When a Good Story Is Not Enough: The Limits of Storytelling in Sustainability Advertising

Storytelling is widely regarded as a persuasive advertising strategy. However, its effectiveness in sustainability contexts remains underexplored. Sustainability advertising – defined as advertising that communicates a brand's environmental benefits, sustainable practices, or eco-friendly products – represents a particularly credibility-sensitive domain, as consumers often respond with skepticism and greenwashing concerns. Consequently, narrative persuasion may operate differently in this context. Across two experimental studies (total $N = 800$), we compare purely narrative sustainability ads to purely factual ads and hybrid ads that combine storytelling with factual information. We test these formats for both established and unknown brands. Our findings challenge prior assumptions about the universal effectiveness of storytelling. Mediation analyses indicate that greenwashing perceptions and perceived informativeness explain these effects. Overall, our results demonstrate the limits of storytelling in sustainability advertising. By addressing this previously underexplored area, this research enriches storytelling and sustainability advertising literature and provides practical guidance for marketers.

Keywords: storytelling, narrative persuasion, sustainability, green products, green advertising, consumer behavior