Gender Differences in Information Processing and Transparency: Cases of Apparel Brands’ Social Responsibility Claims

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to understand how male and female consumers differently evaluate sustainability claims from brands and how brands’ sustainability efforts and the presence/absence of information transparency in the claims affect their brand schemas differently.

Methodology: 500 participants were recruited for an online experiment implementing both treatment and message variance. PROCESS, a recently developed regression-based bootstrapping technique was used to test the hypotheses.

Findings: Males were more likely than females to rely on their existing schemas for judgment in case of Made in USA but not Fair Labor claims. The presence of information transparency in claims reduced participants’ reliance on their schemas.

Practical implications: The findings might be helpful for brands to design marketing claims with specific customer segments to stand out amidst advertisement clutter. Especially, brands targeting male consumers might try to build strong brand schemas starting the early stages of brand image building as males tend to consistently rely on their schemas for judgment. On the other hand, brands might benefit from providing transparent information about their sustainability efforts in their claims (especially those related to Made in USA) while targeting female consumers. However, irrespective of gender, brands might benefit from making claims with information transparency.

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Originality/value: This study investigated the influence of gender in evaluation of brands’ sustainability claims and the role of information transparency in the process, thereby filling a gap in literature. It is one of the very few studies to empirically investigate not only whether males and females are different in their information processing styles but also how such differences arise.

Keywords: sustainable claims, brands, transparency, schema, gender, Made in USA, Fair Labor

Introduction

Today’s consumers are increasingly conscious about the products/services they use (Burke, 2013). Especially for apparel products, consumers are curious about the origin of their products and even take extra efforts to purchase products sourced domestically to help the domestic economy (Ha-Brookshire and Yoon, 2012). More and more apparel consumers are curious about the social and environmental impact of their purchase choices, demanding greater information about how products are being made throughout the entire supply chain than in the past (Dickson, 2001). In response, many apparel brands now communicate their social responsibility (SR) initiatives in their marketing claims. However, SR attributes of products/services tend to be credence attributes, and therefore, are difficult to verify from surface appearance or due to high cost of information search (OECD, 1997). For example, it is difficult, if not impossible, to judge if certain coffee beans are grown by farmers who are paid fair wage, or if a t-shirt is made of organic cotton just by looking at the product. Therefore, to aid in decision-making and help verify the credibility of apparel brands’ SR claims, consumers often demand transparent, simple, and easy-to-understand information for brands’ SR practices (Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

Information transparency in apparel brands’ SR related claims has received mixed responses. In this light, several dimensions of information transparency have been identified in the literature, namely, information access, comprehensiveness, relevance, quality, accuracy, factuality, timeliness and reliability of information (Vishwanath and Kauffman, 2001; Hofstede, 2003). Dickson (2001) found that 16% of US consumers were interested in using claims with information transparency when it comes to labor or manufacturing issues for their apparel purchase decisions. Studies have also found that the extent of information transparency on claims may influence consumers’ responses to promotional communications, such as attitude towards the claim, attitude towards the brand, and purchase intention (Ahearne et al., 2000).

While information transparency has been emphasized in the consumer literature, studies also show that some apparel consumers prefer brand messages without specific and factual information about SR efforts (Feng and Burleson, 2008; Lorek and Lucas, 2003). For example, Lorek and Lucas (2003) found that German consumers preferred apparel marketing claims without third party certifications or other factual information about the brands’ SR efforts. This might be because such claims often contain less information, are considered less distracting and are easier to process. In this light, sometimes brands refrain from providing information transparency on their SR claims and resort to symbolically communicate their SR efforts to consumers. For example, a brand name of “Be Good” inherently communicates ‘goodness’ of that brand offerings (www.begoodclothing.com). To some
consumers this simple brand name is easier to process without further efforts.

However, little research exists on why certain claims are deemed appropriate by certain consumers while not by others. Therefore, it is often unclear how apparel brands should execute marketing communications to avoid creating confusion and skepticism among consumers (Phau and Ong, 2007). One strategy for understanding the behavior of specific consumer groups is through market segmentation (Levy et al., 2013). Previous literature suggests that marketers have widely used gender as one of the most common criteria for market segmentation, mostly because it is easy to identify, easy to access, and large enough to be profitable (Putrevu, 2001). Research indicates that males and females often process and evaluate information differently (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991). Therefore, corporate communications must take different approaches to male and female consumers. In this light, to help apparel brands successfully communicate their SR efforts, we aimed to understand the differences and similarities in how males and females evaluate SR claims from apparel brands.

**Literature Review**

**Apparel Brands’ Social Responsibility Claims and Consumers**

SR claims are important ways for apparel brands to inform consumers about their SR efforts, to identify and differentiate themselves in advertisement clutter. In this regard, apparel SR claims refer to marketing messages that communicate a brand’s commitment to positively affect/minimize harm to the environment and society, by balancing ethics with profitability through improvising the production, marketing and consumption processes of apparel products (Dickson and Eckman, 2006). Claims related to SR attributes of products are increasingly visible in the market, mostly because of the pressure on businesses from consumers, government and non-government organizations to be socially responsible and to communicate their efforts clearly (Elkington, 2004). SR claims can be in the form of advertisements, labels, hangtags, websites, or any other form of communication, both verbal and non-verbal (United States Federal Trade Commission, 2012).

For the purpose of this study, we specifically focus on two types of SR claims commonly used by U.S. apparel brands—Made in USA and Fair Labor. First, coupled with 9/11 attacks and the economic recession of 2008, in the U.S. apparel industry, ethnocentrism promoted patriotism among U.S. consumers in recent years. These consumers focus on helping domestic economies and local communities, and, by purchasing U.S.-made products, they believe they are being socially responsible (Lee et al., 2003). The effect of Made in USA label has also been explored in the SR consumer behavior literature. Some businesses have used place (or location) as a focal point in their branding efforts to respond to the recent local movement trend. For example, a group of wineries in California launched successful place-based marketing and regional branding strategies for “consumers who are anxious to know where products come from” (Bruwer and Johnson 2010; Dimara and Skuras 2005, p. 91). Products with local growers’ signatures or stamps have become popular as consumers were able to immediately picture the actual beneficiaries of their socially responsible consumption choices. Similarly, brands using the Made in USA label communicate their SR efforts by promising to benefit the domestic economy (Ha-Brookshire and Norum, 2011).

Second, today’s consumers also increasingly want to know the social impact of their purchase choices. Therefore, how labor was used during the production has been a
focus of SR literature (Dickson, 2001). Recent tragedies like the Bangladesh apparel factory collapse have emphasized the need to raise awareness about fair labor practices and consumers are increasingly paying attention to apparel brands’ fair labor efforts (Alam, 2013). Therefore, claims regarding Made in USA and Fair Labor were considered suitable for this study.

Previous research indicates that SR claims spread awareness about a product’s SR attributes and reduce consumers’ information search costs by providing information, which otherwise would be difficult to evaluate (Thøgersen et al., 2010). SR claims, especially through labels on apparel products, are found to influence consumers’ attitudes and purchase intentions (Hyllegard et al., 2012). Literature suggests that consumers do take brands’ social responsibility efforts into account for their purchase decisions and their evaluations of such efforts influence the brands’ image (Foo and Yazdanifard, 2014). Researchers also found that socially responsible messages influenced the extent to which consumers changed their brand attitudes (Olsen, Slotegraaf and Chandukala, 2014). Although consumers are found to respond positively to environmentally or socially conscious product claims (Phau and Ong, 2007), literature also suggests that consumers often are skeptical towards such claims, which negatively influence their consumption choices (Darke and Ritchie, 2007). Moreover, researchers found that consumers sometimes willfully ignore SR related information to reduce dissonance, especially when consumers are not interested in the brands’ SR efforts (Ehrich and Irwin, 2005). This indicates SR claims might influence certain segments of consumers, while not so much on others.

Gender and Brands’ SR Claims

Gender has been used widely to segment consumers for branding, marketing, and advertising purposes (Putrevu, 2001). This practice is prevalent mostly because market segments based on gender are easy to identify, easy to access, and large enough to be profitable (Putrevu, 2001). In this study, the term gender is used in reference to how a person identifies oneself (which might result from social and cultural differences in human beings) and might be different from sex, which is purely biological (World Health Organization, n.d.).

In the context of SR-related claims in apparel branding, the impact of gender on claim processing and evaluation has been inconclusive. Dickson (2001) found that women were more likely than men to use and be affected by “no sweat” labels in the case of apparel purchase. Hyllegard et al. (2012) also found that females were more likely than males to use detailed SR information printed on an apparel product’s tag when shopping. This indicates that women, compared to men, might be more likely to demand transparent information in SR related claims to aid in decision-making, especially in the apparel purchase setting. On the other hand, Hustvedt and Bernard (2010) found inconsistent gender differences in consumers’ responses, particularly, willingness to pay, for apparel products containing SR claims. Therefore, research on gender differences (or similarities) in processing of SR claims has been inconclusive and limited. Even more limited or virtually non-existent is research on how males and females process apparel brands’ SR related claims, based on their inherent tendency to use self- and other-generated information differently. To fill this gap in literature, in the following few sections, we review three theories to understand the effect of gender on processing of SR claims.

Gender and Information Processing

The literature indicates that both
biological and socialization factors contribute to the differences in males and females, which in turn influence their processing and evaluation of information (Costa et al., 2001). Based on the selectivity hypotheses, behavioral scientists have found that men have a higher threshold for message elaboration than women (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991). Therefore, under conditions requiring moderate attention, women are more likely to process information elaborately than men. Also, men are selective processors and often do not engage in comprehensive processing of all available information before reaching a judgment (Meyers-Levy, 1989). Instead of detailed elaboration of message components, men tend to rely on highly salient heuristics that imply a certain inference. Therefore, when men encounter new information, they are more likely to rely on their self-generated information and discount other-generated information (Meyers-Levy, 1989). Self-generated information in this context refers to information based on prior experiences/encounters and usually has set expectations associated with them (Mandler, 1982). On the other hand, women are comprehensive processors who evaluate all available information (unless restricted by memory) before rendering judgment (Meyers-Levy, 1989). Women usually give equal importance to their self-generated information and outside information, encode more message components, and elaborate on each component more extensively than men (Meyers-Levy, 1989). Therefore, when faced with external information, women might be more likely to find associations between their existing self-generated information and new information than men to resolve any conflicts. In order to delve deeper into how individuals process new information based on their existing self-generated information, we refer to the schema congruity theory (Mandler, 1982).

**Self-generated Information or Schemas**

According to the schema congruity theory (Mandler, 1982), human beings process a new event based on their existing self-generated expectations about the same. Their evaluation of the event then depends on whether the new event conforms to their prior set expectations or not. These existing self-generated images in an individual's mind can be termed as schemas. Schemas can eventually lead to formation of attitudes (Mandler, 1982).

Schemas are defined as “representations of experience that guide action, perception, and thought” stored within our memory (Mandler, 1982, pp.3). When new information conforms to set expectations, that is, congruent to existing schema, an individual feels a sense of familiarity, and his/her existing expectations are further reinforced (Mandler, 1982). On the contrary, incongruity involves significant change in existing schema in order to reconcile new information. If new information can be reconciled with existing schema, the newly formed schema prevails. On the other hand, if new information cannot be reconciled, the existing schema prevails, which in turn is reinforced even further (Mandler, 1982).

According to the information processing theory of consumer choice [IPTCC] (Bettman, 1979), in ideal situations, consumers make choices by referring to their internally stored information (self-generated information or schemas) such as through product recall and brand recall. However, individuals search for external, other-generated information to fill their gaps in logic when internal information is inadequate or incongruent with new information. This external information is constantly evaluated against schemas, which in turn guide future information search. Ultimately, according to IPTCC, information is deemed sufficient for the moment, depending on the goal and the cost of information search.

**Brand Schemas and Gender**

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Applying the schema-congruity theory to the brand- and gender-related literature, brand-related, self-generated information or brand associations (attributes, beliefs, attitudes, or experiences) connected to the brand name in consumers’ minds can be termed as brand schemas (Dahlén et al., 2005). Such brand schemas essentially make up the meaning of the brand for the consumer (Dahlén et al., 2005). Brand schemas are often personal, accumulated over time, and quite resistant to change (Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2000). A well-established brand schema makes the brand stand out in the advertisement clutter, enhances consumers’ motivations to process the brand’s advertisements, and is often more persuasive (Dahlén and Lange, 2004).

As discussed in the schema congruity theory, when encountered with new claims from a brand, consumers resort to their existing brand schemas to evaluate this new information. When brand claims are congruent with existing schemas, consumers’ existing schemas are reinforced. However, if brand claims are incongruent with existing brand schemas, consumers might search for external information to resolve the incongruity and fill a gap in logic (Bettman, 1979; Lee and Schumann, 2004).

However, previous research also indicates that incongruity between brand schema and brand claims might not always be resolved. This might be because associations stored in the brand schema of a familiar brand tend to be strong and perceived as relevant and personal (Dahlén and Lange, 2004). This brand schema often acts as a standard of comparison for any new brand-related information, and any incongruity or conflict might be regarded as disturbing, thus discounting external information in favor of internal, self-generated information. Particularly, female consumers are found to attach equal importance to both self and other generated information, and might be more willing to form judgment based on both their self-generated information (schemas) and external information (Meyers-Levy, 1989). On the other hand, male consumers prefer to make judgments based on their self-generated information, and tend to discount external information in favor of self-generated information. Therefore, males might form judgments based more on their schemas and less on external information. If Meyers-Levy’s finding is true, apparel brands’ SR-related communications are expected to have less impact on male than female consumers because male consumers will more likely use their previous schemas rather than new messages. This provides huge implications for apparel marketers and brand managers in terms of resource allocations to saturate their core SR messages through female consumers. Therefore, we hypothesized:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Gender moderates the extent to which participants’ pre-existing schemas (pre-schemas) about apparel brands’ SR efforts influence their post-schemas (schema after claim exposure) about the same, such that the influence of pre-schemas on post-schemas will be higher for males than for females.

**Information Transparency**

According to the schema congruity theory and IPTCC, humans first search their internal memory for information to make a judgment. In case of insufficient internal information, human beings resort to external sources of information. According to Lee and Schumann (2004), a “resolution message or a hint” can help an individual resolve incongruity by suggesting a possible connection between a seemingly unrelated claim and the existing brand schema (pp. 75). For example, introducing informative copy texts explaining the relation between salient brand associations...
and an incongruent brand extension was found to improve perceived fit among consumers (Brigdes, Keller and Sood, 2000). Therefore, information that provides evidence of claims, or information transparency, is an important part of information processing, particularly to resolve incongruity. In this light, transparency is defined as “visibility and accessibility of information especially regarding business practices” (Merriam-Webster, 2010; Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire, 2011, p. 136). Information transparency is thought to have several dimensions to be effective: information access, comprehensiveness, relevance, quality, accuracy, factuality, timeliness and reliability of information (Vishwanath and Kauffman, 2001; Hofstede, 2003).

Presence of information transparency on brands’ claims has been found to reduce information asymmetry and consumers’ perceived risk by providing additional evidence about credence attributes such as apppellations of product origins and labor issues across the supply chain (McEachern, 2008). The recent Green Guides released by the United States Federal Trade Commission (2012) recommend businesses to provide factual information to support their advertisement claims to avoid causing deception. In addition, Yan et al. (2012) found that consumers exposed to apparel brands’ messages containing transparent information formed favorable opinions towards the brands’ eco-friendly product claims than those who viewed messages without transparent information (Yan et al., 2012). This indicates that although consumers form post-schemas based on their pre-schemas, the presence of information transparency may influence the relationship between pre and post-schema resulting in strong favorable post-schemas toward apparel brands SR efforts. Therefore, we hypothesized:

\[ H2: \text{Irrespective of the effect of gender, information transparency moderates the relation between participants’ pre-schemas and their post-schemas about an apparel brand’s SR efforts, such that high information transparency in claims will reduce the influence of pre-schemas on post-schemas.} \]

However, literature indicates that females are more easily affected by external information than males (Meyers-Levy, 1989). Therefore, it was expected that males, compared to females, will be less affected by information transparency and more affected by their pre-schemas for apparel brands’ SR efforts. Therefore, the study hypothesized (Figure 1 illustrates the study’s hypotheses):

\[ H3: \text{In the presence of high information transparency of an apparel brand’s SR efforts, the influence of pre-schema on post-schema will be higher for males than females.} \]

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Method

Research Design and Stimuli Development

This study employed a 2 (types of claim: Made in USA/ Fair Labor) X 2 (transparency: high/low) X 4 (brands replications: Nike/Adidas/ Reebok/ New Balance) mixed model repeated measures experiment. While each participant was exposed to one transparency condition, brand and claims were run within subjects.

First, as discussed in the literature review section, two types of SR claims, namely Fair Labor and Made in USA, were used for this study to create message variance. Two versions of each message were then created in the form of static brand webpages to manipulate treatment variance of information transparency (high/low). Four such different sets of messages were created for each Made in USA and Fair Labor claim using four different apparel brands to create message variance. Type of

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transparent information was also varied across the four sets of messages to contribute to message variance. These multiple messages in the experiment were thought to help reduce the influence of message confounds by reducing between-message variance to random error (Thorson et al., 2012). This technique facilitates researchers to generalize the results to a greater population of messages than a single-message experimental design. Following this technique, a total of 16 claims were created. Each participant saw four SR claims from the four active wear brands (one randomly selected Fair Labor or Made in USA message from each brand). See Appendix A for sample stimuli materials.

Since the study necessitated that we investigate participants’ existing apparel brand schemas, brands familiar to participants were selected (Dahlén and Lange, 2004). First, four professors and one researcher at a major U.S. university shortlisted six apparel brands that either make clothes in the USA or do not and are either perceived to make efforts for fair labor or not. In the next step, 100 participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk rated the brands based on their familiarity and their existing schemas about the brands’ efforts to make clothes in USA, New Balance ranked highest (mean = 0.297, S.D. = 0.778), followed by Nike (mean = 0.027, S.D. =1.38), Reebok (mean = -0.050, S.D. = 1.156), and, Adidas (mean =-0.155, S.D. =1.301). Consequently, four brands, Nike, Adidas, Reebok, and New Balance were deemed appropriate for the study as they showed a wide range of schemas for both Made in USA and Fair Labor efforts.

Measures

Information transparency was conceptualized as a message content (Thorson et al., 2012) that depicted relevant, factual information related to the claim, following two dimensions of information transparency identified by Vishwanath and Kauffman (2001) and Hofstede (2003). Information transparency was manipulated as a dichotomous variable (high/low).

Gender was conceptualized as the consumers’ self-identification of themselves as male or female. It was measured as a dichotomous variable (male/female).

Pre-schema was conceptualized as consumers’ existing schema about an apparel brand’s Made in USA or Fair Labor efforts. Specifically, pre-schema about Made in USA was measured using five items adapted from Maronick (1995; reliability not mentioned): (Brand) supports U.S. economy; (Brand) is committed to enhancing the number of U.S. jobs; (Brand) is committed to keeping dollars in the U.S.; (Brand) manufactures some or all of its products in the U.S.; and (Brand) sources its raw materials from the U.S. For pre-schema for
apparel brand’s Fair Labor practices, five items were adapted from Dickson (2001; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.79): (Brand) pays fair wages to its workers; (Brand) provides workers safe workplaces; Child labor is generally not used by (Brand); (Brand) requires that their workers do not work more than normal working hours without extra compensations; and (Brand) cares about its workers. The actual name of the brand whose message was shown was replaced in the items.

Finally, post-schema was conceptualized as consumers’ brand schema after exposure to a particular message, measured using the same variables as pre-schema.

**Stimuli manipulation check**

To check if brand names were identifiable on the stimuli designed for this study, additional 160 participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk indicated if brand names were noticeable on the stimuli messages. This was essential, as the study measured brand schema. Each person saw either four Made in USA or four Fair Labor stimuli messages. For all claims, 98.6% to 95.0% of participants correctly recalled brand names, deeming this manipulation successful. In the next step, manipulation of information transparency was checked. For Made in USA claims, participants were asked (Yes/No) whether the message they saw indicated that the brand pays fair wage, does not employ child labor, and provides a safe work environment. For all four brands, results revealed that between high and low transparency claims, there is significant difference in the frequency of participants who answered that the message indicated if the brand pays fair wage [Adidas: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 7.96, p = .005$; Nike: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 16.01, p < .001$; Reebok: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 2.63, p < .001$; New Balance: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 12.93, p < .001$], and if the brand does not employ child labor [Adidas: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 6.95, p = .008$; Nike: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 27.54, p < .001$; Reebok: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 4.08, p < .001$; New Balance: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 19.84, p < .001$] and whether the brand provides safe work environment [Adidas: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 3.36, p = .053$; Nike: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 17.75, p < .001$; Reebok: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 23.65, p < .001$; New Balance: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 22.17, p < .001$]. For all claims, participants’ answers were significantly different for high and low transparency conditions rendering manipulation of transparency for Made in USA successful.

For Fair Labor claims, participants were asked (Yes/No) whether the message they saw indicated that the brand pays fair wage, does not employ child labor, and provides a safe work environment. For all four brands, results revealed that between high and low transparency claims, there is significant difference in the frequency of participants who answered that the message contained information if the brand’s products are designed in USA [Adidas: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 16.71, p = .001$; Nike: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 27.54, p < .001$; Reebok: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 27.76, p < .001$; New Balance: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 24.57, p < .001$]; if the brand procures fabrics and other raw materials from USA [Adidas: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 31.54, p < .001$; Nike: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 33.03, p < .001$; Reebok: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 34.14, p < .001$; New Balance: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 26.03, p < .001$], and if the brand’s products were dyed and finished in USA [Adidas: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 27.6, p < .001$ and New Balance: $\chi^2(1, 38) = 4.47, p = .048$]. For all claims, participants’ answers were significantly different for high and low transparency conditions rendering manipulation of transparency for Fair Labor claims successful.

**Sample Selection, Data Collection, and Data Analysis Procedure**

Five hundred U.S. respondents were recruited for an online experiment through a market-based research firm, Qualtrics. Each
Overall, the relationships between the variables were tested through regression-based conditional process analyses using bootstrapped confidence intervals (bootstrapping). PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), a macro for SPSS which uses path analysis-based technique to test for multiple moderators and mediators was used for this study. Bootstrapping does not increase the sample size but creates a large number of sub-samples (500, 5000, etc.) of size n (n=actual sample size of the study; n=500 for this study) from the original sample with replacement (Hayes, 2013). The products of the path coefficients \((a_1b_2, a_2b_2, \text{etc.})\) are calculated from each sub-sample, and a distribution is created for all path coefficients \((a*b)\) values with their confidence intervals and \(p\)-values. This technique does not make any normality assumption on response distribution, something necessary for the causal approach to mediation (Hayes, 2013). It also does not require a large sample size as needed for structural equation modeling, while providing high statistical power for the test (Hayes, 2013). Therefore, this technique was deemed appropriate to test the study hypotheses.

**Results**

**Respondent Profile**

Descriptive analysis of the study data was undertaken to determine the demographic characteristics of the study sample. Table 1 shows demographic information in details.

[Table 1 here]

**Principal Component Analysis and Scale Reliability**

Principal component analysis (PCA) with oblique rotation was conducted on schema items. PCA using eigenvalue >1 yielded two principal components for each pre-schema and post-schema scales. For pre-schema, the two components explained 83.67% of total variance. Five pre-schema items related to Made in USA loaded on to component 1 (factor loadings: 0.97 to 0.55), while those 5 related to Fair Labor loaded on to component 2.
loaded on to component 2 (factor loadings: 0.94 to 0.66). For post-schema, the two components, explained 85.31% of total variance. Five pre-schema items related to Made in USA loaded on to component 1 (factor loadings: 0.92 to 0.88), while those 5 related to Fair Labor loaded on to component 2 (factor loadings: 0.94 to 0.90). These results suggested that there might be an effect of SR message type on respondents’ pre and post-schemas. Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) of 10-item pre-schema scale was 0.95 and that for post-schema was 0.89.

**Mean Difference between Male and Female Participants**

Independent sample t-test was conducted to see the difference in schemas between male and female participants. Results indicated that mean pre-schema was not statistically significantly different for male (mean= 4.56) and female (mean= 4.63) participants \[ t (1998) = -1.32, p = 0.19, CI_{95} = -0.171, 0.034 \]. However, mean post-schemas were significantly different for male (mean= 5.49) and female (mean= 5.78) participants \[ t (1998) = -5.52, p < .001, CI_{95} = -0.401, -0.191 \]. The results indicated that mean pre-schema was the same for both male and female participants, that is, both males and females were in equal agreement with the fact that the brands adhered to fair labor efforts or made clothes in USA before exposure to stimuli messages. However, after exposure to stimuli messages, females were in more agreement to the fact that the brands adhered to fair labor efforts or made clothes in USA than males. These results suggested that although male and female participants initially started with the same pre-schema, there might be gender influences on how they process the messages to form their post-schemas. In the next step, regression-based conditional process analyses using bootstrapped confidence intervals were conducted to understand the effect of gender on transparency and participants’ schemas.

**Hypotheses Tests**

Hypotheses 1 proposed that *gender moderates the extent to which participants’ pre-schemas influence their post-schemas such that the influence of pre-schemas on post-schemas will be higher for males than for females.* To check the potential interaction effects of SR message types, gender, with respondents’ schemas, gender and SR message type were introduced as moderators in the relationship between pre and post schemas. PROCESS results showed that the interaction term gender X pre-schema was not statistically significant (unstandardized \( b = -0.06, p = 0.155, CI_{95} = -0.135, 0.021 \), meaning that the effect of pre-schemas on post-schemas about brands’ SR efforts was the same for both males and females. However, results revealed that the interaction term, claim type X pre-schema was statistically significant \( b = 0.113, p = 0.005, CI_{95} = 0.035, 0.191 \). This indicates that the relation between pre and post schemas was different for Made in USA claims as compared to Fair Labor claims.

Moreover, gender interacted with claim type, indicating that the effect of gender on the relation between pre and post schemas varied based on the type of claim. Specifically, the effect of pre-schema on post-schema for male participants was less for Made in USA claims (effect = 0.455, \( p < 0.001, CI_{95} = 0.387, 0.523 \)) than for Fair Labor claims (effect = 0.568, \( p < 0.001, CI_{95} = 0.503, 0.632 \)). Similarly, the effect of pre-schema on post-schema for female participants was less for Made in USA claims (effect = 0.398, \( p < 0.001, CI_{95} = 0.332, 0.465 \)) than for Fair Labor claims (effect = 0.511, \( p < 0.001, CI_{95} = 0.440, 0.582 \)). Therefore, for further analyses, each SR message type was examined separately for hypotheses tests. Hence, for all further analyses, 5 items specifically measuring pre-

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1 ‘Effect’ is the total effect of pre-schema on post-schema.
schema for Made in USA (or Fair Labor) were averaged to form pre-schema score for Made in USA (or Fair Labor) for each participant per claim exposure. Similarly, for post-schema related to Made in USA (or Fair Labor), 5 items specifically measuring post-schema for Made in USA (or Fair Labor) were averaged for each participant per claim exposure. Reliabilities of the 5-item pre-schema scales were 0.94 for Made in USA and 0.95 for Fair Labor. Reliability for 5-item post-schema scale was 0.96 for both Made in USA and Fair Labor.

**Made in USA Claims**

Hypothesis 1 proposed that gender moderates the extent to which participants’ pre-schemas influence their post-schemas such that the influence of pre-schemas on post-schemas will be higher for males than for females. PROCESS results indicate that the interaction term gender X pre-schema was significant in predicting post-schema ($b=-0.17, p<.001, CI_{95}=-0.27, -0.07$). Therefore, the effect of pre-schemas on post-schemas about brands’ Made in USA claims was more for males than females, supporting H1. Additionally, pre-schema also directly influenced post-schema ($b=0.79, p<.001, CI_{95}=0.62, 0.97$).

Hypothesis 2 proposed that information transparency moderates the relation between participants’ pre-schemas and their post-schemas about a brand’s SR efforts such that presence of high information transparency in claims will reduce the influence of pre-schemas on post-schemas. Results indicated that the interaction term (pre-schema X transparency) was significant ($b=-0.19, p<.001, CI_{95}=-0.3, -0.09$), indicating that information transparency does moderate the relation between pre- and post-schemas. Moreover, the direction of the effect indicated that high information transparency in claims reduces the effect of pre-schemas on post-schemas, supporting H2 for Made in USA claims. Additional analysis of the data revealed that information transparency also directly positively influenced post-schema ($b=1.4, p<.05, CI_{95}=-1.0, 1.97$), indicating that participants’ post-schemas were more in agreement to the fact that a brand made clothes in USA in case of low information transparency than high information transparency.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that for high information transparency, the influence of pre-schema on post-schema will be higher for males than females. For this hypothesis, the post-hoc tests were examined. In case of high transparent claims, the effect of pre-schema on post-schema was higher for males (effect=0.43, $p<.001, CI_{95}=0.34, 0.52$) than females (effect=0.25, $p<.001, CI_{95}=0.17, 0.35$), supporting H3 Made in USA claims.

Further analysis of the study results revealed that the effect of pre-schema on post-schema for males was more for low transparent claims (effect=0.62, $p<.001, CI_{95}=0.53, 0.71$) than for high transparent claims (effect=0.43, $p<.001, CI_{95}=0.34, 0.52$). Similarly, for females, the effect of pre-schema on post-schema was higher for low transparent claims (effect=0.45, $p<.001, CI_{95}=0.36, 0.54$) than for high transparent claims (effect=0.25, $p<.001, CI_{95}=0.17, 0.35$). This indicated that pre-schema affects post-schema less for claims with high information transparency compared to low transparency for both males and females. Moreover, for males the difference in effect of pre-schema on post-schema for high and low transparent claims (0.19) was similar to that for females (0.19). This indicated that high transparency as compared to low transparency impacted the same for both males and females.

**Fair Labor Claims:**

Hypothesis 1 proposed that gender moderates the extent to which participants’ pre-schemas influence their post-schemas such that the influence of pre-schemas on post-schemas will be higher for males than for females. PROCESS results indicate that the interaction

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term gender X pre-schema was not significant in predicting post-schema \( (b=-0.02, p=0.94, CI_{95}=-0.51, -0.47) \). This indicated that the effect of pre-schema on post-schema about brands’ Fair Labor efforts was the same for males and females. Therefore Hypothesis 1 was not supported for Fair Labor claims. However, pre-schema directly affected post-schema \( (b=0.58, p<0.001, CI_{95}=0.42, 0.75) \).

Hypothesis 2 proposed that information transparency moderates the relation between participants’ pre-schemas and their post-schemas about a brand’s SR efforts such that the presence high information transparency in claims will reduce the influence of pre-schemas on post-schemas. Results indicated that the interaction term (pre-schema X transparency) in the study model was significant \( (b=-0.18, p<0.001, CI_{95}=-0.39, -0.08) \), indicating that information transparency does moderate the relation between pre- and post-schemas. Moreover, the direction of the effect indicated that the presence of high information transparency in claims reduces the effect of pre-schemas on post-schemas, supporting H2 for Fair Labor claims. Additional analysis of the data revealed that information transparency also directly positively influenced post-schema \( (b=1.68, p<0.001, CI_{95}=0.42, 0.75) \). This indicated that, after exposure to claims with high information transparency, participants were in more agreement to the fact that the brands adhered to fair labor efforts than after exposure to claims with low information transparency.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that for high information transparency, the influence of pre-schema on post-schema will be higher for males than females. In the case of high transparent claims, the effect of pre-schema on post-schema was higher for males \( (effect=0.49, p<0.001, CI_{95}=0.36, 0.53) \) than females \( (effect=0.45, p<0.001, CI_{95}=0.4, 0.58) \), supporting H3 for Fair Labor claims.

In spite of the non-significant moderation effect of gender, further analysis of the study results revealed interesting results. For males, the effect of pre-schemas on post-schemas was more for low transparency claims \( (effect=0.67, p<0.001, CI_{95}=0.54, 0.72) \) than for high transparency claims \( (effect=0.49, p<0.001, CI_{95}=0.36, 0.53) \). Similarly, for females, the effect of pre-schemas on post-schemas was more for low transparency claims \( (effect=0.63, p<0.001, CI_{95}=0.58, 0.77) \) than for high-transparency claims \( (effect=0.45, p<0.001, CI_{95}=0.4, 0.58) \). This indicated that for both males and females, the effect of pre-schemas on post-schemas was less for high transparency claims compared to low transparency. The results also revealed that for Fair Labor claims, the effect of pre-schema on post-schema was the same for both males and females for high as well as low transparency claims. Moreover, for males the difference in effect of pre-schema on post-schema for high and low transparency claims \( (0.18) \) was similar to that for females \( (0.18) \). This indicated that high transparency as compared to low impacted the same for both males and females for Fair Labor claims. Tables 2 and 3 show the study results in detail.

Table 2 here
Table 3 here

Conclusion

Gender has been one of the most widely used strategies for segmenting consumers (Putrevu, 2001). The communications literature indicates that both biological and socialization factors contribute to gender differences, which in turn influence their information processing and judgment. Furthermore, according to ITPCC, external information might be especially important in decision-making when there is insufficient or inconsistent information stored in schemas, as such information might provide a connection between a seemingly unrelated event and the existing schema. Especially for SR messages
from apparel brands, external information in the form of information transparency might provide a link between brands’ claims and their actual SR efforts. Information transparency can help reduce information asymmetry by providing additional evidence about credence attributes of SR messages. Therefore, this study investigated how males and females evaluate SR claims from apparel brands based on their existing brand schemas and information transparency.

The study has important findings, and therefore, contributions and implications. The findings suggested that both male and female participants’ post-schemas were affected by their pre-schemas, thus supporting the schema-congruity theory (Mandler, 1982). The study findings also indicated that high information transparency on SR claims influences participants’ post-schemas about apparel brands’ Made in USA and Fair Labor claims, thus supporting Bettman’s (1979) information processing theory of consumer choice. The findings emphasized the fact that although consumers’ existing schemas about the brand are important indicators of how they form their post-schemas after exposure to SR marketing messages, the type of SR message and the gender of the message receiver control the impact of pre-schema on post-schema. Moreover, depending on which gender they are targeting at, males or females, apparel brands can benefit from allocating their resources to be transparent about their SR efforts. These findings can be helpful for apparel marketers and brand managers in designing their SR marketing communications. Detailed implications of the study are listed below.

First, the study results indicated that the effect of pre-schemas on post-schemas was more for males than females. Therefore, apparel brands targeting male consumers can particularly benefit from building favorable brand schemas in consumer’s minds about brands’ SR practices. This can be easier to accomplish in the early stages of brand image building when the schemas formed are not so strong and personal, therefore less resistant to change (Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2000). Once a strong and personal schema is established in consumers’ minds, male consumers tend to fall back on their existing schemas about the brand consistently to form their future schemas. In an age of information transparency and intense media scrutiny where brands are often attacked for their corporate wrongdoings, it is important that brands consistently maintain favorable brand schemas to come across persuasive in their SR efforts. This is especially important for products targeting male consumers, for whom, pre-schema influences post-schemas about brands’ SR efforts.

Second, study results indicated that for both males and females, information transparency influenced post-schemas about SR efforts, both directly and indirectly. When a Fair Labor or Made in USA claim had high transparency, the effect of pre-schema on post-schema was reduced for both male and female apparel consumers than when claims had low transparency. In fact, transparency also directly positively affected post-schema, meaning that participants’ new brand schemas were more in agreement to the fact that the brand made clothes in USA or participated in fair labor efforts when they were exposed to high transparent claims than low transparent ones. Therefore, apparel brands willing to change their existing schemas or build new schemas can consider being highly transparent in their SR claims. The study showed that providing information related to where exactly in USA their products are designed, sourced from, sewn, finished and distributed (in case of Made in USA), as well as the various initiatives that brands are taking to ensure fair labor practices such as the above-minimum wage paid to workers, safe work environment provided,
acknowledging rights of workers and initiatives against child labor (in case of Fair Labor claims) served as information links between their existing schemas about brands’ SR efforts and brand claims, leading to more favorable schemas. Therefore, using transparent information about SR practices can be particularly applicable for apparel brands, who often suffer from allegations of falsely claiming to produce their products in USA or negative images for their involvement in incidents such as employment of child labor or forcing workers to work in sweatshop-like conditions.

Third, particularly for Made in USA claims, post-schemas for female participants were found to be more influenced by transparent information on the claims and less by pre-existing schemas. More importantly, female participants’ post-schemas, as compared to male participants’ post-schemas were more in agreement to the fact that brands took efforts to manufacture clothes in USA in case of high-transparency claims. Therefore, brands targeting female consumers can especially benefit from providing transparent information about their Made in USA claims, in order to form more favorable post-schemas about brands’ Made in USA efforts. In an apparel purchase setting, although country of origin information is available on all product labels, brands can provide additional information about their specific USA-based sourcing strategies for products targeted at female consumers. Moreover, since females were more receptive towards Made in USA claims than males, apparel brands can particularly consider investing in USA-based sourcing strategies for products targeting females instead of males. Considering USA-based sourcing is often more expensive than sourcing from underdeveloped/developing countries with cheap labor cost, this can have huge implications for apparel brands with limited resources who are looking to invest domestic sourcing strategies for female consumers.

Fourth, for Fair Labor claims, there were no differences between how male and female participants’ pre-schemas influenced their post-schemas. Although investigating the reason for this anomaly was beyond the scope of this study, it may have resulted from similarities in information processing styles among males and females. Literature suggests that when the risk associated with making a wrong decision is too big, both males and females process claims with equally high elaboration (Meyers-Levy, 1989, Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991). In this case, recent tragedies like the Bangladesh factory fire may have highlighted the need to employ fair labor and the negative consequences of not doing so. In fact, previous literature suggests that apparel consumers are often sensitive towards labor issues and feel “responsible to help a small child in Bangladesh” (Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire, 2011, pp. 144). Therefore, for claims where the risk of making a wrong decision is high, such as Fair Labor claims, apparel brands can target both male and female participants the same way using details about their fair labor efforts, since both male and female consumers are equally likely to process transparent information and form a more favorable post-schema towards brands’ fair labor efforts.

Moreover, the influence of pre-schema on participants’ post-schema was less for Made in USA claims than Fair Labor ones. This implies that participants were more open to use their use external information on Made in USA claims to form their post-schemas than for Fair labor ones. This might be because, as suggested earlier, the perceived risk associated with making a wrong decision and harming a human being might be more than that associated with choosing a product that is not made in USA. Thus, in case of Fair Labor claims, participants were more inclined to refer to their pre-schemas or their self-generated information

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which were formed as a result of their prior experiences with the brand to form their post-schemas. Therefore, they were more skeptical towards other generated information on the claims.

Finally, the study results also provide implications for academicians. In an age where consumers are often burdened with external information, it is important that academicians prepare students to create effective communication strategies for apparel brands. This can be achieved by providing transparent information related to SR claims to provide a link between apparel brands’ SR claims and consumers’ existing brand schemas to stand out in the advertisement clutter and create a niche in the market. The study results further emphasize the importance of gender as a market segment, thereby helping apparel educators teach students how to take advantage of the most commonly used and easily identifiable segmenting strategy. For example, the study indicates that while apparel brands might invest equal resources in promoting a brand as that employing Fair Labor to both male and female consumers, it might be better to invest resources in adopting a USA-based sourcing strategy and promoting a product as Made in USA if the product targets female consumers than that targeting male consumers.

The study is not without limitations. First, the study looked at apparel consumers’ existing brand schemas. However, it did not specifically consider whether the schemas were congruent, moderately incongruent, or severely incongruent to brands’ claims. Literature suggests that males and females might have different information processing strategies based on the level of congruity/incongruity (Lau and Phau, 2010). They found that women are better than men at processing moderately incongruent advertisement imagery from extension brands and linking it to the image of the parent brand. Therefore, future research that investigates how males and females evaluate SR claims from apparel brands based on their level of congruity/incongruity between their brand schemas and the claim might be helpful.

Second, although results did not indicate any difference in how male and female participants evaluated Fair Labor claims, it was beyond the scope of this study to investigate the reason for such a finding. As suggested, one reason might be that the level of perceived risk associated with making a wrong decision amongst consumers might be high, leading both males and females to elaborately process the claims. Therefore, empirical research to understand the reason for such a finding and the role of perceived risk in information processing might be beneficial.

Third, it was beyond the scope of this study to investigate the effect of consumers’ self-concept on their information processing. Research indicates that women were able to establish stronger fit between the brand image and their self-concept than men (Lau and Phau, 2010). Therefore, future research on the how males and females process information from apparel brands based on their self-concept in relation to brand image will be beneficial. The study also did not control for consumers’ knowledge about social responsibility or their general attitude towards social responsibility in general. Moreover, in this study, we investigated the social responsibility aspect of Made in USA claims, which might be different from the effect country of origin of an apparel product on consumer perceptions and consumption choices. Therefore, future research is recommended to address the similarities and differences between country of origin effect and Made in USA effect amongst consumers’ perceptions.

Lastly, certain limitations can be found in the study’s design. The study sample consists
of only U.S. consumers. Although issues related to social responsibility might be of global interest, similar studies in different cultures might be needed before the results can be generalized. This is because the meaning structures associated with fair labor and domestically produced products might differ across countries and cultures. Moreover, the stimuli were designed such that Fair Labor and Made in USA claims appear on static webpages. However, brands communicate with consumers through multiple other media such as product labels, hangtags, packaging, and point of purchase promotions. Although, the current study design was suitable to address the purpose of the study, future research on omni-channel information sources might be beneficial to help brands better design their communication strategies. Moreover, transparent information was provided through text, and literature suggests that there might be differences in how males and females process textual information. Therefore, future studies using textual as well as non-textual information might be important.

References
Dickson, M. A. and Eckman, M. (2006), “Social responsibility: The concept as defined...


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Figure 1 Conceptual Model Showing the Relation Between Consumers’ Pre-Schema, Post-Schema, Gender and Information Transparency as Hypothesized for this Study.

Note:* H3: For high transparency, influence of pre-schema on post-schema will be higher for males than females.
Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Online Experimental Study

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
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<td></td>
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<td>8</td>
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</tr>
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<td>25-30</td>
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<td>6.4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41-45</td>
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<td>10.4</td>
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<td>12.0</td>
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<td>56-60</td>
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<td>16.2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>61 and up</td>
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</tr>
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<td>50.0</td>
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<td>Divorced/Widower</td>
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<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employed Full-Time (40 or more hours/wk)</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>36.6</td>
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<td>Retired</td>
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<td>3.8</td>
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<td>1.8</td>
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<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native American/Alaskan</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>24.0</td>
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<td>$30,000-$39,999</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>14.0</td>
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<td>$40,000-$59,999</td>
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<td>22.2</td>
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<td>$60,000-$89,999</td>
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<td>19.0</td>
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<td>$90,000-$119,999</td>
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<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
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<td>$120,000-$199,999</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$200,000 and above</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note. Number of participants (n) = 500.
### Table 2 Results of PROCESS: Conditional Process Analysis with Bootstrapped Confidence Intervals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>b*</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>LLCI^a</th>
<th>ULCI^b</th>
<th>R^2(,000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Post-schema</td>
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<td>0.084</td>
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<td>0.419</td>
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<td>0.40</td>
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<td>Post-schema</td>
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<td>&lt;.001</td>
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<td>0.250</td>
<td>-0.072</td>
<td>0.943</td>
<td>-0.508</td>
<td>0.472</td>
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<td>Post-schema</td>
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<td>0.052</td>
<td>-3.526</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
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<td>-0.081</td>
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<td>0.053</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.390</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
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<td><strong>Made in USA</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Pre-schema</td>
<td>Post-schema</td>
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<td>5.990</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.997</td>
<td>1.968</td>
<td>(&lt;.001)</td>
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<td>0.052</td>
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<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>-0.273</td>
<td>-0.068</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *^a* Represents unstandardized regression coefficient. *^b* Represents Bootstrapped Lower Limit of the confidence interval, *^c* Represents Bootstrapped Upper Limit of the confidence interval.

### Table 3 Conditional (Moderated) Effect of Pre-schema on Post-Schema at Different Values of Gender and Information Transparency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediator</th>
<th>Transparency</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Effect*</th>
<th>Boot SE^a</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>BootLLCI^b</th>
<th>BootULCI^c</th>
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*Note:* *^* Effect’ is the total effect (unstandardized betas) of pre-schema on post-schema at various values of the moderators. *^a* Represents Bootstrapped Standard error. *^b* Represents Bootstrapped Lower Limit of the confidence interval, *^c* Represents Bootstrapped Upper Limit of the confidence interval.

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Appendix A

Sample Stimuli Materials

High-Transparency Made In USA Message

Low-Transparency Made In USA Message

High-Transparency Fair Labor Message

Low-Transparency Fair Labor Message

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