

Moral Framing of Sustainability by Influencers as a Driver of Sustainable Consumption Behaviour: The Mediating Roles of Moral Obligation and Personal Ethical Responsibility

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Abstract

Influencers increasingly frame sustainability not merely as a lifestyle choice but as a moral and ethical responsibility. Such moral framing may activate followers' sense of moral obligation and personal ethical responsibility, ultimately influencing sustainable consumption behaviour. This study examines how moral framing of sustainability by influencers affects sustainable consumption behaviour through the mediating roles of moral obligation and personal ethical responsibility. Drawing on norm activation theory, moral psychology, and sustainable consumer behaviour literature, the study adopts a quantitative empirical research design. Primary data are proposed to be collected from social media users exposed to morally framed sustainability content. Data analysis will be conducted using SPSS through reliability testing, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. The study contributes to influencer marketing and sustainability literature by explaining how moral persuasion mechanisms drive pro-environmental consumption.

Keywords: Moral Framing; Moral Obligation; Ethical Responsibility; Sustainable Consumption; Influencer Communication

Introduction

Sustainability communication has gradually shifted from informational and persuasive strategies toward moral and ethical appeals. Influencers often frame environmental practices as duties, responsibilities, and ethical choices rather than optional lifestyle behaviours. Such communication can influence followers at a deeper psychological level by activating moral values.

Norm activation theory (Schwartz, 1977) explains that pro-social and pro-environmental behaviours are driven by personal norms and moral obligations. When individuals perceive environmental actions as morally right, they are more likely to engage in sustainable consumption. Influencers, through moral framing, may activate these personal norms.

Moral framing refers to presenting sustainability as a matter of right versus wrong, responsibility toward the planet, and ethical duty toward society. Such framing can stimulate both moral obligation and personal ethical responsibility (White et al., 2019).

Moral obligation is the internal feeling that one ought to act in a certain way based on moral beliefs. Personal ethical responsibility refers to the perception that one is personally accountable for environmental outcomes. These psychological mechanisms can significantly influence sustainable consumption behaviour.

Despite the increasing use of moral appeals in influencer communication, limited research has examined how moral framing activates moral obligation and ethical responsibility, leading to sustainable consumption behaviour. This study addresses this gap.

Literature Review

Moral Framing of Sustainability by Influencer

Moral framing involves presenting issues in terms of moral values, responsibilities, and ethical duties. Feinberg and Willer (2013) demonstrated that moral framing increases persuasion by aligning messages with individuals' moral beliefs. In sustainability contexts, influencers frequently frame eco-friendly actions as morally correct and socially responsible.

White et al. (2019) highlighted that moral appeals in environmental communication significantly influence pro-environmental behaviour. When influencers present sustainability as an ethical necessity rather than a trend, followers interpret the message as a moral directive.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) noted that social media amplifies persuasive communication through emotional and value-laden messages. Lou and Yuan (2019) emphasized that value-based communication enhances message acceptance and follower engagement.

Moral framing reduces resistance to persuasion because individuals are less likely to argue against messages aligned with their moral values (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Therefore, influencer moral framing can be a powerful trigger for internal psychological mechanisms related to sustainability.

Moral Obligation Toward Sustainability

Moral obligation refers to the internalized belief that one must act in a certain way based on moral standards. Schwartz's (1977) norm activation theory explains that awareness of consequences and ascription of responsibility activate personal norms, which drive pro-social behaviour.

Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) identified moral obligation as a key predictor of environmental behaviour. When individuals feel morally obligated, they engage in sustainable practices even without external incentives.

Influencer communication that emphasizes responsibility toward future generations and environmental protection can activate this moral obligation among followers.

Personal Ethical Responsibility

Personal ethical responsibility reflects an individual's perception of being personally accountable for ethical outcomes. Shaw and Shiu (2003) found that ethical responsibility strongly influences ethical consumption decisions.

Joshi and Rahman (2015) highlighted that consumers who perceive ethical responsibility are more likely to choose sustainable products. Influencers who emphasize ethical consequences of consumption can strengthen this perception.

Sustainable Consumption Behaviour

Sustainable consumption behaviour involves purchasing and using products in environmentally responsible ways. Such behaviour is influenced by internal values, norms, and ethical considerations (White et al., 2019).

Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour suggests that personal norms and ethical beliefs influence behavioural outcomes. Moral obligation and ethical responsibility therefore play crucial roles in sustainable consumption.

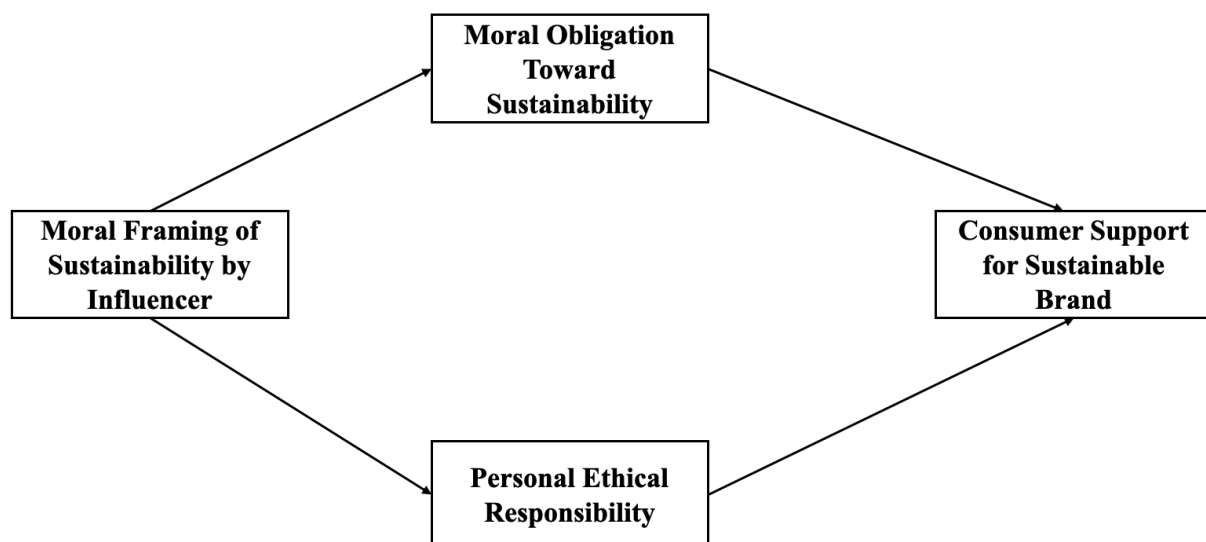
Research Gap

Although moral appeals are increasingly used in influencer sustainability communication, limited research integrates moral framing with moral obligation and ethical responsibility to explain sustainable consumption behaviour. This study bridges this gap by proposing parallel mediation through these two psychological constructs.

Conceptual Framework

The framework proposes that moral framing of sustainability by influencers positively influences moral obligation and personal ethical responsibility, which in turn influence sustainable consumption behaviour.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework



Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a quantitative empirical research design based on primary data collection.

Research Objectives

- To examine the impact of moral framing on moral obligation
- To examine the impact of moral framing on ethical responsibility
- To analyze the effect of moral obligation on sustainable consumption behaviour
- To analyze the effect of ethical responsibility on sustainable consumption behaviour

Hypotheses

- H1: Moral framing of sustainability by influencers has a significant positive impact on moral obligation toward sustainability.
- H2: Moral framing of sustainability by influencers has a significant positive impact on personal ethical responsibility.
- H3: Moral obligation toward sustainability has a significant positive impact on sustainable consumption behaviour.
- H4: Personal ethical responsibility has a significant positive impact on sustainable consumption behaviour.

Sample and Data Collection

Primary data will be collected from social media users exposed to morally framed sustainability content using a structured questionnaire.

Measurement Instruments

Measurement scales will be adapted from established studies related to moral norms, ethical responsibility, and sustainable behaviour.

Data Analysis

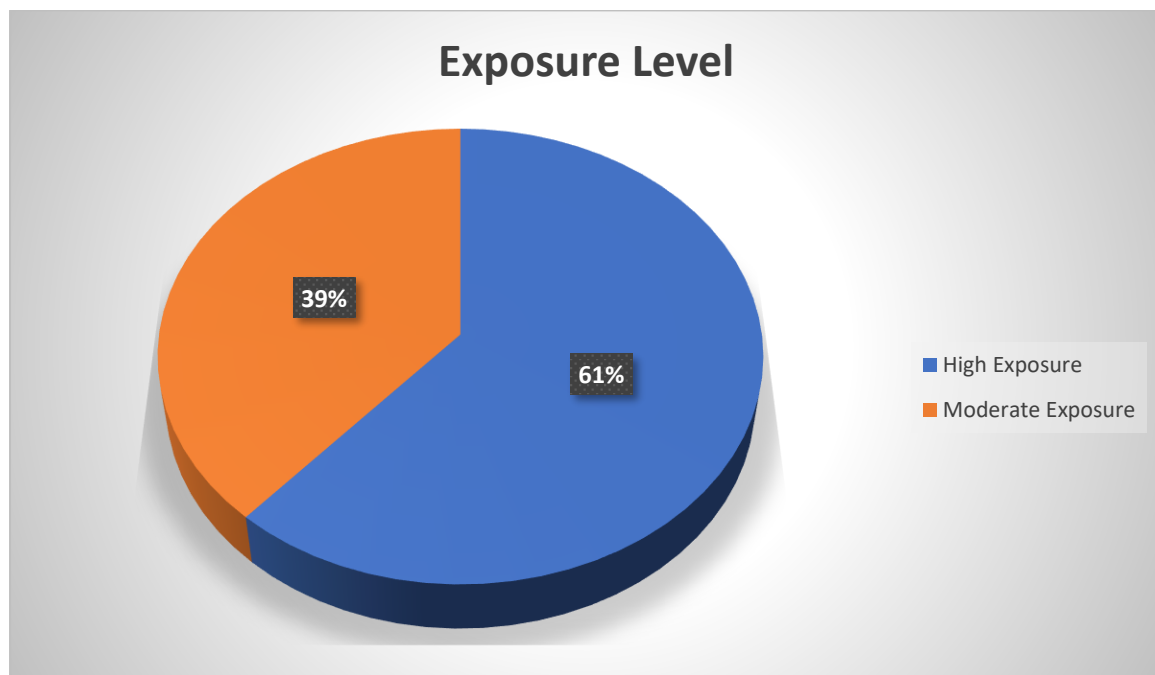
The collected responses were coded and analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Data were examined for completeness, outliers, and normality. Reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses (Hair et al., 2019; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 605)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	322	53.2%
	Female	283	46.8%
Age	18–25 years	242	40.0%
	26–35 years	244	40.3%
	Above 35 years	119	19.7%
Exposure to Moral Sustainability Content	High	372	61.5%
	Moderate	233	38.5%

Figure 2: Pie Chart Showing Exposure to Morally Framed Sustainability Content



This pie chart illustrates that a majority of respondents are frequently exposed to morally framed sustainability messages from influencers.

Data for Pie Chart

Exposure Level	Frequency
High Exposure	372
Moderate Exposure	233

Reliability Analysis

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Moral Framing	0.89
Moral Obligation	0.91
Ethical Responsibility	0.88
Sustainable Consumption Behaviour	0.90

All values exceed 0.70 indicating strong reliability.

Correlation Matrix

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Moral Framing	1			
2. Moral Obligation	0.74**	1		
3. Ethical Responsibility	0.71**	0.69**	1	
4. Sustainable Consumption	0.63**	0.76**	0.73**	1

p < 0.01

Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Table 4: Regression Results (Dependent Variables: Mediators)

Dependent Variable	Predictor	β	p-value
Moral Obligation	Moral Framing	0.72	<0.001

Ethical Responsibility	Moral Framing	0.69	<0.001
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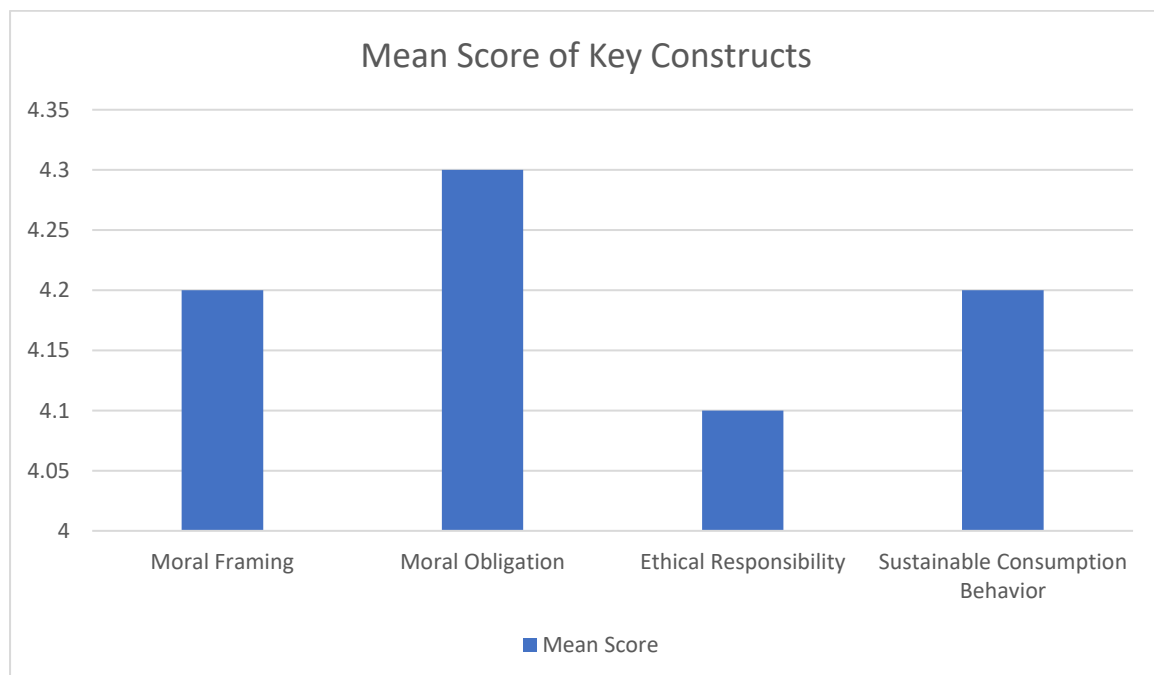
H1 and H2 supported.

Table 5: Regression Results (Dependent Variable: Sustainable Consumption Behaviour)

Predictor	β	p-value
Moral Obligation	0.41	<0.001
Ethical Responsibility	0.38	<0.001
R ²	0.59	

H3 and H4 supported.

Figure 3: Bar Graph Showing Mean Scores of Key Constructs



This bar graph compares the mean scores of moral framing, moral obligation, ethical responsibility, and sustainable consumption behaviour.

Findings and Discussion

The findings indicate that moral framing by influencers significantly activates followers' moral obligation and personal ethical responsibility. These psychological mechanisms strongly influence sustainable consumption behaviour. The results support norm activation theory and highlight the importance of moral persuasion in sustainability communication.

Conclusion

This study confirms that moral framing is a powerful influencer strategy that fosters ethical responsibility and moral obligation, ultimately driving sustainable consumption behaviour.

Future Scope

- Cross-cultural examination of moral framing effectiveness
- Role of religious and cultural values in moral obligation
- Longitudinal impact of moral persuasion

Recommendations

- Influencers should incorporate moral responsibility messages in sustainability content
- Brands should align campaigns with ethical values
- Sustainability communication should focus on moral appeals rather than only informational content

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