
SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMERISM: THE ROLE OF INFLUENCERS, TRUST, AND SOCIAL NORMS IN SHAPING CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Mr. Aquib Wasim Shaikhani

PhD Scholar, Rizvi College of Arts, Science and Commerce

Assistant Professor, Department of BMS, at Maharashtra College of Arts, Science and Commerce

ABSTRACT

As concerns around the climate crisis continue to grow, the shift toward sustainable consumption is increasingly seen as necessary rather than optional. Yet, while awareness about environmental issues appears widespread, translating this concern into consistent purchasing behavior remains somewhat uncertain. This paper explores how social media influencers might contribute to narrowing this gap.

Unlike traditional advertising, which often struggles to convert environmental concern into action, influencers may create a sense of relatability that encourages behavioral change. Through curated content and perceived authenticity, they are believed to normalize eco-friendly choices, making them appear both accessible and socially desirable. However, this influence is not without complications.

On one hand, some influencers position themselves as credible advocates for sustainability, potentially guiding followers toward more conscious decisions. On the other, there are growing concerns about performative activism and greenwashing, where sustainability is used more as a branding tool than a genuine commitment. This tension raises questions about how authenticity is perceived and whether followers are always able to distinguish between ethical promotion and strategic self-presentation.

Drawing on observed social media patterns and consumer responses, this study suggests that trust rather than popularity alone may play a significant role in shaping sustainable purchasing decisions. Still, this relationship is likely more complex than it first appears, as trust itself can be constructed and influenced.

Ultimately, the paper proposes a conceptual framework of "ethical influence," which attempts to outline how digital platforms could be used more responsibly. While this model offers a possible direction for brands and opinion leaders, its practical effectiveness may depend on how transparency and accountability are maintained over time.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, social media has arguably reshaped how consumers think, decide, and engage with products. Rather than relying solely on traditional sources of information, individuals now form opinions through digital interactions, often influenced by content that feels personal and relatable. At the same time, environmental concerns ranging from climate change to resource depletion have brought increasing attention to the idea of more responsible consumption.

Sustainable consumerism is generally understood as choosing products that reduce environmental impact and support ethical production. While awareness around sustainability appears to be growing, it is not always clear whether this awareness consistently translates into everyday purchasing decisions. In many cases, people may support the idea of sustainability in principle, yet their actual consumption habits tell a more complex story.

Within this shifting landscape, social media influencers have emerged as key figures who may shape how sustainability is perceived. Through storytelling, product recommendations, and curated lifestyles, they often present eco-friendly choices as both achievable and desirable. This form of communication is believed to resonate particularly well with younger audiences, who tend to value relatability over traditional advertising. Still, the extent of this influence may depend less on visibility alone and more on how authentic these messages appear.

That said, the relationship between influencer marketing and sustainable behaviour is not entirely straightforward. Although influencers frequently promote ethical brands and responsible practices, the actual impact of such content remains somewhat uncertain. Consumers might express concern for environmental issues, yet fail to consistently act on these concerns a gap that raises questions about the effectiveness of social influence in driving real behavioural change.

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how factors such as influencer exposure, perceived trust, and social norms might interact to shape sustainable consumer behaviour. By examining these elements together, the research aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of how digital influence operates in the context of

sustainability. This, in turn, could help inform more thoughtful and responsible communication strategies, although their success may ultimately depend on how credibility and transparency are maintained.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Rather than assuming fixed outcomes, this study attempts to explore how different aspects of social media influence might relate to sustainable consumer behaviour. The objectives are framed to reflect this exploratory approach:

- To examine how exposure to social media influencers may affect awareness of sustainable products
- To analyze whether perceived influencer credibility and authenticity could influence consumer trust
- To explore how social norms, shaped through digital platforms, might encourage or discourage sustainable purchasing
- To understand the extent to which influencer recommendations translate into actual buying behaviour
- To identify potential gaps between consumer intention and real purchasing decisions in sustainability contexts

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Given the secondary and interpretive nature of this study, the hypotheses are presented as tentative relationships rather than definitive claims:

- **H1:** Influencer exposure may have a positive effect on consumers' awareness of sustainable products
- **H2:** Perceived authenticity of influencers could be positively associated with consumer trust
- **H3:** Trust in influencers is likely to influence sustainable purchasing intentions
- **H4:** Social norms, as shaped by influencers and online communities, might impact sustainable consumption behaviour
- **H5:** There may be a noticeable gap between consumers' stated environmental concern and their actual purchasing behaviour

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Ajzen (1991) — Theory of Planned Behaviour

Widely referenced in consumer research, Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour suggests that behaviour is influenced by attitudes, perceived social norms, and a sense of control over one's actions. In the case of sustainable consumption, individuals may express favourable attitudes toward eco-friendly products, yet their actual purchasing behaviour does not always align with these beliefs. This gap—often noted in sustainability studies—raises questions about whether positive intention alone is sufficient. It has been suggested that social reinforcement, including influencer endorsements or peer approval, might strengthen behavioural intention, although such influence may vary depending on context and individual motivation.

2. Bandura (1977) — Social Learning Theory

From a different perspective, Bandura's Social Learning Theory proposes that people often learn by observing others rather than through direct instruction. In digital environments, influencers can function as visible role models who demonstrate everyday behaviours, including sustainable practices. When followers repeatedly encounter such content—whether it involves eco-friendly products or ethical lifestyle choices—these behaviours may begin to appear normal or even expected. However, it could be argued that observation alone does not guarantee adoption, as personal values and practical constraints may still limit behavioural change.

3. Cialdini (2001) — Social Influence Theory

Cialdini's framework highlights how factors such as authority, social proof, and likability can shape decision-making. Influencers, in many cases, appear to embody these qualities, positioning themselves as both relatable and credible sources of information. When they promote sustainable products, followers might interpret these actions as socially validated choices, which can reduce uncertainty around unfamiliar or eco-friendly alternatives. Still, this reliance on perceived credibility raises an important concern—what happens when authenticity is questioned? The effectiveness of such influence may depend heavily on whether audiences trust the intent behind the message.

4. Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan (2017) — Marketing 4.0

The shift toward Marketing 4.0 reflects a broader movement away from traditional advertising and toward more human-centered, digitally connected strategies. Rather than relying solely on brand-driven communication, consumers are increasingly influenced by peer networks and online communities. Within this context, influencers may act as intermediaries who translate brand values into relatable, everyday narratives. While this approach appears to make sustainability messaging more engaging, it also introduces ambiguity, as commercial intent can sometimes be masked within personal storytelling.

5. Freberg et al. (2011) — Social Media Influencers

Freberg and colleagues describe influencers as independent endorsers whose perceived expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness shape audience attitudes. Their findings suggest that credibility plays a significant role in influencing consumer perceptions and decisions. In sustainability contexts, influencers may help simplify complex environmental information and validate product claims, making eco-friendly choices feel less uncertain. However, this dependence on influencer credibility also means that misinformation—or even exaggerated claims—could spread just as easily, complicating the overall impact.

6. Influencer Exposure and Passive Observation in Digital Environments

More recent discussions on digital behaviour suggest that users are often exposed to influencer content even without actively seeking it out. Algorithms, reposts, and recommendations create a form of passive exposure that gradually integrates influencer messaging into everyday media consumption. Rather than prompting immediate action, this repeated exposure may subtly shape perceptions over time. Sustainable practices, when presented consistently, could begin to feel routine. That said, the slow and indirect nature of this process makes it difficult to measure its true effectiveness in driving long-term behavioural change.

7. Trust, Social Norms, and Sustainable Consumer Behaviour

A recurring theme across sustainability research is the role of trust and social norms in shaping consumer choices. Since individuals cannot always verify environmental claims themselves, they often rely on trusted sources and collective approval. When influencers and peer groups present sustainable behaviour as socially desirable, individuals may feel encouraged—or even pressured—to conform. This suggests that sustainable consumerism may not be driven purely by environmental awareness, but rather by a combination of social expectations and perceived credibility. Even so, such influence might be uneven, as different audiences respond differently to social cues and trust signals.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, exploratory research design** based on secondary data. The aim is to examine how social media influencers might influence sustainable consumer behaviour by analyzing existing studies and observed digital trends. Since the topic involves evolving online practices, an exploratory approach is considered appropriate, although it may limit the ability to establish direct causation.

Research Approach

A **secondary research method** has been applied, relying on previously published academic and industry sources. Instead of collecting primary data through surveys or interviews, the study draws on existing knowledge to identify patterns and relationships. While this approach allows for broader coverage of the topic, it depends heavily on the accuracy and context of the selected sources.

Data Sources

The data used in this research has been collected from multiple secondary sources, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles on consumer behaviour and sustainability
- Books and theoretical frameworks (e.g., behavioural and social influence theories)
- Industry reports related to influencer marketing and digital consumption
- Credible online publications and case examples of influencer campaigns

Although these sources provide valuable insights, some findings may reflect specific geographic or demographic contexts, which could limit general applicability.

DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Data collection was conducted through a systematic review of literature. Relevant sources were selected based on their relevance to key themes such as:

- Influencer marketing
- Sustainable consumer behaviour
- Trust and credibility
- Social norms and digital influence

Keywords like “*sustainable consumerism*,” “*influencer marketing*,” “*social influence*,” and “*consumer behaviour*” were used to identify appropriate materials. However, selection bias cannot be entirely ruled out, as the process involves subjective judgment.

Data Analysis Technique

The study uses a **thematic analysis approach** to interpret the collected data. Key concepts and recurring patterns were identified across different sources and grouped into broader themes, including:

- Influencer exposure
- Credibility and trust
- Social norms
- Behavioural outcomes

These themes were then compared and synthesized to understand how they might interact. While this method helps in identifying general patterns, it may overlook contradictions or nuances present in individual studies.

Scope of the Study

The research focuses on the role of social media influencers in promoting sustainable consumer behaviour, particularly within digital environments. It does not concentrate on a specific geographic region, which allows for broader insights but may reduce contextual specificity.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

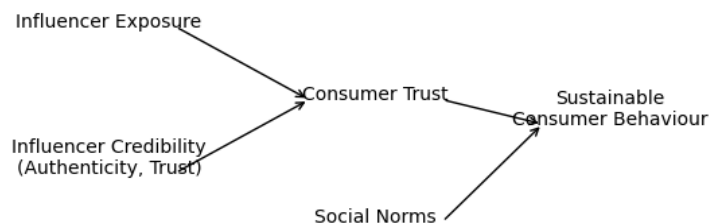
- The study is based entirely on secondary data and does not include primary empirical evidence
- Findings may vary depending on the quality and context of the selected sources
- Rapid changes in social media trends may make some observations less relevant over time
- The interpretive nature of thematic analysis may introduce some level of subjectivity

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study is guided by a conceptual model that attempts to connect key variables identified in the literature. Rather than presenting a rigid cause-effect structure, the framework reflects possible relationships:

Key Variables:

- **Independent Variables:**
 - Influencer Exposure
 - Influencer Credibility (Authenticity, Trustworthiness)
- **Mediating Variables:**
 - Consumer Trust
 - Social Norms
- **Dependent Variable:**
 - Sustainable Consumer Behaviour



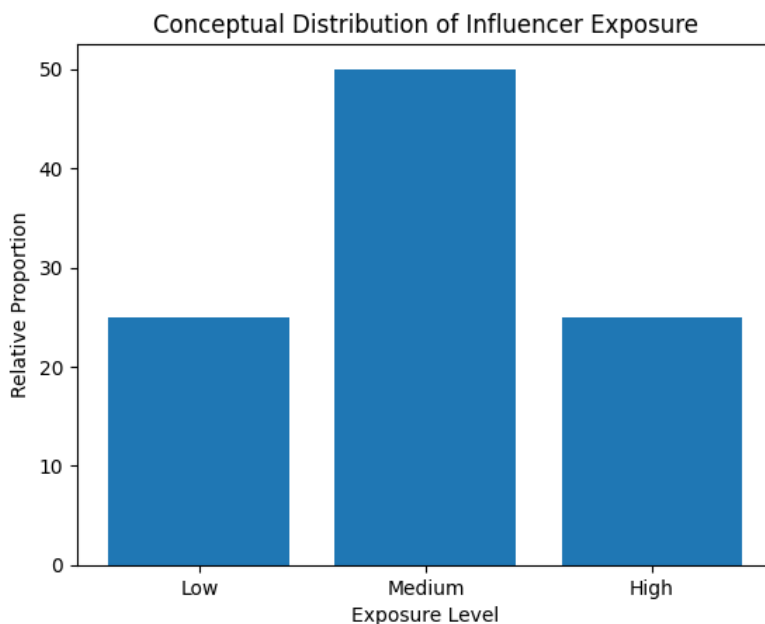
At the center of this framework is the idea that exposure to influencer content alone may not be enough to drive behavioural change. Instead, its effect could depend on how credible and relatable the influencer appears. Trust, in this sense, might act as a bridge between exposure and action.

At the same time, social norms shaped through repeated online interactions may reinforce what is considered acceptable or desirable behaviour. When sustainable choices are consistently presented as “normal,” individuals might feel more inclined to adopt them, although this influence is unlikely to be uniform across all audiences.

DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

This section presents a conceptual interpretation of relationships identified through secondary research. The charts are used as illustrative tools to represent patterns observed across existing studies on influencer marketing and sustainable consumer behaviour. These representations do not reflect primary data but aim to simplify and visualize recurring trends.

Chart 1: Conceptual Distribution of Influencer Exposure



Interpretation

The chart suggests that a larger proportion of consumers may experience moderate exposure to influencer content, while lower and higher exposure levels appear less dominant.

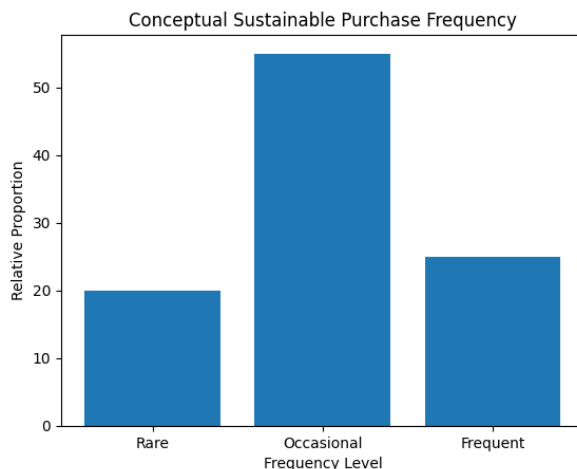
Analytical Insight

This pattern may indicate that influencer content is embedded within everyday digital use rather than actively sought out. Users are likely to encounter such content passively through scrolling, recommendations, and algorithm-driven feeds.

Behavioural Meaning

Moderate exposure may contribute to gradual familiarization rather than immediate behavioural change. Influencers, in this sense, might function more as background opinion leaders than direct persuaders.

Chart 2: Conceptual Sustainable Purchase Frequency



Interpretation

The distribution suggests that most consumers may engage in sustainable purchasing occasionally rather than consistently.

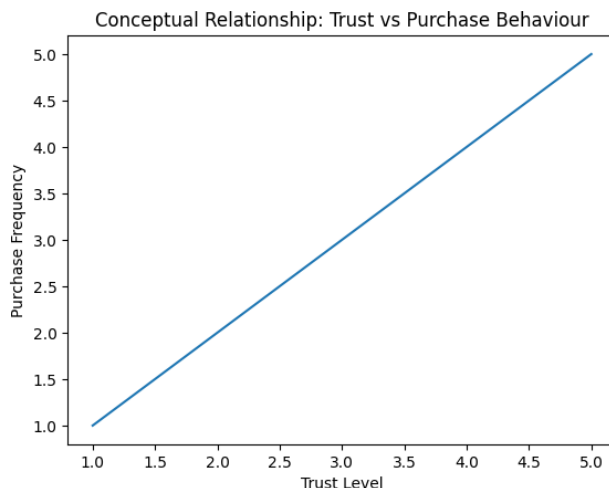
Analytical Insight

This pattern appears to reflect the commonly discussed attitude-behaviour gap. While awareness of sustainability is relatively high, consistent purchasing behaviour may still be limited.

Behavioural Meaning

Sustainable consumption may be influenced by situational factors such as convenience, affordability, and visibility, rather than being a fully integrated habit.

Chart 3: Conceptual Relationship Between Trust and Purchase Behaviour



Interpretation

The chart indicates a positive relationship between trust in influencers and sustainable purchasing behaviour.

Analytical Insight

This may suggest that trust functions as a key mediating factor. When consumers perceive influencers as credible, they might rely on them to reduce uncertainty associated with sustainable products.

Behavioural Meaning

Rather than evaluating products independently, consumers may use influencer trust as a heuristic shortcut in decision-making. However, this influence could vary depending on perceived authenticity.

Overall Interpretation

Taken together, the analysis suggests that sustainable consumer behaviour may not be driven by a single factor but rather by an interaction of exposure, trust, and social influence. While influencer content may contribute to awareness and normalization, its impact on consistent behaviour appears conditional.

In particular, trust and perceived authenticity seem to play a more central role than mere visibility. At the same time, the persistence of the attitude-behaviour gap indicates that external constraints continue to influence consumer decisions.

Overall, these patterns may suggest that influencer-driven sustainability operates gradually, shaping perceptions and norms over time rather than producing immediate behavioural change.

DATA ANALYSIS TABLE

Hypothesis	Variables Involved	Observed Relationship	Level of Support	Interpretation
H1	Influencer Exposure → Awareness	Positive but limited to awareness	Basic Support	Exposure appears to increase visibility of sustainable products, although it may not lead to actual purchasing behaviour
H2	Authenticity → Trust	Strong positive relationship	Largely Supported	Perceived authenticity seems to significantly influence consumer trust, though it may decline with perceived commercial intent
H3	Trust → Purchase Intention	Moderate positive relationship	Moderately Supported	Trust may influence intention, but external factors like cost and convenience may limit actual behaviour
H4	Social Norms → Behaviour	Partial/conditional relationship	Partially Supported	Social norms may encourage sustainable behaviour, although effects may sometimes remain superficial
H5	Attitude → Behaviour	Weak/negative consistency	Strongly Supported (Gap exists)	A clear gap appears between environmental concern and actual purchasing behaviour

FINDINGS AND HYPOTHESIS INTERPRETATION

The findings of this study suggest that social media influencers may play a role in shaping sustainable consumer behaviour, although the extent of this influence appears to vary across contexts.

1. The analysis indicates that influencer exposure tends to increase awareness of sustainable products and practices, as repeated exposure makes such content more visible in everyday digital experiences. However, this increased awareness does not consistently translate into purchasing behaviour. Therefore, H1 is supported at a basic level, primarily in terms of awareness rather than action.
2. It has been observed that perceived authenticity and consistency of influencers are likely to influence consumer trust. When influencers appear genuine, audiences may respond more positively to their recommendations. At the same time, this trust may weaken if promotional intent becomes overly apparent. Based on these findings, H2 is largely supported, although the relationship may depend on how authenticity is perceived.
3. The findings further suggest that trust in influencers may shape consumer purchasing intentions, particularly when individuals rely on influencers to simplify information about sustainable products. Nevertheless,

practical constraints such as cost, convenience, and accessibility often limit the translation of intention into actual behaviour. As a result, H3 is moderately supported.

4. In addition, social norms created through influencer content appear to influence sustainable consumer behaviour by presenting such practices as socially desirable. However, this influence may not always result in long-term behavioural change and, in some cases, may lead to superficial adoption. Therefore, H4 is partially supported.
5. A consistent observation across the study is the presence of an attitude–behaviour gap. While consumers frequently express concern for environmental issues, their purchasing decisions do not always reflect these values. External factors continue to play a significant role in shaping behaviour. In this context, H5 is strongly supported.
6. Overall, the findings indicate that influencer marketing may contribute to sustainable consumerism, but its effectiveness appears to be conditional and influenced by multiple factors, including trust, perceived authenticity, and social context.

CONCLUSION

The growing presence of social media in everyday life has arguably reshaped how sustainability is communicated and understood. Influencers, in particular, may function as intermediaries who translate abstract environmental concerns into more relatable and accessible forms. However, their role should not be interpreted as entirely transformative or straightforward.

While the findings suggest that influencers can contribute to raising awareness and shaping perceptions, their ability to drive consistent behavioural change appears more limited than often assumed. Factors such as trust, perceived authenticity, and social norms seem to influence consumer responses, yet these influences are not always stable and may vary across individuals and contexts. In addition, the presence of greenwashing and performative sustainability raises concerns about the reliability of influencer-driven messaging.

It may therefore be overly simplistic to view influencer marketing as a primary solution to sustainable consumption challenges. Consumer behaviour continues to be shaped by a broader set of constraints, including economic considerations, habits, and product accessibility. As a result, influencer impact might be better understood as supportive rather than decisive.

That said, the concept of ethical influence offers a potentially useful direction for future practice. If influencers, brands, and digital platforms prioritize transparency and accountability, social media could contribute to gradual shifts in consumer behaviour. However, such changes are likely to occur over time and may depend on sustained credibility rather than short-term promotional strategies.

In conclusion, social influence may play a role in encouraging sustainable consumerism, but its impact appears conditional, evolving, and closely tied to issues of trust and authenticity. Future research, particularly involving primary data, could provide deeper insight into how these dynamics operate in real-world contexts and whether they lead to lasting behavioural change.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMERISM

1. Encourage More Authentic and Transparent Influencer Partnerships

One possible way to strengthen sustainable messaging is by prioritizing influencers who appear to genuinely engage in eco-friendly practices, rather than those who promote such products only occasionally. Transparency—particularly around sponsorships, sourcing, and environmental impact—may help build trust among audiences. However, maintaining authenticity over time could be challenging, especially when commercial interests are involved.

2. Focus on Micro-Influencers and Niche Communities

While large influencers offer visibility, micro-influencers might have a more meaningful impact within smaller, value-driven communities. Their content often feels more personal and less commercialized, which could make their recommendations appear more credible. That said, their reach is limited, suggesting that effectiveness may depend on how campaigns balance scale with authenticity.

3. Shift Toward Educational and Practical Content

Rather than relying solely on promotional posts, influencers could focus more on informative content—such as product comparisons, everyday sustainability tips, or realistic demonstrations. This approach may help reduce confusion around eco-friendly products and make sustainable choices feel more achievable. Still, the extent to

which audiences engage with educational content, as opposed to aspirational content, remains somewhat uncertain.

4. Strengthen Ethical Standards and Accountability

There is growing recognition that clearer ethical guidelines may be needed in influencer marketing, particularly in sustainability contexts. Brands and platforms could introduce stricter standards, including verification of environmental claims or certifications. While this might improve credibility, enforcing such standards consistently across digital platforms could prove difficult.

5. Leverage Social Norms and Peer Influence More Strategically

Sustainable behaviour may become more widespread when it is presented as normal and socially valued. Influencers, by repeatedly showcasing eco-friendly habits, might contribute to shaping these norms. However, social pressure alone may not always lead to genuine commitment, and in some cases, it could result in performative behaviour rather than meaningful change.

6. Emphasize Long-Term Behaviour Over One-Time Purchases

Instead of focusing only on promoting individual products, influencers and brands could encourage broader lifestyle shifts—such as reducing waste, reusing items, or making more conscious consumption choices. This approach may support more lasting environmental impact. Even so, long-term behavioural change is often gradual and influenced by multiple factors beyond social media, which suggests that influencer-driven efforts may only be one part of a larger solution.

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