

The Role of Social Media in Promoting Sustainable Brands: Influencing Consumer Perceptions and Behavior Towards Sustainable Products

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Abstract. Sustainability has become a primary concern for consumers and businesses, and the need for brands to communicate their environmental initiatives effectively has significantly increased. Social media platforms have become powerful tools for shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors toward sustainable products. This study investigates how social media influences consumer trust, engagement, and purchase intentions related to sustainable brands. The study uses a mixed-method approach that includes qualitative meta-analysis, case studies, and a quantitative online survey. The study examines how transparency, influencer marketing, and consumer engagement on social media impact consumer attitudes and behaviors. Results indicate significant correlations between social media transparency and purchase intentions. According to the study results, influencer credibility is crucial in driving engagement with sustainable products. Case studies of brands such as Patagonia, IKEA, Unilever, and Tesla demonstrate how real-world companies use social media to promote sustainability, which further confirms the relevance of the study's findings.

Keywords: sustainability, social media, consumer behavior, sustainable brands, green marketing, digital communication, influencer marketing, greenwashing

1. Introduction

Sustainability has become a mainstream concern among consumers globally. Because awareness of environmental issues and climate change has increased, businesses need to align their practices with sustainability values. Next to adopting sustainable practices the main concern of brands is how to communicate such efforts to consumers in an effective way. Social media has a significant role in the communication process of sustainability. Through social media platforms, brands can share their efforts on sustainability and engage directly with consumers, which will increase the trust of consumers in brands [1].

This study's goal is to answer the following research questions:

1. How do social media platforms influence consumer trust in sustainable brands?
2. What role influencers play in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors toward sustainable products?
3. How does consumer engagement on social media impact brand loyalty for sustainable products?

This research combines a qualitative meta-analysis of existing literature, case studies of brands using social media to promote sustainability, and a quantitative online survey on consumer attitudes and behaviors in regard to sustainable brands on social media.

1.1. Hypotheses

This research tests the following hypotheses:

- H1: Social media transparency positively influences consumer trust in sustainable brands.
- H2: Influencer credibility positively impacts purchase intentions for sustainable products.
- H3: Consumer engagement with social media posts about sustainability positively correlates with brand loyalty.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Rise of Sustainability in Consumer Culture

In recent years, sustainability has become an important factor for consumers, with environmental and social concerns becoming especially important [1]. Consumers of all generations, particularly Millennials and Generation Z, require more brand accountability regarding their environmental impact [2]. Because of that, businesses are under pressure to adopt sustainable practices and communicate them effectively [3]. According to a global survey by Nielsen [2], 73% of consumers would change their consumption habits to reduce their environmental impact. A report by Accenture [4] indicated that 72% of consumers are more likely to purchase from brands that are in line with their environmental and ethical values, which then shows the importance for brands to build credibility through transparency in sustainability claims.

Consumer shift toward sustainability is attributed to what literature names the "conscientious consumer" movement [5]. Conscientious consumers prioritize ethical considerations, such as fair trade and cruelty-free products. They actively seek available information on a company's environmental and social impact. Due to that factor, businesses are adding sustainability as a core element of their value propositions [6]. Companies such as Patagonia, IKEA, and Unilever are capitalizing on this trend by incorporating sustainability into their brand identity and marketing strategies [7], [8].

Sustainability is also becoming a factor of brand equity, increasing customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and brand differentiation [9]. According to Keller [10], brand equity is the added value that adds value to a product or service due to the brand's associations in the consumer's mind. If sustainability becomes one of these key associations, it enhances perceived brand value and strengthens consumer trust. Therefore, sustainability is increasingly connected with total brand equity in the marketplace, creating opportunities for businesses that seek to engage ethically-minded consumers.

2.2. The Influence of Social Media on Consumer Behavior

Social media platforms have changed consumer behavior, creating a new reality for brand interaction with consumers. Social media platforms allow brands to communicate directly with consumers and encourage real-time engagement [11]. The rise of user-generated content and brand-consumer conversations have transformed how consumers perceive brand authenticity. Which is especially valid concerning sustainability claims [12]. Unlike traditional marketing methods, social media allows brands

to build relationships through dialogue and community-building. Therefore, transparency on social media is more important than it was when using traditional marketing methods.

Consequently, the two-way communication facilitated via social media has led to an increase in brand story engagement by consumers. This increases engagement, confidence, and loyalty [13]. Consumers are actively engaging with sustainability-related content and, thus, brand messaging by sharing and commenting. Brands are more trustworthy in their sustainability initiatives when brands are transparent [14]. With the help of social media platforms, brands can exhibit their pursuit of sustainability through multimedia, especially videos and infographics or stories that engage consumers emotionally [15].

Trust is an important factor in shaping consumer behavior [16], especially pertaining to purchase intentions in brands favoring sustainability. The study by Perez et al. [17] shows that social media transparency enhances consumer trust in sustainable brands, also a central idea received from the literature which claims specifically authenticity and transparent practices are means to construct trust [18]. Social media is a platform where brands can show off their sustainability efforts so much more effectively, along with encouraging other people to join them — be it through influencer marketing or user-generated content (UGC) that displays consumers' participation in sustainable initiatives.

It has also been demonstrated through research that interactions with the brand and a level of consumer engagement can be influenced by social media. Men and Tsai [19] reported that dialogic communication on social media increased perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which in turn had a positive effect on brand trust and loyalty. Ultimately, brands that communicate well about sustainability in a two-way dialogic sense are the ones who manage to establish strong relationships with consumers over time. As a result, social media represents both the promise and peril of brand engagement on sustainability.

2.3. Social Media and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) by Petty and Cacioppo [20] is a model that explains how consumers process information on social media in the context of sustainability. The Dual Processing Model (ELM) states that information is processed through two primary routes: the central route and the peripheral route. When message recipients are highly motivated and capable of processing information, they are likely to take the central route or carefully examine the message content. In contrast, when time or ability is low, and motivation is lacking in the consumer's mind, they rely on simple cues such as a credible source or an interesting spoke person to make judgments.

For example, on social media, the central route would be activated when consumers read detailed information about a brand's sustainability practices (e.g., specific values of carbon emissions or life cycles of a product). However, in platforms like Instagram or TikTok, the peripheral route might be more relevant because users can rely on social media influencers' credibility not using too much-elaborated criteria before assessing sustainability reports [17]. One such factor is influencer marketing, which is an essential peripheral cue that gives consumers signs of trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise, potentially influencing their attitudes toward sustainable products [22].

Influencers who are regarded as believable endorsers of sustainability have been shown to influence customers [23]. For example, influencers who are highly involved in self-brand connections can convince consumers to follow sustainable actions [24]. In respect to sustainability, at least for consumers who may fall into the low-need-for-cognition group (i.e., not being naturally inclined to engage in high elaboration with stimuli leading them away from central route processing), influencer credibility underscores the necessity related to promoting sustainability. Therefore, the ELM can be applied in investigating how individuals employ central and peripheral routes of processing

sustainability cues on social media when influenced by the types of information presented by either influencer or brand.

2.4. The Role of Influencers in Social Media Marketing

In the case of sustainable brands, influencers are at the heart of social media marketing strategy [25]. Influencer marketing takes the opposite approach by empowering brands to access certain consumer segments through reputable intermediaries with existing trust and relationships among their followers. As Lou and Yuan [26] point out, consumers are more likely to believe in and interact with branded content that was promoted by an influencer than the branded content that a brand puts up itself. Trust in this context is especially relevant when it comes to sustainability because consumers tend to question greenwashing [27] and claims that might be too good to be true by brands.

Real sustainability influencers can drive the brand's trust in the consumers' eyes. Finally, research illustrates that collaboration with environmental influencers helps to increase consumer trust in the brand's sustainability efforts. For instance, Patagonia uses such influencers as part of its promotional tactics for Worn Wear [7]. Similarly, research by Roozen and Raeymaeckers [28] concluded that influencers who are known for their environmental activism have a more significant effect on consumer purchase intentions of sustainable products. This affirmative reaction is even stronger when influencers bear testimony (credible testimonials combined with personal anecdotes and an emotional connection).

Still, challenges exist for brands with influencer marketing as they relate to maintaining authenticity in sustainability messaging. The proliferation of "green influencers" also offers an increasingly fertile ground for greenwashing — that is, the act of promoting products as eco-friendly when they are not in reality. In particular, brands must be very selective in who they choose to represent them as influencers by ensuring that influencers are a good fit for their sustainability values [29]. Failing to comply would prove to be expensive, damaging both consumer sentiment and the brand.

2.5. Greenwashing and Consumer Skepticism

One major problem with sustainability marketing nowadays, especially in social media, where brands are allowed to put their messaging into corporate boards' limitations, is greenwashing [30]. Greenwashing refers to a brand exaggerating or misrepresenting its products or practices as being more environmentally friendly than they are, resulting in consumer skepticism. TerraChoice [31] research showed that when companies overuse environmental claims or engage in greenwashing practices such as "vagueness," "hidden trade-offs," or "false labels," the consumer's trust wanes.

Consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical of greenwashing, as plenty of online sources can be used for fact-checking brand claims. De Jong et al. [27] point out the advanced capabilities of consumers to identify greenwashing, especially on social media platforms where they can have real-time conversations with other users. Greenwashing can be exposed on social media by whistleblowers and activists. Transparency of green claims on social media platforms requires brands to have clarity in sustainability communications.

In an attempt to address the elevation of greenwashing, many brands are now using third-party certifications, such as Fair Trade or Rainforest Alliance, to verify their statements related to sustainability [32]. They ensure a brand's environmental performance and are useful in increasing consumer trust. At the same time, it is important to be transparent and offer regular updates on sustainability targets, as this is something consumers expect from brands — proof that they are still working hard to improve their impact [17]. The consequences of consumers noticing greenwashing by

brands are that brands will no longer have a loyal consumer following and will face backlash on social media platforms.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining a qualitative meta-analysis with case studies and a quantitative online survey. The qualitative meta-analysis synthesized data from peer-reviewed studies, industry reports, and case studies published between 2015 and 2024. The case studies focus on real-world examples of brands using social media to promote sustainability, such as Patagonia, IKEA, Unilever, and Tesla [33], [34]. The quantitative survey was designed to collect consumer attitudes toward sustainable brands and their behaviors on social media platforms.

3.1. Case Studies of Sustainability in Social Media

Several brands have successfully used social media platforms to promote their sustainability efforts:

- **Patagonia:** Known for its environmental activism, Patagonia uses Instagram and other platforms to promote campaigns such as *Worn Wear*, which encourages customers to repair and reuse their products [7]. This aligns with Patagonia's brand values of sustainability and environmental protection, and their social media efforts have significantly enhanced consumer trust.
- **IKEA:** The global furniture giant promotes its sustainable product lines, such as eco-friendly furniture made from recycled materials, through social media campaigns. IKEA engages consumers by showcasing how sustainability can be integrated into daily life, building trust through transparency and engagement [8].
- **Unilever:** Through its *Sustainable Living Plan*, Unilever uses social media to highlight its progress toward sustainability goals, including reducing plastic waste and promoting eco-friendly products [17]. Unilever's transparency in sustainability communication has contributed to higher consumer trust.
- **Tesla:** Tesla leverages social media, particularly Twitter, to promote its electric vehicles and sustainability mission. Tesla's social media presence emphasizes innovation and environmental impact, helping to foster a loyal, sustainability-conscious consumer base [29].

3.2. Survey Design and Sample

The online survey was distributed to 500 respondents using an online survey platform. Respondents were selected based on quota sampling to ensure representation across gender, age, and geographic region. The sample consisted of 52% females and 48% males, with a majority aged between 18 and 45 years.

Analysis was conducted to determine the minimum sample size required to detect statistically significant effects. Given a medium effect size (Cohen's $f^2 = 0.15$), a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, and a power of 0.80 (Cohen, 1988), the recommended sample size for multiple linear regression with five predictors was 92. The final sample size of 500 exceeded this recommendation, ensuring sufficient power to detect medium to small effects in the regression analysis. This larger sample size allows for more robust generalizability of the findings and greater precision in estimating the relationships between social media transparency, influencer credibility, consumer trust, and purchase intentions.

Respondents rated their answers on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Ethical considerations were adhered to, including informed consent and protection of participant anonymity.

3.3. Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analyses, and multiple linear regression modeling to determine the relationships between social media transparency, influencer credibility, consumer trust, and purchase intentions. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors (VIFs), all of which were below 2.0, indicating no significant multicollinearity. Statistical significance was tested with p-values and 95% confidence intervals.

4. Results

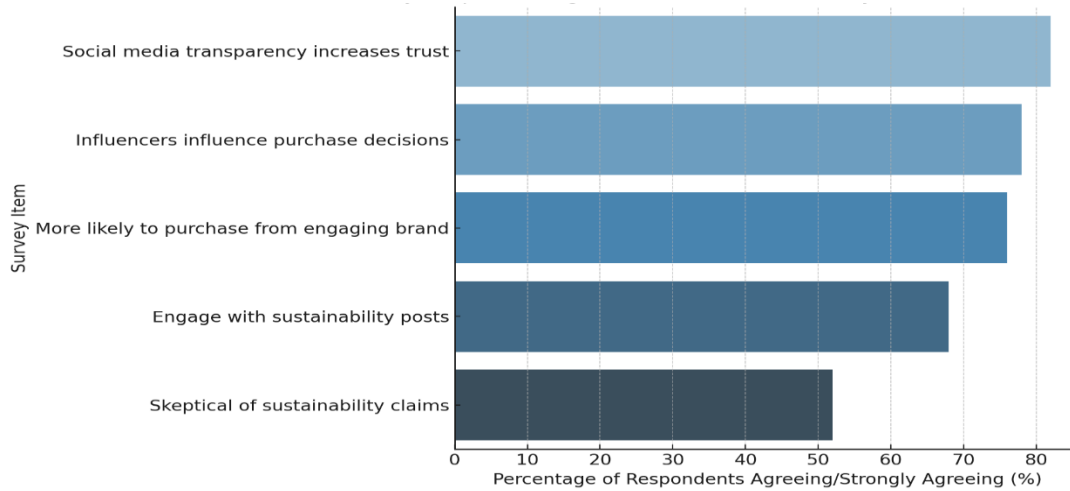
4.1. Quantitative Survey Findings

The survey findings provided quantitative evidence to support the hypotheses, and key insights are summarized in Table 1 and shown on Figure 1.

Table 1. Key Insights of the Survey

Survey Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	% Agree/Strongly Agree
Social media transparency increases my trust in brands.	4.25	0.86	82%
Influencers who are passionate about sustainability influence my purchase decisions.	4.10	0.94	78%
I am more likely to purchase from a brand that engages with me on social media.	4.05	0.88	76%
I regularly engage (like, share, comment) with social media posts about sustainability.	3.80	1.02	68%
I am skeptical of sustainability claims made by brands on social media.	3.45	1.12	52%

Figure 1: Survey Responses: Agreement with Sustainability and Social Media Statements

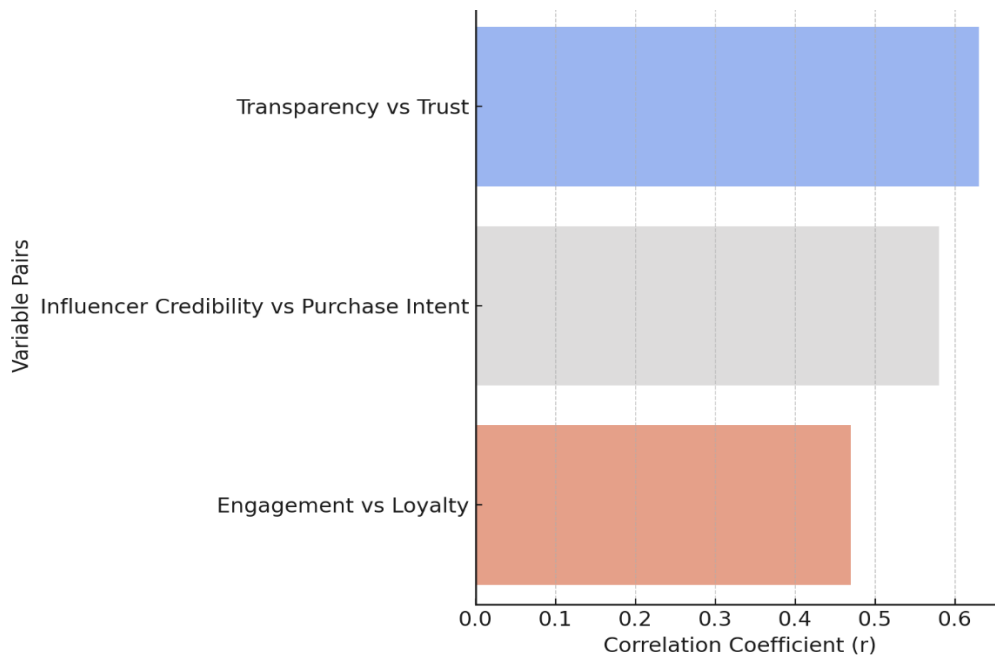


4.2. Hypotheses Testing

Correlation Analysis

The correlations between key variables are visualized in Figure 2. These relationships were used to confirm or reject the study's hypotheses.

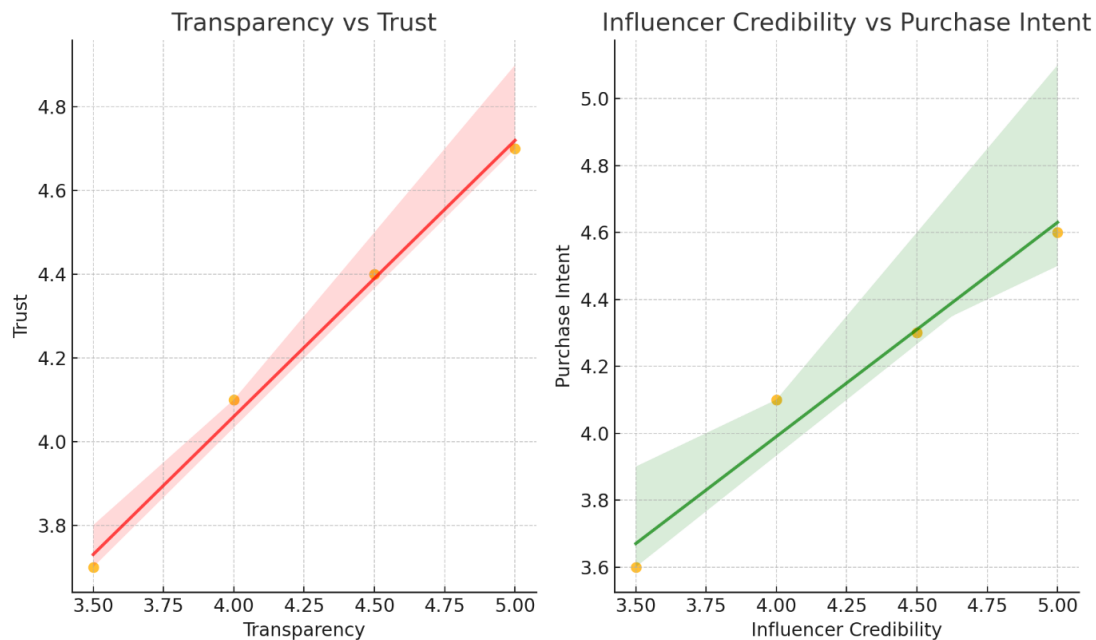
Figure 2: Correlation Between Key Variables



- H1: Social media transparency positively influences consumer trust in sustainable brands.**
 This hypothesis was supported. A correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between social media transparency and consumer trust ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, the regression analysis confirmed that transparency is a significant predictor of consumer trust, supporting **H1**.
- H2: Influencer credibility positively impacts purchase intentions for sustainable products.**
 This hypothesis was supported. The regression analysis showed that influencer credibility is a significant predictor of purchase intention, with a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), confirming **H2**.
- H3: Consumer engagement with social media posts about sustainability is positively correlated with brand loyalty.**
 This hypothesis was partially supported. While engagement with sustainability-related posts was positively correlated with brand loyalty ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.05$), the effect size was smaller than expected. Nevertheless, the correlation is statistically significant, thus supporting **H3**.

The regression analysis of social media transparency and trust, as well as influencer credibility and purchase intentions, is shown in the following plots.

Figure 3: Regression of Transparency vs. Trust and Influencer Credibility vs. Purchase Intent



5. Discussion

This study identifies transparency, influencer marketing, and consumer engagement as significant factors in promoting sustainable brands via social media. Transparency in communication is a crucial

factor that ultimately leads to consumer trust, and social media makes it easy for companies to step up. The ELM model suggests that influencer marketing operates primarily through the peripheral route, where cues such as an influencer's credibility have more influence on consumers than information about sustainability.

These findings are also illustrated in Patagonia, IKEA, Unilever, and Tesla case studies. Transparency and influencer partnerships are the key building blocks to gaining consumer trust, a lesson illustrated by Patagonia's Worn Wear initiative [7]. The adoption of sustainable practices in the home motivated by IKEA campaigns has also led to greater consumer involvement in sustainability [23]. The Unilever example of utilizing social media to communicate advances towards sustainability goals demonstrates the value of transparency [17]. Tesla's bold stance that stands apart from its contemporaries through innovative sprouting up on Twitter underlines the significance of engagement and transparency in building brand loyalty [29].

This study is a reminder to marketers of the need for authenticity and engagement in social media strategies. The brands should work only with influencers that reflect their sustainable values, not greenwashing. Consumer trust is essential, and maintaining authentic and transparent communication helps maintain it. Perhaps policymakers would benefit from setting up some boundaries around the misleading sustainability claims that are springing all over social media for consumer protection.

The research is relevant to marketing and communication theory, as it combines the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) with sustainability campaigns based on social media. This illustrates the importance of a peripheral route in developing consumer behavior toward sustainable consumption, influenced by cues such as influencer credibility. Future studies could instead examine the extent to which different social media strategies activate more central vs. less central processing routes.

10. Conclusion

Social media plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable brands by shaping consumer perceptions, building trust, and influencing purchasing behaviors. By leveraging transparency, influencer marketing, and active consumer engagement, brands can foster a culture of sustainability. Results show significant correlations between social media transparency and purchase intentions. According to the study results, influencer credibility is crucial in driving engagement with sustainable products. However, the risk of greenwashing is a major concern, further making the need for authenticity in sustainability messaging important. Future research should explore the long-term effects of social media-driven sustainability campaigns on consumer loyalty and investigate the role of emerging platforms like TikTok in promoting ethical consumption.

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