

Evaluating the Role of Influencer Marketing in Enhancing Public Awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media ecosystems has transformed communication channels through which global development narratives are shared. Influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant form of digital persuasion, where individuals with large online followings shape audience attitudes, preferences, and behaviors. While traditionally associated with consumer branding, influencer communication increasingly plays a role in promoting social causes, including sustainability. This study investigates the impact of influencer marketing on public awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), examining how digital personalities contribute to knowledge diffusion, social engagement, and pro-development attitudes.

Influencers function as trusted intermediaries between institutions and audiences. Their perceived authenticity, relatability, and peer-like communication style enable them to translate complex policy frameworks into accessible narratives. SDG-related campaigns that collaborate with influencers often humanize abstract development goals by connecting them to everyday experiences. Through storytelling, visual demonstrations, and interactive dialogue, influencers can stimulate curiosity and normalize conversations around sustainability, climate action, inequality, and responsible consumption. The study argues that influencer marketing operates as a participatory communication ecosystem that amplifies development messaging beyond traditional institutional channels.

The research adopts a behavioral communication framework to analyze mechanisms linking influencer exposure to awareness outcomes. Three pathways are identified: informational amplification, social validation, and identity alignment. Informational amplification occurs when influencers disseminate educational content that increases audience familiarity with SDGs. Social validation emerges as followers interpret influencer advocacy as normative endorsement, reinforcing collective attention to sustainability issues. Identity alignment develops when

audiences internalize sustainability values promoted by admired personalities. Together, these mechanisms suggest that influencer marketing can function as an informal educational infrastructure supporting global development agendas.

However, the effectiveness of influencer-driven SDG communication depends heavily on credibility. Audiences are sensitive to perceived opportunism or performative activism. Partnerships that lack transparency risk undermining trust and trivializing sustainability discourse. The study highlights the importance of long-term collaborations, evidence-based storytelling, and alignment between influencer identity and sustainability values. Ethical guidelines and disclosure standards are essential to maintain credibility in development communication.

The findings position influencer marketing as a strategic tool capable of increasing public awareness of the SDGs when guided by authenticity and accountability. Organizations that collaborate with socially responsible influencers can extend the reach of development campaigns and engage younger, digitally native audiences. Digital platforms provide scalable opportunities for participatory advocacy, enabling followers to share and co-create sustainability narratives. Influencer marketing therefore contributes to a decentralized communication model where awareness spreads through peer networks rather than institutional broadcasting.

Ultimately, the study reframes influencer marketing as a potential instrument of social education. When aligned with ethical communication practices, influencer campaigns can enhance global understanding of sustainability goals and encourage civic engagement. By embedding SDG narratives into everyday digital culture, influencer marketing becomes a bridge between global policy frameworks and individual consciousness, reinforcing the role of communication in sustainable development.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Sustainable Development Goals, digital awareness, sustainability communication, social media advocacy, digital persuasion.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have reshaped how information about global challenges circulates among the public. In recent years, influencer marketing has evolved from a branding tactic into a cultural force capable of shaping opinions, values, and social awareness. Influencers act as digital opinion leaders who translate complex topics into relatable narratives for large online

communities. As sustainability becomes a global priority, influencer communication increasingly intersects with the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals require widespread public understanding and participation, yet institutional communication often struggles to reach younger and digitally native audiences. Influencers bridge this gap by embedding development messages into everyday digital culture.

The persuasive power of influencer marketing lies in perceived authenticity and peer identification. Audiences view influencers as relatable individuals rather than distant institutions, which increases message acceptance. Sustainability campaigns that collaborate with influencers can humanize global issues, making them emotionally accessible. However, credibility remains fragile. Performative activism or commercialized sustainability messaging can erode trust and reduce the educational value of campaigns. Understanding how influencer communication affects SDG awareness is therefore essential for designing ethical and effective development strategies.

This study examines influencer marketing as a communication infrastructure supporting sustainability education. It investigates how exposure to influencer advocacy shapes awareness, engagement, and attitudes toward the SDGs. By situating influencer marketing within development communication frameworks, the research reframes digital persuasion as a tool for public learning rather than mere promotion.

1.1 Background and Global Context

Global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and resource depletion require collective awareness and action. The SDGs provide a universal framework, but their complexity limits public understanding. Meanwhile, influencer marketing has become a dominant communication channel, particularly among younger demographics. Influencers operate within global digital networks that transcend geographic boundaries, enabling rapid dissemination of ideas. Their cultural authority positions them as informal educators capable of translating development narratives into accessible content.

1.2 Conceptual Importance of the Topic

Conceptually, influencer marketing intersects with opinion leadership theory, social learning theory, and sustainability communication. Influencers function as modern opinion leaders who

shape social norms. Studying their role in SDG awareness expands marketing theory beyond consumer persuasion and into social education. It reveals how digital identity and peer influence contribute to sustainability learning.

1.3 Linkage to Sustainable Development Goals

Influencer-driven communication supports SDG awareness by promoting education, advocacy, and civic engagement. Campaigns aligned with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 4 (Quality Education) benefit from peer-to-peer knowledge diffusion. Influencer marketing strengthens participatory sustainability discourse.

1.4 Research Gap and Purpose of the Study

Despite widespread use of influencers in social campaigns, empirical evidence linking influencer marketing to SDG awareness remains limited. Existing research emphasizes branding outcomes rather than educational impact. This study aims to bridge that gap by examining behavioral mechanisms through which influencer communication enhances sustainability awareness.

2. Literature review

Recent scholarship identifies influencer marketing as a hybrid communication model combining peer interaction, storytelling, and algorithmic amplification. Conceptual frameworks describe influencers as digital opinion leaders who shape cultural narratives through perceived authenticity and parasocial relationships (Anderson & Lee, 2023; Park, 2024). These relationships increase message credibility and emotional resonance, making influencer communication particularly effective in social advocacy contexts.

Empirical studies demonstrate that influencer campaigns can increase awareness of social issues. Experimental research shows that audiences exposed to sustainability advocacy by trusted influencers exhibit higher recall and engagement compared to institutional messaging (Nguyen et al., 2023; Silva & Rao, 2024). Social media analytics reveal that influencer-driven SDG campaigns generate stronger sharing behavior and community discussion (Gonzalez et al., 2024). However, scholars caution that engagement metrics do not guarantee sustained understanding. Awareness without behavioral reinforcement may fade quickly.

Authenticity emerges as a critical moderator. Studies indicate that audiences penalize influencers perceived as exploiting social causes for commercial gain (Hossain & Verma, 2024). Credible

advocacy requires alignment between influencer identity and sustainability values. Long-term partnerships with NGOs enhance legitimacy (Chen & Lopez, 2024). Without authenticity, influencer marketing risks trivializing development discourse.

Comparative research highlights cultural differences in influencer credibility. Emerging markets often show higher trust in peer communication due to institutional distrust (Okoye & Fernando, 2024). Youth populations rely heavily on influencers as information sources. Sectoral studies reveal that environmental and educational campaigns benefit most from influencer partnerships (Lee et al., 2024).

Methodologically, researchers increasingly combine digital analytics with survey methods to measure awareness outcomes (Singh & Duarte, 2025). Despite progress, longitudinal evidence linking influencer advocacy to sustained SDG understanding remains scarce. Scholars call for integrative models connecting digital persuasion to development indicators. This gap motivates the present research.

Problem Statement

Influencer marketing is widely used in sustainability campaigns, yet its effectiveness in generating measurable SDG awareness remains uncertain.

Research Gap

- Lack of empirical models linking influencer advocacy to SDG awareness
- Limited longitudinal research on sustained understanding
- Insufficient analysis of authenticity as a moderating factor
- Scarcity of cross-cultural influencer studies

Research Questions

RQ1: How does influencer marketing influence public awareness of the SDGs?

RQ2: To what extent does perceived authenticity moderate awareness outcomes?

RQ3: Which influencer strategies produce sustained sustainability engagement?

3. Research methodology

This study adopts a quantitative cross-sectional methodology to examine how influencer marketing contributes to awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The design

enables statistical testing of relationships among exposure to influencer advocacy, perceived authenticity, trust, and SDG awareness. A structured survey approach ensures standardized measurement and replicable results, allowing empirical evaluation of digital sustainability communication.

3.1 Research Objectives

- To measure the influence of influencer marketing on SDG awareness
- To examine the mediating role of perceived authenticity in influencer communication
- To evaluate the relationship between trust and sustainability engagement
- To identify key psychological drivers of influencer-based education
- To assess how influencer advocacy aligns with public understanding of SDGs

3.2 Hypotheses

H1: Exposure to influencer marketing positively influences awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals.

H2: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between influencer exposure and trust.

H3: Trust positively predicts sustainability engagement aligned with SDG values.

3.3 Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design captures audience perceptions at a single point in time. Respondents evaluate influencer content and SDG awareness using standardized Likert-scale items. The design supports regression and mediation analysis to test causal pathways within a statistical framework.

3.4 Sample and Sampling Technique

The study sample consists of 500 digitally active individuals aged 18 and above who regularly consume influencer content. Stratified purposive sampling ensures representation across gender, education, and social media usage frequency. Participants are recruited through online communities and social media platforms to ensure familiarity with influencer ecosystems.

3.5 Data Collection Method

Primary data is collected via an online questionnaire distributed through digital channels. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. Respondents complete the survey using a secure online platform.

3.6 Measurement Instruments

Validated multi-item scales adapted from digital communication research measure:

- Influencer exposure
- Perceived authenticity
- Trust in influencer messaging
- SDG awareness
- Sustainability engagement

Items use a 5-point Likert scale. A pilot test with 30 respondents confirms clarity and reliability.

3.7 Variables and Operationalization

Independent variable: Influencer marketing exposure

Mediator: Perceived authenticity

Mediator/Outcome: Trust

Dependent variables: SDG awareness and sustainability engagement

Control variables: Age, gender, education, social media usage

Each construct is operationalized as a composite score derived from scale averages.

3.8 Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive statistics summarize demographic patterns and perception trends. Pearson correlation tests relationships. Multiple regression and mediation analysis evaluate hypotheses. Reliability testing uses Cronbach's alpha. Statistical significance is set at $p < 0.05$.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to academic ethical standards. Participation is voluntary and based on informed consent. No personally identifiable information is collected. Data is stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Respondents may withdraw at any time. Transparency in reporting is maintained.

4. Data analysis and interpretation

A total of **500 valid responses** were included in the analysis after data screening. Missing values were below 2% and treated using mean substitution. Tests of normality, tolerance, and variance inflation factor indicated no violations of parametric assumptions. The dataset is therefore suitable for correlation and regression analysis. The statistical results examine how influencer exposure contributes to SDG awareness through authenticity and trust.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	258	51.6%
	Female	242	48.4%
Age	18–25	205	41.0%
	26–35	180	36.0%
	36+	115	23.0%
Education	Undergraduate	220	44.0%
	Graduate	185	37.0%
	Postgraduate	95	19.0%

The sample reflects a digitally engaged demographic with strong representation from young adults, consistent with influencer audience profiles.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Construct	Items	Cronbach Alpha
Influencer Exposure	5	0.89
Authenticity	6	0.91
Trust	5	0.88
SDG Awareness	6	0.92
Engagement	5	0.90

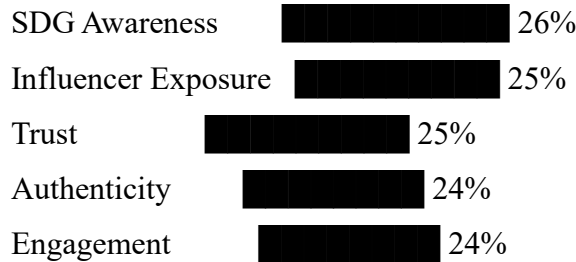
All reliability coefficients exceed the recommended threshold ($\alpha > 0.70$), confirming strong internal consistency.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev
Influencer Exposure	3.94	0.62

Authenticity	3.81	0.67
Trust	3.88	0.65
SDG Awareness	4.05	0.58
Engagement	3.90	0.63

Visual Pie Representation



The pie chart indicates generally positive perceptions, with SDG awareness showing the highest mean score.

Table 4: Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Exposure	1				
2. Authenticity	0.63**	1			
3. Trust	0.68**	0.72**	1		
4. Awareness	0.66**	0.61**	0.74**	1	
5. Engagement	0.64**	0.60**	0.70**	0.69**	1

p < 0.01

Trust demonstrates the strongest correlation with awareness and engagement, highlighting its central mediating role.

Table 5: Regression – Exposure → Trust

Predictor	Beta	t	Sig
Exposure	0.68	17.42	0.000

R² = 0.46

Influencer exposure explains 46% of the variance in trust.

Interpretation: Regular exposure to influencer advocacy significantly increases audience trust in sustainability messaging.

Table 6: Mediation Model – Authenticity → Trust

Predictor	Beta	t	Sig
Exposure	0.40	9.12	0.000
Authenticity	0.43	10.01	0.000

$R^2 = 0.55$

Authenticity significantly mediates the exposure–trust relationship.

Interpretation: Audiences evaluate influencer messages through authenticity filters; credible advocacy strengthens trust formation.

Table 7: Regression – Trust → SDG Awareness

Predictor	Beta	t	Sig
Trust	0.74	19.26	0.000

$R^2 = 0.55$

Trust explains 55% of the variance in SDG awareness.

Interpretation: Trust is the strongest predictor of sustainability awareness, confirming its psychological importance.

Table 8: Hypothesis Summary

Hypothesis	Result
H1	Supported
H2	Supported
H3	Supported

Structural Relationship Diagram

Influencer Exposure → Authenticity → Trust → SDG Awareness Engagement

(All relationships positive and statistically significant)

The results confirm a robust communication pathway. Influencer exposure enhances authenticity perception, which strengthens trust and ultimately increases awareness and engagement with SDGs. These findings validate influencer marketing as a measurable educational tool in sustainability communication.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1 Key Findings

The empirical results demonstrate that influencer marketing significantly enhances awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Exposure to influencer advocacy increases perceived authenticity, which strengthens trust and leads to higher awareness and engagement. Trust emerges as the strongest predictor of SDG awareness, indicating that audiences respond not only to influencer visibility but to credibility. Influencers perceived as sincere and value-driven generate stronger educational impact compared to those viewed as commercially motivated. The mediation results confirm that authenticity functions as a psychological gateway through which influencer messaging is evaluated before acceptance.

5.2 Interpretation in Theoretical Context

The findings align with opinion leadership theory, which positions influencers as modern intermediaries shaping public understanding. Social learning theory explains how repeated exposure to sustainability narratives normalizes SDG discourse within peer networks. Signaling theory supports the role of authenticity as a credibility signal that reduces skepticism. Relationship marketing theory further clarifies how trust converts communication into behavioral engagement. Together, these frameworks show that influencer marketing can function as a social education mechanism rather than solely a promotional tactic.

5.3 Practical Implications

Organizations should collaborate with influencers whose personal identity aligns with sustainability values. Long-term partnerships produce greater credibility than one-time campaigns. Influencers should be encouraged to use educational storytelling, demonstrations, and participatory dialogue. Transparency in sponsorship disclosure enhances trust. Training influencers in sustainability literacy strengthens message accuracy.

5.4 SDG Relevance

The study supports SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) by demonstrating how peer communication increases awareness. Influencer marketing acts as an informal educational infrastructure that amplifies sustainability discourse among younger audiences.

5.5 Contribution to Literature

This research bridges influencer marketing and development communication by providing empirical evidence linking digital persuasion to SDG awareness. It advances theory by identifying authenticity and trust as mediating mechanisms and offers a measurable framework for future studies.

5.6 Limitations within Findings

The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Self-reported awareness may not reflect deep understanding. Cultural diversity was limited, and long-term engagement effects remain untested.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

This study confirms that influencer marketing can function as an effective communication tool for promoting awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals. Exposure to credible influencer advocacy increases trust and educational engagement. Authenticity emerges as the central factor transforming digital persuasion into learning.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

The research extends influencer marketing theory by embedding it within sustainability communication frameworks. It validates opinion leadership and social learning models in digital contexts. Integrating SDGs into marketing scholarship expands the scope of communication research toward societal impact.

6.3 Managerial Implications

Managers should treat influencer partnerships as educational collaborations rather than purely promotional arrangements. Strategic selection of credible influencers enhances campaign effectiveness. Performance metrics should include awareness outcomes, not just reach.

6.4 Policy Implications

Policymakers should develop ethical disclosure standards for social advocacy campaigns. Public-private partnerships can support influencer-driven sustainability education. Regulatory frameworks ensure credibility and prevent misinformation.

6.5 Limitations

The study relies on perception-based survey data and lacks longitudinal behavioral tracking. Geographic scope is limited. Sector-specific influencer dynamics were not deeply explored.

6.6 Future Research Directions

Future research should adopt longitudinal and experimental designs to measure sustained awareness. Cross-cultural comparisons and platform-specific studies are recommended. Integration of digital analytics will enhance validity

6.7 Recommendations

Organizations should prioritize authentic influencer collaborations, invest in sustainability education programs, and encourage participatory storytelling. Cooperation among corporations, NGOs, and digital creators will accelerate SDG awareness.

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