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Three experiments show that a symbolic sustainable attribute improves consumers' attitude towards a product when external cues signal low quality. We also specify the mediating role of warm-glow feelings and of the relative weight of the sustainable attribute (vs performance attribute) in forming product attitude.

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Symbolic Sustainable Attributes Improve Attitude Toward Low-Quality Products: A Warm-Glow Feelings Account

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Firms are investing considerable amounts of money to develop sustainable offerings that respond to an important global consumer trend (Olsen, Slotegraaf, and Chandukala 2014). However, sustainable attributes can have either positive, neutral or negative effects on product evaluation (e.g. Bodur, Gao, and Grohmann 2013; Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, and Raghunathan 2010). In this research, we report on three experiments to demonstrate that sustainable attributes have a positive effect on consumer attitudes for low-quality (versus medium-) products or services. We also identify the mediating role of warm-glow feelings and of the relative weight of the sustainable attribute (vs utilitarian attribute) in forming product attitude.

When external cues signal that the overall quality of a product is low, it discredits performance-related product attributes in a process of quality disconfirmation (Golder et al. 2012). Therefore, in the case of a low-quality product, attributes that do not relate to product performance are likely to gain additional weight in consumers' formation of product attitudes. Accordingly, symbolic sustainable attributes, which do not relate to product performance (vs utilitarian attributes) should improve product or service attitude when external cues signal low quality (Hypothesis 1).

Research shows that sustainable attributes induce warm-glow feelings (Chernev and Blair 2015). Given our prediction that symbolic sustainable attributes may gain additional weight when consumers evaluate low-quality products, this change in weighting should in turn lead to an increase in warm-glow feelings. Hence, we expect that warm-glow feelings mediate the effect of a symbolic sustainable attribute on product attitude when external cues signal low product quality (Hypothesis 2). We also propose that this mediating effect is explained by the relative weight of the symbolic sustainable attribute in forming an overall evaluation (i.e. there is a serial mediation; Hypothesis 3).

Study 1 used a 2 (product quality: low vs. medium) \times 3 (sustainable attribute vs. utilitarian attribute vs. no attribute) between-subjects design to test H1 and H2. We manipulated product quality with *Consumer Reports* ratings of a sunscreen product, which was presented as either "EcoConscious" (sustainable attribute), "Very Water Resistant" (utilitarian attribute), or without text (no attribute). A sample of 615 US citizens (52% women) completed a survey on MTurk. An ANOVA revealed main effects of product quality ($F(1, 615)=359.85, p<.001$) and sustainable attribute ($F(2, 615)=4.15, p=.016$) on product attitude, as well as an interaction effect ($F(2, 615)=3.71, p=.025$). Planned contrasts revealed that eco-conscious attribute induced better attitude than no attribute and water resistant attribute in the low-quality condition ($M_{EcoConscious}=2.99$ vs. $M_{NoAttribute}=2.33, p=.003$; $M_{EcoConscious}=2.99$ vs. $M_{WaterResistant}=2.43, p=.054$). When quality was medium, no significant difference appeared across conditions, supporting H1. H2 was tested with a moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS Macro Model 8, Hayes 2017). A significant moderated mediation was observed (Index=.55, 95% CI=.13 to .97), whereby the indirect effect of symbolic sustainable attribute (vs. utilitarian attribute) on product attitude was more important in the low-quality condition ($ab_{Low-quality}=-.90, 95\% CI=-1.24$ to $-.58$) than in the medium-quality condition ($ab_{Medium-quality}=-.35, 95\% CI=-.62$ to $-.09$). These results support H2.

Study 2 tests the differential effect of symbolic sustainable vs utilitarian sustainable attributes. It used a 2 (product quality: low vs. medium) \times 3 (symbolic sustainable attribute [fair-trade] vs. utilitarian sustainable attribute [organic] vs. no attribute) between-subjects design. "Fair-Trade" and "Organic" were successfully pre-tested as representing respectively symbolic and utilitarian attributes. We manipulated product quality with independent experts' quality ratings. Respondents (660 US citizens, 55.8% women) were asked on MTurk to evaluate a T-shirt. A main effect of product quality ($F(1, 660)=398.15, p=.000$) on product attitude was again observed but not of sustainable attribute ($F(2, 660)=1.56, p=.211$). Their interaction was not significant ($F(2, 660)=1.31, p=.270$). Yet, planned contrast indicated that when quality was low, attitude was more favorably rated in the symbolic sustainable attribute condition ($M_{FairTrade}=2.75$) than in the no attribute condition ($M_{NoAttribute}=2.30, F(1, 660)=6.67, p=.010$). All the other contrasts revealed no significant differences across conditions ($p's>.10$). These results provide further support to H1 by showing that adding a symbolic sustainable attribute (but not a utilitarian sustainable attribute) increases product attitude when the product quality is low. H2 was tested using the same procedure as in study 1. As expected, a significant moderated mediation was observed (Index=.43, 95% CI=.09 to .77), whereby the indirect effect of symbolic sustainable attribute (vs. utilitarian sustainable attribute) on product attitude was significant and more important in the low-quality condition ($ab_{Low-quality}=-.34, 95\% CI=-.60$ to $-.07$) than in the medium-quality condition ($ab_{Medium-quality}=.09, 95\% CI=-.11$ to $.30$).

Study 3 used a 2 (hotel quality: low vs. medium) \times 3 (attributes: symbolic sustainable first [then utilitarian] vs. utilitarian first [then symbolic sustainable] vs. utilitarian only) between-subjects design. Respondents (728 US citizens, 55.5% women) were asked on MTurk to evaluate a Hotel. Quality ($F(1, 728)=533.65, p=.000$) and sustainable attributes ($F(2, 728)=10.841, p=.000$) had a main effect on attitude. Their interaction was marginally significant ($F(2, 728)=2.724, p=.066$). Planned contrasts indicated that when quality was low, the order of attribute presentation had no effect on attitude ($M_{SustainableFirst}=4.02$ vs. $M_{UtilitarianFirst}=4.32, p=.128$) but both conditions generated more favorable attitudes than utilitarian attributes only ($M_{UtilitarianOnly}=3.53$ vs. $M_{SustainableFirst}=4.02, p=.001$; $M_{UtilitarianOnly}=3.53$ vs. $M_{UtilitarianFirst}=4.32, p=.000$). By contrast, when quality was medium, the attitude was not different across conditions ($p's>.10$). These results provide further support to H1 and show that the order of attribute presentation does not influence the hypothesized effects. To test H3, we performed a serial mediation (PROCESS Macro Model 6, Hayes 2017) with the relative weight of attributes and warm-glow feelings as mediators. Results support our hypothesis: sustainable attribute importance and warm-glow feelings had a negative sequential indirect effect on attitude (indirect effect=-.07, 95% CI=-.12 to $-.03$), whereby hotel quality decreased sustainable attribute importance, which negatively influenced warm-glow feelings, resulting in a less favorable attitude.

Using different implementations of quality cues (provided by independent experts and other consumers) and sustainable attributes, this research contributes to the literature on sustainable attribute effects by showing that the presence of a symbolic sustainable attribute increases attitude when product quality is low (vs. medium). More-

over, this research shows how the attribute weight influences warm-glow feelings and attitude.

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