

Recycled vs. Recyclable: How Retail Context Shapes Consumer Response to Sustainability Claims

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Abstract

Marketers often highlight sustainability by noting that products are made from recycled materials or are recyclable. This research examines how these message frames—“recycled” versus “recyclable”—shape consumer evaluations across retail contexts. Across two controlled experiments, we demonstrate that in upscale retail settings (e.g., Nordstrom), products described as recycled elicit more favorable attitudes and higher purchase intentions than those described as recyclable. In contrast, in downscale settings (e.g., Target), the pattern reverses: consumers respond more positively to recyclable products. These effects persist regardless of the degree of recycling stated—whether 100% (“This backpack is 100% recycled/recyclable!”; Study 1) or 50% (“Our bedding collection is made from 50% recycled/recyclable cotton”; Study 2). The findings extend message framing and retail context theories by identifying a boundary condition for sustainability communication.

Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics