

**Are Company Appeals for Sustainability More Effective When They Reflect Their
Brand Image?**

Raphaela Pinheiro Freitas Silveira

s4012992

Department of Psychology, University of Groningen

Honours Bachelor Thesis (PSB3E-BTHO)

Supervisor: Dr. Thijs Bouman

Second Evaluator: Prof. Alynda Kok

January 13, 2023

Abstract

Many businesses strive to change their communication messages into ones that are more sustainable in order to react to the expanding pro-environmental and social actions in society. Companies' appeals can succeed by personalizing their message to the unique traits of their target audience rather than using a one-size-fits-all strategy. Therefore, the current paper tested the effects of sustainable messages and sustainable brand images on brand trust, brand engagement and future behavior changes of costumers. However, although businesses may change their communication to suit a target audience better, the success of this adjustment may also depend on how well the communication suits the brand itself such as congruence between business messages and brand image. For this, the paper furthermore tests the effects of a (mis)alignment between a company's financial and environmental communications and its financial and environmental brand image, on a 2 (environmental versus financially oriented message) x 2 (environmental versus financial fictitious energy company brand image) design. Dutch (N=57) and Brazilian (N=45) students and (young) professionals were the subjects of a questionnaire survey. According to our findings, perceptions of brand trust, brand engagement, and future intentions for sustainable behavior in the participants did not seem to be influenced by the more sustainable messages, more sustainable brand images, or (in)consistency between the environmental versus economic message and brand image.

Keywords: Brand image, Company communication, environment, finance, Brand trust, Brand engagement, future sustainable behavior intention

Are Company Appeals for Sustainability More Effective When They Reflect Their Brand Image?

To address environmental challenges, numerous organizations are increasing their focus on sustainability (Pimonenko et al., 2020). One way companies do so is by engaging on Corporate Environmental or Social Responsibility (CER or CSR) acts. Źak, 2015 and Księżak & Fischbach, 2018 define CER or CSR as a company's approach to recognizing its responsibilities to the environment and society and generating firm growth without irreversibly affecting the environment.

Adopting a greener company lifestyle affects how businesses construct their mission, strategy, and policies (Pimonenko et al., 2020), and if communicated correctly, it potentially benefits the firm (Servaes & Tamayo, 2013). For instance, consumers have become educated and careful about company motivation while shopping and are informed and care about environmental issues. Therefore they may prefer a company that follows the same principles with a green-brand communication. This possibly results in differences in their overall evaluation of the company (David et al., 2005), consumer confidence, and consumer loyalty behavior (Źak, 2015). Moreover, a modern communication strategy can include an awareness campaign to foster CER or CSR among individuals outside the company.

Further, to adapt to growing pro-environmental and social action in society, many organizations seek to adapt their communication messages towards a more sustainable angle. Research has shown that campaigns can benefit from adapting the message to the distinctive characteristics of their target group (i.e. tailoring), other than using a one-size-fits-all approach (David et al., 2005). Besides the adaptation of communication strategies, companies can contribute to environmental and social causes by adapting their brand image to encourage pro-environmental behavior among their clients (De Dominicis et al., 2017). Brand image is the general perception and feeling regarding a brand (Deheshti et al., 2016), which can

provide positive outcomes toward consumer behavior and brand trust, as well as credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of both its members and its stakeholders (David et al., 2005).

Although businesses may change their communication to better suit a target audience (David et al., 2005), the success of this adjustment may also depend on how well the communication suits the brand itself. In comparison to earlier research, which mostly concentrated on how such communication techniques fit with customers' personal values, there has been a significant lack of study on the consequences of whether such communication tactics should also match the brand image itself. For this, we propose to investigate any possible (mis)alignment between a company's financial and environmental communications and its financial and environmental brand image, on a 2 (environmental versus financially oriented message) x 2 (environmental versus financial fictitious energy company brand image) design.

Environmental versus financially oriented message

As previously mentioned, many communication strategies have been explored to communicate more about sustainable targets (van den Broek et al., 2017). Simultaneously, this approach also falls in line with previous research that assumes that persuasiveness can be increased by adapting the message to the target audience's basic values, which frequently emphasize self-enhancing (e.g., financial rewards) and self-transcending (e.g., pro-environmental, pro-social objectives) (van den Broek et al., 2017). This can be reasoned for since tailor-made messages are more pertinent to the listeners' personal lives, encouraging interaction and elaboration with the message. Since company communications can be compelling enough to change how customers behave (van den Broek et al., 2017), it is crucial to carefully assess the message content to avoid adverse effects such as a waste of resources or an unwanted behavior change.

A common method used by companies evolves around egoistic centered ideals. The messages of egoistic (self-interest) centered ideals emphasize the personal advantages customers may obtain from environmental conservation. Classic examples can be money savings or gaining the acceptance of others (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). For instance, a water company can advertise money savings as a direct result of water savings. Modern campaigns frequently include economic reasons because firms assume that financial savings are a primary motivator of pro-environmental action (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). However, there are several reasons why clients might find this less attractive (Schwartz et al., 2015). For instance, because many environmental actions have low financial advantages but require substantial time- and/or effort-investment, economic appeals may unintentionally discourage the very behaviors they intended to encourage (van den Broek et al., 2017). At the same time, it can demotivate highly biospheric-motivated participants by inhibiting their intrinsic environmental motivation (van den Broek et al., 2017), since the introduction of external rewards can lead to a decreased motivation to engage in the behavior when people are already motivated to behave for environmental conservation reasons.

Alternatively, an environmental communication involves putting aside people's interests and concentrating on what is best for the environment and future generations (van den Broek et al., 2017). An illustration of this situation could be an energy provider telling customers that by conserving energy, they can save the planet, or perhaps a more specific situation where the city council asks the populace to ban plastic bags because they pollute the ocean and may be responsible for the deaths of numerous animals. Instead of following the approach of stressing the financial benefits of their action, this type of message can increase customers' intrinsic motivation, strengthening their natural environmental incentive (van den Broek et al., 2017).

Additionally, environmental messaging can improve customer perceptions in a number of areas, including firm reputation, trust, engagement and understanding or awareness of CSR (Kim, 2019). Kim and Ferguson (2014, 2016) identified that CSR communication are related to 6 characteristics: CSR informativeness, personal relevance, endorsement factor, consistency, transparency, and factual message tone. These characteristics would need to be fulfilled in order to qualify to a consumer as CSR communication.

Among these 6 indications, consistency and transparency play a crucial role in increasing trust and giving communication messages a more real appearance (Kim, 2019). Transparency is linked to the disclosure of CSR information, both good and bad. Further, how regularly a company communicates its CSR goals is a measure of consistency, leaving companies that only communicate their CSR program in a short media public moment but do not follow up consistently as less trustworthy than a consistent counterpart. Therefore, the following hypothesis is anticipated:

Hypothesis 1a. Participants will have a higher level of brand trust in sustainable messages compared to the financially oriented ones.

Next, brand engagement is closely related to the "personal relevance" aspect. Customers are motivated to relate to and interact with a brand more when they are presented with materials from it that are personally relevant to them.

Hypothesis 1b. Participants will have a higher level of brand engagement in sustainable messages compared to the financially oriented ones.

Finally, changing consumer behavior is one of a company's major strategies for spreading a sustainable message. Based on the previously mentioned common downsides of economically motivated messages and the advantages of environmental communication, it is also anticipated that when sustainable messages are delivered, as opposed to financially

motivated ones, future behavior intentions will improve. Based on this, the following hypothesis are also proposed in this study:

Hypothesis 1c. Participants will have a higher level of sustainable future behavior intentions in sustainable messages compared to the financially oriented ones.

However, the effectiveness of such communication campaigns may not only depend on preferences of consumer but also on whether it aligns with the brand image of the company. Every company has a brand image representing customers' perceptions and feelings about them (Srivastava, 2011). Brand image can be defined as how likely the customer is to believe the company will deliver what is promised. For that, is necessary to take into consideration how the brand image is communicated and the customer perception.

These perceptions can mediate the decision-making process when the customers are indecisive about different companies (Alhaddad, 2015). Therefore, brand image is prominent in the marketing strategy of firms. Overall, many positive outcomes come from a strong brand image communication, such as intense positive connections with customers' memory, mutual trust and loyalty, higher profit margins, and brand opportunities (Alhaddad, 2015). Once more, in order to be perceived as CSR, certain communication characteristics must be fulfilled (Kim, 2019). Only when being consistent and transparent, your CSR activities are accepted as such by costumers. And again, consistency and transparency are likewise factors found to generally increase the trust in a person or brand. Therefore, efforts of a company to establish a sustainable CSR brand image, are likewise to be expected to increase the costumers trust in your company. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study:

Hypothesis 2a. Participants will have a higher level of brand trust in a sustainable brand image compared to the financially oriented ones.

Customers are predicted to interact with a sustainable brand image more frequently than they do with financially driven brand image. This may be the case given that customers are more knowledgeable about company's goals these days when they shop. They are also more likely to be aware of and concerned about environmental problems, and therefore patronize a company that promotes such ideals through its use of green branding. Consequently, this might lead to a change in their willingness to engage with the company overall (David et al., 2005). Based on this, the following hypothesis is anticipated:

Hypothesis 2b. Participants will have a higher level of brand engagement in a sustainable brand image compared to the financially oriented ones.

Lastly, it is also expected that sustainable brand images, as opposed to ones that are financially motivated, lead to higher future behavior intentions. This expectation is again based on the previously mentioned typical drawbacks of economically motivated messages and the benefits of general environmental communication. Based on this, the following hypothesis are proposed in this study:

Hypothesis 2c. Participants will have a higher level of sustainable future behavior intentions in a sustainable brand image compared to the financially oriented ones.

Whereas most research focused on how well messages fit the preferences and needs of customers (van den Broek et al., 2017), little is known about its relation with the sender of the information. Specifically, if the effectiveness of different messages may depend not only on the motivations of the receiver of the information but also on the image they may have of the sender of the information (Deheshti et al., 2016). When a company's communications and brand image are consistent (congruent messages), customers will improve the perception of the business because they see it as authentic and different from rivals (Deheshti et al., 2016). The brand's reputation might also help to boost consumer trust because of positive experiences from the past.

However, when a brand's image and advertising are inconsistent, the company thus sends out incongruent messages (Arbouw et al., 2019). This may fail to integrate the relationship between the advertisement and the brand image and will harm people's feelings about the message. For instance, a pro-environmental message coming from a fossil based company could have the message differently perceived if compared to a pro-environmental message coming from a renewable based company. The perception results, however, can vary depending on the degree of the incongruence and customer affiliation with the brand. For instance, Dahlén and colleagues, (2008) state that the mediation of strong brand familiarity can enhance incongruent advertisements. All this leads to believe that an environmental message may be more compelling for a company that has an environmental brand image, while an economic message may be more compelling for a company with an economic brand image. Based on this, an additional positive effect should be visible for all variables when brand image and message are consistent. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3a. Congruent brand image and message result in a higher level of brand trust compared to incongruent brand image and message.

Hypothesis 3b. Congruent brand image and message result in a higher level of brand engagement compared to incongruent brand image and message.

Hypothesis 3c. Congruent brand image and message result in a higher level of sustainable future behavior intentions compared to incongruent brand image and message.

Methods

Study design and Sample

A 2 (environmental versus financially oriented message) x 2 (environmental versus financial fictitious energy company brand image) design between-subjects experimental design was performed to test the hypotheses. The participants, primarily students in the Netherlands and Brazilian (young) professionals, received a link to an online questionnaire.

The survey was in English; however, for some Brazilian participants, the questionnaire was translated into Portuguese to avoid misunderstandings due to the language barrier.

In total, 124 people started the research; from these, 102 completed the entire survey and will be considered for the analysis. 57 students participated in the Netherlands, of whom 65,5% of the participants were female, and ages ranged from 19 to 65 years old ($M = 24.27$, $SD = 7.8$). In Brazil, 45 (young) professionals participated in the study, of whom 51.1% were female, and the ages ranged from 18 to 65 years old ($M = 30.2$, $SD = 10.7$).

Procedures

The Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen received the research proposal for the current study, and on November 8th, 2022, the research plan was approved. On Qualtrics, data collection started on November 29th and ended on December 10th, 2022. Through social media (such as the WhatsApp and Instagram apps), participants were invited to take the online survey that was designed in the Qualtrics survey platform. Students in the Economic and Consumer Psychology class were also given access to the survey through a link on the Brightspace platform. The participants were initially given a broad description of the study and asked to give their informed consent. After that, they were requested to answer three demographic questions about their age, gender, and country they current live in. Succeeding they were asked questions about personal values (Appendix 1, not part of this study), followed by the experimental manipulation, which required them to spend 15 seconds reading about a fictitious electric company that is randomly either economically or environmentally oriented. This is followed by another 15 seconds reading about a communication message from the company that again is randomly generated economically or environmentally oriented. Subsequently, the participants were asked to fill in questions regarding Brand trust, Future behaviors intention, brand engagement and lastly the manipulation check.

Experimental manipulation

During the survey, participants were randomly assigned to view one of four conditions (Figure 1), each condition presented a certain combination of the two experimental manipulations, namely brand image and message, which are described below.

Brand image. First, participants received information about the energy company, presenting it either as being sustainability or financially oriented. Specifically, the sustainable brand image mentioned: “Elektro is a Canadian-based multinational energy company focused on providing renewable energy solutions. Founded in 1984 our company mission is to utilise our wind farm to provide the Canadian population with sustainable energy.” While the financially oriented brand image mentioned: “Elektro is a Canadian-based multinational energy company focused on providing low-cost energy solutions. Founded in 1984 our company mission is to utilise our gas fields to provide the Canadian population with affordable energy.”

Message. After the brand was introduced as either sustainable or financial, a message was presented in which the company advised participants to reduce their energy consumption. This message either contained a sustainability or financially-related appeal. Specifically, for the financial-oriented message appeal says, “turn off the light on your way out, save money,” accompanied by an image of several lightbulbs with the money sign in one of them. And, the “environmental-oriented message” appeals say: “turn off the light on your way out, save the environment.” accompanied by the same image of several lightbulbs but with the planet sign in one of them.

Figure 1

Four study conditions.



Measures

Brand Trust

Brand trust was measured with 9 items adapted from Jung et al. (2014) and Delgado-Ballester, (2011). The items contained statements, and participants had to indicate how much they (dis)agreed with each statement on a 5-point scale 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The 9 items were: “This is a company that will not disappoint me.”, “This company guarantees satisfaction.”, “This company is honest about its activities.”, “I can trust this company.”, “I can trust that this company is honest in its communication.”, “This company is transparent about its activities.”, “This company takes the interest of the consumers into account when developing new energy processes,” “This company has much experience in energy projects,” and “This company has extensive knowledge about energy”. The reliability of the brand trust was good, with ($\alpha = 0.89$), with ($M= 3.30, SD = 0.69$).

Future behaviors intention

Intending to measure the participants’ future energy use behaviors, it was asked how often the participant intended to engage in 6 different behaviors during the following week. The following items were asked: “Turn off lights when not in use.”, “Turn off appliances

when not in use.”, “Unplug your electronics when fully charged.”, “Lower the thermostat/radiators/ air conditioning to save energy.”, “Consume less energy.” “Take shorter showers.”. The participants had available 5 scale points varying from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The reliability of the future behavior scale was acceptable, with $\alpha = 0.77$. Accordingly, we computed the average mean score over the items ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.78$).

Brand engagement

The brand engagement was measured with 3 items adapted from Kaur et al. (2020) study. Participants were asked to what extent they agree with the following statements: “I would like to know more about this company.”, “I would like to learn more about this company.”, and “I would like to have an energy contract with this company.”. It presented a 5-point scale varying from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The reliability of the brand engagement scale was good, with $\alpha = 0.83$ and $M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.0$.

Manipulation check

It was asked how participants perceived the company and advertising messages with the following questions: “To what degree would you regard the presented company "economics oriented"?", “To what degree would you regard the presented company "sustainability-oriented"?", “To what degree would you regard the presented message as "economics oriented"?” and “To what degree would you regard the presented message as "sustainability-oriented"?”. The participants could answer each question on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

Lastly, it was also asked to select a number from 0 to 10 on the extent the participant thinks the presented scenario was realistic 0 (*extremely unrealistic*) to 10 (*extremely realistic*).

Method of Analysis

A manipulation check was conducted to ensure that the participants understood the intervention as intended. For that, a t-test analysis (appendix 2) was conducted to analyze mean variation and its significance. In order to assess the normality assumptions, it was first looked at histograms, skew measures, kurtosis measurements, and a Shapiro-wilk test was conducted. Then, we conducted Levene's test to examine the homogeneity of variances. After reviewing the descriptive statistics, an independent t-test and Mann-Whitney U test (depending on the normality test) were conducted to determine whether any differences between the groups existed (i.e., between the two brand images and between the two messages).

The 3 hypotheses were the major subject of the analysis. For H1, a Kruskal-Wallis H was conducted to test the relationship of sustainable messages with brand trust, brand engagement and future sustainable behavior intention, since the normality test was not supported for an ANOVA analysis. Likewise, for H2, a Kruskal-Wallis H analysis tested if a sustainable brand image relates to brand trust, brand engagement and future sustainable behavior intention. Lastly, for H3 a two-way ANOVA tested if the outcome variables company trust, future sustainable behavior intention, and brand engagement will increase when the factors brand image and message are consistent with each other (e.g., both brand image and message are sustainable or both are financial) For this an interaction term was added for brand image and message. A posthoc test will be carried out if significant results are discovered. Effect sizes are classified as small ($\leq .01$), medium ($\geq .06$), and large ($\geq .14$), as indicated by partial eta squared (η^2). Shapiro-Wilk test of normality, Levene's test of variance homogeneity, and boxplots were used to assess the ANOVA's of normality, homogeneity, and outliers.

Results

The results section presents the outcome of the performed hypotheses checks. For this, manipulation and realism checks are performed to validate the data.

Manipulation and realism checks

As expected, the manipulation and realism checks confirmed the effectiveness of our manipulation. Using the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality it was found significant values ($p < 0.001$) for all four manipulation check questions, showing a violation on the normality assumption, which leads to a test of the effectiveness of the manipulation with the Mann-Whitney U test. Although participants who were part of the financially oriented brand image condition perceived the brand as more financially oriented than participants who received a sustainable oriented brand image (see in table 1), this difference was not statistically significant *Mann-Whitney U* = 1191.00; $z = -0.75$; $p = 0.45$. Different results could be observed for participants receiving the sustainable-oriented company brand images condition (table 2). Participants in the sustainability oriented brand image condition also perceived the brand as more sustainable oriented than participants in the financially oriented brand image condition; (table 1); (*Mann-Whitney U* = 956.50; $z = -2.37$; $p = 0.018$). The latter one is in line with expectations and previous studies.

Table 1

Effects of mean comparison of the manipulation check questions with company brand images.

| Comp | | To what degree would you regard the presented company "economics oriented"? | To what degree would you regard the presented company "sustainability oriented"? |
|-------------|----------------|---|--|
| Money | Mean | 5.10 | 4.88 |
| | N | 52 | 52 |
| | Std. Deviation | 1.241 | 1.641 |
| Sustainable | Mean | 4.84 | 5.58 |
| | N | 50 | 50 |

| | | | |
|-------|----------------|-------|-------|
| | Std. Deviation | 1.462 | 1.430 |
| Total | Mean | 4.97 | 5.23 |
| | N | 102 | 102 |
| | Std. Deviation | 1.353 | 1.573 |

Regarding the messages, participants who were part of the financially oriented message condition, perceived the company as more financially oriented than sustainable oriented (table 2); (*Mann-Whitney U*= 871.500; $z=-2.90$; $p=0.004$). Meanwhile, participants who were selected for the environmentally oriented messages condition also scored higher in environmental message perception compared to financially oriented message perception (table 2); (*Mann-Whitney U*= 910.500; $z=-2.90$; $p=0.007$). Lastly, the realism of the study was likewise confirmed by the four groups combined, selecting a mean of 6.9 on the realism scale.

Table 2

Effects of mean comparison of the manipulation check questions with company messages.

| Message | | To what degree would you regard the presented message "economics oriented"? | To what degree would you regard the presented message "sustainability oriented"? |
|----------------------|----------------|---|--|
| Financially oriented | Mean | 5.15 | 4.94 |
| | N | 48 | 48 |
| | Std. Deviation | 1.557 | 2.004 |
| Sustainable oriented | Mean | 4.24 | 6.04 |
| | N | 54 | 54 |
| | Std. Deviation | 1.601 | 1.132 |
| Total | Mean | 4.67 | 5.52 |
| | N | 102 | 102 |
| | Std. Deviation | 1.637 | 1.687 |

Hypothesis tests

Since the variables could not support the ANOVA assumption of normality, this paper shows the results of the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis Test intending to achieve a more

accurate result for H1 and H2, while using a parametric interaction effects ANOVA analysis for H3. As robustness check, a parametric ANOVA analysis results for H1 and H2 is also available in Appendix 2, yielding insignificant results.

A Kruskal-Wallis Test was conducted on brand trust to test H1 and H2. H1 suggests that the participants would have higher trust, brand engagement and future behavior intentions in sustainable orientated messages. The results also did not show significant differences between the message conditions on trust $H(1) = 0.24, p=0.62$, brand engagement $H(1)= 1.06, p=0.30$ or future sustainable behavior intentions $H(1)=0.01, p=0.92$. Furthermore, H2 suggests that participants would have a higher trust, brand engagement and future behavior intentions in businesses with a sustainable brand image. The results suggest that there is no statistically significant difference between the brand image conditions on trust $H(1) = 0.21, p = 0.65$, brand engagement $H(1) = 0.21, p = 0.64$ or future sustainable behavior intentions $H(1)=3.57, p = 0.06$.

To determine the results of H3, a parametric interaction effects ANOVA analysis on the variables brand trust, brand engagement, and future behaviors was conducted. In none of the results, a significant relationship between the variables was displayed. The results of each of the variables for brand trust, brand engagement and future sustainable behavior intentions can be found respectively in table 3, table 4 and table 5.

Table 3

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: BRAND TRUST

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|-----------------|-------------------------|----|-------------|----------|-------|---------------------|
| Corrected Model | .960 ^a | 3 | .320 | .751 | .524 | .022 |
| Intercept | 1125.377 | 1 | 1125.377 | 2642.899 | <.001 | .964 |

| | | | | | | |
|----------------------|----------|-----|------|-------|------|------|
| Company | .218 | 1 | .218 | .513 | .476 | .005 |
| Message | .002 | 1 | .002 | .006 | .940 | .000 |
| Company * Message | .785 | 1 | .785 | 1.843 | .178 | .018 |
| Error | 41.730 | 98 | .426 | | | |
| Total | 1173.062 | 102 | | | | |
| Corrected Total | 42.689 | 101 | | | | |

Table 4*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Dependent Variable: BRAND ENGAGEMENT

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|----------------------|----------------------------|-----|----------------|----------|-------|------------------------|
| Corrected Model | 1.548 ^a | 3 | .516 | .529 | .663 | .016 |
| Intercept | 1074.743 | 1 | 1074.743 | 1102.385 | <.001 | .918 |
| Company | .351 | 1 | .351 | .360 | .550 | .004 |
| Message | .878 | 1 | .878 | .901 | .345 | .009 |
| Company * Message | .357 | 1 | .357 | .366 | .547 | .004 |
| Error | 95.543 | 98 | .975 | | | |
| Total | 1179.889 | 102 | | | | |
| Corrected Total | 97.090 | 101 | | | | |

Table 5*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Dependent Variable: FUTURE SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOURS INTENTION

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|--------------------|----------------------------|----|----------------|-------|------|------------------------|
| Corrected Model | 1.713 ^a | 3 | .571 | 1.054 | .372 | .031 |

| | | | | | | |
|-----------|----------|-----|----------|----------|-------|------|
| Intercept | 1361.999 | 1 | 1361.999 | 2514.027 | <.001 | .962 |
| Company | 1.563 | 1 | 1.563 | 2.884 | .093 | .029 |
| Message | .003 | 1 | .003 | .006 | .941 | .000 |
| Company * | .093 | 1 | .093 | .172 | .679 | .002 |
| Message | | | | | | |
| Error | 53.092 | 98 | .542 | | | |
| Total | 1424.917 | 102 | | | | |
| Corrected | 54.805 | 101 | | | | |
| Total | | | | | | |

General discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to look into the relationships between two popular forms of corporate communication (i.e., messages with environmental and financial appeals) and two different types of brand image traits (environmental versus financial energy company brand image). In general, it was expected that consumers would place more trust, brand engagement, and adaptation of future behavior in enterprises with a sustainable messaging and brand image than one with financial messaging and brand image. Additionally, businesses with consistent brand image and communication strategies (e.g., sustainable oriented brand image and communication strategy) would likewise see a rise in company trust, future behavior intention, and brand engagement.

When used effectively, brand image and environmental messaging (such as CSR communication) can influence consumer behavior and brand trust by boosting a company's reputation, trustworthiness, and customers' knowledge of or understanding of CSR (Kim, 2019; Deheshti et al., 2016). However, the current data cannot conclusively prove that participants are more likely to have higher levels of brand trust, brand engagement, and future behavior intentions when a company's utilizes sustainable oriented communication (H1) or brand image is sustainable-oriented (H2). This evidence refutes the notion that a corporation can boost brand trust, brand engagement, and future behavior intentions by simply utilizing a sustainable message/brand image. Consequently, more studies on this topic should be

conducted in order to help firms to understand better what can influence consumer perceptions and choices.

Regarding the interaction analysis, Arbouw et al. (2019) emphasized the significance of communications and their coherence with brand image while communicating with customers in order to prevent sending conflicting messages. However, none of the three dependent variables could be supported, demonstrating that this data shows no evidence that participants could exhibit a favorable response when the marketing message matched the brand image. This may have been the case because the researcher's choice of message or brand image may not have been sufficiently inconsistent. For instance, if the customer views the unexpected message as being pertinent, the advertisement may be given a higher rating than one that is surprisingly irrelevant. This is in line with the theory put forth by Arbouw et al. (2019), which states that the perception outcomes can vary depending on the level of inconsistent messaging and customer loyalty to the brand.

Limitations and Future research

The study faced limitations that need to be addressed. First, there was room for improvement in the message that the study promoted. In this study, a message was chosen to promote something that did not immediately offer a clear advantage to the organization, which could have unintentionally benefitted the trustworthiness of the companies and the other dependent variables by default. For instance, both of our communications implied that turning off the light would have either helped the client save money or helped the environment by conserving energy resources, without having an impact on the company itself. The pure absence of benefits for the company could increase the trust in the message.

Another limitation of this study was regarding the 6 characteristics of CRS communication. Two of these six traits—consistency and transparency—are most closely related to trust, as was already mentioned (Kim, 2019). Unfortunately, we might have failed

to meet the consistency requirements. Our company message was simply presented one time to each participant, which could have affected their trust levels.

Moreover, because of a monopolistic energy market in Brazil that offers only one supplier per region, Brazilians are unable to select an energy provider for their home/companies freely. Therefore, almost half of the respondents never had to choose between energy firms before. This may have had an effect on how they responded. On the other hand, the Dutch participants (including students) have a range of choices, which may make company features like brand image more important in their judgments and cause them to pay more attention to it. The difference in familiarity with the choices could have caused a discrepancy of the ability to differentiate between messages within the sample and therefore impacted the results.

Lastly, as was previously mentioned in the discussion of H3, it's possible that the message advertisements and brand introduction messages weren't sufficiently inconsistent to produce reliable findings for the hypothesis. While the majority of the results of the manipulation check's mean comparison were very comparable, the lack of statistically significant results might suggest that the manipulation has not been completely clear for all the participants.

Future research could explore different characteristics that are prominent for a company and for a message. This way, companies can have a broader idea of what variables could be significant to focus on while designing their messages and brand image. Regarding company, future research could focus on different characteristics of specific firms which can help us to understand which ones are crucial to focus on during the develop of a company such as its reputation in the marketplace and/or creativity. Regarding the messages, it would also be interesting to know more about how various aspects of the message that can affect how customers perceive it, such as choice of font, color, and size. Additionally, investigate

the impact that varied backgrounds of individuals (i.e., a trusted environmental expert or a movie star) can have on the degree to which a message is trusted. This can lead the companies to a better understanding of psychology of communication and bring many positive outcomes out of it (e.g., higher brand awareness).

Moreover, it would be interesting to study if companies that by definition are already sustainable oriented (e.g., Greenpeace) would present different results when showing an economic message and vice versa such as a company that already presents financially oriented characteristics (e.g., a bank) and its effects with a sustainable message. Since their customers might have a stronger brand image in their heads, it could be expected that these organizations would have had a tougher time presenting an incongruent brand image and message. By doing research on the subject, companies will always be better prepared when creating new messages in the future that are more relevant to their own operations. This can help them to understand their customers and, as a result, gain more trust, engagement, loyalty, and other positive results for their brand.

Practical Implications

Most efficient utilization of resources is often very important especially to small businesses, which may not have enough funds to build a big marketing strategy. However, with the help of the literature, firms are able to optimise their marketing communication and gain a competitive advantage. Even with the previously mentioned limitations in mind, the findings suggest that any company can promote sustainability without negative consequences even if the company is not generally perceived as pro-environmental. The same applies for companies which have a sustainable oriented brand image: Promoting sustainable behavior in combination with financially oriented messages is not found to lower trust or brand engagement. Therefore, business in real-world situations, can spend specific time and resources to find what kind of message fits the best with their individual customer and

discover how to make them become more engaged, feel more trusted, or intend to change their behavior in the future (van den Broek et al., 2017) but should consider that the effects are found to be limited and the investment might have a stronger impact to be spend elsewhere in the communication strategy (e.g. higher quality in the presentation of the decided on message).

Conclusion

To conclude, this article represents an attempt to scientifically investigate whether sustainable messages, brand image and the (in)congruence between communication and brand image affects trust, brand engagement and future sustainable behavior intentions. Our results did not support these hypotheses, yielding that environmental versus economic brand image, communication, and a consistency between the message and brand image did not appear to influence the effects of perceptive brand trust, brand engagement and future sustainable behavior intentions on the participants.

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Appendix 1

Exploratory Analyze - Personal values

Participants were presented with a brief description of 10 different persons and asked to indicate how much each portrayed person is like them. The score varied between 1 (the person is totally not like them) and 7 (the person is totally like them). With this question, this paper aimed to evaluate each participant's altruistic (concerning others), biospheric (concerning the environment), egoistic (concerning one's own resources), and hedonistic values (concerning one's own pleasure) (Bouman et al., 2021). Being altruistic: "It is important to this person that everyone has equal opportunities and is treated justly", "It is important to this person to be helpful and take care of those who are worse off."; biospheric: "It is important to this person to protect the environment and prevent environmental pollution.", "It is important to this person to respect and be in unity with nature."; hedonic: "It is important to this person to have fun and do things (s)he enjoys.", "It is important to this person to enjoy life's pleasures."; and lastly, egoistic: "It is important to this person to be influential and have authority over others.", "It is important to this person to have authority over others.", "It is important to this person to have money and possessions.", "It is important to this person to be recognized for their achievements and success." The reliability of the personal values scale was acceptable, with ($\alpha = 0.74$, $M_{reliability} = 50.63$, $SD = 7.5$).

Appendix 2

Table 6

Two-way ANOVA H1

Estimates

Dependent Variable: TRUST

| Comp | Mean | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|-------------|-------|------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Money | 3.282 | .091 | 3.102 | 3.462 |
| Sustainable | 3.375 | .092 | 3.192 | 3.558 |

Table 7

Two-way ANOVA H1

Pairwise Comparisons

Dependent Variable: TRUST, BRAND ENGAGEMENT AND

| (I) Comp | (J) Comp | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. ^a | 95% Confidence Interval for Difference ^a | |
|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|------------|-------------------|---|-------------|
| | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Money | Sustainable | -.093 | .129 | .476 | -.350 | .164 |
| Sustainable | Money | .093 | .129 | .476 | -.164 | .350 |

Table 8

Two-way ANOVA H2

Estimates

Dependent Variable: TRUST

| Ad | Mean | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|-------------|-------|------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Money | 3.333 | .094 | 3.146 | 3.520 |
| Sustainable | 3.324 | .089 | 3.147 | 3.500 |

Table 9

Two-way ANOVA H2

Univariate Tests

Dependent Variable: TRUST

| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|----------|----------------|----|-------------|------|------|---------------------|
| Contrast | .002 | 1 | .002 | .006 | .940 | .000 |
| Error | 41.730 | 98 | .426 | | | |

Appendix 3

Table 10

Regression analysis

Correlations

| | | Comp | Ad | TRUST | BEHAVIOURS | ENGAGEMENT |
|------------|-----------------|-------|------|--------|------------|------------|
| Comp | Pearson | 1 | - | .092 | -.128 | -.035 |
| | Correlation | | .008 | | | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .934 | .355 | .196 | .723 |
| | N | 103 | 103 | 103 | 103 | 103 |
| Ad | Pearson | -.008 | 1 | .029 | .046 | .115 |
| | Correlation | | | | | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .934 | | .773 | .647 | .246 |
| | N | 103 | 103 | 103 | 103 | 103 |
| TRUST | Pearson | .092 | .029 | 1 | .193 | .396** |
| | Correlation | | | | | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .355 | .773 | | .050 | <.001 |
| | N | 103 | 103 | 103 | 103 | 103 |
| BEHAVIOURS | Pearson | -.128 | .046 | .193 | 1 | .264** |
| | Correlation | | | | | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .196 | .647 | .050 | | .007 |
| | N | 103 | 103 | 103 | 103 | 103 |
| ENGAGEMENT | Pearson | -.035 | .115 | .396** | .264** | 1 |
| | Correlation | | | | | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .723 | .246 | <.001 | .007 | |
| | N | 103 | 103 | 103 | 103 | 103 |