

Influencer Community Engagement as a Driver of Sense of Belonging Toward Sustainable Communities

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Abstract

Influencers increasingly engage followers through interactive communication, discussions, and community-building activities around sustainability. Such engagement may foster a sense of belonging among followers toward sustainability-focused communities. This study examines how influencer interaction with followers, encouragement of sustainability discussions, and creation of sustainability-focused online communities influence followers' sense of belonging. Drawing on social identity theory and online community engagement literature, the study adopts a quantitative empirical research design. Primary data are proposed to be collected from social media users exposed to sustainability-oriented influencer communities. Data analysis will be conducted using SPSS through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), reliability testing, and regression analysis. The study contributes to influencer marketing and sustainability literature by explaining how community engagement fosters psychological belonging to sustainable movements.

Keywords: Community Engagement; Influencer Interaction; Online Community; Sense of Belonging; Sustainability

Introduction

Sustainability communication on social media has evolved from one-way promotion to interactive community engagement. Influencers no longer merely share content but actively interact with followers through comments, live sessions, polls, and discussions. These interactions create a virtual community centered around sustainability.

Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive part of their identity from the groups they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When influencers create interactive spaces for

sustainability discussions, followers begin to identify themselves as part of a sustainability-oriented group.

Influencer interaction with followers enhances perceived closeness and engagement (Dessart et al., 2015). Encouraging discussions through questions, polls, and feedback creates a participatory environment. Additionally, influencers often create sustainability-focused groups, hashtags, or online communities that foster collective participation.

Sense of belonging refers to the psychological feeling of being part of a group. In sustainability contexts, this belonging can motivate individuals to align their behaviors with community norms (White et al., 2019).

Despite the rise of influencer-led communities, limited research has examined how such engagement fosters a sense of belonging toward sustainability communities. This study addresses this gap.

Literature Review

Influencer Interaction with Followers

Influencer interaction includes replying to comments, engaging in live sessions, and responding to follower queries. Dessart et al. (2015) emphasized that interactive engagement increases emotional connection between users and online communities. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that influencer responsiveness enhances follower involvement and trust.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) noted that social media platforms enable two-way communication, strengthening user participation. Such interaction creates a perception of accessibility and inclusion.

Encouragement of Sustainability Discussions

Encouraging discussions through polls, Q&A sessions, and opinion-sharing increases participatory engagement. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) observed that interactive content increases user involvement and engagement levels.

White et al. (2019) argued that participatory communication enhances pro-environmental engagement. When followers discuss sustainability issues, they become cognitively involved in the topic.

Creation of Sustainability-Focused Online Community

Online communities create shared identity and collective participation. Tajfel and Turner (1986) suggested that group belonging shapes individual attitudes and behaviors. Dessart et al. (2015) highlighted that brand communities foster emotional attachment and participation.

Influencers often use hashtags, groups, and community challenges to create a sustainability-focused environment, encouraging followers to feel part of a larger movement.

Sense of Belonging Toward Sustainable Community

Sense of belonging refers to the psychological attachment individuals feel toward a group. Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) noted that social belonging influences environmental behavior adoption.

When followers perceive themselves as members of a sustainability community, they are more likely to adopt behaviors consistent with community values.

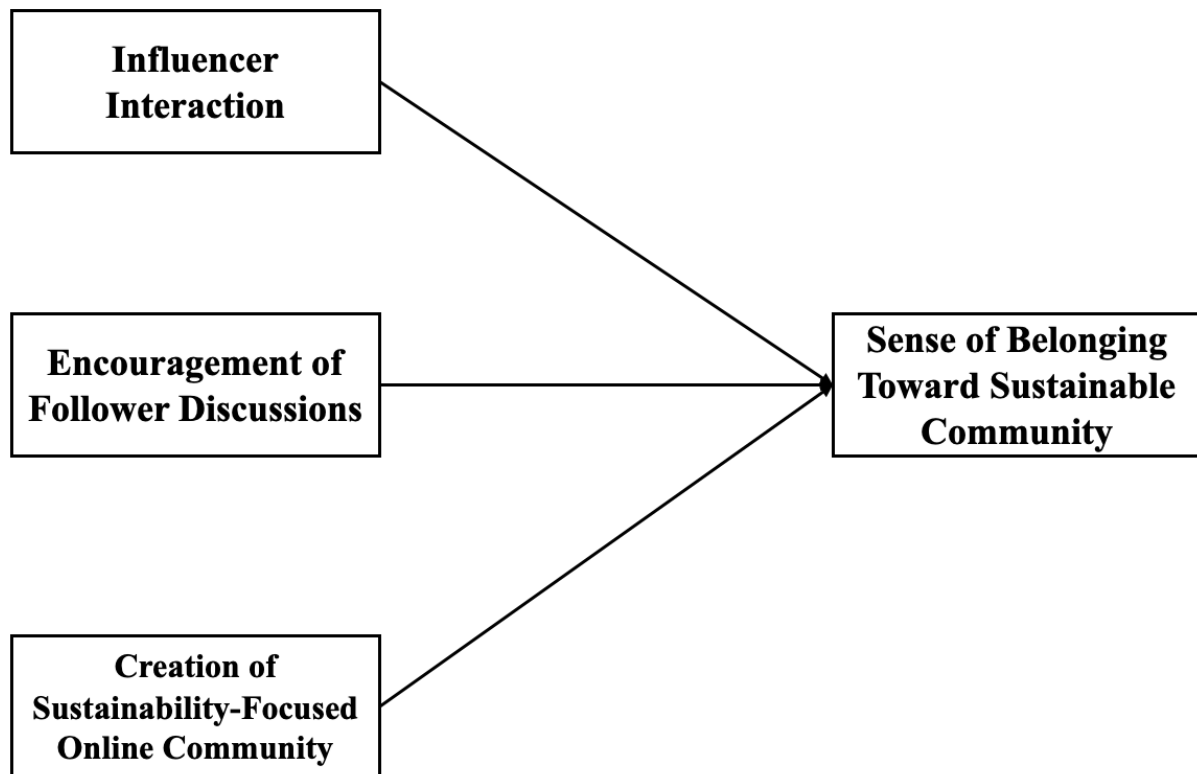
Research Gap

Although influencer engagement strategies are widely practiced, limited studies examine how such community engagement fosters a sense of belonging toward sustainability communities. This study fills this gap using an exploratory factor analysis approach.

Conceptual Framework

The framework proposes that influencer interaction, encouragement of discussions, and creation of sustainability-focused communities positively influence followers' sense of belonging toward sustainable communities.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework



Research Methodology

Research Design

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

Research Objectives

- To examine the impact of influencer interaction on sense of belonging
- To examine the impact of discussion encouragement on sense of belonging
- To examine the impact of community creation on sense of belonging

Hypotheses

- H1: Influencer interaction positively impacts sense of belonging toward sustainable community.
- H2: Encouragement of sustainability discussions positively impacts sense of belonging toward sustainable community.

- H3: Creation of sustainability-focused community positively impacts sense of belonging toward sustainable community.

Sample and Data Collection

Primary data will be collected from social media users who follow sustainability influencers using a structured questionnaire.

Measurement Instruments

Approximately 15 items will be developed to measure the three dimensions of community engagement and sense of belonging, enabling exploratory factor analysis.

Data Analysis

All responses were coded and analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Since new multi-item constructs were developed to measure influencer community engagement, **Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)** was first conducted to identify underlying factor structures. This was followed by reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 645)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	348	54.0%
	Female	297	46.0%
Age	18–25 years	270	41.9%
	26–35 years	250	38.8%
	Above 35 years	125	19.3%
Active in Influencer Communities	Yes	422	65.4%
	No	223	34.6%

Exploratory Factor Analysis

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Test	Value
KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.903
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Sig.)	0.000

The KMO value above 0.9 and significant Bartlett's test confirm suitability for factor analysis.

Table 3: Rotated Component Matrix (Factor Loadings)

Items	Interaction	Discussion	Community
Replying to comments	0.81		
Live sessions	0.79		
Responding to queries	0.76		
Polls and Q&A		0.84	
Asking follower opinions		0.82	
Discussion posts		0.78	
Hashtags for sustainability			0.83
Community challenges			0.80
Online groups/pages			0.77

Three clear factors emerged corresponding to the proposed independent variables.

Reliability Analysis

Table 4: Reliability Statistics

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Influencer Interaction	0.88
Discussion Encouragement	0.90
Community Creation	0.89
Sense of Belonging	0.92

Correlation Matrix

Table 5: Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Interaction	1			
2. Discussion	0.69**	1		
3. Community	0.72**	0.74**	1	
4. Belonging	0.76**	0.78**	0.80**	1

p < 0.01

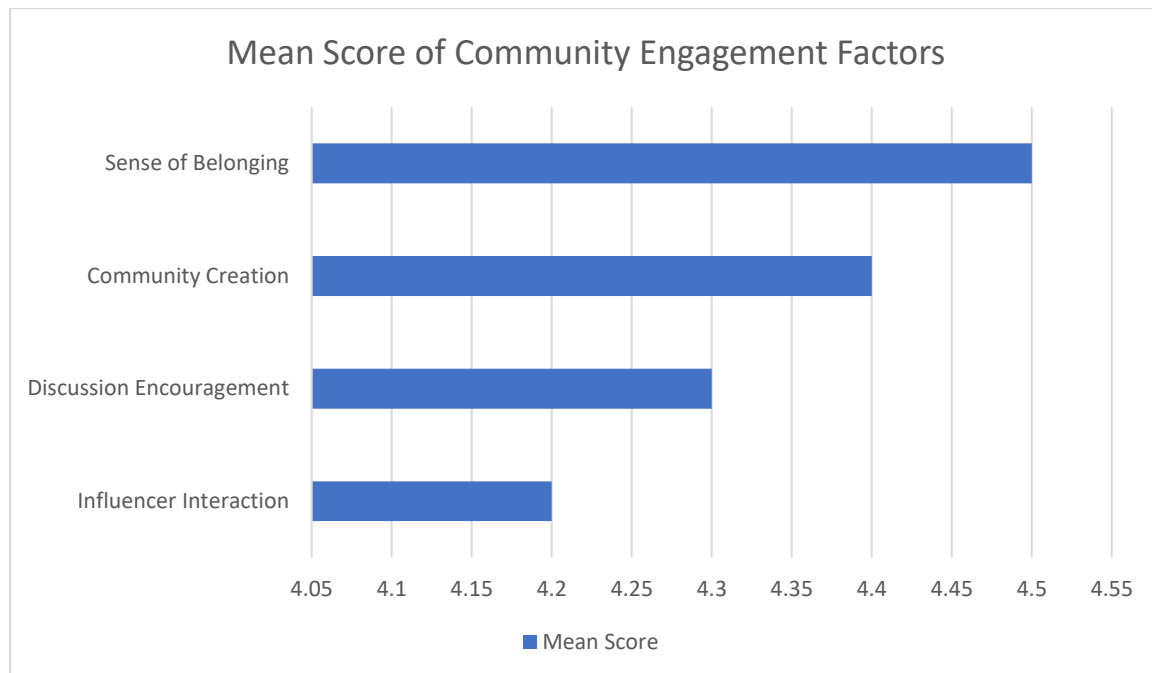
Regression Analysis

Table 6: Regression Results (Dependent Variable: Sense of Belonging)

Predictor	β	p-value
Influencer Interaction	0.28	<0.001
Discussion Encouragement	0.32	<0.001
Community Creation	0.36	<0.001
R ²	0.69	

H1, H2, and H3 supported.

Figure 2: Bar Graph Showing Mean Scores of Community Engagement Factors



Findings and Discussion

The results strongly validate the role of influencer community engagement in fostering a sense of belonging toward sustainability communities. The high KMO value and significant Bartlett's test confirm the adequacy of the data for factor analysis. The rotated component matrix clearly identifies three distinct factors representing influencer interaction, discussion encouragement, and community creation, validating the conceptual structure of the model.

Reliability statistics demonstrate strong internal consistency across all constructs. The correlation matrix indicates significant positive relationships among all variables, suggesting that higher levels of engagement correspond to stronger feelings of belonging.

Regression results reveal that all three dimensions of community engagement significantly influence sense of belonging, with community creation having the strongest impact. This indicates that followers feel most connected when influencers create structured sustainability communities through hashtags, challenges, and groups.

These findings support social identity theory, which posits that individuals derive identity from group membership. When influencers actively engage followers and create participatory spaces, followers begin to perceive themselves as part of a sustainability movement.

The bar graph further illustrates high mean scores across constructs, reinforcing that respondents perceive influencer engagement as an important driver of belonging. This sense of belonging can later translate into sustainable behavioral adoption.

Conclusion

This study confirms that influencer interaction, encouragement of discussions, and creation of sustainability-focused communities significantly enhance followers' sense of belonging.

Future Scope

- Longitudinal study on community participation
- Role of micro vs macro influencer communities
- Cross-cultural study of online sustainability communities

Recommendations

- Influencers should actively interact with followers
- Discussion-based posts should be encouraged
- Sustainability-focused online communities should be developed

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