Reframing Recycling Waste: How Message Focus Activates Emotional Value Perceptions for Circular Fashion Brands

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Recycled plastics have emerged as scalable path to circularity, also for fashion brands. Despite positive attitudes, consumer response to integrating recycled waste into apparel is mixed, especially for skin-tight bodywear. Particularly in online retail where consumers infer product information through brand messaging, the framing of recycled material properties influences commercial success. Drawing on theories of transformational salience and psychological proximity, this study compares material innovation with story-based messages across two experiments, examining interaction effects with high- or low-contact fashion items and the role of consumer knowledge about recycling in shaping these effect. In a 2 (focus: innovation vs. narrative) × 2 (item type: garment vs. accessory) between-subjects online experiment among US consumers, narrative messages improved attitudes and purchase intentions. Mediation analyses indicate that emotional value perceptions explain these effects. Narrative framing also reduced perceived contamination, while no differences were found across item types, revoking notions of close-contact disgust responses. Results of a second experiment, using a 3-factorial design (innovation vs. narrative vs. control) for a low-contact garment, confirm the robustness of the narrative framing effects, yet shows that their effectiveness depends on consumers' recycling knowledge. The findings highlight emotionally resonant communication as crucial for promoting circular fashion online, while also pointing to the relevance of consumer knowledge in appraising sustainable innovations. By specifying when emotionally driven messaging can be most effective, the findings inform communication strategies to strengthening consumer acceptance of recycled materials in the fashion material space.

Keywords: Emotional value; Framing; Recycled Ocean Plastic; Fashion items; Perceived contamination; Online retail