

**SENSE AND SENSIBILITY IN SUSTAINABILITY: HOW KNOWLEDGE AND EMOTIONS ELABORATE GREEN ADVERTISING MESSAGES TOWARDS BRAND OUTCOMES**

Elena Cedrola, University of Macerata, Italy<sup>1</sup>  
Marta Giovannetti, University of Macerata, Italy<sup>2</sup>  
Paola Signori, University of Verona, Italy<sup>3</sup>

**ABSTRACT**

This study examines how consumers process green advertising emotionally and cognitively, focusing on how sustainability knowledge and attitudes shape perceptions of sustainability messages. Analyzing 220 pre- and post-exposure survey responses to a circularity-themed fashion brand video advertising, findings show positive effects on brand-related outcomes, including engagement, trust, and favorability toward brand.

**Introduction**

Across industries, firms increasingly proclaim environmental and social commitments, yet measurable progress remains uneven. Meeting societal and regulatory expectations requires that sustainability be embedded in operations, offerings, and brand meaning, not merely signaled (Cronin et al., 2011; Reppmann et al., 2025). In this environment, transparency and credibility are strategic assets: consumers actively scrutinize sustainability claims ex ante, calibrating trust and purchase intentions accordingly (Golob et al., 2023). As a result, the communicative “how” has become as consequential as the substantive “what.” Sustainability communication spans a wide spectrum—from informational and deliberative modes to transformative narratives, reporting, green advertising, and, at times, misleading claims. Empirical work links the detection of greenwashing to judgments of truthfulness and trustworthiness (Chen & Chang, 2013), while also showing that consumers’ environmental involvement and their cognitive vs. affective processing styles condition these judgments (Schmuck et al., 2018). This paper advances and tests a nomological network based on the Affect–Reason–Involvement (ARI) lens—where emotional reactions to an ad shape ad liking, brand attitude, and downstream behavioral intentions (Brown & Stayman, 1992). Specifically, we model affect as ad-evoked emotions that cascade into ad credibility and brand outcomes (Pons et al., 2006). We then specify reason as cognitive appraisals of the message’s green credibility and the perceived (non)deceptiveness of claims, which together inform brand authenticity and trust (Sander et al., 2021). Finally, we formalize involvement as environmental involvement that both moderates the affective and cognitive pathways and amplifies learning from the message. In doing so, we extend the ARI framework beyond traditional brand-attitude outcomes to include “additional consumer knowledge”—defined as brand-enabled sustainability knowledge gain that contributes to consumers’ broader cultural

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<sup>1</sup> elena.cedrola@unimc.it

<sup>2</sup> marta.giovannetti@unimc.it

<sup>3</sup> paola.signori@univr.it

understanding of sustainable practices (Ejelöv et al., 2018). This study contributes to sustainability communication research by integrating ARI with Construal Level Theory (CLT) to explain how emotions and cognitions jointly translate green advertising into brand outcomes.

### **Background and Conceptual Model**

The conceptual framework of this study is rooted in the dual-process perspective of consumer behavior, specifically focusing on how sustainability-related information is processed through both affective and cognitive pathways. While skepticism and social cynicism help identify greenwashing (Policarpo et al., 2023), unrecognized greenwashing eventually erodes brand trust (Chen & Chang, 2013). Conversely, a sustainable brand personality strengthens consumer attitudes by providing a coherent, positive image (Sander et al., 2021). Sustainability is often perceived as abstract due to vague language and distant outcomes, hindering engagement; applying Construal Level Theory (CLT), researchers suggest matching message appeals with framing (Chang, 2010). Abstract appeals (high-level construal) pair best with gain-framing, while concrete appeals (low-level construal) are more effective with loss-framing or to promote specific behaviors (Chang et al., 2015). Emotional appeals are vital for pro-environmental behavior: positive emotions like hope and pride foster motivation, with pride specifically increasing perceived consumer effectiveness (Pasca, 2022). Conversely, guilt and shame can drive action, though excessive guilt may cause defensiveness (Rees et al., 2015). Message framing and structure also dictate emotional impact; loss-framed messages emphasizing negative consequences often elicit stronger reactions than gain-framed messages (Amatulli et al., 2019). Furthermore, narrative storytelling is more effective at reducing skepticism and increasing empathy than purely statistical data (Morris et al., 2019). Utilizing the PANAS construct (Watson et al., 1988), we propose that basic emotions (Ekman, 1992; Russell, 1980) reinforce the rational processing of green advertising content, and finally impact brand outcomes favorably. In particular, brand perception and the authenticity of the green characteristics of the product being advertised, such as Greenwashing and Green Trust (Chen & Chang, 2013), are crucial to the credibility of observed green advertising. Consequently, the effectiveness of the communication message can be assessed in terms of brand affection and brand attitude (Spears & Singh, 2004), along with a greater attitude toward sustainability. Specifically, we developed and tested a nomological network specifying the following hypotheses: H1: Pre-viewing brand attitude positively influences positive emotions and negatively influences negative emotions; H2: Pre-viewing brand affection positively influences positive emotions and negatively influences negative emotions; H3: Pre-viewing environmental knowledge influences the generation of emotions during viewing; H4-H5: Positive emotions elicited by the ad positively influence ad credibility, while negative emotions influence it negatively (Höfling & Alpers, 2023); H6-H7: Consumers' green trust has a positive impact on perceived ad credibility, while perceptions of greenwashing have a negative impact (Chen & Chang, 2013); H8-H9: Ad credibility positively influences post-viewing brand attitude and brand affection; H10-H11: Ad credibility influences post-viewing environmental knowledge and positively influences attitudes toward sustainability; H12-H13: Ad Credibility mediates the relationship between experienced emotions and post-viewing brand outcomes (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

### **Methodology and Sample**

The theoretical framework was tested using a series of psychometric measures and 1-to-5 Likert scales. The experimental design adopted a pre- and post-exposure survey methodology, where participants' emotional responses during video exposure were captured via camera-based facial expression tracking and the PANAS scale (Watson et al., 1988). To measure cognitive processing, we used adapted measures for Environmental Knowledge (EK), Attitude towards Sustainability (ATTUS), Green Trust (GRTR), and perceived Greenwashing (GRWA) based on Chen & Chang (2013). The perception of credibility was measured by Ad Credibility (ADCR), and output variables included Brand Attitude (BATT) and Brand Affection (BAFF) following Spears & Singh (2004). These dimensions were measured after viewing a video promoting "The Cube" by Max Mara, which illustrates the technical process of recovering cashmere waste to create a patented circular padding material. Notably, the process involves a specific supplier, testifying to the brand's circularity efforts through high supply-chain transparency. This stimulus was chosen because it represents a low-level construal (concrete and technical) of circular economy practices, ideal for testing the "Reason" path of the ARI model. The sample of N=220 respondents was recruited in Italy (June–September 2025) via direct invitation and social media. Data were processed using SmartPLS 4 for PLS-SEM, following established literature on the estimation of structural models (Hair et al., 2012; 2017). To test the mediating role of emotions and credibility, we utilized Bias-Corrected Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. Control for common method variance was performed according to Chin et al. (2013).

### **Results**

The sample showed a wide variety of ages, with a predominance of young adults and middle-aged respondents; the majority have a master's degree and are currently employed or students. Prior to testing the structural model, we ensured reliability and validity: all constructs displayed adequate internal consistency and convergent validity. Assessment confirms the central role of Ad Credibility (ADCR). The SEM analysis reveals that positive emotions (PANAS\_POS) significantly enhance credibility ( $b = 0.237$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting H4, whereas negative emotions (PANAS\_NEG) and perceptions of greenwashing (GRWA) did not reach full statistical significance in their negative impact on this specific stimulus. Regarding brand outcomes, ADCR emerged as a powerful predictor: it significantly improves Post-vision Brand Attitude ( $b = 0.631$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Post-vision Brand Affection ( $b = 0.601$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and Attitude toward Sustainability ( $b = 0.604$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting H8, H9, and H11. A particularly interesting result concerns H10: while ADCR significantly impacts Post-vision Environmental Knowledge, the relationship is negative ( $b = -0.347$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests a paradoxical effect where highly credible and technically specific ads might lead consumers to feel they have learned less about "general" sustainability, as their focus is narrowed to a single, brand-specific industrial solution. Overall, the model explains a substantial portion of the variance for the main dependent variables, particularly for Brand Attitude and Brand Affection.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

The findings confirm that Ad Credibility (ADCR) serves as the fundamental pivot for transforming emotional and cognitive reactions into tangible brand outcomes. Contrary to

expectations (Schmuck et al., 2018), pre-viewing brand attitude and affection did not significantly influence emotion generation, suggesting that in complex contexts like the circular economy, emotional response is driven more by specific transparency cues than by prior loyalty. Positive emotions were confirmed as critical drivers of credibility, supporting the notion that proactive messages can lower consumer defensive barriers. Verifiable transparency cues in the stimulus effectively mitigated initial skepticism, reinforcing the idea that concrete evidence acts as an "antidote" to greenwashing concerns (Chen & Chang, 2013). The most robust evidence highlights the profound impact of ADCR on post-viewing outcomes, with path coefficients exceeding 0.60. Furthermore, the strong positive effect on Attitude towards Sustainability confirms that green advertising acts as an educational tool (Lee et al., 2024). However, the "knowledge paradox" emerged: highly concrete messages (low-level construal), while perceived as credible, may actually limit the consumer's perception of "general" knowledge gain. Consumers might focus so intensely on the technical solution presented that they do not perceive a broader expansion of general environmental understanding. This highlights the need for a "hybrid construal" strategy, where concrete traceability data is paired with high-level aspirational storytelling (Gutentag & Russell, 2025). From a practical perspective, the data provide clear guidance for fashion marketers: circularity should be communicated through narratives that evoke inspiration and empowerment. Managers must ensure transparency is structural; although not directly tested in this stimulus, the integration of Blockchain technology emerges as a strategic solution (Lee et al., 2024). This technology enables luxury brands to offer immutable traceability, from ethical sourcing to carbon footprint monitoring. This oversight transforms the relationship with the customer from "blind trust" to "verifiable data". Ultimately, a successful strategy involves bridging the gap between technical transparency and emotional storytelling, ensuring that circularity translates into genuine environmental awareness and a lasting affective bond.

**Keywords:** Green Advertising, Emotions, Knowledge, Brand Attitude, Brand Affection

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