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Repurposing the Hangtag

Turning Sustainability into Sales in Fashion Retailing

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Sustainability has become a central concern in the fashion industry. While consumers often claim they prefer environmentally and socially responsible products, their actual purchasing behavior tells a different story. This mismatch – commonly referred to as the intention-behavior gap – remains one of the biggest barriers to sustainable transformation in retail.

Rethinking sustainability communication: From static labels to rich media

Sustainability is a so-called credence quality: It is not possible to experience or verify it directly, even post-purchase. Therefore, informing consumers ▸

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Two experiments with different formats of sustainability information

BOX 1

We conducted two laboratory experiments with almost 120 student-participants each. In both experiments, they were randomly assigned to one of two groups: One was exposed to sustainability information via textual hangtags (control group), whereas the other group had the opportunity to scan a QR code (see Figure 1). The QR code led to a video reading the same information that the control group received (experiment 1) or to the same information using augmented reality (AR) in experiment 2.

Hangtags for textual (left) and QR code/AR group (right)

FIGURE 1

The experiments took place in two adjacent rooms that were separated by a one-way mirror. One room served as a fictitious store, which also had a separate changing room hidden from view. The researchers were able to observe consumers' interactions with T-shirts exhibited in different sizes (S, M, L) for both males and females. Before entering the room, participants read a scenario: They should imagine visiting their favorite fashion store with the idea of potentially buying a basic white T-shirt. Prices were outlined based on the actual mean price of white T-shirts for a major online shop in Germany. We asked participants to inform themselves about the T-shirts so they could decide for/against purchasing it.



Evaluation of the experience and real behavior

Following the experiment, participants had to complete a brief survey on their purchase intention, willingness to pay and evaluation of the shirt. In the AR setting, we further included an auction mechanism, so some participants had to actually buy the T-shirt. This approach provides insight into real economic behavior rather than just stated intentions, counteracting the hypothetical biases inherent in mere online surveys. Figure 2 shows the main results of both studies, which are discussed in the following chapter.

is important, also to counteract potential greenwashing concerns. Most fashion retailers already provide sustainability information – typically via small, text-heavy hangtags. However, these labels are often overlooked, difficult to read or too abstract to meaningfully influence decisions.

Media richness theory argues that complex information requires richer communication formats. Sustainability, with its environmental, social, and economic dimensions, is inherently complex. Compressing it into a few lines of text can strip away nuance and reduce impact. Digital media, by contrast, are more accessible. They offer more space for storytelling; more entertainment via multimedia formats including video, audio and visuals; and allow interactive engagement with consumers. Can these formats actually narrow the intention-behavior gap in the domain of sustainable fashion in retail?

In our study, we shed light on this issue: Not just the availability of sustainability information, but how it is communicated. We examined whether digital formats, specifically QR codes linking to videos and augmented reality (AR), can make sustainability information more effective and ultimately influence real purchasing decisions. In two labora-



Visualization, AI-generated, Prompt GCO Medienagentur

tory experiments, we investigated intentions plus actual purchases, allowing participants to try on T-shirts and satisfying the need for touch prevalent in fashion (see Box 1).

Richer media formats can improve perception and increase intent and willingness to pay

Richer digital communication formats both improved perception and significantly increased intention, whereas traditional labels seemed weaker at convincing consumers to buy sustainable product options.

QR codes leading to sustainability information in a video significantly improved product evaluations and purchase intentions

When sustainability information was delivered via QR code and video, product evaluation improved, and purchase intention increased significantly (see upper part of Figure 2).

Augmented reality increased willingness to pay

In the AR setting, similar tendencies were observed: Participants showed higher purchase intentions and a higher willingness to pay, which was also reflected in actual payments. Product evalua- ▸

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tions were only marginally better. In other words, AR helped convert sustainability into economic value but did not dramatically change how consumers felt about a product (see lower part of Figure 2). Overall, the study's AR implementation slightly reduced the credibility of the information. This can likely be attributed to platform effects, as the AR filter was delivered via a social media interface. However, among consumers who viewed the sustainability information as credible, AR led to substantially more positive product evaluations and higher purchase intentions than textual information. The gap between "wanting to buy sustainably" and "actually doing it" got smaller.

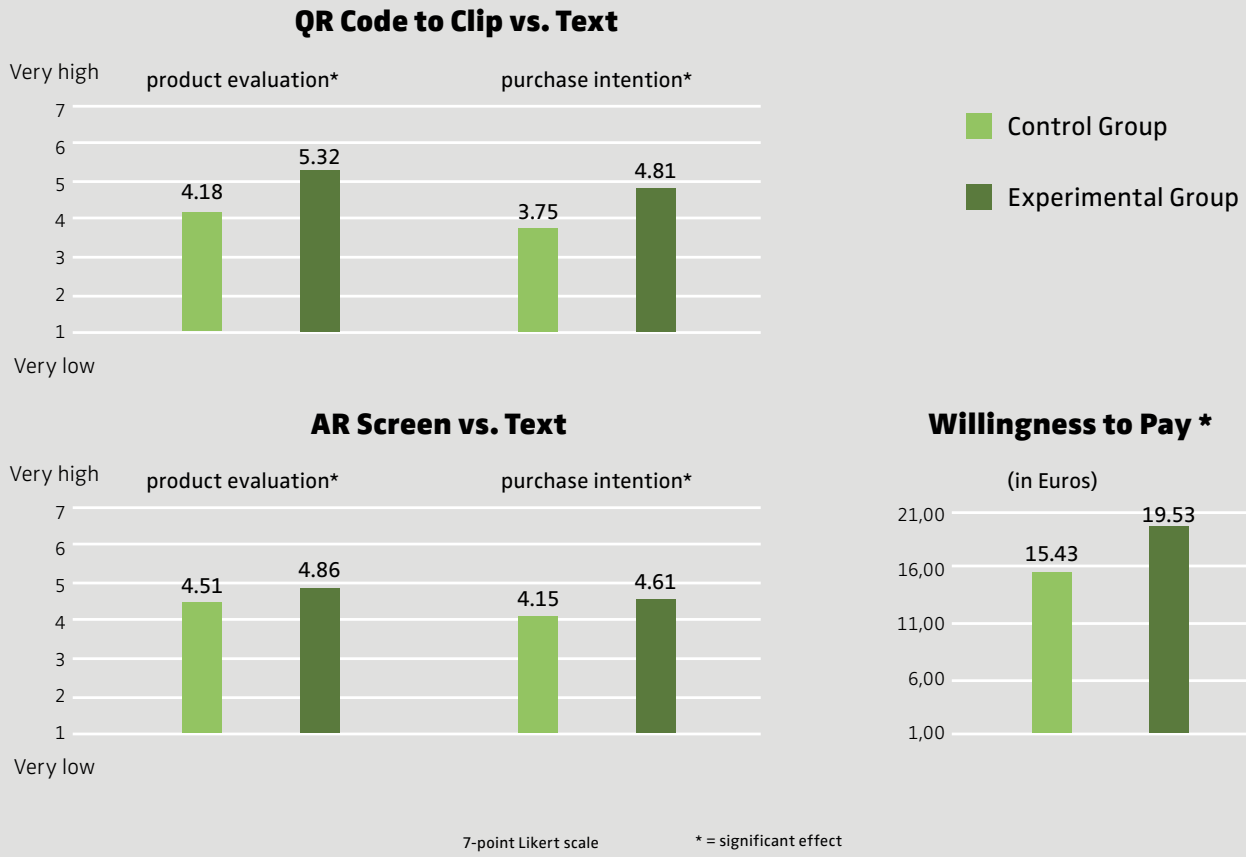
Improving sustainability communication can pay off

Our findings suggest that improving how sustainability information is communicated can help consumers better evaluate sustainable fashion and, ultimately, drives sales. However, the lab setting may have made participants more aware of sustainability and more willing to engage with such information than in regular buying situations. Therefore, retailers should think of ways to highlight the topic in the first place. Sustainability com-

" Improving how sustainability information is communicated can help consumers better evaluate sustainable fashion and, ultimately, drives sales. "

Results for textual information (control group) compared to video clips and AR

FIGURE 2





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munication should not be limited to hangtags. It should be integrated into brand communication in shops and other channels, as well as in bonus programs, to raise overall awareness and increase the likelihood that consumers engage. In addition to such motivational support, the following improvements to sustainability communication are worth trying.

Use communication formats with fewer restrictions and more creative potential

Digital media channels enable much richer visualization of information through pictures, videos, music and even personalized content. Additional information about what is typically listed on a hangtag could further enhance the positive impression of sustainable products and their likelihood of being purchased. Interestingly, the same fashion retailers often provide multimedia visualizations to illustrate information on textile sustainability on their online shops. Using digital formats in brick-and-mortar stores would also bridge this online-offline divide. In addition, QR codes used to access digital information could also integrate bonus programs or sales incentives, such as via retailer apps already installed on smartphones.

Start with videos before offering AR

Managers should consider implementing QR codes that link to videos about sustainable products when the sustainable qualities are complex. Given that consumers were actually paying more for sustainable T-shirts using AR, using digitalized information seems to be a promising way to offset the higher production costs inherent in many sustainable products. Since QR codes are more prevalent in consumers' shopping than AR and had larger effects in our experiment, it is advisable to focus on this way of communicating sustainability information first.

Convenience is king

Short videos are a very popular form of communication among the younger generation. Many consumers turn to YouTube, Instagram or TikTok for information on financial investment strategies, cooking recipes and more. It seems that using this convenient format is also effective for sustainability information. While getting the information directly on a hangtag requires active reading, the video in our experiment read the information to the consumer, thus making information processing easier. By using preferred and convenient formats, retailers are more likely to reach consumers with sustainability information.

Creating win-win situations with better sustainability communication

The textile industry's environmental footprint is substantial. It accounts for a striking share of global emissions, water degradation and land use. Increasing the market share of sustainable textiles therefore represents an impactful step toward reducing environmental harm. While many consumers are aware of these facts and intend to buy accordingly, they still seem to need confirmation at the point of sale. Fashion retailers can encourage their consumers to follow through with their intentions by doing a better job at explaining the value of sustainable fashion. One way to achieve this is to repurpose hangtags as gateways to more engaging digital sustainability communication formats rather than direct carriers of text-based information. Based on our findings, experimenting with QR codes linking to richer media such as video clips or AR-framed environments can pay off in several ways: for shops by spurring sales of sustainable textiles at higher price levels, for consumers by helping them to live up to their intentions and for our planet by reducing the environmental footprint. Overall, this creates a win-win situation in which improved sustainability communication not only closes information gaps but also supports tangible behavioral changes in the purchasing process.

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FURTHER READING

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