

## Construal Level Perceptions of Environmental vs. Social Sustainability in Online Fashion Shopping Environments

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**Abstract :** Sustainable consumption is on the rise, yet it has still not entered the mainstream in several industries, such as the fashion industry. In online fashion contexts, sustainability cues have been used to signal the sustainable benefits of certain garments to promote sustainable consumption. These sustainable cues may focus on the ecological or social dimension of sustainability. Since sustainability, in general, relates to distant, abstract benefits, the current study aims to examine if and how psychological distance may mediate the effects of exposure to different sustainability cues on consumption outcomes. Following the framework of Construal Level Theory of Psychological Distance, reduced psychological distance renders the construal level more concrete, which may influence attitudes and subsequent behavior in situations like fashion shopping. Most studies investigated sustainability as a composite, failing to differentiate between ecological and societal aspects of sustainability. The few studies examining sustainability more in detail uncovered that environmental sustainability is rather perceived in abstract cognitive construal, whereas social sustainability is linked to concrete construal. However, the construal level affiliation of the sustainability dimensions likely is not universally applicable to different domains and stages of consumption, which further suggest a need to clarify the relationships between environmental and social sustainability dimensions and the construal level of psychological distance within fashion brand consumption. While psychological distance and construal level have been examined in the context of sustainability, these studies yielded mixed results. The inconsistent findings of past studies might be due to the context-dependence of psychological distance as inducing construal differently in diverse situations. Especially in a hedonic consumption context like online fashion shopping, the role of visual processing of information could determine behavioural outcomes as linked to situational construal. Given the influence of the mode of processing on psychological distance and construal level, the current study examines the moderating role of verbal versus non-verbal presentation of the sustainability cues. In a 3 (environmental sustainability vs. social sustainability vs. control) x 2 (non-verbal message vs. verbal message) between subjects experiment, the present study thus examines how consumers evaluate sustainable brands in online shopping contexts in terms of psychological distance and construal level, as well as the impact on brand attitudes and buying intentions. The results among 246 participants verify the differential impact of the sustainability dimensions on fashion brand purchase intent as mediated by construal level and perceived psychological distance. The ecological sustainability cue is perceived as more concrete, which might be explained by consumer bias induced by the predominance of pro-environmental sustainability messages. The verbal versus non-verbal presentation of the sustainability cue neither had a significant influence on distance perceptions and construal level nor on buying intentions. This study offers valuable contributions to the sustainable consumption literature, as well as a theoretical basis for construal-level framing as applied in sustainable fashion branding.

**Keywords :** construal level theory, environmental vs social sustainability, online fashion shopping, sustainable fashion

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