

The Effectiveness of Sustainable Advertising in Emerging Markets: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

As sustainability becomes a central concern for consumers, companies in emerging markets are increasingly incorporating sustainability themes into their advertising strategies. This systematic review synthesizes research on sustainable advertising to explore two core questions: (a) What factors contribute to the effectiveness of sustainability advertising? and (b) What motivates consumers in emerging markets to engage in sustainable behaviors in response to such advertising? The review is structured around key dimensions including ad context, message framing, source credibility, along with consumer-related drivers such as environmental concern, values, and trust. By consolidating findings from diverse studies, this review provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how sustainable advertising functions in emerging markets and identifies critical gaps to guide future research in this evolving domain.

Keywords Sustainable Advertising, Advertising Effectiveness, Emerging Markets, Consumer Behavior

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, consumers especially those in emerging markets have started expecting more from companies than just profit-making. People now look to businesses to play an active role in protecting the environment and contributing to societal well-being. This growing expectation has pushed many organizations to weave sustainability into the fabric of their operations, product design, and communication strategies. From mission-driven startups to well-established corporations, firms are increasingly adopting environmentally responsible practices and highlighting them through their advertising efforts. Certifications like B Corporation status and initiatives promoting environmental transparency reflect this broader shift toward long-term sustainable commitment (Kong, Witmaier, & Ko, 2021). Sustainability, which refers to balancing economic development, environmental stewardship, and social equity (Brundtland, 1987), has evolved into a strategic priority for many businesses. Globally, products marketed as sustainable are gaining a larger share of consumer spending, and are often growing faster than their conventional counterparts (Crawford, 2020). Today, more than 85% of consumers say they are consciously moving toward more sustainable consumption (Xu, Jin, & Fu, 2021). In this landscape, advertising plays a crucial role in conveying a company's sustainability values, actions, and offerings—especially in fast-changing, culturally diverse emerging markets.

However, even as sustainability advertising becomes more common, its actual effectiveness in emerging economies remains underexplored and somewhat fragmented. Differences in culture, income levels, and regulations mean that sustainable messaging may resonate differently across regions. To fill this gap, this paper presents a systematic review of the

literature on the effectiveness of sustainability advertising in emerging markets. The study is guided by two central research questions:

(a) What makes sustainability advertising effective in emerging market contexts?

(b) What drives consumers in these regions to engage in sustainable behavior in response to such advertising?

To answer these questions, the paper begins by outlining the conceptual foundations of sustainability and distinguishing it from related concepts like corporate social responsibility (CSR). It then synthesizes current findings into a cohesive framework, examining factors such as message design, source credibility, and advertising context. Finally, it identifies key drivers of consumer engagement towards sustainable advertising and proposes a future research agenda to support ongoing inquiry in this critical and evolving field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability- What it is?

The idea of sustainability was formally introduced in the Brundtland Commission Report, which defined sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987). At its core, sustainability involves long-term thinking and the integration of environmental, social, and economic goals, a framework often referred to as the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997). Although closely related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), sustainability takes a broader, more future-focused and systemic approach. It encourages businesses to embed ethical and environmental considerations into all aspects of their operations (Catlin, Luchs, & Phipps, 2017). In emerging markets where rapid economic growth is

often prioritized pursuing sustainability poses both opportunities and challenges. Unlike traditional CSR activities, which may focus on donations or one-off cause campaigns, sustainable business practices are designed for lasting environmental and societal impact. However, in practice, CSR and sustainability are often used interchangeably, which can blur important distinctions between the two (Catlin et al., 2017). In advertising, sustainability-related messaging typically highlights a firm's eco-conscious practices, ethical sourcing, or social impact initiatives. Evaluating the effectiveness of these messages in emerging markets, where consumer awareness and cultural values vary widely is crucial for understanding their long-term influence.

Sustainability encompasses three key dimensions: environmental, social, and economic. Among these, environmental sustainability is most commonly emphasized in advertising, featuring green products, net-zero goals, or waste reduction efforts often eliciting strong consumer responses due to growing environmental concerns. Social sustainability focuses on trust, equity, and community well-being, while economic sustainability is about ensuring long-term business viability, though it tends to receive less attention in promotional messaging. Notably, many consumers associate sustainability mainly with environmental issues, often overlooking the social and economic aspects. Research suggests that these dimensions are perceived differently, which impacts how sustainability advertising is received. This paper unpacks these nuances to better understand what drives the effectiveness of sustainability advertising in emerging markets, where awareness, preferences, and expectations continue to evolve.

Advertising Effectiveness

Advertising effectiveness refers to the extent to which an advertisement achieves its intended objectives, such as increasing brand awareness, influencing consumer attitudes, or driving purchase behavior. It measures how well the advertising message resonates with the target audience and contributes to the overall marketing and business goals of the organization.

In the context of emerging markets, the effectiveness of sustainable advertising depends largely on how consumers perceive the message, brand, and its environmental claims. Key factors include purchase intentions, recall ability, and actual behavior. Consumer attitudes, shaped by both emotional and cognitive responses serve as strong predictors of behavioral intention. In sustainable advertising, beliefs play a vital role in attitude formation. When consumers trust the brand's green claims, their attitude improves, enhancing the likelihood of sustainable purchase behavior.

Factors contribute to the effectiveness of sustainability advertising

Advertising Context- In sustainable advertising, effectiveness is not determined by the message alone, it's shaped by a complex mix of contextual factors, particularly in emerging markets where these influences are constantly evolving. Elements like the broader macro-environment, cultural norms, ongoing crises, and the way an ad is executed all play critical roles. The macro-environment, which includes political, economic, and social conditions directly affects how consumers interpret sustainability messaging. For example, shifts in climate policies or major global events like the COVID-19 pandemic can heighten public sensitivity to environmental issues, making sustainability-themed ads more impactful (Gangadharbatla, 2021). Crises, whether environmental disasters or social upheavals, can significantly alter the tone and perceived authenticity of advertising. In such situations, brands may either double down on their sustainability claims to demonstrate responsibility or avoid them altogether to sidestep potential backlash (Milfeld, Flint, & Zablah, 2023). Cultural values further shape how ads are received—collectivist societies tend to resonate more with messages emphasizing community welfare, while individualistic cultures often respond better to personal benefit-driven appeals. Similarly, consumer awareness and willingness to invest in sustainable products vary widely across regions, with emerging markets often more focused on locally relevant issues (Lee, Chang, & Chen, 2017).

How an ad is executed also matters. The choice of platform such as Facebook, Twitter, or traditional media can influence how clearly the message is communicated and how much engagement it generates (Liu & Liu, 2020). Ads placed in media that align well with the message's content tend to be more memorable and effective. Despite growing interest in sustainability, much of the current advertising research remains centered on Western contexts. This highlights an urgent need to better understand how sustainability messaging works in the more diverse, rapidly changing environments of emerging markets.

Message Design- Message design plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of sustainable advertising, particularly in emerging markets where consumer attitudes toward sustainability are still developing. The way a message is structured, whether it uses concrete or abstract appeals—can significantly influence how credible and persuasive it feels. Concrete messages, which offer specific, tangible details, often build greater trust and boost purchase intent. In contrast, abstract appeals can be effective when highlighting broader societal benefits or when paired with visually

contrasting elements to spark interest. Framing is another important factor. Messages framed around personal gains or self-benefits tend to motivate sustainable behaviors, but their impact can vary depending on the audience and the format in which they're delivered (Kim et al., 2021). Fear-based or overly assertive messages, if not carefully crafted, can trigger psychological resistance especially among consumers who are not particularly concerned about environmental issues. On the other hand, green demarketing appeals—encouraging reduced consumption can enhance a brand's authenticity, especially when addressing problems like overconsumption.

Storytelling, or narrative-based messaging, has also proven effective. By engaging emotions and minimizing resistance, stories create a more relatable and memorable way to communicate sustainability values (Brechman & Purvis, 2015). Visuals matter too—when imagery aligns with the verbal message (e.g., eco-friendly images paired with green claims), consumers are more likely to process the ad positively and form favorable brand attitudes (Hur et al., 2020). Design elements like eco-labels, green color palettes, and sustainability certifications (such as B-Corp) can further boost credibility but they need to be used thoughtfully. Overuse or lack of clarity in such cues can lead to skepticism or backlash. Ultimately, effective message design must be culturally sensitive and aligned with the audience's level of environmental awareness. In emerging markets, where values and expectations are in flux, tailoring messages to local contexts is essential for maximizing the impact of sustainable advertising.

Source Characteristics- In sustainable advertising, the characteristics of the message source play a vital role in shaping consumer perceptions and determining ad effectiveness. A source that is seen as credible demonstrating expertise, trustworthiness, and even physical or social appeal, can significantly boost how well a message is received. However, one of the persistent challenges in sustainability advertising is information asymmetry. Since consumers often cannot verify the depth or authenticity of a company's sustainability efforts, they turn to shortcuts or heuristics to make judgments. These include the company's industry reputation, overall corporate image, and the credibility of any endorsers involved (Cowan & Guzman, 2020). Industries perceived as environmentally responsible like eco-tourism or outdoor apparel—often enjoy a positive “halo effect,” where their sustainability messages are taken at face value. In contrast, companies from controversial sectors such as fast fashion or fossil fuels frequently face consumer skepticism, regardless of what their ads claim. Luxury brands also face a unique challenge: while they're generally trusted more than fast fashion brands, sustainability messaging can

sometimes clash with their image of exclusivity and prestige.

A company's overall reputation is another key trust signal. Brands with a longstanding commitment to social values, or those certified as B Corporations, tend to be seen as more genuine in their sustainability communication, which helps build consumer trust (Bartels et al., 2020). On the flip side, companies with a history of negative publicity or inconsistent practices often struggle to be believed, even if the ad content appears convincing. This dynamic may be even more pronounced in emerging markets, where consumer trust levels can vary widely depending on brand familiarity and cultural norms. Influencers particularly those positioned as environmental advocates or “greenfluencers”—are increasingly used as spokespersons in sustainable advertising. Their effectiveness depends on how relatable they are to their audience, their perceived knowledge, and, above all, their authenticity (Pittman & Abell, 2021). Understanding which source traits resonate most with consumers in emerging markets is a promising area for future research, as trust-building remains central to the success of sustainability-focused campaigns.

Consumer-Centric Factors Influencing Sustainable Advertising Effectiveness

Understanding what motivates consumers is key to making sustainable advertising more effective. While interest in sustainability is growing, there remains a notable gap between what people say and what they actually do. Many consumers claim to support sustainable brands but don't follow through with their purchases a phenomenon known as the attitude-behavior gap (White, Hardisty, & Habib, 2020). This disconnect can be attributed to several factors: the desire to appear socially responsible without taking action (Janssen & Vanhamme, 2015), concerns that sustainability compromises product performance, and the perception that sustainable options are more expensive. For advertisers, addressing these concerns is essential in reaching both environmentally conscious and indifferent consumers. It's important to recognize that consumers are not all the same. Those who prioritize sustainability often have strong eco-centric values, feel a moral obligation to act responsibly, and view sustainability as part of their identity. These traits make them more responsive to sustainable advertising. On the other hand, consumers who are less engaged with sustainability tend to view green choices as inconvenient or costly. For them, messaging that emphasizes practical benefits, such as value, performance, or reliability and builds brand trust is likely to be more persuasive.

Beyond individual values, product and brand factors also shape how consumers respond to sustainability messages. When people are more involved with a product category, they're more likely to pay attention

to green advertising. Likewise, trusted brands with a good reputation are better positioned to make credible sustainability claims (Su, Lian, & Huang, 2020). For example, companies with strong reputations can attribute their sustainability efforts to genuine prosocial motives, which enhances trust and increases the likelihood of purchase (Cho & Taylor, 2020). The social context also plays a big role. Social norms especially those reinforced by close circles like family and friends can significantly influence how consumers engage with sustainable ads. Personality traits matter too; individuals who are more agreeable or open-minded tend to be more receptive to pro-environmental messages. Lastly, moving beyond a simple division of consumers into "sustainable" and "non-sustainable" groups is essential. As Lee and Haley (2022) point out, nuanced segmentation can reveal diverse subgroups with unique motivations. This enables advertisers to craft more targeted and meaningful messages. Ultimately, narrowing the gap between intention and action in sustainable advertising requires aligning ad content with consumer values, product involvement, brand strength, and the social dynamics that influence decision-making.

Measuring the Effectiveness of Sustainable Advertising in Emerging Market context

Measuring the effectiveness of sustainable advertising goes beyond simply assessing consumer attitudes, it also involves evaluating attention, behavior, and the broader context in which ads are received. Traditional advertising research typically follows a linear path: consumers are first exposed to an ad, pay attention to it, and then form attitudes toward the product, brand, or message (Lee & Cho, 2020). But with sustainable advertising, the process is more complex due to challenges like consumer skepticism, green fatigue, and the persistent gap between attitudes and actual behaviors (White, Hardisty, & Habib, 2020). Visual attention is a critical first step in message processing. Research on eco-labels shows that sustained visual focus on cues like organic or fair-trade symbols can positively shape consumer preferences and increase the likelihood of purchase. However, capturing attention isn't enough. Many consumers respond favorably to sustainability messages but don't follow through with sustainable actions, which highlights the importance of examining deeper, often unconscious attitudes and actual behaviors. Self-reported measures such as willingness to pay more for eco-friendly products or support for environmental policies are commonly used to gauge effectiveness. Yet, these don't always align with real-world behavior. That's why incorporating behavioral data, such as actual purchases, social media interactions (likes, shares, or comments), and consumer sentiment is increasingly essential to understanding how well sustainable advertising works in practice.

Trust also plays a major role. When consumers believe a brand's sustainability claims, their intention to purchase often increases. Building this "green trust" is key to closing the gap between what consumers say and what they do. To truly understand and improve the impact of sustainable advertising, future research should explore implicit attitudes, account for social desirability bias, and rely more on real-world experiments that reflect how people interact with sustainability messages in their daily lives.

Conclusion- This study provides a comprehensive overview of the drivers and determinants of effective sustainable advertising by exploring source, message, and contextual characteristics. In the context of emerging markets, where economic, cultural, and technological conditions vary widely, sustainable advertising faces both unique challenges and immense potential. Limited awareness, trust issues, and greenwashing concerns may hinder consumer receptivity. Yet, rising environmental consciousness and digital penetration present opportunities to engage diverse consumer segments. Understanding local dynamics, tailoring messages to cultural contexts, and building credible sustainability narratives are key to enhancing advertising effectiveness. A region-specific, evidence-based approach is essential for meaningful and measurable impact. The paper calls for more nuanced, interdisciplinary approaches and encourages greater focus on behavioral outcomes and social sustainability. As consumers increasingly seek authentic, purpose-driven brands, advertising must evolve accordingly. Future research should address when, how, and for whom sustainable ads work, ensuring they not only persuade but also inspire real action.

Limitations- While this review offers valuable insights, it has certain limitations. First, the study primarily synthesizes existing literature without conducting empirical analysis, limiting generalizability. Second, the focus remains largely on English-language and Western-centric research, potentially overlooking cultural and regional nuances in consumer responses to sustainable advertising. Third, much of the referenced literature emphasizes environmental sustainability, with less exploration of social or economic sustainability dimensions. Finally, many cited studies rely on self-reported attitudes rather than real behavioral outcomes. Future studies should adopt cross-cultural, longitudinal, and experimental approaches to validate findings and address the complexity of sustainable advertising effectiveness.

Future Research- Future research in sustainable advertising must integrate evolving theoretical frameworks to better understand ad effectiveness and consumer response. Construal Level Theory

offers insights into how psychological distance moderates abstract versus concrete sustainability appeals. Signaling Theory helps explain how brands communicate trust, quality, and authenticity through green messaging, impacting brand equity and performance. The Theory of Reasoned Action has also guided research on how attitudes and subjective norms shape intentions to purchase sustainable products. However, future studies should embrace alternative perspectives like critical discourse analysis (Liu & Liu, 2020), visual cognition theories (Hur et al., 2020), and socio-cultural insights. Additionally, expanding beyond environmental messaging to include social sustainability themes is crucial. Research must also prioritize behavioral outcomes over attitudinal metrics, identifying not only when sustainable ads work—but why, how, and for whom.

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