Message Matching in Sustainable Marketing

A quantitative study of concrete messaging, its effects on brand liking, brand credibility, brand attitude and green purchase intention and the moderating effect of message matching

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Abstract

This study investigates how the concreteness of sustainability messaging affects consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions within the sustainable fashion industry. Drawing on Construal level theory (CLT), priming theory, and framing theory, we examine the effects of concrete versus abstract brand messages on brand liking, brand credibility, brand attitude and green purchase intention. Additionally, the study explores whether congruence between message framing and consumer mindset, referred to as message matching, enhances these effects. Using a quantitative experimental design (N=318), the results demonstrate that concrete sustainability messages consistently lead to more favorable consumer outcomes across all dependent variables. However, no significant moderating effect of message matching was found. These findings contribute to both theory and practice by highlighting the persuasive power of message specificity in sustainability contexts and questioning the reliability of construal-level matching effects in applied marketing communication. Practical implications are offered for marketers seeking to craft effective and trustworthy sustainability messages in the fashion retail sector.

Keywords

Message Matching - Brand Liking - Brand Credibility - Brand Attitude - Green Purchase Intention - Brand Messaging - Sustainable-Fashion - Construal Level Theory - Construal-Level Matching

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Introduction

The urgency of addressing climate change and environmental sustainability is increasingly critical, influencing numerous aspects of global society and economy, particularly the consumer retail sector. Retailers play a pivotal role in the transition towards sustainable consumption patterns, as they are directly positioned at the intersection of consumer demand and market supply. Consequently, effective sustainability communication in retail has become essential. This form of communication not only informs consumers but also shapes their values, fosters trust, and ultimately motivates environmentally responsible purchasing behaviors (Belz et Peattie, 2010).

However, despite the clear importance of and increasing emphasis on sustainability in consumer markets, brands encounter significant challenges in effectively conveying their sustainability initiatives. One central challenge regarding sustainable marketing is skepticism and perceived greenwashing, causing consumers to doubt the authenticity of the sustainability claims. Additional difficulties arise from determining the optimal communication strategies, balancing abstract, value-oriented messaging with concrete, detailed information, to resonate best with diverse consumer segments (Fischer et al., 2021; Braga et al., 2024).

Previous research in sustainability marketing has examined consumer reactions to green ads, the credibility of environmental claims, and various framing strategies, highlighting the roles of authenticity, psychological proximity, and message concreteness (eg. Spence et Pidgeon, 2010., Musgrove et al, 2018., Pittman et al, 2022., Florence et al, 2022). However, most construal-level matching work has paired construal level with gain-loss or emotional-rational appeals (Saeed et al., 2024), leaving the question open of how abstract vs concrete priming interacts with abstract vs concrete brand messages.

To fill this gap, we first assess whether abstract or concrete sustainability messages resonate more strongly in a sustainable-fashion context. We then investigate whether matching those messages with corresponding priming (abstract or concrete) further boosts brand liking, credibility, attitude and green purchase intentions. By pairing Construal level theory with

priming and framing frameworks, our research offers new theoretical insights into the cognitive mechanisms that drive effective sustainability communication and delivers actionable guidance for brands seeking to craft clearer, more persuasive eco-messaging.

Purpose and Expected Contributions

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to test whether concrete messaging will be positively associated with brand liking, brand credibility, brand attitude and green purchase intention and if, in turn, message matching has a moderating effect.

Theoretical Contributions

This thesis contributes to the theoretical understanding of sustainability messaging and message priming by integrating multiple communication frameworks, namely Construal level theory (CLT), framing theory, priming effects and construal level matching, to examine how consumers cognitively, behaviorally and affectively process different types of sustainability messages. While previous studies have compared the role of concrete vs abstract appeals in isolation (eg. Van Horen et al, 2024., Trzebinski et al, 2023), and construal level matching mainly in gain/ loss or emotional/ rational contexts (Saeed et al., 2024), we extend the CLT literature by investigating how abstract vs concrete priming, paired with matching brand message framing, operates in a sustainability context. By introducing message-matching paradigms, the study builds on psychological distance literature and adds nuanced empirical evidence to support processing fluency theories (eg. Lee et Aaker, 2004., Kim et al, 2009)

Practical Contributions

On a practical level, this study offers actionable insights for sustainable fashion brands and marketers, particularly in the retail apparel industry, who seek to effectively communicate sustainability efforts and influence green purchase intention (Borges et al, 2023., Fischer et al, 2021). First, by empirically testing how abstract versus concrete messaging affects brand credibility, attitude, liking and purchase intention, the research provides evidence on how to tailor messaging to maximize effectiveness (Fischer et al, 2021). For example, findings can

inform e-commerce content strategies (e.g., product descriptions, campaign visuals) by identifying which message formats are perceived as more trustworthy and persuasive.

Second, the thesis contributes to campaign design for sustainability initiatives by showing how message congruence (between initial priming and subsequent product communication) can enhance persuasion via cognitive alignment and affective engagement. Brands can apply this by ensuring consistency and accuracy in tone, language, and imagery across marketing materials (Borges et al., 2023). Third, it addresses consumer skepticism and greenwashing concerns by identifying message strategies that reinforce perceived brand authenticity, a known driver of engagement and loyalty in sustainability contexts (Bulmer et al., 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Sustainability Messaging

Sustainable messaging, also known as green marketing, refers to strategic communication aimed at encouraging environmentally and socially responsible behaviors, attitudes, and consumption patterns. It is a multidisciplinary concept grounded in communication studies, environmental psychology, and marketing, and it emphasizes the use of persuasive, credible, and often emotionally engaging messages to foster sustainability. These messages are increasingly disseminated through traditional media, digital platforms, and organizational reports, targeting both individuals and institutions to promote long-term sustainable development. Sustainable messaging is not only about providing information, it involves shaping values, building trust, and motivating behavior change toward a more sustainable future (Belz and Peattie, 2010., Peattie and Crane, 2005).

Recent research has systematically explored how sustainability is communicated within the field of marketing, particularly in areas such as sustainability advertising, brand storytelling, and consumer reactions to green claims. A literature review by Braga et al., (2024) maps out the academic landscape, highlighting a shift from simple informational messaging to more value-driven and behavior-focused approaches. The study emphasizes that effective sustainable

messaging must align with consumers' values and be perceived as authentic to avoid skepticism. When it comes to social media, sustainability communication has grown significantly over the last decade. According to Bulmer et al., (2024) social media platforms like Instagram are being used extensively for sustainable messaging, particularly by brands. The research explored how sustainability-related Instagram posts affect brand authenticity and consumer trust. Their findings show that consistent, visually engaging and value-driven content fosters consumer trust and reinforces a brand's sustainability commitment.

A crucial area of sustainable messaging is how consumption behaviors are influenced through communication. A review by Fischer et al. (2021) describes sustainable consumption communication as an emerging interdisciplinary field. The study points out that messaging must not only inform but also reshape societal norms and default behaviors. For instance, using framing techniques like "nudging" or social comparison has shown measurable impact on promoting sustainable consumption patterns. Another perspective from a company perspective is that companies are increasingly expected to communicate their sustainability efforts clearly and transparently. Borges et al. (2023) conducted a systematic literature review and found that corporate sustainability communication often focuses on environmental performance, social responsibility, and stakeholder engagement. However, the credibility of these messages depends heavily on consistent action and the use of third-party certification, reporting standards and external evidence.

Lastly, sustainability messaging is set into the context of emotional and moral appeals in green consumer behavior. Taufique (2022) demonstrates that emotional affinity toward nature and internalized environmental values have a stronger impact on green consumer behavior (GCB) than environmental knowledge alone. While past research emphasized cognitive aspects, this study highlights the role of both cognitive and affective components in sustainability messaging. The findings support using emotionally resonant, value-driven content, aligned with the elaboration likelihood model, to drive behavior change more effectively than purely informational appeals.

Construal Level Theory & Message Matching

Construal Level Theory

Psychological distance lays out the core principles of Construal level theory (CLT) and is described as an event/ object that is either psychological close (concrete construal) or distant (abstract construal). According to Trope and Liberman (2010), this reflects a phenomenon of mental construal in which objects or events that are further from an individual's direct experience are processed more abstractly, reflecting a higher level of construal. Their research highlights that these different forms of distance are cognitively interconnected, that both distance and mental construal mutually influence one another. Also, that they together affect how people predict outcomes, form preferences and ultimately take action.

However, in Trope and Liberman's earlier research (2003) they describe Construal level theory as a temporal distance, which shapes an individual's responses to upcoming events by influencing their mental representations. Specifically, the more distant an event seems in time, the more likely individuals are to focus on fewer, more abstract features (high-level construal), rather than concrete and incidental details (low-level construal). Moreover, the authors argue that an event's construal level plays a crucial role in shaping both evaluative judgements and behavioral outcomes that arise from perceptions of psychological distance.

Construal-level Matching

Instead of studying psychological distance alone, CLT research typically combines or matches distance manipulations with tailored ad appeals that themselves operate at a specific structural level. Specifically, because a message whose framing aligns with a person's construal mindset feels more cognitively coherent, recipients process it more fluently and give it greater weight in their judgments - resulting in higher evaluations for matched stimuli (Saeed et al., 2024). Saeed et al., (2024) further highlights that researchers have tested abstract-concrete ad matching across a variety of psychological distances, such as temporal, social, hypothetical and spatial.

Moreover, when looking at recent studies, empirical evidence shows that abstract appeals resonate better with distant-future goals and that concrete appeals resonate more with immediate

decisions. In a study by Kim et al., (2009) they propose that when a message orientation (concrete vs abstract) matches the temporal frame (near vs distant) it creates processing fluency. Processing fluency generates in turn a positive, “feels right”, experience, and thus the message's persuasiveness (i.e. positive attitudes and intentions). The author also brought up that it is a difference depending on the individual’s expertise, where novices (less informed) rely more on this fluency effect and respond strongly to the match of temporal distance and message orientation. On the other hand, experts are less caught up by the “feels right” feeling, as they rely more on substantive details and less on heuristic processing. This process fluency mechanism is also brought up in Lee and Aaker (2004) study, where their findings demonstrate that regulatory fit, as temporal construal fit, enhances persuasion not only through content, but rather through a match between the message’s framing and the audience’s motivational orientation. In essence, it highlights that processing fluency is a key driver of persuasive effectiveness.

Other studies on this topic highly rely on gain vs loss-framed messages (i.e. Brendl et al., 1995). So is the case in the study by Yan et al., (2012) where they explore emotional and motivational factors, such as happiness and anger, that affect message processing and persuasiveness. They show that research generally shows no clear advantage for either gain or loss, but that a frame-system “matching” can boost persuasion. In this research they match message framing and motivational systems, i.e. a loss-framed message and an approach motivation like fear. In essence, it is not just the frame that matters but also how it fits with the recipients current motivational state. White et al., (2011) also adapt the gain vs loss-framed messages, but highlights a similar matching principle between the loss-versus gain-framed messages and the moderating role of low-level (concrete) mindsets and abstract mindsets. This study shows that pairing these two increases efficiency, enhances processing fluency and, in this particular case, results in more positive recycling results. Findings from this study offer valuable insights for consumers, marketers and broader societal efforts.

Priming & Framing Theory

A great extent of research has been done on the topic of priming. Especially when it comes to how primes affect judgements that are directly applicable to marketing strategies. A research by DeCoster and Claypool (2004) outlines three types of priming effects - assimilation, anchoring

and correction, and suggests a model on how irrelevant information can bias judgement. In a study by Bargh and Pratto (1986) they demonstrated that primed constructs influence automatic attention and perception, without conscious effort. They also bring up that the priming effect does not always have a short-time period, and hence some effects can remain chronically active and continue to shape behavior. Furthermore, Domke et al., (1998) show that media exposure increases the accessibility of some constructs in individuals short-term memory, making some judgements more likely. The fact that priming can vary based on individuals pre-existing values and beliefs, is Domke not the first to mention (i.e. Bargh et al., 1988).

Others show that both framing and priming affect judgements, where participants' prior attitudes as well as how the information is presented affects the outcome (Wang, 2007). When it comes to framing, it can largely influence people's perceptions. Bertolotti and Catellani (2014) show that the effectiveness of climate-change policy messages depends on aligning the message frame with individuals' regulatory focus. In their studies, communicators who matched their framing to people’s pre-existing motivational orientation “primed” more favorable reactions towards desired outcomes. Cesario et al., (2013) found another take on it, and proposed that message framing should align with the recipient’s motivational orientation. It further shows that content can prime individuals to a specific regulatory focus, suggesting that framing goes beyond existing orientations and can actively shape how people process persuasive messages.

Priming Effects

When examining “priming effects” it refers to the way mental constructs shape an individual's perceptions and judgements (Domke et al., 1998). However, this aligns with Bargh and Pratto (1986) as they view it as something that activates an individual’s cognitive framework, influencing subsequent perception and processing. The study suggests that social constructs act as a form of long-term perceptual readiness, affecting how individuals process stimuli. Moreover, the authors (Bargh amd Pratto, 1986) states that priming happens when certain trait-related constructs are highly accessible, and automatically draw more intention and interfere with basic cognitive tasks. The key point, in psychology, is that a stimulus has an effect on what follows, either something internal (eg a decision, emotion) or something external, as a further event, also called a “pre-activation” of mental concepts.

Moreover, Bermeitinger (2015) brings up a few different types of priming. The most relevant included response priming, semantic priming, affective/ evaluative priming and negative priming. Response priming influences the speed of a response to a target, typically resulting in faster responses when the prime and target are compatible. Semantic priming is when an exposure to a stimulus enhances the response to a subsequent, related stimulus, with stronger effects occurring when there is an associative or categorical relation between the prime and the target. Margery (2000) builds on this concept and describes semantic priming as a phenomenon where people respond faster to a target word when it is followed by a semantically related word, compared to an unrelated word. This priming effect reveals how closely related concepts are linked in memory and has been widely used in studies to integrate, comprehend and access words in sentence understanding.

Additionally, affective/ evaluative priming refers to the exposure of an emotional valence, either negative or positive, which influences the response to a subsequent target (Bermeitinger, 2015) . Another relevant topic is goal priming. In the article by Tate et al., (2014) goal priming refers to activating a specific goal or intention within the individual, by exposing them to a certain cues or stimuli. In this particular case, the study had an environmental goal of waste reduction as an example. Conceptual priming refers to shared conceptual features, called conceptual combination between different attributes. In other words, it is the process by which exposure of related conceptual features activates related ideas. Ideas that might not have been triggered if the features had been presented separatly. In generative cognitive tasks, such combinations can trigger new associations that are not explicitly present, but are logically or thematically consistent with the primed constellation. This means that priming a group of related concepts can influence the perception by bringing additional, indirectly related ideas (Marsh et al., 1999).

Framing Theory

Often brought up in the same discussion is the framing theory. According to Nelson et al., (1997) framing refers to the way a communication source shapes and defines a social or political issue for its audience. It involves emphasizing specific aspects of the issue, ultimately influencing how the audience interprets and assesses it. Hence, the author differs from traditional persuasion,

which rather changes an individual's beleifs. Another take on it, is introduced in the article by Florence et al., (2022) where they define message framing as either sociological or psychological framing, proposing that consumer decision-making is dependent on how a decision/ context is framed. Hence, the authors describe sociologically framing as how a social problem is presented, whereas psychological framing involves highlighting specific aspects of a message to guide the audience's attention, influencing their decision-making prosess.

Hypothesis Formulation

Concrete Messaging Effect

Construal level theory (CLT) as proposed by Trope and Liberman (2010) posits that people's mental representations of information vary depending on psychological distance. They suggest that the closer an object is from its direct experience, the lower is the level of construal (concrete) and the more distant from an experience it is seen as abstract. This in turn, influences preferences and predictions, where low-level construals feel more psychologically close and thus are processed more fluently than abstract, high-level construals (Trope and Liberman, 2010). According to Lee and Labroo (2004) processing fluency affects judgement and leads to increased brand liking, attitude and generally more positive evaluations. Further, recent research show that concrete product descriptions and advertising are seen as more persuasive, increase purchase intention and perceived trustworthiness, compared with abstract communication (Van Horen et al, 2024; Trzebinski et al, 2023; Bambauer-Sachse et Heinzle, 2018). Thus, concrete comparatives claims likewise generate stronger positive activation than non-concrete comparatives (Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle., 2018). Collectively, these findings supports the prediction and leads us to the following hypothesis:

H1: Concrete brand messages will increase brand liking, compared to abstract messaging.

Brand Credibility

Consumer's affective reactions (responses involving feeling, moods or emotions) to a message is a powerful indicator for the message source: when an advertisement is found pleasant and likeable, viewers generalise that positive feeling to the brand and judge it as more trustworthy

and competent (Muk et al., 2016). This halo effect has also been documented across branding contexts. For example, Ohlwein and Bruno (2021) show that higher brand likeability raises perceived product fairness, quality and overall satisfaction - dimensions that map directly into brand credibility. Credibility itself is the belief that a brand can (expertise) and will (trustworthiness) deliver what it promises. Such beliefs are strengthened when past interactions have been effectively positive (Erdem and Swait, 2004). Accordingly, we predict:

H2: Higher perceived brand liking will lead to greater brand credibility.

Brand Attitude

Brand credibility, believability rooted in perceived expertise and trustworthiness (Erdem and Swait, 2004), shapes how consumers evaluate subsequent brand communications. When people see a brand as credible, they infer that its claims are reliable and that the company will honor its promises. This credibility fosters positive affect toward the brand's messages (Batra and Homer, 2004) and, in turn, enhances overall brand attitude. Empirical work confirms the link: higher credibility elevates satisfaction, trust, commitment and emotional positively (Sweeney and Swait, 2008) and directly improves brand attitude (Goldsmith et al., 2000). In green-marketing contexts, credible claims regarding environmental benefits likewise translate into more favorable brand attitudes (Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012). Thus, leading to the following hypothesis:

H3: Higher perceived brand credibility will lead to greater brand attitude.

Green Purchase Intention

A positive attitude toward a brand has been shown to significantly influence green purchase intentions. For instance, a study by Siyal et al., (2021) found that consumers with favorable attitudes toward green brands are more likely to form intentions to purchase green products. This positive attitude, often driven by environmental concerns, translates into a higher likelihood of engaging in green purchase intention. Other results from Wang et al., (2022) show that attitudes towards a green brand serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between green brand positioning, green customer value and green purchase intention. Research by Hartmann and

Apaolaza-Ibáñez (2012) show that brand attitudes significantly increase purchase intention, in a study about green energy.

H4: More favorable brand attitude will lead to stronger green purchase intentions.

Moderating Effect of Message Matching (Priming x Brand Messaging)

Next, we examine the moderating effect of message matching on the concreteness advantage, specifically, whether a concrete-concrete matching yields larger outcomes than an abstract-concrete mismatch (i.e., construal-level matching; Saeed et al., 2024). This aligns with previous research by Trope and Liberman (2010), as their psychological closeness leads to more fluent processing compared to abstract, high-level construals. Recent research also shows that concreteness and tangible features in advertising enhances persuasion, compared to abstract framing (Van Horen et al, 2024) as well as concreteness outperforms abstracteness when it comes to trustworthiness in a product related description (Trzebinski et al, 2023).

Moreover, message matching effects occur when the framing of a message aligns with the construal level activated by the prior stimuli, such as abstract or concrete prime, resulting in greater processing fluency and cognitive alignment. This fluency in turn, enhances the effectiveness of the message (Kim et al., 2009). Research suggests that this occurs because individuals often misattribute the ease of processing to the inherent quality of the message or experience, leading to more favorable evaluations. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as a “feels right” experience. When there is a fit between the message and the recipient’s mental representational state, the message is perceived as more persuasive due to this affective response (Kim et al., 2009). Moreover, perceived message persuasiveness tends to increase when the message aligns with the recipient’s cognitive framework or mental state (Schwarz and Clore, 1983). Cesario et al., (2004) further show that matching a message to an individual’s mental or motivational state significantly amplifies persuasive outcomes, making matched messages feel more credible and engaging. Thus, leading to the following hypotheses:

H5: The matching effect on brand liking will be stronger for concrete messaging than for abstract messaging.

H6: The matching effect on brand credibility will be stronger for concrete messaging than for abstract messaging.

H7: The matching effect on brand attitude will be stronger for concrete messaging than for abstract messaging.

H8: The matching effect on green purchase intention will be stronger for concrete messaging than for abstract messaging.

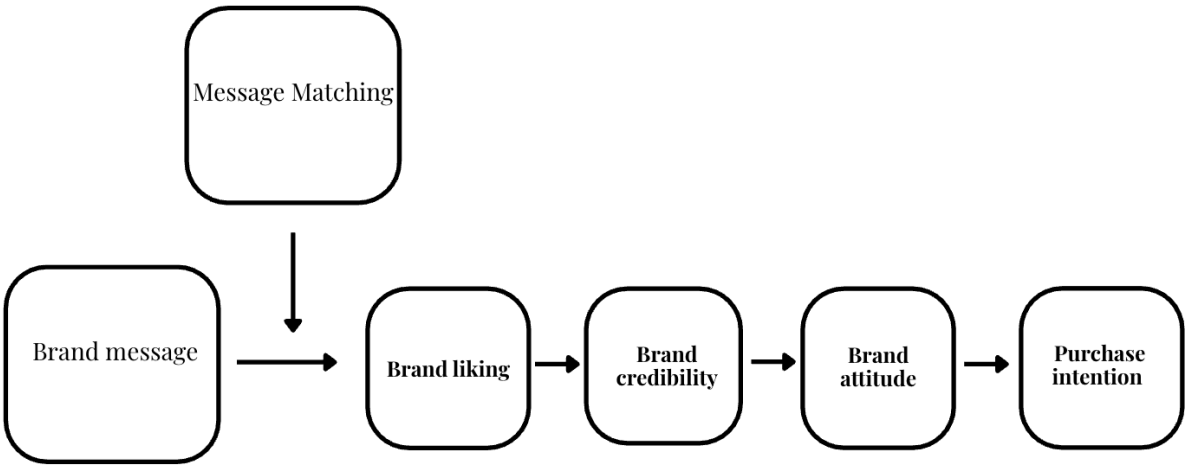


Figure 1: Overview of the hypothesis framework.

Methodology

In the following section, research method, research design, pre-test, survey method and sample & data collection is outlined. Moreover, the sample's reliability and validity will lastly be analyzed.

Research Method

The research was conducted using a quantitative questionnaire with closed scaled questions, to address sustainability messaging and its effect on primary and secondary variables. Firstly, a

pre-test was conducted in order to know if our statements were appropriately perceived. Secondly, with help from these insights, we conducted the main survey.

According to research, a quantitative data collection aligns with the purpose of this paper as it enables the verification of hypotheses and the measurement between several variables, confirming the cause-and-effect relationship. Moreover, it predicts causal relationships, quantifies happenings and describes the characteristics of a popluation. It also analyzes numerical data, ensuring objectivity and replicability. The use of close-ended questions allows for systematic data collection, reducing the risk of researcher bias and facilitating generalization (Jha, 2023).

Research Design

The research had an experimental research design (Jha, 2023), conducted by a survey in Qualtrics for data collection (see Appendix 1 for survey). The study used message matching, between conceptual priming (abstract /concrete) and brand messaging (abstract/ concrete) with 4 randomized groups, to be able to see differences on primary and secondary variables across groups.

The research followed a typical trait -priming study as outlined by DeCoster and Claypool (2004) that firstly consists of the priming phase, in the first part of the study, where participants are exposed to a series of trait-related primes. Secondly, it follows the distractor phase, which is where the participants are exposed to the object of impression. The last part of the experiment consists of a judgement phase which is measured by how the participants can provide different ratings depending on the target.

Firstly, in the priming phase, the respondents were either faced with an abstract or concrete sustainability message, both generated and created by AI. Thus, the trustworthiness of the information cannot be granted. However, the goal was not simply to convey facts, but to craft two distinct priming messages - one concrete and one abstract. They are the following:

Concrete;

> "Every year, 8 million metric tons of plastic waste enter our oceans, killing over 100,000 marine animals. A single plastic bottle takes 450 years to decompose, polluting water and harming wildlife. Meanwhile, deforestation wipes out an area the size of 27 soccer fields every minute, increasing carbon emissions and destroying habitats. You can help by bringing a reusable bag when shopping, avoiding plastic-packaged products, and choosing furniture made from recycled or responsibly sourced materials. Every small action—reduces waste and helps protect our planet for future generations."

Abstract;

> "Our planet is facing an environmental crisis that affects us all. Climate change, deforestation, and pollution are accelerating, putting ecosystems and future generations at risk. To create a sustainable future, we must rethink our consumption habits and work together toward a greener world. By making more responsible choices, we can collectively reduce our environmental footprint and contribute to global sustainability efforts."

The aim was to see if the sustainability message will have a priming effect on the respondent moving to the next phase.

Secondly, moving to the distractor phase, the respondent was faced with one out of two brand messages that were either a concrete or abstract brand message about jeans water consumption. To maintain consistency and reduce bias, the same core message was used, presented in two different angles (abstract vs concrete). The concrete message was: "*Producing a pair of jeans requires 16,000 bottles of water — enough to meet the drinking needs of 4,750 people for a day*." (Oxfam, 2024) and the abstract: "*Designed for a water-conscious future*." However, the respondent was either faced with a concrete sustainability message and a concrete brand message, an abstract sustainability message and an abstract brand message, a concrete sustainability message and an abstract brand message or an abstract sustainability message and a concrete brand message.

To present the brand messages, we created two different product pages, one with the abstract message and one with the concrete message. The imaginary company was called “BlueCycle” and was marketed in the survey as: “a sustainable fashion brand that transforms recycled denim into stylish, high-quality designs. By giving jeans a second chance, BlueCycle reduces waste and conserves resources, offering consumers a way to embrace fashion with a lower environmental footprint.” The information was given to make the scenario as realistic and authentic as possible. The two product pages were identical except from the either abstract or concrete messaging.

At the same time as the product page was shown, the respondents were told that: "Imagine that after reading the article, you remember that you've been thinking about buying a new pair of jeans. You visit a clothing store's website and come across this message: “...”, to put them in the right state of mind.

After the randomized priming and brand message on the product page, all respondents were first faced with questions regarding the primary variables: brand credibility, brand attitude, brand liking and green purchase intention. Then the secondary variables measured psychological distance to environmental issues.

Pretest

Prior to the main survey, we conducted two pilot tests to validate our concrete and abstract sustainability stimuli, both when it comes to priming and brand messaging. The respondents viewed one of the two messaging (either concrete or abstract), both when it comes to brand messaging and the priming message.

Brand Messaging

The first pilot (N = 37) was distributed through our social network via social media (primarily via Facebook) with an anonymous link with no remuneration for the participants. The survey randomised respondents into either one of two groups, assigned to view one of the two product pages stimuli (either concrete or abstract brand messaging):

1. Concrete stimulus: "*By choosing recycled denim, you save 16,000 bottles of water - enough to provide drinking water for 4750 people for a day.*"
2. Abstract stimulus: "*Designed for a water-conscious future.*"

The participants were asked how concrete vs abstract they thought the message was in both groups, ranging on a 1 - 7 scale (1 = abstract and 7 = concrete). Descriptions about abstract/ concrete were included in the survey, sourced by Trope and Liberman (2010), to avoid confusion and get as accurate responses as possible.

An analysis with an independent sample t-test was then conducted in SPSS, where the first group (N = 19) that viewed the concrete message had a mean of 6,37 and was statistically significant ($p < .001$). In the other group (N = 19) (abstract), the independent t-test showed a mean of 1.58 ($p < .001$). This confirms our statements, that the concrete message is considered concrete and the abstract message is considered abstract and could thus continue with these messages to the main study.

Priming

Another pre-test (N = 47) was distributed in our social channels (primarily via Facebook), as in the brand message pre-test, with no remuneration for the participants and they accessed the survey by an anonymous link. This pre-test was done in order to see if the two general sustainability messages (priming), presented as an article (as outlined in "Research Design"), were perceived concrete vs abstract. When the pre-views and non-finished answers were excluded (N = 37), an independent sample t-test was then conducted in SPSS. However, the concrete sustainability message (N = 17) had a mean of 1.59 ($p < .001$) and the abstract message (N = 20) had a mean of 6.0 ($p < .001$, concrete = 0 and abstract = 7), thus confirming our predictions.

Survey Design & Measures

The survey had 3 parts. The first one was a randomizer, including 4 different groups. The second part included questions from the primary and secondary variables and the last part background questions, including general knowledge of sustainability, cynicism, as well as a standard gender, age and a control question.

Primary Variables

All of our questions scaled from 1 - 7 (1 = Strongly disagree and 7 = Strongly agree). The primary variables included brand credibility, brand attitude, brand liking and green purchase intention.

Brand credibility, building on expertise and trustworthiness, was measured through three questions adopted by Erdem and Swait (2004), "*This brand's product claims are believable*", "*This brand has the ability to deliver what it promises*" and "*This brand is authentic*".

Brand attitude was measured through the questions: "*My impression of BlueCycle is appealing*", "*My impression of BlueCycle is favourable*" and "*My impression of BlueCycle is pleasant*". adopted by Spears and Singh (2004).

Brand liking was measured using two questions: "*I like the image on BlueCycle's product page*" and "*I associate positive things with the image on BlueCycle's product page*" (Colliander and Marder, 2018).

Green purchase intention was measured using the questions "*I intend to buy this product.*", "*I am willing to buy this product.*" and "*I will make an effort to buy this product.*", adopted by Hou and Sarigöllü (2022).

Secondary Variables & Demographics

The secondary variable measured psychological distance. Three questions adopted by Brügger et al., (2016), "The effects of climate change feel… very personal to me … very distant from my life", "The environmental impact of my purchasing decisions feels… close…distant" and "When brands highlight sustainability in their messaging, it feels… authentic … hypothetical". The general knowledge of the respondent regarding sustainability was included in the background

part, as did a question regarding cynicism -capturing if respondents perceive the brand messaging as unfair and manipulating. The questions used were: "*I am familiar with the concept of sustainability*" (Manresa et al., 2021) and for cynicism;"*The brand tried to manipulate the consumer in ways that I don't like.*" and "*The scenario on the product page was realistic*" (Gao et al., 2025). Moreover, we included an open-ended question for age, known for the most efficient method in SPSS. For gender, the respondents were asked: "Which one of these do you identify as?" where they could select from "Woman", "Man" and "Other/ non-binary". The control question for attention check was the following: "*What was this survey about?*" where they could choose from "Jeans", "Sofas" and "Jewelry".

Sample & Data Collection

320 participants at Prolific were paid 0.4 pounds to complete the survey. An external link from qualtrics was used. Further, a sample only including USA location was selected, with a representative sample where gender, age and ethnicity was given, where demographic data could be downloaded. Hence, we did not ensure that the participants were born in the USA, only country of residence. Respondents that incorrectly answered control questions were removed, thus those that could not identify the survey's topic as "jeans", as well as previews. Moreover, only respondents over 18 could participate, thus one underaged was found in the data (or typo wrong), and was therefore removed from the sample. Respondents that took too long to answer the survey were automatically removed, to ensure data quality.

Out of the 320 responses, one was removed due to age and one due to incorrectly answered control questions. The total valid responses therefore consisted of 318. The gender distribution was 50.3% men (N = 160), 48.4% women (N = 154) and 1% non-binary (N = 4). Looking at age, the age ranged between 18 - 87, where the mean age was 45.5. Thus, the sample is too small for age and gender to be used in further analysis and hypothesis formulation and will therefore not be further used.

Reliability & Content Validity

Validity

Validity refers to the extent to which a survey accurately measures the indented constructs. Without strong validity evidence, survey data may lack meaning and cannot reliably support the conclusions drawn from the result (Hill et al., 2022). Firstly, to promote internal validity, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four groups to ensure that the differences in outcomes were due to the independent variable, rather than external factors or selection bias. A group variable was then created for the four randomized groups and frequencies confirmed near equal cell sizes (N1 = 80, N2 = 78, N3 = 82, N4 = 78). To ensure that the randomization was accurately done, variations in demographic factors like gender and age were tested to ensure that the differences were not significant. This approach reflects the emphasis placed by Andrade (2018) on internal validity, which concerns the extent to which a study produces credible results, assessed through procedures such as verifying the appropriateness of randomization and examining the extent of systematic bias.

As gender has a nominal scale, a Pearson chi-square test showed that there is no significance ($p > 0.05$) difference in gender distributions between the four groups ($x2 = 2.92$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.819$). When it comes to age, a K-independent Kruskal Wallis showed that there is no significant difference between the groups ($x2 = 2.49$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.48$). Therefore, it can be concluded that the randomization procedure was successful, as neither gender nor age differed significantly across groups and none of the respondents were informed in advance about which group they were assigned to. To conclude, according to internal validity, the study has produced credible results.

When it comes to external validity, according to Andrade (2018) external validity concerns the extent to which the findings of a study can be generalized to other contexts. A random sampling process increases the likelihood that the sample is representative of the broader population, thereby supporting valid generalization. However, the findings may not necessarily generalize beyond the specific population from which the sample was drawn. Thus, the sample of this study consisted of respondents residing in the United States and was representative in terms of age,

gender and ethnicities to avoid sampling bias. However, given the relatively small sample size (N = 318 and in each group: Group 1 = 80, Group 2 = 78, Group 3 = 82, Group 4 = 78), the findings cannot be fully generalized to neither the population of which the sample was drawn nor the broader population, although they may offer some insights to the represented sample. Because this scenario-based design may limit external validity, future research should use larger and more diverse samples, to ensure findings generalize to a broader population.

Lastly, ecological validity, as outlined by Andrade (2018), refers to which the results of a study can be generalized to real-life, naturalistic settings. In essence, ecological validity works as a subtype of external validity, and is related to how naturally the study conditions reflect real life. In the study, ecological validity was ensured by making the product page's features and name as realistic as possible in the survey's distractor phase. This was done by using a product page template in Canva and adding the brand name and the messaging, including a product picture of a standard pair of jeans. This, to ensure that the product page was seen as realistic as possible (see Appendix 1). The brand-page was generally inspired by a regular clothing online shop when it comes to adding necessary elements such as sizes and "add to Cart". The product pages were standardized to reduce the impact of irrelevant variations on participants' perceptions and not influencing the causal relationship.

Reliability

As mentioned in the section "Survey design & Measures", multiple measurements (questions) were used for every key variable. According to Diamantopoulos et al., (2012), their research indicates that, in most practical situations, multi-item scales provide superior predictive validity compared to single-item measures. In this study, the majority of the variables used 3 questions and one had 2 measures. However, to ensure reliability, Cronbach's alpha - one of the most used objective measures - will be employed (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011). For the two-measure variable, a correlation analysis was used instead.

For the two question variable (Brand liking), a Pearson correlation analysis will instead be employed. It was found that all variables were reliable and significant: brand liking ($r = 0.769$, $p < 0.001$), brand credibility ($a = 0.898$), brand attitude ($a = 0.936$), green purchase intention ($a =$

0.948) and psychological distance (a = 0.771). According to Mukaka (2012) the size of the correlation coefficient should be above 0.5 to have a moderate positive correlation. All of the variables above have a high positive correlation (0.7 - 0.9) to very high positive correlation (0.9 - 1).

Empirical Results

The statistical analysis used to test the hypothesis was an independent t-test for group means and correlation analysis for the mediation chain (Brand liking -> Brand credibility -> Brand attitude -> Green purchase intention). Moreover, to analyze the matching effect, a two-way Anova was conducted between a priming variable (concrete vs abstract) and brand messaging variable (concrete vs abstract) for the same mediation chain, Brand liking -> Brand credibility -> Brand attitude -> Green purchase intention.

Concrete vs. Abstract Messaging Effect

H1: Concrete brand messages will increase brand liking, compared to abstract messaging.

When analyzing the concrete vs abstract brand message effect, a new variable was created having group 1 (N = 158) as the concrete brand messages (concrete/ concrete group and abstract/ concrete group) and group 2 (N = 160) as the abstract brand message (abstract/ abstract group and concrete/ abstract group). An independent t-test was conducted between the concrete/ abstract variable and brand liking, brand credibility, brand attitude and green purchase intention. The concrete messaging (group 1) had a significant higher mean for all the variables; brand liking (M = 5.42, SD = 1.29, p = 0.020), brand credibility (M = 5.16, SD = 1.19, p = 0.005), brand attitude (M = 5.53, SD = 1.17, p = <0.001) and green purchase intention (M = 4.59, SD = 1.75, p = 0.004). Thus, group 2 revealed lower means across all variables; brand liking (M = 5.03, SD = 1.63), brand credibility (M = 4.75, SD = 1.41), brand attitude (M = 4.97, SD = 1.61) and green purchase intention (M = 3.98, SD = 2.02). Therefore H1 - H4 is supported.

Variable	Group 1, M (SD)	Group 2, M (SD)	Mean difference	P-value
Brand liking	5.42 (1.29)	5.03 (1.63)	0.39	0.020
Brand credibility	5.16 (1.19)	4.75 (1.41)	0.41	0.005
Brand attitude	5.53 (1.17)	4.97 (1.61)	0.56	<.001
Green purchase behavior	4.59 (1.75)	3.98 (2.02)	0.61	0.004

Table 1: Independent t-test for each dependent variable.

H2: Higher perceived brand liking will lead to greater brand credibility.

Analyzing the first step in the mediation chain between brand liking and brand credibility, a Pearson correlation confirmed a moderate positive relationship (Mukaka, 2012) between brand liking and brand credibility ($r = 0.643$, $p = <0.001$). The link between liking and credibility in H2 is therefore supported.

H3: Higher perceived brand credibility will lead to greater brand attitude.

When it comes to the relationship between brand credibility and brand attitude, the second step in the chain had a significantly moderate positive relationship (Mukaka, 2012), with $r = 0.693$ and $p = <0.001$. The hypothesis (H3) is therefore supported. An unplanned strong correlation between brand liking and brand attitude was also found ($r = 0.868$, $p = <0.001$).

H4: More favorable brand attitude will lead to stronger green purchase intentions.

The last step in the mediation chain between brand attitude and green purchase intention had a significant and high positive relationship (Mukaka, 2012), with $r = 0.741$ and $p = <0.001$. The hypothesis is therefore supported.

Hypothesis	Variable	r	P-value
H2	Brand liking ↠ Brand credibility	0.643	<.001
H3	Brand credibility ↠ Brand attitude	0.693	<.001
H4	Brand attitude ↠ Green purchase intention	0.741	<.001

Table 2: Pearson correlation on the mediation chain.

Moderating Effect of Message Matching

To examine whether priming moderated the effect of brand messaging (i.e., message matching), we conducted four separate 2 x 2 ANOVAs - one for each dependent variable (brand liking, brand credibility, brand liking & green purchase intention). Starting with doing a new variable for priming, having randomizer 1 and 3 (concrete/ concrete and concrete/ abstract) in Group 1 for concrete (N = 162) and randomizer 2 and 4 (abstract/ abstract and abstract/ concrete) in group 2 (N = 156). The matching effect was then analyzed using a two-way ANOVA between the new priming variable and the "brand message variable" (previously used for testing H1).

H5: The matching effect on brand liking will be stronger for concrete messaging than for abstract messaging.

Firstly, a 2 x 2 ANOVA between the brand message variable and the priming variable revealed a significant main effect of brand messaging ($p = 0.027$), such that concrete messaging ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.29$) elicited higher liking than abstract messaging ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.61$). Neither the main effect of priming ($p = 0.69$) nor the priming x brand message interaction ($p = 0.93$) were significant, indicating that the concreteness advantage held regardless of the prime and the hypothesis could therefore be rejected.

H6: The matching effect on brand credibility will be stronger for concrete messages than for abstract messages.

H7: The matching effect on brand attitude will be stronger for concrete messages than for abstract messages.

H8: The matching effect on green purchase intention will be stronger for concrete messages than for abstract messages.

Analyzing the matching effect of the other dependent variables; brand credibility, brand attitude and green purchase intention, the 2 x 2 ANOVAs yielded the same results where brand message had the only significant result with a higher mean for concrete brand messages than abstract, signifying that priming had no moderating effect of brand messaging, showing no matching effect. Ultimately, H5 to H8 are not supported.

Summary of Results

The table below concludes the hypothesis, results and significance. However, the significance level of the mediation chain was placed in parentheses. Four out of eight hypotheses were supported, illustrated in the table below.

Hypothesis	Result	Significance (Mediation chain)
H1: Concrete brand messages will increase brand liking, compared to abstract messaging.	Supported	p = 0.020
H2: Higher perceived brand liking will lead to greater brand credibility.	Supported	p = 0.005 (<.001)
H3: Higher perceived brand credibility will lead to greater brand attitude.	Supported	p = <.001 (<.001)
H4: More favorable brand attitude will lead to stronger green purchase intentions.	Supported	p = 0.004 (<.001)
H5: The matching effect on brand liking will be stronger for concrete messaging than for abstract messaging.	Not supported	p = 0.93
H6: The matching effect on brand credibility will be stronger for concrete messages than for abstract messages.	Not supported	p = 0.116
H7: The matching effect on brand attitude will be stronger for concrete messages than for abstract messages.	Not supported	p = 0.998
H8: The matching effect on green purchase behavior will be stronger for concrete messages than for abstract messages.	Not supported	p = 0.958

Table 3: Summary of hypothesis, results and significance level.

Discussion

This study set out to explore if concreteness of sustainability-related brand messages is positively associated with brand liking, credibility, attitudes, and purchase intentions. The main finding is clear and consistent: concrete brand messages are significantly more effective than abstract ones across all key outcome variables, supporting H1 - H4. Consumers showed significantly more positive reactions to concrete, quantifiable sustainability claims, such as stating exactly how many water bottles are saved by choosing recycled denim, than to broad, generic statements of environmental benefit. This suggests that people are more likely to trust and engage with a brand when its sustainability efforts are communicated in a grounded, detailed and concrete way.

Another significant insight comes from the examination of how these variables interact. The study supports a chain-like model in which liking enhances credibility, which in turn strengthens brand attitudes, eventually leading to increased purchase intentions. In other words, our results align with previous research and demonstrate a mediation chain whereby increased brand liking in turn drives stronger green purchase intentions. This highlights the interconnected nature of how consumers process and respond to brand communication. Interestingly, the data also pointed out a supplementary finding with a particularly strong parallel direct link between liking and brand attitude, suggesting that affective reactions to a brand can powerfully shape broader brand evaluations, possibly even bypassing credibility assessments.

Finally, the study tested whether matching the level of abstraction in a consumer's mindset (induced through a priming task) with the level of abstraction in the brand's message would further enhance persuasion. The findings showed no significance and added benefit to matching message style with the consumer's mental frame. However, concrete messages outperformed abstract messages regardless of whether participants were put into a different situational mindset (i.e. conceptual priming).

Theoretical Contributions

This study offers several contributions to the theoretical understanding of message framing and consumer behavior, particularly within the context of sustainability marketing. Central to our hypothesis (H1 - H4) was Construal level theory (CLT), which posits that psychological distance affects how abstractly or concretely individuals process information (Trope and Liberman, 2010). With hypothesis H5 - H8 we expected that matching the construal level induced in the consumer (via priming) with the framing of the message would enhance persuasion. However, our findings partially challenge this assumption. While concrete messages clearly outperformed abstract ones across all outcomes, this effect remained consistent regardless of the primed construal level.

Thus, our findings both reinforce and challenge key insights of Construal level theory (CLT) and previous research on matching. Consistent with CLT's emphasis on low-level construal, concrete message framing outperformed abstract ones across liking, credibility, attitude and green

purchase intention. Thus, our findings run counter to prior research (e.g., Kim et al., 2009; Cesario et al., 2004; Schwarz et Clore., 1983), which argues that aligning consumer's transient construal (via priming) with message framing boosts persuasiveness and processing fluency and thus the construal-level matching effect (Saeed et al., 2024). Yet, we observed no significant prime x message interaction and our data indicate that concrete messages are effective regardless of the audience's mindset. In other words, the expected interaction between priming and message type was not supported, suggesting that the influence of message concreteness may operate independently of consumers' temporary mindset.

Thus, this theoretical issue and criticism towards the construal level is not something new. According to research by Benschop et al., (2021), they were among the first to note that standard construal level primes often fail to produce reliable shifts in participant's mental construct. In this particular case, they used category word manipulation for priming. Moreover, Brügger et al., (2016) also challenges the effect of CLT and matching, as their research showed no significance between proximising climate change and motivation to act, specifically psychological distance had no direct effect on the participants. Thus, theory should specify when single-task primes suffice vs when multiple priming measures are required to induce construal shifts.

These boundary findings suggest that in high-stakes domains like sustainability, message clarity and trustworthiness may matter more than prime-message congruence. While our research upholds CLT's basic concreteness effect, they also expose important limits; concrete framing appears to be a universally persuasive cue, operating independently of consumers' transient construal minds. These findings align with Trautmann (2019) who casts doubt on the robustness of construal-level effects and highlights their challenges with replicability.

Moreover, another valuable finding was an additional strong link between brand liking and brand attitude, instead of passing by brand credibility in the mediation chain. These findings align with a research by Walla et al., (2011) suggesting that liked brands elicited significantly more positive emotion and motivation, key components of brand attitude. This is a valuable addition to the literature on consumer psychology, as it highlights the power of affect (emotions), even in contexts traditionally assumed to be governed by "rational" decision-making, such as sustainability (eg., Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006).

Another theoretical implication stems from the idea that priming effects are not universal but can be influenced by individuals' pre-existing values, beliefs, and attitudes. While CLT and related research often treat priming as a broadly applicable tool for temporarily shifting construal levels, prior studies suggest that the effectiveness of priming may depend on internal predispositions. For instance, Bargh et al. (1988) were among the first to demonstrate that primes interact with existing cognitive structures, rather than operating independently. This perspective is echoed in more recent work, such as Domke et al., (1998) who argued that priming in political communication may succeed or fail depending on how well the primed content resonates with the audience's prior beliefs. Applied to the current study, this could explain why no significant interaction was found between priming and message concreteness: participants may have processed the primes through the lens of their existing attitudes toward sustainability, making the primes less influential than expected. This highlights a limitation of CLT when applied without considering individual differences, and points to the need for future theoretical models to account for value-aligned priming or audience segmentation when predicting priming effects.

Practical Contributions

The findings from this study offer clear and valuable insights for practitioners, especially those working with sustainability communication in marketing. One of the most important takeaways is the effectiveness of concrete messaging. Brands aiming to communicate their sustainability efforts should prioritize specific, tangible language over abstract claims. Concreteness not only builds trust but also enhances affective connection and credibility, ultimately leading to more favorable brand attitudes and higher purchase intentions.

Another practical implication is that message matching strategies may not be necessary in this context. While construal level theory suggests that aligning the Construal level of a message with the recipient's mindset may enhance persuasive outcomes (Trope and Liberman, 2010), our findings suggest that concrete messages are broadly effective regardless of the consumer's current mental frame. This challenges the assumption that cognitive matching is always beneficial and instead emphasizes the consistent advantage of clarity and specificity in messaging.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of affective (feelings/ emotions) engagement through clarity. Although emotional appeals are often associated with dramatic storytelling or evocative imagery, research shows that emotional responses can also be strongly shaped by the perceived transparency and credibility of a brand's communication. Transparent messaging fosters trust and enhances consumers' perception of brand authenticity, which in turn positively influences their attitudes and behavioral intentions (Yang and Battocchio., 2021). The strong connection between liking and attitude found in this study supports the idea that consumers respond emotionally to clear, concrete information, and that this emotional response plays a key role in how they evaluate brands. In this way, clarity itself becomes a vehicle for emotional resonance, not only informing consumers but also engaging them on an affective level.

Limitations

While the findings of this study offer important insights into the effectiveness of message concreteness in sustainability communication, several limitations must be acknowledged. To begin with, the sample characteristics limit the generalizability of the results. Participants were recruited via Prolific, which, while useful for collecting high-quality data, primarily reflects a specific small and American demographic. Even if the sample was diverse, this raises concerns about external validity, as consumer perceptions of sustainability and brand messaging may vary significantly across age groups, cultures and regions (Henrich et al., 2010). Thus, attitudes toward sustainability and reactions to marketing may differ significantly across these groups, potentially influencing how concrete messages are perceived and processed.

Another key limitation is the industry focus. This study focused exclusively on the sustainable fashion industry, using a fictitious brand scenario centered around recycled denim jeans. While this setting provides a realistic and relevant context, it may not fully capture how consumers respond to concrete messaging in other industries, such as food, technology, or services. Prior work suggests that message effectiveness can vary significantly depending on the product category (Grankvist and Biel., 2007), which may in turn influence how consumers respond to message concreteness.

Another limitation concerns the experimental design and measured variables. The study measured naturally occurring psychological responses (e.g., liking, credibility) without manipulating every link in the chain directly. For instance, while we found a strong correlation between brand liking and brand attitude, we did not experimentally manipulate liking itself. This is a common limitation in consumer research where internal processes are inferred from observed behaviors or attitudes (Baron and Kenny., 1986). Future experiments should manipulate these elements more directly to test the robustness of observed relationships.

Future Research

Building on current findings, there are several promising directions for future research that could deepen our understanding of how message framing influences consumer behavior in sustainability contexts.

To begin with, given the mixed evidence for construal-level matching in this study, future research should investigate how to more reliably induce shifts in mental construal, and under what conditions such priming meaningfully interacts with message framing. Several research have highlighted the fragility and inconsistency of construal level priming and standard priming techniques, especially in applied settings (eg. Benschop et al., 2021). They instead recommend strengthening manipulations through a combination of multiple priming techniques, such as mixing visual and textual primes, and incorporating validated manipulation checks to assess whether the prime was actually effective. This is especially relevant given that our study lacked such a manipulation check, leaving it unclear whether participants' mindsets were successfully influenced before viewing the brand message.

In line with this, Trautmann (2019) emphasizes that without independent evidence that a construal shift occurred, researchers cannot assume a prime had its intended psychological effect. He advocated for more rigorous experimental control, including either trait-level assessments of construal or real-time verification of prime effectiveness. Future research would benefit from implementing such checks to validate whether manipulation occurred, and whether the absence of interaction effects reflects theoretical boundaries or methodological shortcomings.

Moreover, the individual differences in how participants respond to primes merit further exploration. As shown in early work by Bargh et al. (1988) and later echoed by Domke et al., (1998) primes interact with people's existing beliefs, values, and attitudes. In the sustainability context, where attitudes toward environmental issues can be deeply ingrained and identity-related, it is possible that some participants were more or less "permeable" than others. Future studies should consider measuring baseline attitudes or values related to sustainability and examining how these moderate the effect of construal primes. This would clarify whether value-aligned priming might work better for some audiences than others. Further, because we ran this study online and used a fictional scenario, we still do not know whether our concrete-message effects would survive in a more immersive, in-person shopping context. Future field studies that embed actual purchase decisions could test the external validity of our findings under real-world conditions.

To conclude, further research could extend beyond online or short-term exposure contexts by exploring how repeated or real-world brand exposures influence construal sensitivity. Field experiments or longitudinal designs may help determine whether priming effects are more robust over time, or whether repeated brand interactions naturally shift consumers' mental construct without artificial primes.

Together, these directions suggest a need to rethink how construal level is manipulated and measured, moving beyond standard protocols toward more sophisticated, multimodal, and individualized priming strategies. Doing so will help researchers better assess the boundary conditions of CLT and build more predictive models of how abstract and concrete messages interact with consumer psychology.

Conclusion

This thesis explored if message concreteness is positively associated with sustainability communication, and whether aligning message framing with consumers' construal level enhances effectiveness. The findings clearly show that concrete messages lead to more favorable

outcomes across all key variables: liking, credibility, attitude and green purchase intentions, highlighting the persuasive strength of specific and tangible communication.

While we expected message-construal matching to further enhance effectiveness, no such interaction was found. This challenges key assumptions within Construal level matching suggests that concrete messaging may be effective regardless of previous mindset. Additionally, the strong direct link between liking and brand attitude emphasizes the importance of emotional responses in shaping consumer evaluations

Together, these insights contribute to theory by questioning the robustness of CLT's matching effects and offer clear practical guidance: brands should prioritize clarity, specificity, and emotional resonance in sustainability messaging. This research helps bridge theory and practice, and opens important directions for future work in both marketing and consumer psychology.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Main Survey

Welcome!

This study explores how consumers perceive sustainability communication in retail. All data will be used for a bachelor's thesis in Retail Management at the Stockholm School of Economics.

Confidentiality. Anything you say or state in the survey will be held strictly confidential and will only be made available to supervisors, tutors and the course management team.

Secured storage of data. All data will be stored and processed safely by the SSE and will be permanently deleted when the projected is completed.

No personal data will be published. The thesis written by the students will not contain any information that may identify you as participant to the survey subject.

Thank you so much for your time!

Q6 ✳

By checking this box, you confirm that you consent to the above information and certify that you are over 18 years old.

○ I agree to the information above and certify that I am over 18.

Q31 ✳

What is your unique Prolific ID?

Please write the numbers.

Concrete priming + c

Q12

Imagine you are reading a newspaper article about sustainability.This is an excerpt from the article. Read it carefully.

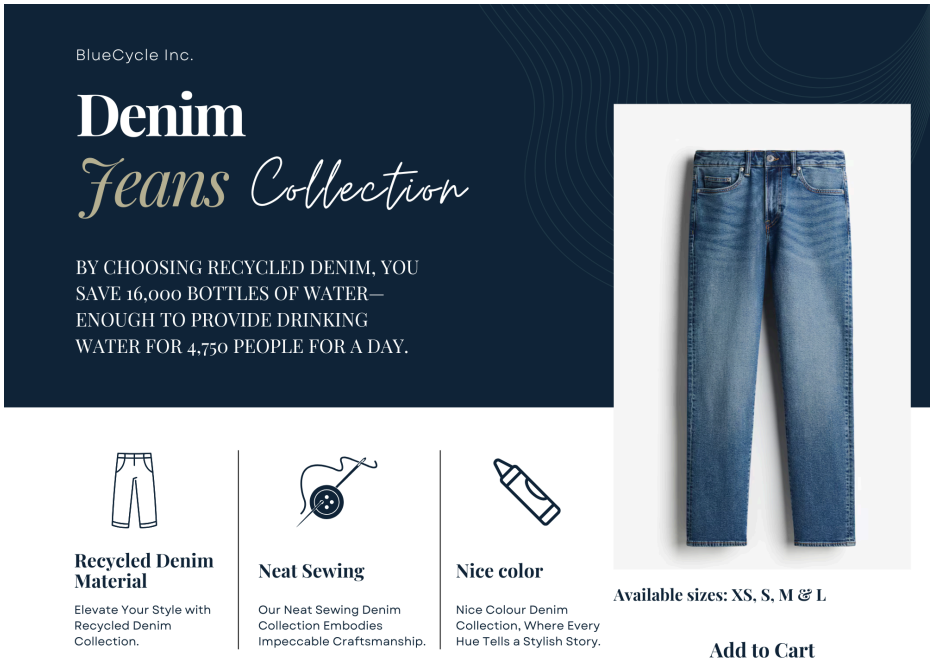
"Every year, 8 million metric tons of plastic waste enter our oceans, killing over 100,000 marine animals. A single plastic bottle takes 450 years to decompose, polluting water and harming wildlife. Meanwhile, deforestation wipes out an area the size of 27 soccer fields every minute, increasing carbon emissions and destroying habitats. You can help by bringing a reusable bag when shopping, avoiding plastic-packaged products, and choosing furniture made from recycled or responsibly sourced materials. Every small action—reduces waste and helps protect our planet for future generations."

Page Break

Q8

Imagine that after reading the article, you remember that you've been thinking about buying a new pair of jeans. You visit "BlueCycle's" website and come across this message: "By choosing recycled denim, you save 16,000 bottles of water—enough to provide drinking water for 4,750 people for a day."

About BlueCycle: BlueCycle is a sustainable fashion brand that transforms recycled denim into stylish, high-quality designs. By giving jeans a second chance, BlueCycle reduces waste and conserves resources, offering consumers a way to embrace fashion with a lower environmental footprint.



Abstract priming + a

Q14

Imagine you are reading a newspaper article about sustainability. This is an excerpt from the article. Read it carefully.

"Our planet is facing an environmental crisis that affects us all. Climate change, deforestation, and pollution are accelerating, putting ecosystems and future generations at risk. To create a sustainable future, we must rethink our consumption habits and work together toward a greener world. By making more responsible choices, we can collectively reduce our environmental footprint and contribute to global sustainability efforts."

Page Break

Q10

Imagine that after reading the article, you remember that you've been thinking about buying a new pair of jeans. You visit "BlueCycle's" website and come across this message: “Designed for a water-conscious future."

About BlueCycle: BlueCycle is a sustainable fashion brand that transforms recycled denim into stylish, high-quality designs. By giving jeans a second chance, BlueCycle reduces waste and conserves resources, offering consumers a way to embrace fashion with a lower environmental footprint.



Concrete priming + a

Q11

Imagine you are reading a newspaper article about sustainability. This is an excerpt from the article. Read it carefully.

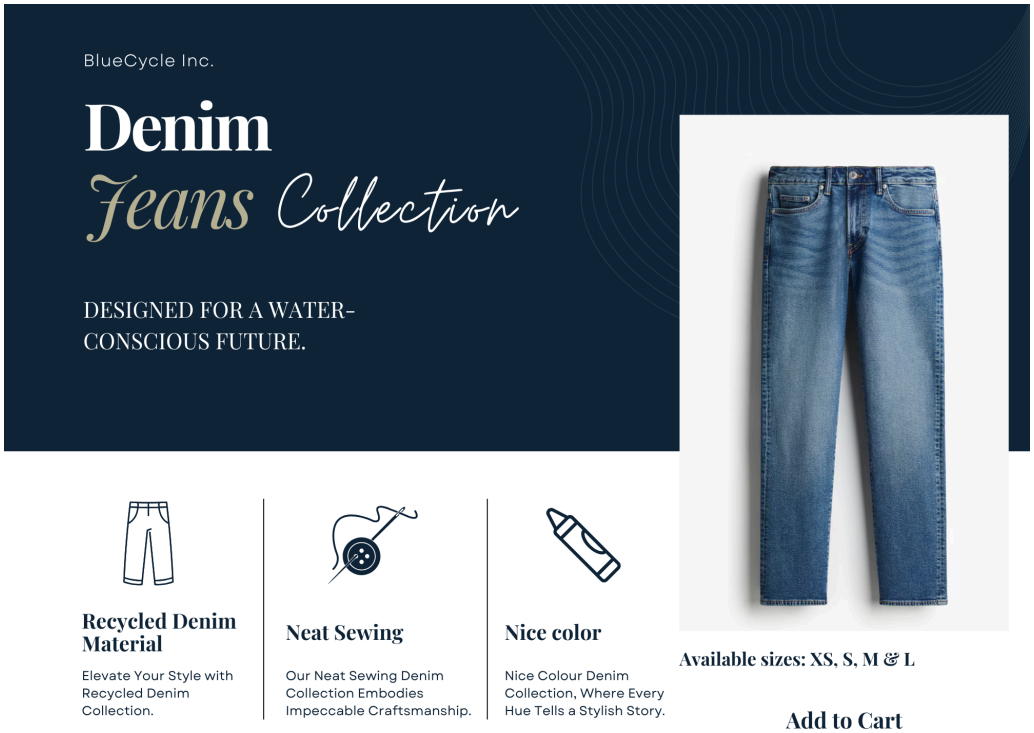
"Every year, 8 million metric tons of plastic waste enter our oceans, killing over 100,000 marine animals. A single plastic bottle takes 450 years to decompose, polluting water and harming wildlife. Meanwhile, deforestation wipes out an area the size of 27 soccer fields every minute, increasing carbon emissions and destroying habitats. You can help by bringing a reusable bag when shopping, avoiding plastic-packaged products, and choosing furniture made from recycled or responsibly sourced materials. Every small action—reduces waste and helps protect our planet for future generations."

Page Break

Q18

Imagine that after reading the article, you remember that you've been thinking about buying a new pair of jeans. You visit "BlueCycle's" website and come across this message: “Designed for a water-conscious future."

About BlueCycle: BlueCycle is a sustainable fashion brand that transforms recycled denim into stylish, high-quality designs. By giving jeans a second chance, BlueCycle reduces waste and conserves resources, offering consumers a way to embrace fashion with a lower environmental footprint.



Abstract priming + c

Q19

Imagine you are reading a newspaper article about sustainability. This is an excerpt from the article. Read it carefully.

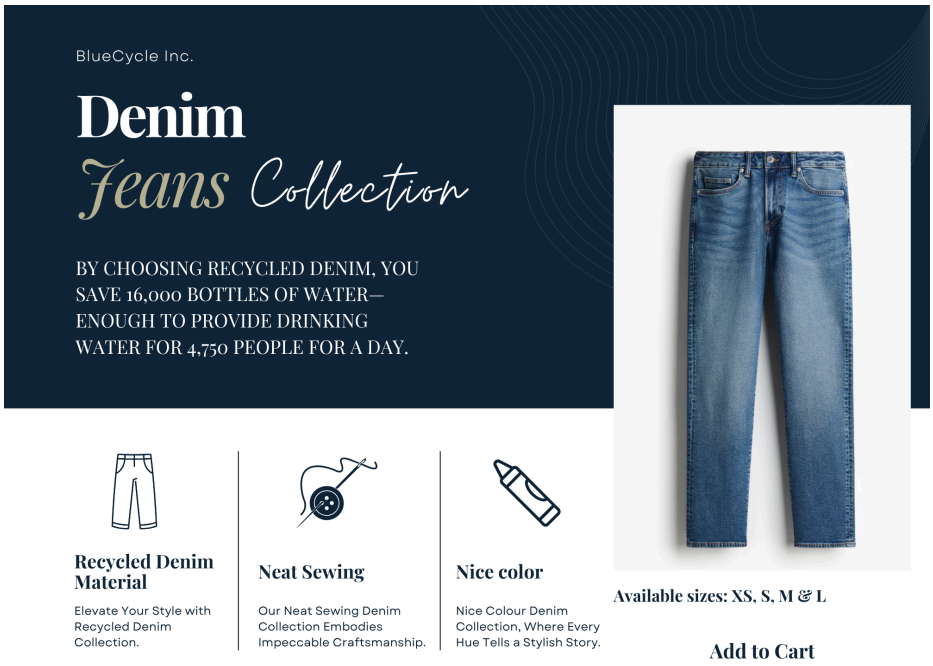
"Our planet is facing an environmental crisis that affects us all. Climate change, deforestation, and pollution are accelerating, putting ecosystems and future generations at risk. To create a sustainable future, we must rethink our consumption habits and work together toward a greener world. By making more responsible choices, we can collectively reduce our environmental footprint and contribute to global sustainability efforts."

Page Break

Q20

Imagine that after reading the article, you remember that you've been thinking about buying a new pair of jeans. You visit "BlueCycle's" website and come across this message: "By choosing recycled denim, you save 16,000 bottles of water—enough to provide drinking water for 4,750 people for a day."

About BlueCycle: BlueCycle is a sustainable fashion brand that transforms recycled denim into stylish, high-quality designs. By giving jeans a second chance, BlueCycle reduces waste and conserves resources, offering consumers a way to embrace fashion with a lower environmental footprint.



Perceived credibility of communication

Q21

This brand's product claims are believable.



Q12

This brand has the ability to deliver what it promises.



Q13

This brand is authentic.



Brand liking

Q14

I like the image on BlueCycle's product page.



Q15

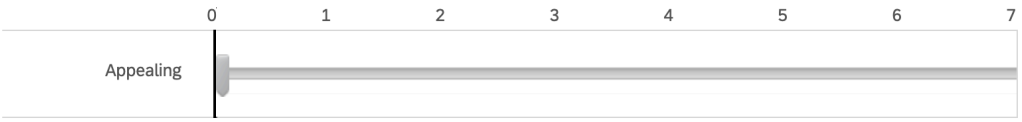
I associate positive things with the image on BlueCycle's product page.



Brand attitude

Q16

My impression of BlueCycle is appealing.



Q17

My impression of BlueCycle is favourable.



Q18

My impression of BlueCycle is pleasant.



Green purchase intention

Q19

I intend to buy this product.



Q20

I am willing to buy this product.



Q32

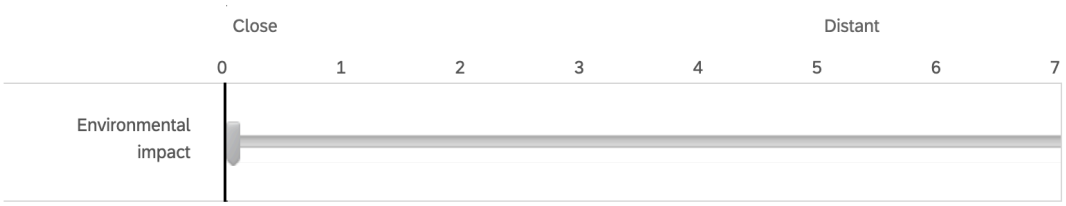
I will make an effort to buy this product.



Psychological distance

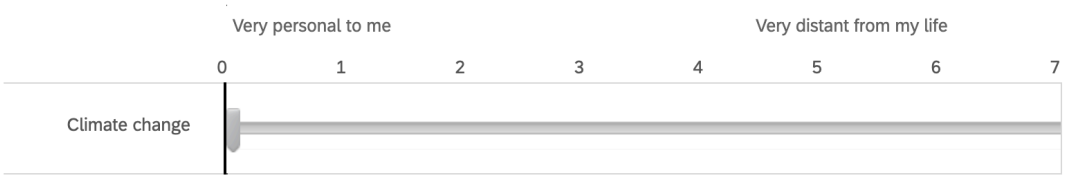
Q22 *

The environmental impact of my purchasing decisions feels...



Q23 *

The effects of climate change feel ...



Q24 *

When brands highlight sustainability in their messaging, it feels...



Bakgrund

Q25

I am familiar with the concept of sustainability.



Q26

The scenario on the product page was realistic.



Q27

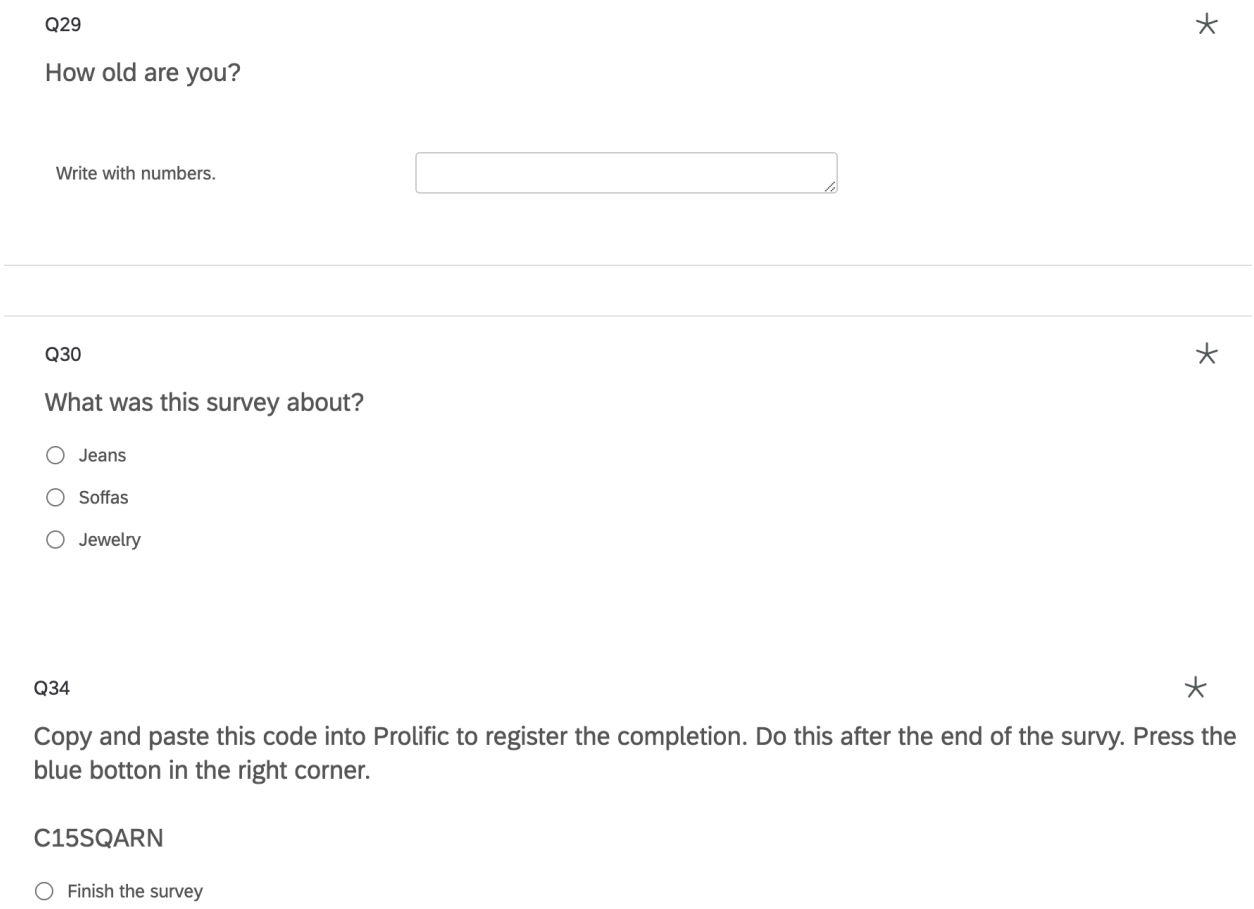
The brand tried to manipulate the consumer in ways that I don't like.



Q28

Which one of these do you identify as?

- ○ Man
- ○ Woman
- ○ Other / non-binary



Appendix 2: AI transparency

AI was mainly used in the thesis to improve and correct language and to understand topics for the authors own understanding. Moreover, we used it to find sources, but where they always were double-checked to meet the academic standards. AI was also used to generate our abstract and concrete primes; the goal was not factual precision, but simply to create two clearly distinct messages.