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Mechanisms of Sustainability Influencer Communication: Credibility, Green Trust, and Greenwashing

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SUMMARY

The aim of this study is to explore the communication mechanisms through which social media influencers can influence consumers' environmentally conscious attitudes and their intention to make sustainable purchases. According to the literature, the credibility of the source, value alignment, self-congruity, and parasocial relationships play a key role in the effectiveness of influencer communication. According to a synthesis of the literature, green trust can act as a mediating mechanism contributing to the development of sustainable purchasing intentions, while the perception of greenwashing can weaken the effects of credibility and trust. Even influencers who do not directly address sustainability can have a positive impact if their communication is consistent and aligned with their followers' values. The theoretical contribution of this study is the development of an integrated conceptual model.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability and environmentally conscious consumption have become key areas of marketing and consumer research in recent years (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017; Dudás, 2012; Lunde, 2018; Schäfferné Dudás, 2007; Vágási, 2000). Due to the growing significance of the environmental impacts of consumer decisions, companies are paying increasing attention to communicating their sustainability messages (Easterling et al., 1996; Kenesei & Bernschütz, 2014; Nagy, 2009; Orosdy, 2006). At the same time, the rise of social media has created new opportunities for reaching consumers, in which influencers play a key role (Mohsin, 2022; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). However, the effectiveness of influencer communication does not depend solely on the content of the message (Casaló et al., 2011). Consumer reactions can be significantly influenced by the influencer's perceived credibility and authenticity (Lee & Eastin, 2021), the parasocial relationship established with followers (Yuan & Lou, 2020), and the alignment of values between the influencer and their followers (Nutsugah & Novixoxo, 2026). These factors may be particularly important in sustainability communication, where consumers may be sensitive to contradictory or overly promotional messages (Becker-Olsen & Potucek, 2013; Easterling et al., 1996; Falcão Sobral et al., 2020; Kenesei & Bernschütz, 2014). An increasing number of studies in the literature are examining the relationship between greenfluencers and sustainable consumption (Munaro et al., 2024; Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024); however, less research has explored the conditions under which traditional influencers—those not specifically focused on green topics—are able to convey credible sustainability messages (Buvár et al., 2023). Another question is how the perception of greenwashing modifies the relationships between credibility, trust, and consumer intent (Chen & Chang, 2013; Chen et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). In the Hungarian context, knowledge is also limited regarding how the perceived credibility of influencers, parasocial relationships, value alignment, and the perception of greenwashing are interrelated.

The aim of this study is therefore to explore and critically synthesize the mechanisms of credibility and relationship-building that shape the pro-environmental communication of social media influencers, as presented in the literature. The study examines how source credibility, authenticity, parasocial relationship, influencer–follower value alignment, and self-congruity can contribute to the development of green trust and green purchase intention, as well as how the perception

of greenwashing can weaken these positive effects. Based on the findings in the literature, this study develops an integrated conceptual framework for interpreting the relationships under examination. While the proposed conceptual framework is globally applicable, regional market contexts introduce notable nuances. In Central and Eastern European (CEE) markets, such as Hungary, consumer skepticism toward corporate green claims and influencer sponsorships is historically pronounced (Kenesei & Bernschütz, 2014). In such environments, the negative moderating effect of greenwashing is likely intensified, making genuine value alignment and fallible, non-idealized communication even more critical for fostering green trust.

2. Influencer Marketing as a New Type of Digital Persuasion Tool

The spread of digital communication and social media has fundamentally transformed communication between brands and consumers. Alongside one-way mass communication, networked, interactive, and more personalized forms of communication have taken on an increasingly important role. In this environment, influencers have become opinion leaders who, through their content, not only convey information but can also influence consumer attitudes and decisions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). One of the fundamental factors in an influencer's persuasive power is source credibility. According to the classic approach to source credibility, the persuasive power of a message is determined, among other things, by the source's expertise, trustworthiness, and likability (Weismueller et al., 2020). In influencer marketing, these qualities are particularly important, as followers often perceive a more personal and direct connection with the influencer than they do with traditional advertisements. Authenticity can thus become an important prerequisite for the development of consumer trust and purchase intent (Saima & Khan, 2021). The persuasion process is shaped by general influencer marketing trends and fundamentals (Joshi et al., 2025).

Another key element of persuasion is the parasocial relationship (PSR). Through influencers' regular and personal-toned content, followers can develop a bond that is experienced as a one-sided yet social relationship. This relationship can reduce resistance to advertisements and increase acceptance of messages conveyed by the influencer (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Followers' trust plays a crucial role in the formation of parasocial relationships and in fostering commitment (Breves, Amrehn et al., 2021; Breves, Liebers et al., 2021). The credibility of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) mediated by online communities also plays an important role in this digital environment (Yang et al., 2012).

In the case of sustainability communication, the role of credibility and relational factors is even more pronounced. This is because the evaluation of claims related to environmentally conscious consumption can be influenced not only by the content of the message, but also by the influencer's personal values, past communications, and the relationship with their followers. Consequently, authenticity, alignment of values between the influencer and their followers, and the perception of self-identity can become additional factors that determine the acceptance of sustainability messages. For this reason, influencer marketing cannot be viewed merely as a new advertising platform, but rather as a digital persuasion environment in which source credibility, authenticity, and the relationship with followers collectively shape consumer reactions. From the perspective of sustainability communication, it is therefore particularly important to examine under what conditions these mechanisms can strengthen green trust and the intention to consume in an environmentally conscious manner.

3. The "Greenfluencer" Phenomenon and the Promotion of Sustainable Consumption

A "greenfluencer" can be understood as a digital influencer who, through their communication, highlights environmental responsibility, a sustainable lifestyle, and the consumer decisions associated with them (Nazir & Wani, 2024). Their significance lies not merely in recommending green products or services, but also in presenting sustainability as an everyday, accessible, and socially meaningful practice. According to the literature, influencers convey complex environmental information through personal stories, user experiences, and concrete lifestyle examples, thereby reducing consumers' information gaps and the perceived difficulty of making green decisions (Munaro et al., 2024; Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024). Therefore, the credibility, expertise, and reliability of the source are particularly important in promoting sustainable consumption, as followers use these factors to judge whether a recommendation is based on genuine experience or merely on commercial interests (Zhao et al., 2024; Chan et al., 2025). Consumers' attitudes toward sustainable consumption may also be influenced by individual factors, such as the degree of individualism (Kothari et al., 2025).

The influence of green influencers can manifest at multiple levels of consumer behavior. On the one hand, they can foster the development of environmentally conscious attitudes; on the other hand, they can also reinforce specific

purchase intentions (Lee et al., 2025; Van Nguyen & Le, 2026). Influencer marketing can be a relevant communication tool in shaping purchase intentions for sustainable food products (Wu et al., 2023), while more sustainable consumption patterns have also been examined in the fashion context (Busalim et al., 2022; Joy et al., 2012). According to Chan et al. (2025), the credibility of the source and the characteristics of green influencers are correlated with millennial consumers' intentions to purchase sustainable clothing. It is important to emphasize, however, that communication generally influences primarily purchase intention and the decision-making process; actual behavior is also influenced by price, availability, quality, and the consumer's resources (Testa et al., 2021; Zhang & Dong, 2020).

The persuasive power of greenfluencers can be further strengthened by parasocial relationships. Over time, followers may come to feel that they have a personal connection with the influencer, that they understand the influencer's values, lifestyle, and decision-making criteria, even though the relationship remains, in reality, one-sided and mediated. This sense of closeness can increase acceptance of the messages, because the recommendation is perceived not merely as an advertisement but as the experience of a person considered trustworthy. According to research by Breves and Liebers (2022), parasocial relationships can strengthen both the advertising effectiveness of influencer communication and followers' pro-environmental intentions. This effect can be particularly lasting when the influencer's communication about sustainability aligns with their previous content and publicly stated values. In such cases, the alignment between perceived self-identity and the follower's own value system can increase the message's personal relevance as well as the acceptability of green consumption (Trinh et al., 2026).

From the perspective of encouraging sustainable consumption, it is particularly noteworthy that environmental impact is not necessarily expected only from influencers with explicitly green themes. According to the findings of Buvár et al. (2023), environmental posts by opinion leaders without a green profile also positively shape followers' reactions to sustainable consumption. Such content may be persuasive because it is less likely to give the impression of a pre-established marketing identity or a mandatory brand message. Authenticity, however, does not merely mean a spontaneous tone; it also requires that the influencer explain the reasoning behind their decisions, acknowledge the limitations of sustainable choices, and avoid portraying themselves as consistently flawless consumers. Dynamic social norms complement this effect at the social level, as they suggest not only that a behavior is widely followed but also that an increasing number of people are adopting, for example, more conscious food choices, using clothing for longer, or purchasing fewer but more durable products (Buvár et al., 2023; Minton et al., 2018). Followers can thus interpret their own decisions as part of an unfolding social change (Quesada Baena et al., 2025). This mechanism works convincingly only if the presented norm is credible and consistent with the influencer's actual behavior. Exaggerated, unproven, or contradictory green claims can trigger perceptions of greenwashing, which increases consumer confusion and a sense of risk, and ultimately undermines green trust and purchase intent (Chen & Chang, 2013; Chen et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018).

3.1. The Concept of Greenwashing, Its Impact on Consumer Green Trust, and Increased Perceived Risk

The phenomenon of greenwashing constitutes the most significant point of critical tension in the discourse on sustainable consumption and green marketing. The theoretical roots of the concept extend back to skepticism regarding corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental communication. According to the classic definition by Becker-Olsen and Potucek (2013), greenwashing refers to the deceptive, manipulative, or false communication of environmentally friendly corporate practices and product characteristics. This is not merely a matter of outright lies, but rather a much more nuanced form of communicative manipulation, which Falcão Sobral et al. (2020) have systematically categorized. This deceptive green communication includes unsubstantiated claims, excessive generalizations, the emphasis on insignificant environmental benefits, or the misuse of visual elements (such as the excessive use of the color green or images of nature). The structural background of this phenomenon and the limits of ethical consumer behavior are also analyzed by Jones (2019) also analyzes the structural background of this phenomenon and the limits of ethical consumer behavior, pointing out that greenwashing distorts the fair functioning of the market, while Roulet and Touboul (2015) highlight that the tension between the actual corporate intentions behind green communication and liberal market expectations inherently paves the way for the spread of deceptive practices.

Deceptive green marketing is not without consequences at the level of consumer behavior. Chen and Chang's (2013) seminal theoretical model explores in detail the mediating mechanisms between greenwashing and consumer reactions. According to their findings, the perception of greenwashing increases consumers' green confusion and perceived green risk. Due to the contradictory nature of the information available in the market, consumers become uncertain about which claims are true, leading to high cognitive load and suspicion. This increased perceived risk—that is, the fear that purchasing a green product will not actually contribute to sustainability or will result in a decision that is functionally and financially disadvantageous—may ultimately lead to a decline in green trust (Chen & Chang, 2013).

This loss of trust erodes the market in the long term and at the systemic level. Chen et al. (2020) confirm that the loss of trust due to greenwashing damages the green brand image and also erodes green brand loyalty. Zhang et al., (2018) also demonstrated in their empirical research that the perception of greenwashing fundamentally undermines green

purchase intention, and, even more critically, consumers' environmental concerns are not sufficient to fully override the rejection caused by untrustworthy messages. In other words, even the most committed, environmentally conscious shoppers tend to significantly reduce their green purchase intentions if they suspect greenwashing behind a particular product or brand.

3.2. The Fine Line Between Authenticity and Perceived Greenwashing in Influencer Communication

While in traditional corporate communication, greenwashing primarily manifests at the level of advertisements and packaging, the rise of social media and the proliferation of influencer marketing have added a new, sensitive dimension to this tension. The persuasive power of influencers is fundamentally based on personal authenticity and the parasocial relationships and interactions they build with their followers. Lee and Eastin (2021) highlight that perceived authenticity is a complex, multidimensional construct built on sincerity, consistency, self-identity, and real-life experiences. When an influencer conveys pro-environmental messages or promotes green products, the line between perceived authenticity and greenwashing becomes extremely thin (Fang, 2024). Since consumers cannot directly verify the truthfulness of sustainability claims, they are forced to rely on the influencer's word. However, if the influencer's green messaging contradicts their past behavior (such as a lifestyle that promotes overconsumption) or is clearly driven solely by commercial gain, followers will recognize the phenomenon of greenwashing, which discredits the entire campaign and the influencer themselves.

In the Hungarian advertising and communications market, this tension manifests even more sharply and is compounded by local characteristics. The seminal Hungarian findings of Kenesei and Bernschütz (2014) highlighted that, based on earlier domestic research, the assessment of the credibility of green communication played a significant role among the Hungarian consumer group studied. In the Hungarian market, superficial green marketing communications and unfounded green promises are not only ineffective but also backfire, undermining trust in both the influencer and the advertised brand. Therefore, the success of pro-environmental messages is inseparable from the perceived integrity and sincerity of the source conveying them.

To maintain credibility and avoid greenwashing, influencer communication must be based on serious strategic considerations. Boechat et al. (2026), in their analysis of green narratives on Instagram, conclude that consumer engagement can only be achieved through personal, honest, and vulnerable storytelling. Influencers should not pose as flawless eco-heroes but should transparently showcase the challenges of a sustainable lifestyle as well as their own limitations. This transparent and fallible tone significantly increases perceived self-congruence, which, according to Trinh et al. (2026), is one of the key factors in deepening the impact of green messages, thereby increasing the message's personal relevance and the acceptability of green consumption. In contrast, green content that is overly stylized, idealized, or focused solely on promotion can heighten consumers' awareness of persuasion tactics and lead to perceptions of greenwashing. If there is no genuine commitment behind the green post, and the advertised product's green attributes prove to be exaggerated, the resulting perception of greenwashing immediately undermines the benefits of the otherwise valuable parasocial relationship, leading to deep consumer disappointment and cynicism toward sustainable consumption as a whole.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Approach

The aim of this study is to explore and analyze international and domestic literature related to sustainability communication by social media influencers. The research is based on a literature review that links the topics of influencer marketing, digital communication, sustainable consumption, green marketing, greenwashing, and consumer behavior. The aim of the analysis is to explore how an influencer's perceived credibility, authenticity, parasocial relationship, value alignment, and perceived self-identity may be linked to sustainable consumption and green purchasing intentions. In addition, it examines the negative impact of perceived greenwashing on credibility, trust in green initiatives, and consumer reactions. The conceptual framework, developed based on a synthesis of the literature, interprets sustainability influencer communication in the context of communication, relational, and consumer psychological factors.

4.2. Literature Review

During the literature review, both international and Hungarian-language academic publications were identified. In the search process, I utilized databases that cover relevant literature in marketing, communication, consumer behavior, and

the social sciences. The main sources for the international literature review were Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, while I also used the MATARKA and MTMT databases to identify Hungarian-language literature. The search was conducted in August 2026. When compiling the literature, I also took into account publications released in 2026, ensuring that the study includes the latest findings in this field. In developing the search strategy, I sought to integrate the research areas of influencer and digital communication, sustainability and green consumption, and consumer behavior and communication mechanisms (Dörnyei & Mitev, 2010). The combination of these three areas also made it possible to identify publications that do not directly examine greenfluencers but provide an important theoretical foundation for interpreting concepts such as source credibility, authenticity, parasocial relationships, or consumer trust.

4.3. Search Keywords

During the search, I used keywords in Hungarian and English, as well as combinations of these. The main search terms were as follows: “social media influencer” AND sustainability; “influencer marketing” AND “sustainable consumption”; “green influencer” AND consumer; “green influencer” AND sustainability; “social media influencer” AND “green consumption”; “influencer” AND “green purchase intention”; “influencer” AND “environmental behavior”; “greenwashing” AND influencer. The selection of keywords was aligned with the main concepts appearing in the research questions. The search strategy thus made it possible to explore both the direct literature on influencer communication and the related theoretical and consumer behavior research.

4.4. The Time Period Under Study

The literature review was not based exclusively on the most recent publications. In defining the period under study, equal consideration was given to presenting both the classical theoretical foundations of the field and the latest research findings on digital influencer marketing. The publications included in the final sample span the period from 1996 to 2026. Earlier studies primarily contributed to the theoretical foundations of environmental advertising, sustainable consumption, and green marketing, while more recent research has increasingly focused on social media influencers, greenfluencers, and digital sustainability communication. This temporal scope allows us to demonstrate how research on traditional green marketing and sustainable consumption has intersected with the emergence of social media and influencer marketing.

4.5. Selection Criteria

The literature review included publications that provided theoretical or empirical findings relevant to the research topic. During the selection process, I considered works published in academic journals, as book chapters, or in other professionally relevant scholarly publications that examined issues related to influencer marketing, social media communication, or digital opinion leaders. The relevant publications also included studies that addressed sustainable or environmentally conscious consumption, green purchasing, or environmental behavior, as well as those that analyzed the phenomena of green marketing and greenwashing. I also reviewed literature that examined theoretical constructs central to the research, including, among others, source credibility, authenticity, parasocial relationships, social norms, and consumer trust. An additional criterion for selection was that the publication in question should directly contribute to the development of the study’s theoretical or methodological framework.

4.6. Exclusion Criteria

During the literature search, publications that were unrelated to the research questions, focused exclusively on technical or IT aspects, or lacked adequate scientific grounding were excluded. Also excluded were findings on general marketing topics not related to sustainability, influencer marketing, or consumer behavior, as well as duplicated entries and those that did not provide substantive theoretical or empirical results. The application of these criteria ensured the formation of a literature sample relevant to the research questions.

4.7. Selection and Thematic Organization of the Literature

As a result of the search and screening process, 53 publications were included in the final analysis. The selection was based not solely on the year of publication or citation count, but primarily on the theoretical and empirical relevance to the research questions, as well as adequate coverage of the subject area. The selected literature can be organized into three main thematic blocks. The first comprises studies examining the direct relationship between influencers and sustainability, with a particular focus on greenfluencers, sustainable consumption, and green consumption. The second section is based on more general literature on influencer marketing and digital communication, in which source credibility,

authenticity, parasocial relationships, advertising effectiveness, and purchase intent play a prominent role. The third section includes research on sustainable marketing, greenwashing, and consumer behavior, which provides a theoretical foundation for interpreting the credibility of green communication, consumer trust, perceived risk, and green purchase intent. The Hungarian-language literature served to establish the domestic theoretical and methodological context. During the thematic organization, I examined what relationships individual studies identified among the constructs under investigation, as well as in which areas gaps or contradictions were evident. This enabled an integrated interpretation of the findings in the literature and the development of a conceptual framework.

5. Results and Conceptual Model

5.1. Results of the Literature Review

Based on a synthesis of the 53 publications examined, sustainability influencer communication can be understood as a complex process in which factors related to communication, relationships, and consumer psychology build upon one another. The results indicate that consumer reactions cannot be attributed to a single influencer characteristic; rather, the perceived credibility of the message, the social relationship with the influencer, and alignment with the influencer's values collectively shape how the communication is received. Based on an integrated interpretation of the literature, "green trust" may play a central role in this process. A positive consumer impact of the communication is most likely to occur when the follower perceives the sustainability claim as credible, personally relevant, and consistent with the influencer's previous communications. The model thus assumes a multi-step relationship—rather than a direct one—between the communication and the intention to make green purchases.

5.2. The Complex Role of Communication Credibility

The results show that the traditional dimensions of source credibility alone do not fully explain the effectiveness of sustainability-focused influencer communication. In the digital environment, credibility is interpreted in conjunction with the influencer's communication history, behavior, and the values they represent. Based on this, credibility can be understood as a dynamic construct: the evaluation of individual pieces of content is not independent of the influencer's previous statements. Consistent communication can strengthen perceived credibility, while conflicting messages can weaken it. This is particularly significant in the case of sustainability-related content, where it is often difficult for consumers to directly verify the truthfulness of claims. At the same time, findings in the literature also suggest that authenticity is not synonymous with flawlessness (Andonopoulos et al., 2023). Under certain circumstances, portraying personal experiences with sustainability, compromises, and processes of improvement can enhance the realism of the message. From the perspective of credibility, therefore, consistency and transparency may be more important than a perfect image of sustainability.

5.3. Value Alignment as a Mechanism of Connection

Based on the literature review, it can be assumed that value alignment between the influencer and the follower may be a key factor in determining the personal relevance of sustainability messages. Consumers evaluate not only the content of the message but also its social and personal significance. Influencer–follower value alignment and self-congruity together indicate the extent to which a follower can relate the sustainable lifestyle promoted by the influencer to their own values and self-image. When alignment is higher, the message is less likely to be perceived as an external attempt at persuasion and is instead interpreted as content that is consistent with the consumer's own identity (Nutsugah & Novixoxo, 2026). This approach shifts the examination of sustainability influencer communication from simple advertising effect models toward a more complex, identity-based interpretation. From the perspective of consumer reaction, therefore, it is not only who conveys the message that matters, but also how the message relates to the follower's own value system.

5.4. The Mediating Role of the Parasocial Relationship

According to the literature, the parasocial relationship appears as a relational mechanism that can reduce the perceived psychological distance between the communicator and the consumer (Breves, Liebers et al., 2021). As a result of the bond with the influencer, sustainability content may come across as a more personal form of communication than a traditional advertising message from a corporate source (Aw & Chuah, 2021). In the model, therefore, the parasocial relationship can be interpreted not as an independent explanatory factor, but as a mechanism linking credibility- and value-based processes. Its significance may be particularly strong when the influencer's communication is consistent and the values

they convey align with the follower's expectations. At the same time, the literature does not support the assumption that parasocial attachment alone would result in sustainable consumer behavior. Rather, its effect may be to create the conditions for the acceptance of communication, which is then mediated by further trust- and value-based processes.

Proposition 1: An influencer's source credibility and perceived authenticity first trigger psychological processes (such as emotional identification and perceived personal relevance/self-congruity), which subsequently foster parasocial relationships (PSR) and communication credibility as necessary conditions for message acceptance.

Theoretical rationale: Drawing on Source Credibility Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory, source characteristics do not create immediate relational bonds. Instead, consumers first engage in cognitive elaboration and emotional identification, aligning the influencer's advocated green practices with their own self-concept (self-congruity), which then establishes the psychological conditions—specifically parasocial relationships and perceived communication credibility—required for message acceptance.

5.5. Green Trust as a Central Mediating Factor

The central element of the conceptual model is green trust, which can serve as a mediator between communication and consumer intent. According to the model's logic, communication that is perceived as credible and personally relevant first facilitates the acceptance of sustainability claims (Van Nguyen & Le, 2026), and through this, it can create the conditions for green trust. Green purchase intention, therefore, cannot be viewed solely as a consequence of the influencer's direct persuasive power. A key factor in this process may be the intermediate evaluation during which the consumer decides whether a given sustainability claim is reliable and whether the communicator's environmental commitment can be considered credible (Saima & Khan, 2021). Consequently, the model posits a hierarchical relationship: the communication and relationship characteristics associated with the influencer may, through consumer perceptions, be linked to green trust, which may ultimately contribute to the formation of green purchase intent (Nazir & Wani, 2024; Quesada Baena et al., 2025).

Proposition 2: Green trust acts as a **primary partial mediator** in the relationship between the conditions for message acceptance (PSR, communication credibility, and value alignment) and green purchase intention, while direct secondary pathways also persist.

Theoretical rationale: While pro-environmental purchase decisions involve high cognitive evaluation and perceived risk—making green trust a central explanatory mechanism—relational closeness and message credibility can also exert direct or value-driven influences on behavioral intentions. Therefore, green trust operates as a robust partial mediator rather than an exclusive bottleneck.

5.6. The Weakening Effect of Perceived Greenwashing on Positive Consumer Mechanisms

An important feature of the conceptual model is that, in addition to positive mechanisms, it also accounts for the possibility of a loss of credibility. The perception of greenwashing can be interpreted as a negative factor that may modify the strength of the relationship between credibility, trust, and purchase intention (Chen & Chang, 2013; Chen et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). If greenwashing is perceived, the influencer's sustainability communication may lose its previous credibility, which can increase consumer uncertainty and resistance to the message. As a result, the conditions for the development of green trust may weaken, and the positive consumer impact of the communication may be diminished. In the model, therefore, greenwashing is not simply a negative content characteristic of sustainability communication, but a moderating factor that can influence the functioning of the entire impact mechanism. This approach also allows us to interpret why the otherwise strong influencer–follower relationship does not necessarily lead to a positive consumer response.

Proposition 3: Perceived greenwashing negatively moderates the pathway between communication credibility and green trust, while also exerting a direct inhibiting effect on green purchase intention.

Theoretical rationale: Grounded in Signaling Theory and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), greenwashing cues act as contradictory market signals that directly undermine the trust-building capacity of credible messaging (moderating the transition from credibility to green trust), while simultaneously triggering skepticism that directly dampens green purchase intentions.

5.7. Reinterpreting the Roles of Greenfluencers and Traditional Influencers

Based on a review of the literature, the credibility of sustainability communication is not necessarily tied exclusively to dedicated "greenfluencers." Traditional lifestyle, fashion, or other niche influencers may also be suitable for conveying sustainability messages, provided that these messages align with their communication profiles and value systems. **The findings of Buvár et al. (2023) specifically suggest that influencers without a "green" profile are also capable of credibly conveying sustainable consumption messages, particularly when the pro-environmental content is perceived as authentic.** The literature instead focuses on the consistency between the message and the communicator, as well as the source's credibility and the relationship the influencer has established with their followers (Munaro et al., 2024; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Weismueller et al., 2020). In terms of credibility, the value of the content conveyed by the influencer, as well as the perceived credibility and authenticity of the source, can also be decisive (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Lee & Eastin, 2021). In the case of sustainability communication, it is therefore particularly important that messages align with the image the communicator has previously established and with the values held by their followers. The literature on greenwashing highlights that discrepancies between environmental claims and the actual perceived behavior of a company or communicator can lead to a loss of trust and skepticism toward green claims (Chen & Chang, 2013; Falcão Sobral et al., 2020; Fang, 2024). From the perspective of influencer selection, consistency in values and communication may therefore be more important than simply categorizing influencers by topic. This interpretation is also supported by the literature on the characteristics of sustainability influencers, which identifies authenticity, trust, the relationship with followers, and alignment with values as key factors in the effectiveness of sustainability messages (Breves & Liebers, 2022; Chan et al., 2025; Trinh et al., 2026).

As an **analytical extension** of the core conceptual framework, Propositions 4a and 4b operate as boundary conditions dictated by influencer typology:

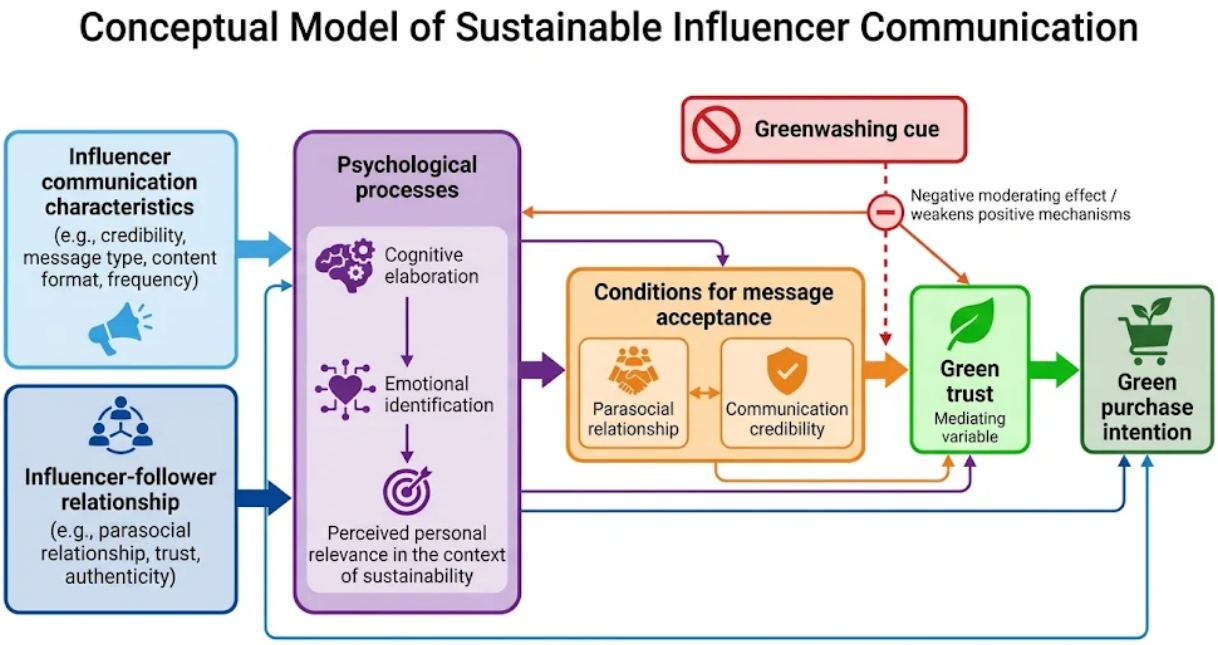
Proposition 4a: For dedicated greenfluencers, followers hold strict baseline expectations regarding environmental consistency; consequently, detected greenwashing cues result in a more severe erosion of green trust due to perceived moral hypocrisy.

Proposition 4b: For non-green (traditional lifestyle) influencers, authentic pro-environmental communication operates primarily through dynamic social norms, yielding higher persuasive gains when unexpected green practices are introduced without commercial overtones.

Theoretical rationale: Non-green opinion leaders are perceived as everyday consumers rather than specialized eco-advocates. When they transparently acknowledge limitations and share imperfect, relatable sustainable steps, followers perceive lower commercial intent, making the message more accessible and triggering less immediate skepticism than heavily branded corporate green campaigns.

5.8. Summary Interpretation of the Conceptual Model

The conceptual model developed based on the literature review posits an interdependent, multi-step mechanism of influence. The starting point of the framework involves the influencer's communication characteristics and the relationship established with the follower. Linked to these inputs are fundamental psychological processes—specifically cognitive elaboration, emotional identification, and perceived personal relevance—which determine the personal resonance of the sustainability message. At the next level, these psychological mechanisms foster the necessary conditions for message acceptance, namely the parasocial relationship (PSR) and communication credibility. In this architecture, green trust acts as a robust primary partial mediator situated between the conditions for message acceptance and green purchase intention, allowing for both mediated and direct pathways toward consumer behavior. Furthermore, as an analytical extension of the framework, influencer typology serves as a boundary condition: dedicated greenfluencers and traditional lifestyle influencers operate through distinct behavioral mechanisms (Propositions 4a–4b). On the other side of the model, the perception of greenwashing functions as a negative moderator that directly weakens the trust-building capacity of credible messaging while also exerting a direct inhibiting effect on green purchase intention. The model's overarching theoretical conclusion is that the impact of sustainability influencer communication is non-linear and cannot be explained solely through source credibility. Instead, consumer responses are shaped by a complex interplay of communication credibility, relational bonding, value alignment, influencer typology, and the boundary risks of greenwashing.



Source: Compiled by the author based on a literature review

Figure 1: A Conceptual Model of Sustainability Influencer Communication

The model illustrates the system of key factors and hypothesized relationships identified as a result of the literature review. The characteristics of influencer communication, as well as the relationship that develops between the influencer and their followers, can influence the personal relevance of the sustainability message through value alignment and perceived self-identity. These factors may contribute to the development of a parasocial relationship and the credibility of communication, which can facilitate message acceptance and the development of green trust. Green trust acts as a mediating variable linking sustainability influencer communication to green purchase intention. In contrast, the perception of greenwashing, as a negative moderating factor, can weaken the credibility of the communication and the positive impact mechanisms. Figure 1 presents a theoretical conceptual model developed as a result of the literature review presented here.

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical Implications

This study advances the theoretical understanding of sustainable digital marketing by synthesizing previously disparate frameworks into an overarching conceptual model. Rather than treating source evaluation as an isolated event, the proposed framework integrates Source Credibility Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) into a single, multi-step decision chain. This integration addresses recent calls for more comprehensive models of digital sustainability persuasion (Breves & Liebers, 2022; Nazir & Wani, 2024; Trinh et al., 2026).

Crucially, the theoretical framework demonstrates that green trust is not a direct or immediate reaction to pro-environmental messaging. Instead, green trust emerges as the combined outcome of sequential cognitive elaboration and affective bonding. By conceptualizing parasocial relationships and self-congruity as facilitating conditions for message acceptance, the study clarifies that cognitive trust in sustainability claims depends heavily on the relational context in which the message is delivered. Furthermore, by framing perceived greenwashing through the lens of the Persuasion Knowledge Model, the study highlights how consumer skepticism acts as a critical boundary condition, capable of neutralizing the positive effects of source credibility and emotional attachment (Chen & Chang, 2013; Fang, 2024).

6.2. Managerial and Practical Implications

The findings offer concrete actionable guidance for brands and content creators navigating digital sustainability communication:

For Brands and Marketers: Brand managers should look beyond dedicated "greenfluencers" when designing sustainability campaigns. While specialized eco-influencers carry inherent domain authority, traditional lifestyle influencers often possess broader reach and stronger dynamic norm-setting capability among mainstream consumers (Buvár et al., 2023). When lifestyle influencers integrate sustainable practices into their everyday content naturally—without overt commercial pressure or aggressive sponsorship tone—consumers perceive lower persuasion intent, leading to higher message acceptance and authentic trust building.

For Social Media Influencers: Content creators aiming to promote eco-friendly behaviors should explicitly avoid constructing an idealized, flawless "eco-hero" persona. Overly stylized or perfect depictions of sustainable living heighten followers' persuasion knowledge and elevate perceived greenwashing risks (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Instead, influencers maintain higher long-term credibility by transparently sharing their personal limitations, real-life compromises, and the practical challenges of eco-conscious living. Vulnerability and fallibility foster stronger self-congruity and genuine authenticity, which ultimately protect green trust.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this paper provides a robust theoretical foundation, several methodological and empirical limitations should be noted:

Methodological Limitations: The proposed conclusions and conceptual model are derived entirely from a synthesizing literature review and theoretical deduction. Consequently, the formulated propositions have not yet been empirically validated through primary data collection.

Future Research Directions: To empirical test the proposed framework, future research should pursue quantitative validation. Specifically, structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) can be employed to test the direct, mediating, and moderating paths outlined in Propositions 1–3. Additionally, experimental designs (e.g., manipulating green vs. non-green influencer posts alongside explicit greenwashing cues) would provide valuable causal insights into how persuasion knowledge activation influences green trust and behavioral intentions across different consumer segments.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the underlying mechanisms through which social media influencer communication shapes green trust and sustainable purchase intentions. By developing an integrated conceptual framework, the research reveals that effective sustainability communication relies on a fine balance between source credibility, relational proximity, value alignment, and greenwashing avoidance. Dedicated greenfluencers and traditional lifestyle creators both play vital roles in driving pro-environmental behavioral changes, provided their messages are grounded in transparency and authenticity. As greenwashing concerns continue to grow in digital environments, establishing and maintaining green trust through open, realistic, and unexaggerated communication remains the most critical determinant of successful digital sustainability marketing.

Declaration of competing interests

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author (Kata Bélteki-Erdős, erdoskata88@gmail.com) upon reasonable request.

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Generative AI Declaration Statement

If AI was used:

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Skyspace for the purpose of identifying related sources for the literature review, refining the academic tone, and correcting grammar and punctuation. The author subsequently reviewed and edited the content as necessary, maintained full human oversight of the process, and assume full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the published work.

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