

# Communicating Sustainability Fashion in Marketing Advertisements on the Context of Malaysia: Stimuli Development and Pre-Testing Results

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## Abstract

Although awareness of sustainable fashion in Malaysia is present, it is growing slowly. Consumers may find it challenging to understand messages or communicating advertisements on pro-environmental actions. Accordingly, stimuli development was designed in this study using regulatory focus theory for the structural development of an advertisement message. The advertisement content was generated based on promotion and prevention regulatory focus messages. This pre-testing study involved 30 university students who were randomly assigned to one of two treatment conditions: promotion or prevention regulatory focus message (n = 15 per group). The data were analysed with an independent samples t-test. The advertisement with the promotion-focused message was more persuasive than that with the prevention-focused message. The findings suggest guidelines for practitioners to devise effective strategies when designing advertisements that will not only help firms obtain personal benefits but also benefit society and the environment.

**Keywords:** Communicating advertisement, sustainable fashion, stimuli development, pre-testing result, regulatory focus theory, promotion regulatory focus message, prevention regulatory focus message

## 1. Introduction

The fashion industry has only recently been recognised as one of the most polluting and exploitative industries in the world (Mizrachi & Tal, 2022). The fundamental issues of the fashion industry stem from the fast-paced production and consumption, which exacerbate environmental and socioeconomic difficulties (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Evidently, the Malaysian fashion sector was responsible for discarding a record 195,300 tonnes of textile waste per year (Syed Abdul Khalid, 2021). Simultaneously, the quantity of textile waste that entered Malaysian landfills increased from 2.8% in 2012 to 6.3% in 2022. Discarded textile waste occupies 5% of all landfill space on the planet and is unavoidable during textile manufacturing and use. The reason is that only 15% of all textiles are recycled by individuals even though 95% of textiles have reuse or recycling potential. Between 80 billion and 100 billion pieces of clothing are produced each year, which is equivalent to 13 times the global population.

Approximately two million kilogrammes of unwanted textiles are discarded daily in Malaysia, which adds to the overflowing landfills. The Kloth Cares initiative has collected more than 75,000 kg discarded fabrics with assistance from its sustainability partners, including Guess Jeans, Lot 10 Shopping Centre, Prince Court Medical Centre, Allianz Malaysia, Sunway Putra Mall, Fraser & Neave, and Sime Darby Plantation. Kloth Cares has also placed more than 80 collection bins throughout the Klang Valley to encourage people to recycle their unwanted fabric and clothing. This effort parallels the Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) blueprint highlighted in the 11th Malaysia Plan as a focus area that will assist the country in achieving green growth and transition to a more inclusive development trajectory.

Minimising or recycling garments does not permanently solve the increasing environmental issues caused by such products throughout their life cycle. The adverse effects of apparel products can be minimised if consumers are aware of the impact of their everyday consumption and are well informed about better alternatives, such as sustainable apparel (Resta et al., 2016; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Sustainable fashion benefits the environment by increasing the value of local production, prolonging the life cycle of materials, heightening the importance of timeless clothing, and reducing environmental waste and harm. Concurrently, sustainable fashion is a burgeoning market in the clothing and textile business with the potential for significant expansion as consumers become more conscious of the environmentally depleting manufacturing techniques of the fast fashion industry and the poor treatment of workers (Kutsenkova, 2017; Dabija et al., 2017). Sustainable fashion can change apparel purchase and usage and result in positive social and environmental outcomes. The number of applications remains limited although the benefits of sustainable fashion are extensively acknowledged (Dewanto & Belgiawan, 2020). These overall reductions aid firms in optimising resource use, expanding chances to enter new markets by introducing innovative product, and gaining a first-mover advantage across the product life cycle (Amornpinyo, 2018; Qiu et al., 2020).

Malaysia believes that environmental sustainability initiatives and awareness should ideally be rooted in tertiary education, or the university environment (Wahid et al., 2020). Furthermore, this awareness must be instilled from the start of each child's education so that this behavioural change and adaptation toward sustainability is continuously practised as they progress up the value chain in the education stream (Kinjawan et al., 2020). Despite a huge body of literature on demand forecasting, there is a scarcity of studies on how marketing methods such as stimuli development of education advertising and other promotional activities affect demand (Birim et al., 2022). Having an effective communication structure for marketers as a basis is particularly crucial which able to assist them in bringing awareness and enhancing the message structure (Krishnan et al., 2019; Hasbullah et al., 2020). To address this particular issue, this study will develop a stimuli and pre-testing advertisement for a sustainable fashion and education advertisement in Malaysia.

This paper is divided into four sections: i) the literature review; ii) the methodology, in which the participants, stimuli procedure development, and selection are described; iii) the hypotheses testing results; iv) the discussion, in which the theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed; and the conclusion, in which the key findings are summarised and recommendations are provided.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Sustainable Fashion*

In defining sustainable fashion, Thomas (2008); Henninger, Alevizou and Oates (2016); and Brismar (2019) highlighted a myriad of labels that denote sustainable fashion: recycled, organic, vintage, vegan, artisan, locally made, custom-made, and fair trade-certified. This notion parallels Kim and Damhorst (1998), who proposed that these sustainable fashion classifications can explain the concept of sustainability. Sustainable clothing can refer to apparel made from recycled materials, organically-grown natural fibres, and exclusive fabrics that require cooler washing temperatures or less ironing, which suggest sustainable handling processes. Apparel with low impact or no dye processing or with environmentally friendly labelling or packaging also reflects the sustainable approach. Second-hand apparel is also considered sustainable apparel given its link to resource conservation (Connell, 2010). Finally, the willingness to wear clothes for a longer duration and purchase fewer clothes exemplify sustainable practises (Global Fashion Agenda, 2018).

### *2.2 Sustainable Marketing Communication (Advertisement)*

Advertising is a prominent form of marketing communication (Hamelin et al., 2020) that may be used to promote product and brand images (Teona et al., 2020; Hasbullah et al., 2020). Persuasive communication strategies, such as advertising, can be used to promote the use of environmentally friendly items (Mandliya et al., 2020; Usrey et al., 2020). The educational process is considered a significantly more promising technique (Mizrachi and Tal, 2022). Regardless, communication structure is a feature that may influence how individuals engage in ecologically responsible practises (Davis, 1995).

A message with an action plan is required to ensure proper conduct, especially among environmentally concerned people (Rhodes, 2014), as explicitly expressing the expected behaviours and consequences can help the audience comprehend the effects of their actions (Jarreau et al., 2017). When using various legislative measures to promote sustainable fashion, it is proposed that certification and communication remain the centre of such a promotion strategy. It is a preliminary and required intermediate step that should assist the promotion of a wider range of sustainable fashion laws (Mizrachi & Tal, 2022). Therefore, credible, comparable, and verifiable product information plays a critical role in enabling more sustainable purchases, lowering the risk of

momentary greenwashing.

### 2.3 Regulatory Focus Theory

Message framing can affect how persuasive communications alter people’s attitudes and intentions towards a behaviour (van de Velde et al., 2010). Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997; 2000) states that all goal-directed behaviours are governed by two distinct motivational systems: promotion or prevention focus. The promotion focus is associated with meeting the need for nourishment and achieving advancement, growth, and accomplishment. In contrast, the preventive system focuses on goals connected to security demands, specifically protection, safety, and responsibility fulfilment (Higgins, 1997, 2000). This regulatory focus has exerted a significant effect and been implicated in a substantial research corpus across the psychology, marketing, and communication domains (Sacchi & Stanca, 2014; Summerville & Roese, 2008).

It is pivotal for a marketer to tailor information related to the product to match the consumers’ regulatory focus to present a high-quality argument and match consumer mindsets (Chi et al., 2021) to highlight the quality of information rather than quantity in influencing consumers’ decision-making (Burtcher & Meyer, 2014; Lagomarsino et al., 2020). Regardless of promotion or prevention orientation, customers prefer products with durable reliability (Bettman & Sujan, 1987; Bullard & Manchanda, 2013; Motyka et al., 2014). Boesen-Mariani et al., (2010) proposed the regulatory focus theory to design more effective advertisements and messages (see Table 1). In the present study, two advertisements were designed separately based on the two appeals (promotion and prevention). Hence, this research proposes a positive relationship between both appeal and sustainable fashion consumption.

H1: Promotion Regulatory Focus Message is positively related to sustainable fashion consumption

H2: Prevention Regulatory Focus Message is positively related to sustainable fashion consumption

Table 1. The Foundation of Regulatory Focus Message (Promotion vs Prevention) (sources: Boesen-Mariani et al. (2010))

Construct	Promotion of Regulatory Focus	Prevention of Regulatory Focus
Needs	Growth and Progress.	Security and Protection.
Standards Targeted	Ideal self (reflected by hopes and aspirations).	Ought self (reflected by duties and obligations)
Strategic Tendencies	Approaching the desired state.	Avoiding the non-attainment of the desired state or avoiding a non-desired state.
Outcome	Presence of positive outcomes. Ensuring that positive outcomes are obtained and avoiding errors and omissions.	Absence of negative outcomes. Ensuring the absence of errors and opting for good rejections.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Stimuli Development

The selection of content information, and diction play important part to attract people’s attention to advertise the messages (Murwonugroho and Yudarwati, 2020). At the same times, the structure of communication and details information also will represent the elements of communication used in a social setting (Masduki and Zakaria, 2020). Up to a point, the advertisement stimuli (promotion and prevention regulatory focus messages) were designed based on the regulatory focus message construct by Boesen-Mariani et al., (2010) (see Table 1). The survey method and the quasi-experimental design were adopted for this study. The researcher has decided to choose quasi-experimental designs as true experimentation cannot be used, and it is difficult to achieve full manipulation of scheduling or allocation of treatments to respondents (Chrysochou, 2017).

The questionnaire survey instrument content validity was determined after the questionnaire had been finalised. Content validity is an essentially intuitive process in pre-testing (Bell & Harley, 2018). This Phase 1 (expert-driven) process indicated the extent to which the scale was representative and whether the information was adequate for measuring the variables (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016) (Kuppelwieser et al., 2019). The validation involved pre-testing of the survey items by reviewing the survey. Instead of assessing each item individually, the experts rated them on a Likert scale (Ruel et al., 2015).

### 3.2 Pre-test Stimuli Selection (Advertisement)

Phase 2 involved the pre-testing responses. The presence of a control group was essential for the

pre-experimental design. Customer randomisation was required as a part of the pre-test as the information obtained was crucial and justified the use of a true experimental design. According to the study by Shamsi and Siddiqui (2017), the university student was found to have a great relationship with green product usage due to their educational qualification. Due to that, we decided to take a university student as a respondent. The respondents were 30 students from UiTM Bandaraya Melaka, Melaka, who were assigned to treatment or control groups (n = 15 per group). In the pre-test, group 1 (treatment) was exposed to the promotional stimuli and group 2 (control) was exposed to prevention stimuli. The respondents were required to digest any of two advertisements on sustainable fashion (as shown in Appendix A) for at least 30 seconds and which included the pre-testing advertisement form. The respondents viewed the advertisement, then completed the validated questionnaire, which contained manipulation check measures.

The items in the questionnaire assessed perceptions towards advertisement content and consisted of sustainable product information (six items), entertainment (four items), irritation (four items), credibility (three items), value (three items), and purchase intention (one item). In this study, items related to product information and advertisement content were sourced from (Wang & Lee, 2006) and graded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The respondents were required to respond to the manipulation check questions as they had been exposed to either a promotion or a preventive structure in the appeals. The surveys were submitted via Google Forms after the pre-test phase.

Phase 3 involved the manipulation check. To assess the regulatory focus manipulation check, two questions were posed and anchored with seven-point bipolar scale items. The respondents were required to indicate if the advertisement was related to promotion or prevention (“Overall, I think the advertisement is concerned about promotion [or prevention],” based on a seven-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). This manipulation was embedded to examine which regulatory focus message demonstrated the most effective appeal to convey the sustainable apparel product messaging in the advertisement. This manipulation check was adapted from the regulatory fit domain by Lee and Aaker (2004). Only the most effective regulatory focus message was used in the final stimulus.

**4. Statistical Analysis**

The descriptive statistics (mean [M] and standard deviation [SD]) were calculated using SPSS. The effects of the promotion and prevention regulatory focus message conditions on sustainable fashion purchasing intention were compared using an independent sample t-test. Data outliers, the quality of life (QoL) scores for each gender level, and variance homogeneity were assessed by boxplot inspection, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, and the Levene test for equality of variances, respectively.

**5. Results**

The boxplot inspection revealed no data outliers while the QoL score for each gender level was normally distributed ( $p > .05$ ) and variance homogeneity was violated ( $p = .344$ ) (see Table 3). Meanwhile, Table 2 illustrates the construct of the promotion regulatory focus message influenced sustainable fashion purchase intention ( $M = 1.6667$ ,  $SD = .50$ ) more than the prevention regulatory focus message ( $M = 1.238$ ,  $SD = .43644$ ). The two constructs were statistically significantly different ( $t = 2.362$ ,  $p = .025$ ) with high effect size.

Table 2. Independent T-test on Means (M) of Post-test Scores: Control Vs Treatment

<b>Group statistics</b>					
<b>Dependent Variable</b>	Regulatory	N	Mean	SD	Standard error of the mean
<b>Purchase Intention</b>	Promotion (Treatment)	15	1.6667	.50	.16667
	Prevention (Control)	15	1.2381	.43644	.09524

The promotion regulatory focus message recorded higher mean scores for all variables (informativeness, entertainment, credibility, and value) except the irritation construct (see Table 4). In line with the results, the regulatory focus manipulation check demonstrated that 89.0% and 81.3% of respondents exposed to promotion- and prevention-framed messages, respectively, indicated the assigned condition correctly. Resultantly, the manipulation check was successful and that the stimulus was an advertisement with a promotion regulatory focus message.

Table 3. Levene’s Test and T-test for Equality of Means

		Independent samples t-test									
		Levene’s test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means							
		F	Significance	t	Degree of freedom	Significance (two-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% Confidence interval of the difference		
										Lower	Upper
PI	Equal variances assumed	.927	.344	2.362	28	.025	.42857	.18148	.05683	.80031	
	Equal variances not assumed			2.362	13.502	0.025	.42857	.19196	.01543	.84171	

Table 4. Group statistics of two constructs

	Regulatory	N	Mean	SD	Standard error of the mean
Entertainment	<b>Promotion</b>	15	<b>4.2333</b>	<b>.46739</b>	<b>.12068</b>
	Prevention	15	1.8000	.46483	.12002
Irritation	Promotion	15	3.6000	1.17944	.28122
	<b>Prevention</b>	15	<b>4.0333</b>	<b>1.08918</b>	<b>.30453</b>
Credibility	<b>Promotion</b>	15	<b>3.9778</b>	<b>.66029</b>	<b>.17049</b>
	Prevention	15	1.7778	.46576	.12026
Value	<b>Promotion</b>	15	<b>4.0444</b>	<b>.67691</b>	<b>.17478</b>
	Prevention	15	1.7778	.46576	.12026
Information	<b>Promotion</b>	15	<b>3.8778</b>	<b>.48984</b>	<b>.12648</b>
	Prevention	15	1.8444	.36983	.09549

**6. Discussion**

In two separate experiments, the researchers used two different sets of regulatory focus theory-derived advertising stimuli (promotion and preventive focus messages). The mean ratings revealed that the promotion regulatory message was more educational, entertaining, credible, and demonstrated high value compared to the prevention regulatory focus message. Despite this, the promotion regulatory message recorded a higher average irritation score than the prevention regulatory focus message. These findings were similar to those of previous studies (Kareklas et al., 2014; Segev et al., 2015; Bhatnagar & McKay-Nesbitt, 2016; Dadoo & Wu, 2019), which reported that promotion focus appeared to be more inclined towards persuading customers to buy green products rather than individuals in a prevention state.

A specific information structure can provide customers with knowledge of the product function, reasons for using the product, and ultimately, reasons to engage in green consumption (Beatson et al., 2020; Masduki & Zakaria, 2020; Elareshi et al., 2021; Marcatajo, 2021). To mould consumer preferences, a corporation should continue to highlight both aesthetic appeal and traditional product features, such as price, quality, convenience, and availability, rather than showcasing excessive sustainable attributes (Fuchs et al., 2013; Amatulli et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2020). Furthermore, commercial communication must be fair, reliable, and verifiable to maintain consumer confidence by protecting customers from misleading claims of sustainability that lead to decisions the consumer would not have made otherwise. This investigation demonstrates the importance of being able to communicate and grasp the product or activity component that yields the benefits advertised. It is critical to communicate and publicise corporate environmental investments clearly and transparently to protect consumers from false messaging (Marcatajo, 2021).

Businesses that use promotion regulatory focus messages as a green marketing technique can communicate their potential (different product features) via hang tags, commercials, and labelling (Bhatt et al., 2020). Such tactics demonstrate that environmental benefits are less effective at promoting environmental messages alone without emphasising the personal benefits associated with sustainable fashion (Achabou et al., 2020). Comprehensive communication strategies for sustainable fashion should raise environmental awareness, address the benefits of supporting fair-trade practises, expose the negative environmental impact of the textile industry, and disseminate information on the benefits of purchasing sustainable fashion.

**7. Practical and Theoretical Contribution**

The regulatory focus theory is comprised of two appeals: preventative and promotion messages. Nonetheless, only the promotion regulatory focus message have a significant result in this study as it appeared to be more effective for promoting sustainable and hedonic items (Micu & Chowdhury, 2010; Lee & Mackert, 2017;Thongpapanl et al., 2018; Naletelich & Spears, 2020; Jung et al., 2021). The inclusion of a promotion regulatory focus message as a most effective structure was consistent with the assertion by (Tyufekchieva & Reichhart, 2018). The authors reported that before the message content is evaluated, it must pique the recipient’s interest immediately so that they feel sufficiently motivated to read it. Thus, businesses must focus on presenting more appealing message subjects that attract recipients in the first instance. It also motivates the study and comprehension of commercial content (Sharma & Kaur, 2020).

This study provides practitioners with guidance for developing the means for creating effective advertisements that not only assist corporations in realising personal rewards but that also benefit society and the environment specific in Malaysia. It can be manifest that Malaysia is a high-context country and relies on the context of the communication. If someone is not aware of the different communication styles between the context cultures, he can simply get into trouble that can lead to serious communication breakdowns when communicating with individuals from another culture (Al-Shboul & Maros, 2020). Cultural differences in communication and behaviour, which may significantly influence success and failure in any kind of cooperation and collaboration between partners of different cultural backgrounds (Pá & Loch, 2020). Communication strategies for sustainable fashion should spread environmental awareness, discuss the benefits of supporting fair-trade practises, uncover the negative environmental effects caused by the textile industry, and disseminate information on the benefits of purchasing sustainable fashion. Additionally, Governments have significant power and influence to determine the policies and services regarding sustainability maintenance and enforcement—by imposing laws and codes, governments can achieve sustainable growth (Hossain et al., 2022). On the similar vein, the policy orientations at the university level need able to led positive outcomes in enhancing students’ sustainability awareness and attitudes in Malaysian universities (Zhou, Abedin, & Sheela, 2022).

**8. Limitations and Further Studies**

Investigating advertising stimuli through the use of images or graphics and text would be fascinating as such framing appears to be an effective marketing tactic. Guido et al. (2019) reported that picture advertisements drew over 91.7% more attention than those without pictures. An organisation can avoid banner blindness by combining faces and images in advertising messages (Hervet et al., 2011). Incorporating intertextuality is a highly successful means of articulating messages and presents the potential to pique consumer emotions (Ghazal Aswad, 2019). Thus, future advertising researchers may use images and text as stimuli.

**Appendix A. Final Stimuli Advertisement for the Research**

Regulatory focus message structure	Promotion of regulatory focus	Prevention of regulatory focus
Needs	Brand X will make your investment in fashion and the environment truly worthwhile. This collection is constructed from sustainable elements, i.e. 95% organic cotton and 5% recycled polyester.	Brand X will prevent you from wasting money by indulging in excessive shopping. This collection is constructed from sustainable elements, i.e. 95% organic cotton and 5% recycled polyester.
Standards targeted	This brand offers you high quality, durability, and timeless style. This renewable and recyclable product offers you a high-quality, stylish, durable and practical accessory for modern life.	Without this brand, you will experience a non-renewable and non-recyclable product that is an inferior, unfashionable, flimsy and impractical accessory for modern life.

Strategic tendencies	Essentially, it is made in Malaysia from Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS)-certified organic cotton, tailoring a fair deal for farmers and workers whilst supporting local environmental and social projects.	Essentially, it is made in Malaysia from GOTS-certified organic cotton. It does not abuse farmers and workers and does not support the destruction of local environmental and social projects.
Outcome	By wearing Brand X, you are reducing water usage by 700 gallons (enough to fill 22 bathtubs), creating less waste, and saving approximately 151 g of a pound of chemicals to produce a single t-shirt.	Without Brand X, you are using an excessive 700 gallons of water (enough to fill 22 bathtubs), creating more waste, and using approximately 151 g of a pound of chemicals to produce a single t-shirt.

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