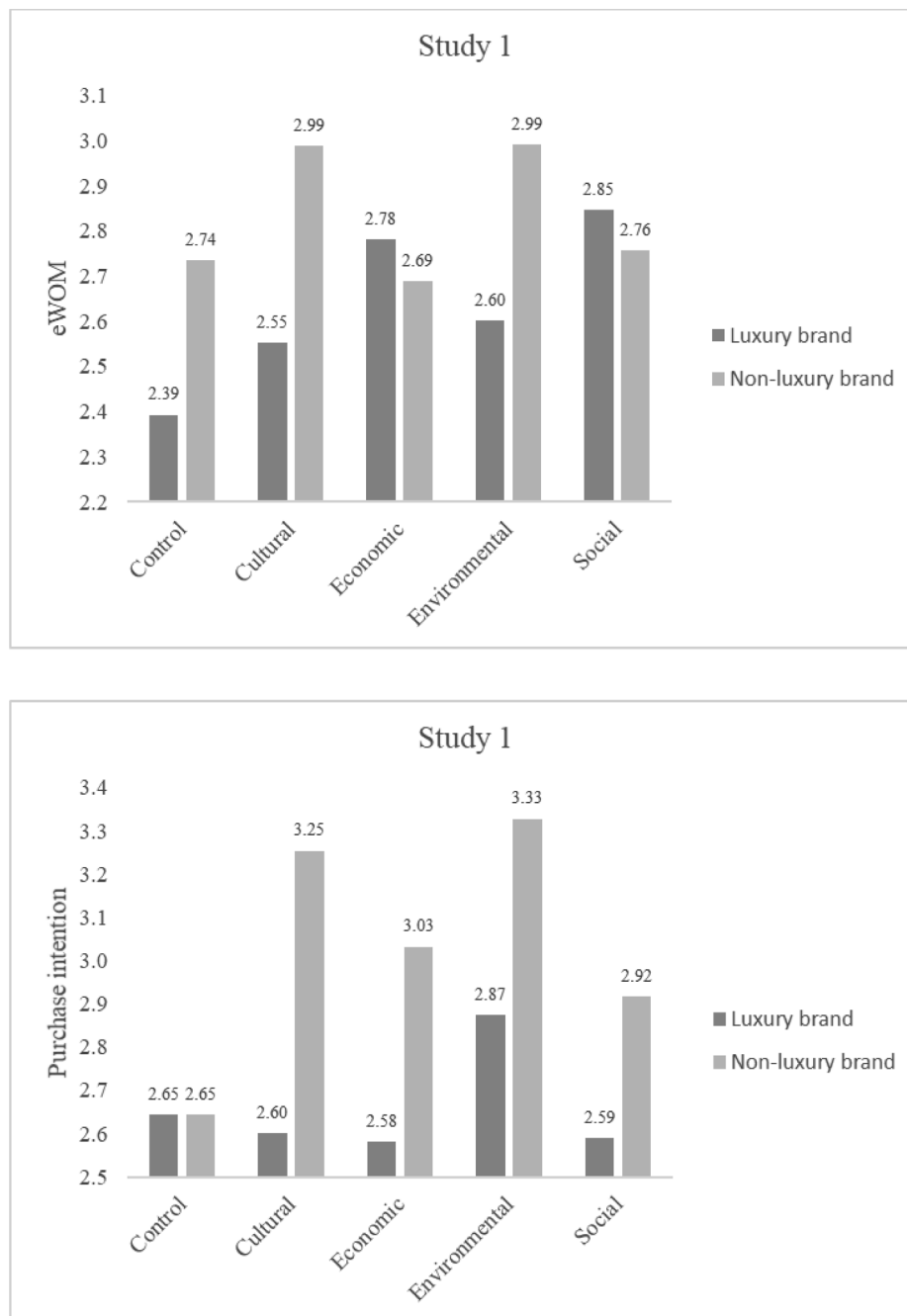


Fig. 3. Group comparisons for different sustainability claims for Study 1.

brand contributes to sustainability on the following dimension...” anchored by *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (7). Perceptions of brand luxury were measured with three items anchored by *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (7) adopted from Ko, Costello, and Taylor (2017). The manipulations of sustainability perception and brand luxury were successful. Participants who viewed the ads containing sustainability claims ($M_{\text{treatment}} = 3.21$) had higher sustainability perceptions ($t(341) = 2.67, p < .01$) than those who viewed the ads without claims ($M_{\text{control}} = 2.72$). Participants had higher perceptions of luxury ($t(427) = 13.56, p < .001$) for the luxury brand

($M_{\text{luxury}} = 6.00$) than for the non-luxury brand ($M_{\text{non-luxury}} = 4.42$).

3.6. Moderated mediation analysis

To investigate the underlying mechanisms affecting sustainability perceptions on eWOM and purchase intention, a moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 10; Hayes (2013)) was performed using brand attitude as the mediator.

Table 1 shows that brand attitude mediated sustainability perceptions, with no significant unconditional direct effect on eWOM

($\beta = 0.01$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = n.s.$) and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.11$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = n.s.$). Sustainability perception had a significant direct effect ($\beta = 0.44$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$) on brand attitude and a conditional effect (see Fig. 2) on trust ($\beta = -0.11$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypotheses 1a and 4. Participants who had low trust toward the non-luxury brand showed a positive effect on brand attitude ($\beta = 0.22$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .01$). Participants with high trust reacted to increased sustainability perceptions by showing negative brand attitudes toward the luxury brand ($\beta = -0.19$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .01$). Brand attitude subsequently influenced purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.18$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .01$), but no significant effect was found for eWOM ($\beta = 0.06$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = n.s.$), supporting Hypothesis 2. A significant interaction effect occurred in sustainability perception \times trust ($\beta = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .05$) on eWOM (see Fig. 2). Intentions to spread positive eWOM increased both for the non-luxury ($\beta = 0.29$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$) and the luxury brand ($\beta = 0.20$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .01$), most strongly for consumers with high brand trust. Brand luxury moderated ($\beta = -0.24$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .01$) the effect of sustainability perception on purchase intention (Fig. 2). Purchase intention decreased ($\beta = -0.24$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .01$) for the luxury brand, and sustainability most strongly increased perception under high trust. Indirect effects of sustainability perception via brand attitude were confirmed on purchase intention for the non-luxury brand ($b = 0.04$, $LLCI = 0.01$, $ULCI = 0.09$) under low trust and for the luxury brand ($b = -0.04$, $LLCI = -0.08$, $ULCI = -0.00$) under high trust.

3.7. Additional analysis

An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tested for group differences in a 2 (brand luxury: non-luxury vs. luxury) \times 5 (sustainability dimension: control, cultural, economic, environmental, and social) between-subjects design. The covariates included the same variables used in the regression analysis. Pairwise comparisons revealed no significant differences in brand attitude across the five conditions for the non-luxury and the luxury brand. The results for eWOM showed that, compared to the control group ($M_{\text{control}} = 2.39$), respondents in the luxury brand condition were more likely to provide positive eWOM when they saw the economic sustainability claim ($M_{\text{economic}} = 2.78$, $p < .05$) and social sustainability claim ($M_{\text{social}} = 2.85$, $p < .05$) (Fig. 3). No differences emerged for the non-luxury brand group. The results of pairwise comparisons of purchase intention revealed significant differences only for the non-luxury brand condition (Fig. 3). Purchase intention significantly increased for respondents in the cultural ($M_{\text{cultural}} = 3.25$, $p < .05$) and environmental ($M_{\text{environmental}} = 3.33$, $p < .05$) sustainability claim group as compared to the control group ($M_{\text{control}} = 2.92$). The results partially supported Hypotheses 3 and 5c.

3.8. Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated that perceived sustainability positively influences brand attitude and that trust strongly and positively affects brand evaluation. However, consumers with high levels of trust have more unfavorable attitudes as sustainability perceptions increase. Sustainability perception plays only a minor role for encouraging sharing behavior on social media. Attitude toward the brand post and general social media engagement mainly drive intentions to share content. Accordingly, increasing sustainability perception will motivate consumers to purchase from non-luxury brands but not luxury brands. Moreover, group comparisons indicated that economic and social sustainability information in brand posts motivate eWOM more for luxury

Table 2

Moderated mediation analysis of the effect of sustainability perceptions on eWOM and purchase intention for Study 2.

| Variables | Brand attitude | | eWOM | | Purchase intention | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|------|---------|------|--------------------|------|
| | β | SE | β | SE | β | SE |
| Sustainability perception (SP) | 0.00 | 0.17 | 0.21 | 0.15 | 0.38 | 0.20 |
| Trust | 0.11 | 0.18 | 0.27 | 0.16 | 0.24 | 0.22 |
| SP \times Trust | 0.01 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.08 | 0.04 |
| Brand luxury | 0.68* | 0.33 | 0.19 | 0.30 | 0.65 | 0.40 |
| SP \times brand luxury | 0.10 | 0.07 | 0.01 | 0.06 | 0.11 | 0.08 |
| Ad attitude | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.64*** | 0.04 | 0.07 | 0.06 |
| Familiarity | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.20*** | 0.05 |
| Authenticity | 0.12* | 0.05 | 0.03 | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.07 |
| Desirability | 0.28*** | 0.05 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.50*** | 0.06 |
| Willingness to pay price premium | 0.07 | 0.05 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.20*** | 0.06 |
| Ownership | 0.04 | 0.10 | 0.21* | 0.09 | 0.01 | 0.12 |
| Resonance | 0.03 | 0.07 | 0.05 | 0.06 | 0.00 | 0.08 |
| Social media engagement | 0.12 | 0.06 | 0.00 | 0.06 | 0.02 | 0.08 |
| Sustainable social media engagement | 0.02 | 0.06 | 0.07 | 0.05 | 0.17* | 0.07 |
| Sustainable buying | 0.02 | 0.05 | 0.11* | 0.05 | 0.03 | 0.06 |
| Brand attitude | | | 0.07 | 0.05 | 0.09 | 0.06 |
| Explained variance | 0.36 | | 0.70 | | 0.56 | |
| N | 384 | | 384 | | 384 | |

Note. Brand attitude: $F(15) = 13.90$, $p = .00$; eWOM: $F(16) = 54.44$, $p = .00$; Purchase intention: $F(16) = 29.43$, $p = .00$. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

brands. Therefore, non-luxury brands are best able to leverage cultural and environmental sustainability to increase purchase intentions.

4. Study 2

Study 2 conceptually replicated Study 1 in a different cultural setting. As in Study 1, mediation and moderation analysis were applied to test the hypotheses on a South Korean sample. Additional analyses were performed using a 2 (brand luxury: non-luxury vs. luxury) \times 5 (sustainability dimension: control, cultural, economic, environmental, and social) between-subjects design. The scales and procedure were identical to those of Study 1.

4.1. Participants

The experiment was conducted among 384 participants from South Korea. Participants were randomly assigned to the treatment or control groups (age, $M = 30$, $SD = 9.66$; gender, 69.3% women; education, 0.5% incomplete high school education, 20.8% complete high school education, 72.9% undergraduate university education, 4.7% graduate university education, 0.5% postgraduate university education, 0.5% other education; occupation, 22.1% student, 64.8% employee, 5.5% employer/self-employed, 7.6% other employment).

4.2. Manipulation checks

The manipulations of sustainability perception and brand luxury were successful. Participants had higher sustainability perceptions ($t(382) = 2.08$, $p < .05$) when viewing the ads containing sustainability claims ($M_{\text{treatment}} = 4.75$) than ads without claims ($M_{\text{control}} = 4.44$). Brand luxury was perceived higher ($t(382) = 10.93$,

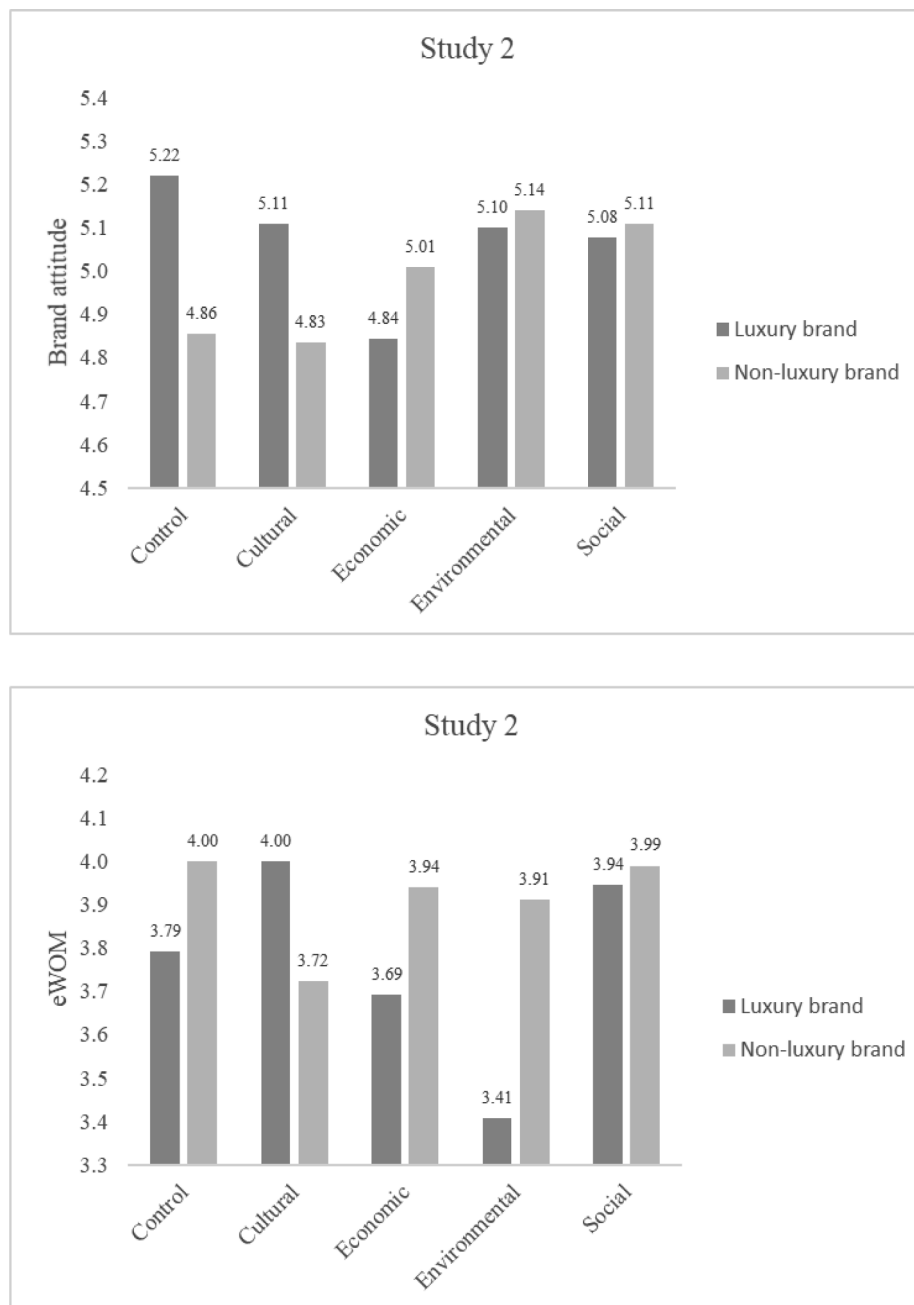


Fig. 4. Group comparisons for different sustainability claims for Study 2.

$p < .001$) for the luxury brand ($M_{\text{luxury}} = 5.47$) than for the non-luxury brand ($M_{\text{non-luxury}} = 4.28$).

4.3. Moderated mediation analysis

Brand luxury ($\beta = 0.68$, $SE = 0.33$, $p < .05$) increased brand attitudes (Table 2). Sustainability perception did not affect purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.38$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = \text{n.s.}$). No mediation or moderation effects were revealed. The results supported Hypothesis 6.

4.4. Additional analysis

ANCOVA tested for group differences across the four sustainability dimensions for the non-luxury and luxury brand. Pairwise comparisons indicated that attitudes toward the luxury brand suffered the most when communicating economic sustainability ($M_{\text{economic}} = 4.84$, $p < .05$) (Fig. 4). Respondents were least likely to provide eWOM when the luxury brand post promoted environmental sustainability ($M_{\text{environmental}} = 3.41$, $p < .05$).

4.5. Discussion

Study 2 tested the same conceptual model in South Korea. Overall, sustainability perception played no significant role in brand evaluations. However, group comparisons showed that luxury brands risk diluting brand attitudes when they advertise economic sustainability. Luxury brands also reduce intentions to spread positive eWOM when they advertise environmental sustainability.

5. General discussion

Several hypotheses were developed to test how sustainability perceptions in Germany and South Korea affect eWOM and purchase intentions, with brand attitude as a mediator. The studies show how trust and brand luxury moderate the proposed relationships. The experimental design compared the effectiveness of advertising content on social media across cultural, economic, environmental, and social sustainability dimensions.

Study 1 revealed that sustainable advertising positively influences brand evaluations, but trust is a boundary condition for the positive effect. Increasing perception of sustainability had a less positive effect on consumers who generally trust the brand. Moreover, increased perception of sustainability had a less positive effect and actually diluted the luxury brand.

The study indicates that brands may boost brand evaluations first by leveraging trust to increase expectations that a brand is ethical and transparent. The claims used in the advertising material were vague in lacking information about how sustainable claims were enforced. Consumers can perceive implicit deception in vague or ambiguous claims that cannot be properly verified. Accordingly, the brand post may appear to be an effort to greenwash (Schmuck et al., 2018). Second, consumers are increasingly aware of sustainability issues, but environmental preservation is a secondary criterion when choosing and purchasing products, particularly for luxury brands where sustainability conflicts with quality, value, and prestige associations (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013).

Sustainability had only a marginal impact on intentions to provide positive eWOM about brands on social media. Primarily guiding such intentions were attitudes toward the advertising material and general predispositions toward using social media. However, luxury brands significantly increased eWOM intentions when making economic and social sustainability claims, which may indicate trend information worth sharing (Godey et al., 2016).

Sustainability perception failed to have a direct and unconditional effect on purchase intentions, but brand attitude was a positive mediator. However, brand luxury negatively moderated the effect of sustainability perception on purchase intention. Hence, as sustainability perceptions increased, willingness to purchase a luxury brand decreased. In contrast, when the communication posts contained cultural and environmental information, non-luxury brands gained the most in purchase intentions. The results align with previous findings suggesting that sustainable communication creates dissonant, conflicting associations for luxury brands. That is, green advertising conflicts with luxury brand images as representing prestige, quality, rarity, and exclusivity. Accordingly, consumers feel that luxury brands have less need for sustainability because they are slow fashion. Sustainability communications then appear to be commercial strategies to boost sales or to threaten quality and scarcity (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013).

Study 2 was conducted in South Korea, which ranks lower (#33) than Germany (#13) on the country sustainability ranking (RobecoSAM, 2018). The results supported the proposition that South Korean consumers will be less influenced by sustainability communication for evaluating brands, for online sharing behavior, and for forming purchase intentions. However, group comparisons showed that luxury brands promoting economic sustainability had significantly declining brand attitudes. Moreover, eWOM intentions for luxury brands

decreased with the communication of environmental sustainability.

To recapitulate, the objective was to investigate how sustainability claims affect evaluations of and intentions toward luxury and non-luxury brands in different cultural settings. Results from both studies show that the cultural setting must be carefully considered in studies of sustainability communication strategies for luxury versus non-luxury brands on social media. That is, the campaigns will be most successful for non-luxury brands if conducted in cultures where consumers are highly aware of sustainability.

6. Implications

The two studies provide valuable insights into how social media communication about sustainability influences non-luxury and luxury brands in individualistic versus collective cultural settings. In Germany, brand posts promoting sustainability enhanced non-luxury and luxury brand attitudes, an important behavioral antecedent. However, advertising messages must be carefully considered. Consumers who highly trust the brand may be skeptical about green advertising and may decrease their brand evaluation. Although communicating sustainability increased eWOM for both non-luxury and luxury brands, it failed to increase purchase intentions.

Non-luxury brands can exploit sustainability associations to increase purchase considerations, but luxury brands risk diluting the brand. Consequently, luxury brand managers should refrain from explicitly communicating sustainability to avoid causing dissonance in brand associations with quality and prestige (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013). Instead, they should use more implicit strategies, such as using sustainable materials in product packaging or store layouts.

In comparison, South Koreans are less aware of sustainability and thus sustainable advertising had unequal effects. Hence, brands should avoid using one-size-fits-all advertising campaigns to promote dedication to sustainability. Instead, communicating sustainability may be socially desirable but disconnected from behavioral intentions (Minton et al., 2012). Sustainable advertising campaigns on social media will be most beneficial for non-luxury brands in cultures where consumers are highly aware of sustainability. Moreover, cultural and environmental sustainability claims will be most effective for non-luxury brands. Although environmental sustainability may be the prototype of green advertising, cultural sustainability is a novel dimension that deserves future attention in studies on sustainable communication.

7. Limitations

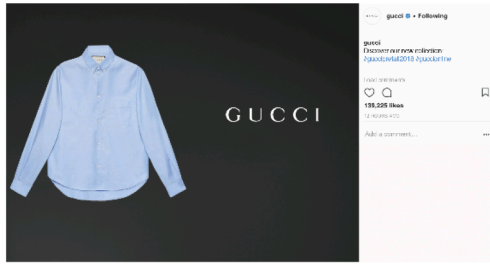
The present study has several limitations. Although trust was found to be a boundary condition for the positive effect of sustainability, the underlying mechanisms are speculations. Further research should investigate why consumers who have high trust and sustainability perceptions would have diluted brand evaluations. Moreover, rather than use only two brands to represent the non-luxury and luxury brand conditions, researchers should investigate whether an experimental design using different brands would change the pattern of sustainability dimensions. Cognition and affect have been shown to guide brand evaluation, but future studies could explore how extensively they affect the processing of sustainable information for non-luxury and luxury brands. Such research would help brand managers frame messages in ways that will trigger the desired cognitive and affective processes.

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Appendix A. Stimulus material

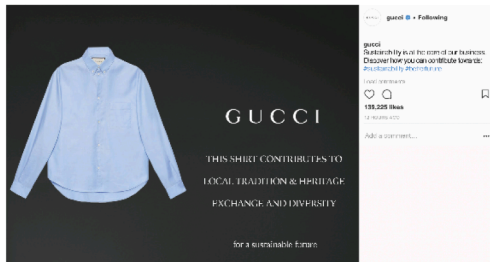
Control claim luxury brand



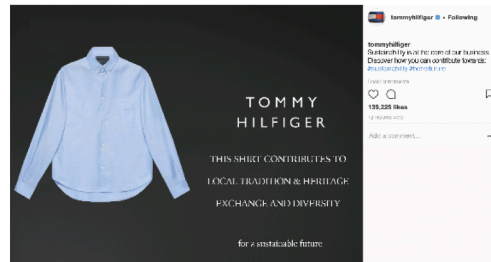
Control claim non-luxury brand



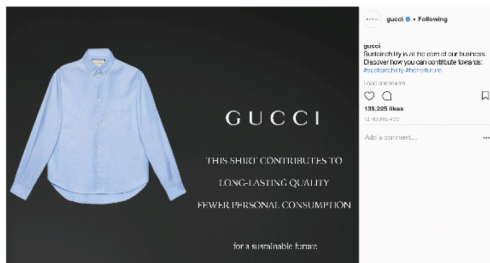
Cultural claim luxury brand



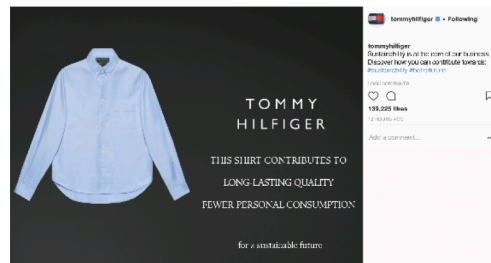
Cultural claim non-luxury brand



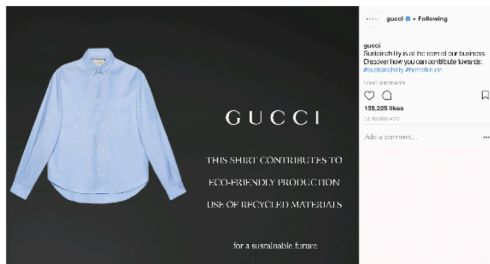
Economic claim luxury brand



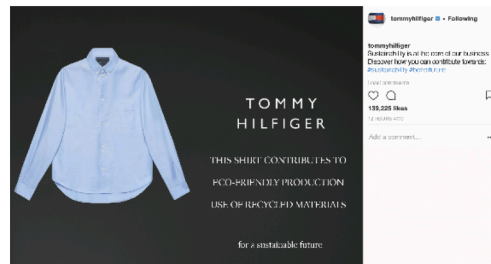
Economic claim non-luxury brand



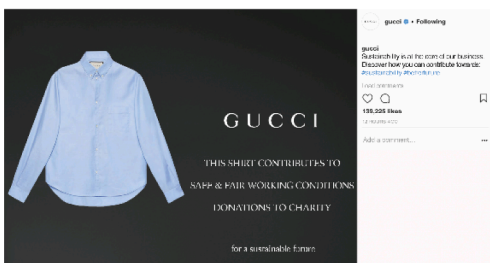
Environmental claim luxury brand



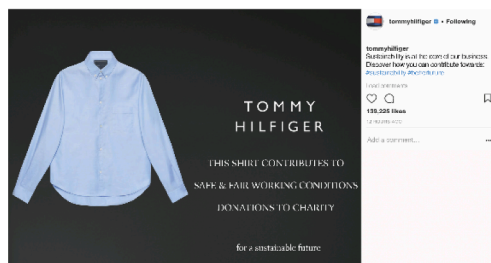
Environmental claim non-luxury brand



Social claim luxury brand



Social claim non-luxury brand



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