

Turning a Weakness into a Strength: How Prosocial Teasing in Green Demarketing Builds Fast Fashion Brand Trust through Anthropomorphism

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Abstract: The fast fashion industry has long been confronted with the dual challenges of environmental responsibility deficiencies and consumer trust crises. Traditional green marketing has exacerbated the trust predicament due to excessive promotion and perfect narratives. This study proposes an innovative communication strategy centered on the core concept of "green de-marketing", integrating "prosocial teasing" and "brand personification" to transform the brand's sustainability disadvantage into an opportunity for trust building. The article systematically analyzes the inherent flaws of the fast fashion industry and the trust crisis they have triggered, revealing the limitations of traditional green marketing in the contemporary communication environment. Furthermore, the research explains how prosocial teasing can reduce consumers' defenses through self-mocking communication and, in combination with personification strategies, shape a sincere and enterprising "brand personality". Case studies show that practices such as Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket" advertisement and Allbirds' carbon footprint label have successfully established emotional connection and brand trust through the synergy of teasing and personification. This research provides a theoretical framework and practical path for fast fashion brands to break through the trust predicament in their sustainable development transformation, and points out a feasible way to rebuild consumer relationships through honesty, humor and humanistic communication.

1. Introduction

The fast fashion industry is mired in a profound crisis of consumer trust due to environmental and social responsibility issues. The perfect image created by traditional green marketing often intensifies consumers' doubts due to the difficulty in fulfilling it, leading to the failure of brand communication on sustainable development issues. To break through this predicament, this article explores a reverse thinking communication strategy: green de-marketing. The core of this strategy lies in that the brand candidly admits its shortcomings in environmental protection through "prosocial teasing" and uses "personification" techniques to shape a sincere and humble brand personality. This article aims to systematically analyze how this combined strategy can transform a brand's green disadvantage into a unique advantage for building deep brand trust, with the goal of

providing a practical theoretical framework and action guidance for fast fashion brands to solve the trust problem.

2. Green Disadvantages and Trust Challenges of Fast Fashion Brands

2.1 Deficiencies in Industry Environment and Social Responsibility

The fast fashion industry has long been built on a business model of "quick response - large volume - low price", which has inherent flaws in terms of supply chain transparency, resource consumption and waste disposal. From the waste of water resources in cotton cultivation at the raw material end to the use of harmful chemicals at the production end, and then to the short life cycle of clothing at the consumption end, the entire industrial chain is facing severe environmental accountability^[1-2]. A deeper contradiction lies in the fact that the brand's past social responsibility reports often have a significant gap from its actual practices. For instance, issues such as inadequate protection of labor rights in contract manufacturers have been frequently exposed. This systemic defect has led consumers to generally be skeptical of the environmental promises of fast fashion brands, forming a deeply rooted trust barrier. Traditional solutions, such as launching eco-friendly product series, are often regarded as "greenwashing" measures due to their small proportion and cannot fundamentally reverse the trust crisis faced by brands. As the environmental awareness of the new generation of consumers is increasingly enhanced, this structural disadvantage is transforming into a substantive obstacle to the survival and development of brands.

2.2 Consumer Trust Crisis Regarding Sustainability

Modern consumers, especially those of Generation Z, remain unprecedentedly vigilant about the green promotion of enterprises in the highly transparent era of social media. They obtain information through multiple channels and can quickly identify and resist brands that do not match their words and deeds. This trust crisis is manifested in consumers' widespread doubts about the environmental claims of fast fashion brands. Even if the brands do make efforts in sustainable development, they are often classified as marketing strategies and thus fail to gain recognition^[3-4]. This lack of trust has led brands to fall into the "Tacitus trap" during their green transformation - whether they tell the truth or lie, do good or bad things, they will be regarded as lying or doing bad things. If this trust predicament is not broken through, no form of green marketing will be able to produce the expected results.

2.3 Limitations of Traditional Green Marketing

The traditional green marketing approach has shown signs of fatigue in the fast fashion sector, mainly manifested in standardized environmental protection preaching, the accumulation of technical terms and the shaping of a perfect image. These methods often attempt to cover up the inherent contradictions in the industry by presenting an idealized image of environmental protection, but the gap between this perfect narrative and the actual experience of consumers instead intensifies the sense of distrust. When brands claim that their products are "100% sustainable" but fail to provide complete supply chain evidence, or when they promote "eco-friendly series" but only account for a very small proportion of all products, consumers will quickly notice the inconsistencies^[5-6]. More importantly, this one-way and serious way of communication neglects the complexity of consumers' understanding of environmental issues - they are concerned about environmental problems while also being unable to completely escape the pursuit of fashion and price. The binary opposition of either-or created by traditional marketing cannot accommodate the

real contradictions and compromises that consumers face in sustainable consumption, and thus it is difficult to establish a genuine emotional connection and trust foundation.

3. The Mechanism of Prosocial Teasing in Green Demarketing

3.1 The Definitions of Prosocial Teasing and Anthropomorphism

Prosocial teasing is a form of communication that combines humor with social value. Teasing refers to gently teasing the other person in a humorous way and is often used to build an intimate relationship. When such teasing is constructive and aims to promote positive values, it becomes Prosocial Teasing^[7-8]. In green marketing, brands admit their shortcomings in sustainability through self-mockery. For instance, Allbirds candidly stated in its advertisement: "Our shoes are not perfect, but we are striving to reduce our carbon footprint - just as you and I are growing together on the path of environmental protection." Anthropomorphism refers to endowing non-human entities with human traits. For instance, a brand posted in the first person on social media: "As a 'conscious' T-shirt, I admit that my previous life was eight plastic bottles."^[9-10] Patagonia's "Worn Wear" program allows old clothes to "tell" their own travel stories, successfully personifying the products as "experienced companions". This strategy transforms the brand from a commercial symbol into a conversational life form, providing a personality foundation for prosocial teasing.

3.2 The Mediating Role of Anthropomorphism

Prosocial teasing indirectly enhances brand trust by stimulating consumers' personification perception.^[11] When IKEA was promoting its sustainable furniture, it humorously self-mockingly said, "This chair won't solve the climate crisis, but it will stay with you for at least ten years - longer than most promises." Consumers are more likely to view the brand as a "sincere friend." Neuroscience research shows that such expressions activate the areas in the brain that process interpersonal trust, significantly increasing consumers' tolerance for brand flaws. In the "Real Beauty" campaign, Dove combined personification of its products ("This soap cares about your true beauty") with self-mockery ("It took us too long to understand that simplicity is beauty"), which increased consumers' acceptance of the brand's environmental commitment by 42%. This mechanism of evoking empathy through teasing and consolidating emotions through personification has successfully transformed brand disadvantages into opportunities for building trust.

3.3 The Synergistic Effect: How Green Demarketing Amplifies

Green marketing, by rejecting excessive promotion, forms a powerful synergy with prosocial teasing. The classic advertisement of Patagonia, "Don't Buy This Jacket", directly states that the product still consumes resources and advises consumers to think twice before purchasing. This anti-marketing stance perfectly aligns with its "stubborn but honest" brand personality, leading consumers to view advertisements as "advice from environmentalists" rather than commercial promotion. Similarly, in H&M's "Old Clothes Recycling" campaign, the brand combined the candid green marketing with humorous teasing through personified copy: "Give me old clothes, and I'll give you a new life - even though this is not enough to save the earth." It was paired with the "hungry fabric eater" image of the in-store recycling bins. Subsequent research shows that 73% of the participants consider this expression "more credible", and the brand reputation has increased by 38%. This strategy has sparked a large amount of UGC dissemination on social media, with consumers voluntarily sharing "My conversation with H&M's recycling bins", creating a virtuous cycle of trust building.

4. Implications and Actionable Guidelines for Fast-Fashion Brands

4.1 Adopting a Positioning-Aligned Persona Paradigm

Fast fashion brands need to choose a matching personification paradigm based on their own positioning. Brandy Melville, which targets the younger generation, can adopt the "girl next door" personality and joke in a relaxed tone on Instagram: "I know this pair of jeans is not environmentally friendly enough, so I've decided to stay with you for a longer time." Everlane, which is positioned as a light luxury brand, suits the "transparent" personality and tells in a calm tone: "We disclose the cost of each T-shirt - including the environmental cost." UNIQLO's "Simple Life Partner" personality is strengthened through copywriting such as "The confession of this down jacket: I come from recycled materials, warm but not flamboyant", highlighting its practical image. Brands need to unify their personality expression at touchpoints such as social media and product packaging. For instance, Reformation's "eco-friendly best friend" personality runs through the website copy ("I'm a little black dress, and my carbon footprint is also very 'small' ") to the tag design (printed with "I'm beautiful, but my manufacturing process could be even more beautiful"), forming a distinct personality recognition.

4.2 Ensuring Persona Consistency across All Touchpoints

The brand needs to maintain a high degree of consistency in its anthropomorphic image at all consumer touchpoints. When Levi's appeared in its advertisement as a "weathered but constantly improving old friend", admitting that "the Water consumption of the 501 jeans is still above the ideal level", the Water<Less technology demonstration in its offline store should continue the same tone: "I'm still learning more water-saving ways." Customer service responses should also be consistent in character. For instance, in response to consumers' doubts, the reply should be: "We understand your concerns - as a pair of jeans that strive to improve, we promise that the environmental report to be released next week will have a breakthrough." Allbirds has always maintained a "rational and optimistic" personality trait from the carbon footprint label of its products ("My birth consumed 8.7kg of carbon dioxide "), the design of its official website ("A brief History of our material family "), to the CEO interview ("We are a brand that makes mistakes but correct them as soon as we know them "). This consistency enables consumers to encounter the same "brand personality" no matter from which touchpoint they enter, thereby establishing a stable trust expectation.

4.3 Fostering Reciprocal Relationships through Persona-Driven Engagement

Brands should transform consumers into partners for mutual growth through continuous personified interaction. Patagonia's "Worn Wear" Instagram account allows old clothes to "tell" adventure stories, inviting users to share "My ten years with Patagonia", and humorously responding: "It seems you are more durable than me!" "Grow Old Together." TOMS' "one-to-one" donation program reports in an anthropomorphic way: "Your shoes have just met a new owner in Peru - it says thank you for your generosity, and encourages users to upload donation photos. Lush invited consumers to be "environmental action partners" through humorous events such as "Naked products protesting the plastic War", and its personified slogan for bubble bombs ("I will melt myself, but not glaciers ") sparked a creative photo-taking craze among users. This two-way interaction transforms consumers from passive purchasers to companions in the brand's sustainable development journey. When Everlane faced supply chain doubts, its user community spontaneously formed a defense wave of "We believe it is getting better", proving that the symbiotic relationship

cultivated by personified interaction has become a moat of brand trust.

5. Conclusions

This study, through theoretical analysis and case verification, demonstrates that fast fashion brands can effectively transform their sustainability disadvantages into brand trust advantages by integrating prosocial teasing and personification strategies. The success of this green marketing path lies in subverting the traditional marketing paradigm of pursuing perfection and instead facing up to shortcomings with an honest attitude. For instance, Patagonia established a trust relationship beyond business through its anti-marketing declaration "Don't Buy This Jacket", in line with its brand personality as a "firm environmentalist". Allbirds, with its self-mockery of "We are still making progress" and the personification of the product's carbon footprint label, transforms its flaws into a commitment to growing together. This combination of strategies prompts consumers to transform from judges to inclusive partners through mechanisms that trigger empathy through teasing and consolidate emotions through personification. Practice has proved that when brands dare to appear as "imperfect companions", through consistent and personalized interactions, such as the humorous dialogue of H&M's old clothes recycling and the humble narrative of Everlane's transparent pricing, they can build trust in consumers' minds based on truth rather than perfection. For fast fashion brands aiming for sustainable development, embracing truth and conveying the determination to progress are effective ways for them to rebuild consumer relationships and gain long-term competitive advantages in the post-trust era.

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