

# Luxury and Sustainability: Technological Pathways and Potential Opportunities

Silvia Ranfagni <sup>1,\*</sup> and Wilson Ozuem <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dipartimento di Scienze per l'Economia e l'Impresa (DISEI), University of Florence (UNIFI), 50144 Florence, Italy

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Business, Industry and Leadership, University of Cumbria, Lancaster LA1 3JD, UK; wilson.ozuem@cumbria.ac.uk

\* Correspondence: silvia.ranfagni@unifi.it

## 1. Introduction

Emerging technologies have the potential to create new industries and transform existing ones, particularly the promotion of sustainable transitions in the luxury fashion industry [1]. The evolving COVID-19 pandemic has caused profound changes in the worldwide economic scenario, changing global consumers' priorities and expectations of positive influences exerted by business activities. In this vein, the epidemic crisis has acted as an accelerator for the transformation of companies towards value creation to meet sustainability requirements.

The pandemic has compelled all industries to become more sustainable, including the luxury industry. COVID-19 has indeed accelerated a transformational shift in the luxury industry to the 2030 United Nations Agenda in order to respond to the interests of the new generations who demand information on the social and environmental commitments of luxury brands [2]. In fact, many luxury companies have been accused of being slow to address social and environmental issues [3] and of having unsustainable behaviours (i.e., usage of nonreusable materials or endangered animals' skins, etc.). In particular, the luxury segments of fashion and textiles are considered the second-highest responsible for global carbon emissions just next to the oil industry. Luxury firms are being coerced by governments, non-governmental organizations, customers, and media into reducing the damage caused by the luxury supply chain [4]. These aspects are compromising the value of luxury brands, and customers are beginning to boycott these brands. In addition, the scarcity of resources in the face of growing demand makes sustainable practices in the luxury industry a critical need [5].

Therefore, more and more luxury companies are strengthening the nexus between sustainability pillars (i.e., environmental, economic, and social) by undertaking a more ethical pathway. Such firms are engaging in an ecological transformation of their value chain (from raw materials sourcing, production, logistics, and HR management to retailing and post-purchase recycling) by innovating their technology, procurement, production, packaging, operations, logistics, retailing, reuse, and recycling systems. In addition, luxury companies are absorbing sustainability issues in their medium- and long-term strategies, and they are externally communicating their efforts related to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [6].

Based on these premises, a deep knowledge of the links between luxury and sustainability is crucial because sustainable luxury could enhance businesses' competitiveness as well as contribute to the transition towards a more sustainable way of living. Luxury is indeed considered an industry model, which is able to influence societal trends on a broad scale [7]. There is a need to consider how luxury could truly embody sustainability in harmony with its traditional image and values, as well as maintain authentic value in the eyes of consumers. In the light of recent economic challenges, emerging technologies are



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catalysts and enablers that can convey sustainability to e-luxury consumers and brands. For years, luxury companies have been facing the issue of communicating their brand values to their consumers to give them a greater understanding of the brand as a whole. In addition, digital channels are particularly appealing to Generation Y and Generation Z consumers, who are also the most sustainability-conscious segment [8]. By embracing sustainability and successfully communicating their sustainability initiatives through diverse digital environments and touchpoints, companies can initiate a continuous virtuous cycle, where the brand is sensitizing consumers to sustainability, and the brand is in turn sensitized to specific causes or issues.

Regarding the remainder of this chapter, definitions of luxury and sustainability are provided to establish understanding of the key terms. Then, the compatibility between luxury and sustainability is explored. Finally, contributions to the collective volume are discussed to shed light on the forced or natural combination of both concepts.

## 2. Defining Luxury

The nomadic and multipurpose nature of luxury makes it particularly difficult to define. Definitions of luxury abound since it is a relative concept and therefore is multi-dimensional. Generally speaking, luxury is associated with the following dimensions [8]: (i) supreme quality linked to a better look, generous warranty, and sophisticated packaging; (ii) high price; (iii) scarcity and uniqueness due to the adoption of special components and skills for implementing both manufacturing and delivery processes; (iv) products and the context surrounding the products should exert a strong aesthetic appeal; (v) hedonism associated with the pleasurable experience provided by a luxury product; (vi) ancestral heritage and long history; (vii) superfluity or uselessness to survival; (viii) exclusivity, in terms of difficulty to acquire a rare luxury product; and (ix) a unique, different, and strongly positioned brand image.

The perceptions of these dimensions have fluctuated and evolved over time [9] because luxury is not static: It takes on different forms and meanings in relation to the context of space and time. In this regard, Dubois et al. [10] suggested that luxury is a derivative of the Latin term “luxus”, which implies an indulgent, lavish, or excessive lifestyle, with connotations of prosperity and elitism through the adoption of non-necessities. These aspects flow into a traditional conceptualization of luxury that characterizes the wealthy classes. Advances arising from the Industrial Revolution improved the standard of living in general, which led to new definitions of luxury [11]. The new luxury included affordable and large-scale commodities and services that have a premium position in the market and are targeted at mass segments of consumers. The availability of luxury items to the majority is the basis of the accessible luxury that is complemented by the concept of *masstige* (mass + prestige), according to which mass consumers seek prestige status at an affordable price [12]. Using this logic, the meaning of luxury shifts from what the product is (i.e., set of attributes) to what it represents in terms of the psychological and emotional experience of consumers [13].

The endless number of extant definitions of luxury is also due to the multiple perspectives adopted to delimit the concept's boundaries [14]. For instance, from a brand perspective, a luxury brand has been defined as a branded product or service that has high quality, a prestigious image, and a premium price, which provides authentic value (functional or emotional) and a deep connection with the customer [15]. From a consumer perspective, luxury has been defined as a subjective contextual interpretation of a lived experience [16]. Table 1 summarizes some studies' conceptualizations of luxury based on the attributes or dimensions associated with it.

**Table 1.** Definitions of luxury: An overview.

Author(s)	Description	Research Focus
Dubois and Paternault [17]	Luxury products enable consumers to achieve their “dream value”, which is provided by the products.	Luxury product
Kapferer [18]	The word luxury has different meanings: It can be an impression, which is subject; it can also be a concept or category; it can also be a term associated with moral disapproval. Luxury brands are multifaceted, comprising beauty, quality, exclusivity, sensuality, history, uniqueness, high price, artistry, and creativity.	Luxury brand
Nueno and Quelch [19]	Luxury brands are defined as brands where the ratio between functional utility and price is low, and the ratio between intangible and situational utility to price is high. Luxury brands provide a sense of indulgence, irrespective of the cost.	Luxury brand
Vigneron and Johnson [20]	Luxury brands are a type of prestige brand providing interpersonal values such as conspicuousness, uniqueness, and social value and personal values such as hedonic or emotional and quality value.	Luxury brand
Phau and Prendergast [21]	Luxury brands have a distinguished brand identity with elevated brand awareness and quality, they are exclusive, and they are able to maintain sales and preserve customer loyalty.	Luxury brand
Dubois et al. (2001) [22]	Luxury has six characteristics, namely: high price, quality, uniqueness and scarcity, attractiveness, history, and extravagance.	Luxury
Vickers and Renand [23]	Luxury goods can be conceptualized and differentiated from non-luxury ones by the instrumental performance exhibited, which is mainly measured by symbolic, experientialism, and functionalism interactionism.	Luxury product
Vigneron and Johnson [24]	Luxury is multidimensional and controlled by factors such as quality, uniqueness, conspicuousness, extended self, and hedonism.	Luxury
Beverland [25]	Luxury brand has six brand components: product integrity, value-driven emergence, culture, marketing, history, and endorsement.	Luxury brand
Okonkwo [26]	Luxury products include characteristics such as exclusivity, controlled limitedness, high price and quality, enhanced brand identity, emotional appeal, creativity, art, originality.	Luxury product
Wiedmann et al. [27]	Luxury can be conceptualized based on value, namely: financial, functional, individual, and social value.	Luxury
Berthon et al. [28]	Luxury can be conceptualized more by objective (material), collective (social), and subjective (individual) dimensions. It is more than a list of characteristics or attributes. Luxury products provide symbolic, experiential, and functional value.	Luxury

Table 1. Cont.

Author(s)	Description	Research Focus
Keller [29]	Luxury brands exhibit 10 attributes; popular among them are superior quality, image, and price.	Luxury brand
Hagtvedt and Patrick [30]	Luxury brands can be conceptualized as brands that have premium goods, which give pleasure to consumers and connect with them at an emotional level.	Luxury brand
Fionda and Moore [31]	The authors identified nine dimensions of the luxury brand: exclusivity, high price, history, culture, enhanced brand identity, product integrity, strong brand elements, strategy, and controlled limitedness.	Luxury brand
Juggessur and Cohen [32]	The terms “luxury” and “prestige” are synonyms; luxury brands have intangible value and superior design, status, quality, and fashion.	Luxury
Kapferer and Bastien [33]	Luxury is a social phenomenon; it is a tool for creating social distance. It is multisensory and experiential; qualitative over quantitative; hedonic over functionality.	Luxury
Tynan et al. [34]	Luxury brands are brands that provide non-essential products and services, which have attributes such as high price, quality, originality, exclusivity, rarity, and prestige, and offer value, such as experiential, functional, psychological, and symbolic.	Luxury brand
Kauppinen-Räsänen et al. [16]	Luxury is a subjective contextual interpretation of a lived experience, as opposed to being embedded within the offering itself.	Luxury
Ko et al. [15]	Luxury brand is a branded product or service that consumers perceive to: be of high quality; offer authentic value via desired benefits, whether functional or emotional; have a prestigious image within the market; be worthy of commanding a premium price; be capable of inspiring a deep connection or resonance with the consumer.	Luxury brand

Source: Adapted from Sharma et al. [35].

The most recent contributions to the luxury literature tend to stress the importance of the experience as an attribute. Atwal and Williams [36] stated that luxury itself embodies the “Experience” concept. Kapferer [37] stressed that the need for luxury brands to be perceived as “exclusive” by their customers is strongly dependent on the design of new and satisfying experiences. Such experiences must be consistent and integrated in order to appeal to increasingly demanding omnichannel consumers [38] as well as fully coherent with the brand’s distinguishing values (e.g., its signature, story, heritage) [39]. Although luxury brands have remained, for many years, deeply attached to the offline channel and to the flagship store, seen as a place for celebrating the brand and to deliver memorable customer experiences [40], the disruptions of recent years have encouraged most companies to fully embrace a digital transformation. Luxury brands have by now overcome an initial reluctance to accept digital transformation, which originated from a limited experience with digital touchpoints, the conceptualization of the store as the brand’s embodiment [28], and from difficulties in opening a dialogue with younger, digitally native generations. It is probably the twofold need to reach new and dynamic targets while not alienating existing target groups [41] that led luxury brands to experiment with various digital solutions and completely redesign their online engagement strategies, so as to appeal to new and traditional segments. This issue is also known as “the Internet dilemma” [42] and represents

luxury brands being torn between maintaining their exclusive image and being exposed on open digital environments (e.g., social media, online communities, marketplaces). On the one hand, this has been negatively associated with luxury democratization; on the other, it has led luxury brands to embrace new values and trends while experimenting with new technologies [43].

### 3. Framing Sustainability

The basis of sustainable development and sustainability were established in the late 1980s by the World Commission on Environment and Development (i.e., The Brundtland Commission). It defined sustainable development as “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [44] (p. 43). In the same direction, sustainability was intended as a permanent sustainable development of economic, social, and ecologic aspects of human existence [45]. Since the introduction of sustainability to the international policy discourse, there has been growing interest in the theme of sustainability, which contributed to an evolution of the concept in the following years. In 2015, the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations established 17 SDGs aimed at expanding previous efforts to eradicate poverty, increase development in poor countries, and decrease the human footprint before 2030 [46]. All actors are asked to pursue the SDGs; in particular, businesses are urged to develop socially and environmentally sustainable business models with which to make a significant contribution to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. To respond to these expectations, the triple bottom line (TBL) approach [47] has been increasingly adopted by companies because it simultaneously focuses on economic, social, and environmental concerns, which are consistent with the 2030 Agenda.

At the same time, a proliferation of publications on sustainability occurred in the last decades to such an extent that sustainability science could be considered a distinct field [48]. However, there is no general consensus regarding the conceptualization of sustainability due to the complexity and dynamism of the concept, which may vary depending on the specific characteristics of the context as well as changes that may occur over time [46]. To synthesize the different interpretations of this concept, a wider and generalized definition of sustainability that stems from environmental social, organizational, and economic dimensions [49] given in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Dimensions of sustainability.

Dimensions	Description	Author(s)
Environmental	Sustainability as respect for the environment and for all its resources	Berns et al. [50]; Pullman et al. [51]
Social	Sustainability as corporate social responsibility. There may follow a “corporate sustainability” aimed at meeting long-term stakeholders’ needs	Dyllick and Hockerts [52]; Montiel [53]; Closs et al. [49]
Organizational	Sustainability as a firm’s core ideology, driving corporate behaviours. Its legitimation requires the sharing of sustainable business principles among stakeholders and all the supply chain’s actors	Closs et al. [49]
Economic	Sustainability as a source of positive performance. This implies the preservation of a sustainability-oriented culture in the firm and in all its interacting economic subjects	Margolis and Walsh [54]; Ambec and Lanoies [55]

Source: Adapted from Guercini and Ranfagni [56].

The environmental dimension of sustainability sustains the conservation and proper use of air, water, and land resources; the regeneration of renewable resources; the substitutability of non-renewable resources; and compliance with the assimilative capacity of hazardous or polluting substances [57]. Environmental sustainability creates both ad-



vantages and disadvantages for firms. An improvement in operational performance (cost savings on energy/water usage, reduction in wastage), social outcomes (stakeholder satisfaction and trust), and strategic benefits (flexibility and improved competitiveness) are the most common advantages [58]. At the same time, extra time to follow burdensome bureaucratic procedures, and extra costs relating to environmental audit and assurance and/or for the adoption of new technology represent the main disadvantages [58]. The social dimension of sustainability concerns the well-being of people and communities, ensures an equally distributed level of human well-being (security, health, and education), and promotes an egalitarian society by reducing poverty, disparity in access to resources for consumption, and unfair working conditions [49]. The organizational dimension of sustainability is linked to the capability of an organization to contribute to sustainable development delivering simultaneously economic, social, and environmental benefits (the so-called TBL) [59]. This is possible if sustainability is incorporated in the firm's core ideology [49], constituting a business philosophy. The economic dimension of sustainability embraces two distinct aspects: one relating to conventional financial performance (e.g., cost reductions) and the other relating to the economic interests of external stakeholders, such as a broad-based improvement in economic well-being and standard of living [60]. Environmental, social, organizational, and economic sustainability dimensions are synergistic and not antagonistic [61]. Thus, there is currently a growing recognition of the need to adopt a more holistic view of sustainability.

#### 4. Matching Luxury and Sustainability

Luxury is not traditionally associated with sustainability, so much so that the two concepts are perceived as oxymoronic. A decade ago, luxury and sustainability appeared to be conflicting topics due to their opposite nature [14]. Specifically, luxury is related to an excessive, exclusive, and prestigious lifestyle, whereas sustainability is connected to a frugal lifestyle aimed at reducing, protecting, and respecting the limited resources on the planet. In addition, the vertical social stratification of luxury is opposite to the horizontal mutual relationships of sustainability. Thus, sustainability issues were usually overlooked in the luxury industry [62].

However, a different view of the link between luxury and sustainability was established by recognizing that sustainability is embedded into luxury's DNA [63]. In particular, rare products of ultra-high quality, made by hand, and with respect for tradition overcome the contradiction between luxury and sustainability. In other words, luxury and sustainability converge in the features of durability and rarity [63]. On the one hand, luxury products are made to last and their durability reduces waste and obsolescence. On the other hand, rarity in the luxury market is linked to the use of rare constitutive resources (skins, leathers, pearls, etc.) that depend on environmental sustainability in terms of the preservation of natural resources. On this basis, luxury depends on sustainability and, at the same time, sustainability finds in luxury a potential ally [56].

The concept of sustainable luxury appears for the first time in Bendell and Kleantous's [64] World Wildlife Fund report in which moving towards authentic luxury brands puts sustainability at its core. However, few pathways in this direction are outlined because much of sustainability research is focused on brands within the contexts of low-involvement and habitual consumption. The number of studies on sustainable luxury starts increasing from 2012 when debates on sustainability were opened by international organizations such as the United Nations [5]. As a result, research interest in these topics gained momentum and now represents a fast-growing field [65].

Sustainable luxury embraces environmentally and/or ethically conscious design, production, and consumption, and is aimed at correcting wrongs and unethical practices, such as animal cruelty, environmental damage, and human exploitation. In the sustainable luxury domain, companies face challenges documented in management and marketing studies. First, challenges in the supply chain require particular attention because existing supply chains need to be transformed to address sustainable concerns and deliver excellence

beyond shallow glamour. For instance, environmental preservation drives luxury firms to redefine their sourcing, manufacturing, and distribution processes, gaining efficiency, fostering innovation, and increasing brand value [43]. However, this transformational shift is hindered by barriers such as supply chain complexity, commercial pressures, and power distribution [66]. A second significant challenge is related to the effective embeddedness of sustainability into the strategic management of luxury firms. Carcano [67] identified four strategic archetypes that differ with respect to internal sustainability orientation (employees, governance structure) versus external sustainability orientation (environment, community) and with respect to the strategic approach (either corporate or spread across the company). An interesting strategic implication concerns the disruptive power of attempts to match luxury with sustainability [68]. In particular, the introduction of sustainable luxury products implies innovation in both consumption and production, increasing the difficulties for incumbents to remain competitive. In this scenario, the luxury market battle is not only economic and financial (e.g., market share, sale, and profit) but also involves sustainable initiatives to acquire new customers because sustainability allows firms to differentiate their offerings [62]. This reveals that sustainability is usually implemented to positively affect consumers' perceptions and purchase decisions. Thus, sustainability can act as a consumption driver above all for younger consumers, such as millennials and Generation Z [69]. Millennials demand that their favourite brands behave responsibly and ethically while maintaining an aura of luxury. An increase in sustainable consumer habits is positively correlated with an increase in luxury product consumption, and Generation Z will continue this shift in sustainable luxury consumption [70].

Despite the important body of knowledge on sustainable luxury, there is a need to further clarify the extent to which luxury and sustainability can be harmonized [8]. From a strategic point of view, sustainable activities comprise "the scope of design, production and consumption that is environmentally or ethically conscious ( . . . ) and oriented towards correcting various perceived wrongs within the luxury industry" [71] (p. 406). This leaves luxury brands with a wide range of possible sustainable activities to undertake, either internally or externally: On the one hand, companies are promoting sustainable behaviours within their own supply chain (e.g., reducing the environmental impact at various stages of production, sustainable sourcing, promoting inclusivity, ethical wages); on the other, they turn to community by supporting causes either directly (e.g., donations, subscriptions) or indirectly (e.g., partnerships, social media campaigns) [72].

In light of these considerations, emerging technologies take on a new prominence, as they allow companies to develop new forms of relationships with luxury customers, especially in communication terms. Communication aspects of sustainability activities tend to be oriented towards increasing the brand's value [73] rather than informing about the business's impact. By this logic, the communication strategy is aimed at focusing on a harmonious convergence between luxury and sustainability by demonstrating that the indulgent promises of luxury with a sustainability consciousness are kept [74]. Flagship stores are considered useful channels to better communicate the togetherness between luxury and sustainability, and the usage of multisensory signals improves the effectiveness of messages. While such deployment of the offline channel reflects the traditional role attributed to the store [30], the online channel offers many opportunities for luxury companies to engage their customers in their sustainability communications. The major advantage of the digital environment is that it brings companies and consumers closer together, enabling multiple interactions initiated by either the company or the consumer [75], and it also allows personalized and tailored communications that have a greater impact [76]. We suggest that such closeness, which is nourished daily through a company's active presence in multiple online social contexts, has been crucial to convey the new sustainable orientation of luxury brands to consumers and other incumbent stakeholders, as well as the numerous pressures from consumers and other incumbent stakeholders. In this way, companies can exploit the digital environment of exchange to promote their own sustainable actions to consumers, and, in turn, expose them to the brand's promotion of a sustainable culture. As shown by

Gautam and Sharma [77], building digital relationships with consumers has an influential effect on adoption and purchase intention for luxury fashion brands; Hasbullah et al. [78] later investigated how communities can affect sustainable luxury fashion purchases, in terms of endorsement and community feeling, through user-generated media content. In order to promote sustainable behaviours, brands must take into account the need to relate to their customers on a regular basis.

Obviously, it is important that communication efforts avoid being perceived as luxury “greenwashing”: Organizations should not engage in unsubstantiated ethical and sustainability claims that lead to reputational risks and an increase in consumer cynicism and mistrust [79]. Generally, it is good practice that the perceived authenticity of a brand must match the credibility of its ethical or sustainable claims. Third-party control over sustainable practices in luxury is limited to few and recently established organizations, such as Positive Luxury’s Butterfly Mark; therefore, most information on sustainability is shared by companies themselves. Miscommunication, either intended or erroneous, might be detrimental to a brand’s reputation, undermining the relationship it has established with its customers.

### 5. Sustainable Luxury: Preliminary Remarks

As argued in the previous sections of this chapter, positive relationships exist between luxury and sustainability, and the way to the promising possibility of convergence to sustainable luxury has been paved. In this context, managerial studies have contributed to the body of knowledge in this domain, but the need for a future research agenda along several paths arises.

First, research should provide further evidence of the ways in which organizations can most effectively produce and sell their sustainable luxury offerings. Hence, product categories that are most suited to combining luxury and sustainability should be better identified since luxury is a large industry embracing a wide range of different products. At the same time, there is a need to understand how organizations across the diverse luxury sector can adopt more deeply sustainable practices. In this vein, the relationships between organizational values, luxury, and sustainability could be emphasized more in future studies. In addition, scholars conducting research in the organizational field could investigate the potential new opportunities offered by digital transformation and its tools, such as the Internet of Things, blockchain, cloud service platforms, recovery technologies, and other Industry 4.0 technologies in the sustainable luxury domain. Questions about how sustainable activities influence both staff motivation and work satisfaction still offer room for further research activities from the organizational perspective of luxury businesses. Additionally, strategies for communicating sustainable activities represent another topic to be investigated in depth. An interesting theme focuses on the balance between the accomplishment of sustainability credentials and the maintenance of luxury’s exclusive allure.

Within the context of sustainable luxury, other fruitful directions for research concern the key characteristics of sustainable luxury consumers in terms of their motives, attitudes, and behaviours behind the consumption of sustainable luxury. In this regard, a possible under-researched area constitutes new ways of liquid consumption and collaborative fashion consumption that includes gifting, sharing, lending, second-hand purchasing, renting, and leasing. Beyond purchase behaviours, knowledge of post-purchase behaviours is also crucial to create sustainable luxury experiences.

### 6. Contributors to Special Issue

Today, sustainable marketing practices are important for developing a more comprehensive understanding of consumers’ purchase decisions in a digital marketing environment. The contributions to this Special Issue are varied and interdisciplinary in their perspectives. The paper written by Herman Donner and Michael Steep entitled “Monetizing the IoT Revolution” investigates the IoT revolution and the impacts it produces



on business models in terms of personalised offers. YunJu Kim and Jong Woo Jun, in their paper “Factors Affecting Sustainable Purchase Intentions of SNS Emojis: Modeling the Impact of Self-Presentation”, examines the combination of nascent digital tools and sustainability, particularly the relationships between social psychological antecedents and SNS users’ intention to purchase emojis as antecedent to understand how to promote a more sustainable consumption of Social Networking Service (SNS) emojis. David Vrtana, Anna Krizanova, Eva Skorvagova and Katarina Valaskova’s paper, entitled “Exploring the Affective Level in Adolescents in Relation to Advertising with a Selected Emotional Appeal”, focuses on the relation between communication and emotions and highlights that the perception of advertising on adolescents is a key factor in the survival of subjective emotional states. Ke Zhang and Kineta Hung’s paper, entitled “The Effect of Natural Celebrity–Brand Association and Para-Social Interaction in Advertising Endorsement for Sustainable Marketing”, focuses on how brand communications interact with sustainability, demonstrating the link between celebrity endorsement and sustainable marketing strategies. Gordon Bowen, Dominic Appiah and Sebastian Okafor’s paper, entitled “The Influence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Social Media on the Strategy Formulation Process”, offers granular insights into the influence of CRS on strategy formulation. The Special Issue ends with the paper “Discovering the Role of Emotional and Rational Appeals and Hidden Heterogeneity of Consumers in Advertising Copies for Sustainable Marketing” by Cheong Kim, Hyeon Gyu Jeon and Kun Chang Lee, who have tried to reveal the role of emotional and rational appeals, as well as the hidden heterogeneity of consumers, in the appeal–value–trust–satisfaction–WOM framework.

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