

## **Influencer Popularity and Audience Engagement as Drivers of Social Proof: Implications for Sustainable Consumption Adoption**

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### **Abstract**

Sustainability influencers often display large follower counts and high engagement metrics, which may create perceptions of social proof among followers. Such social proof can encourage individuals to adopt sustainable consumption practices by signaling that many others are already doing so. This study examines how perceived influencer popularity and visibility of audience engagement influence perceived social proof, which subsequently affects adoption of sustainable consumption practices. Drawing on social proof theory and social influence literature, the study adopts a quantitative empirical research design. Primary data are proposed to be collected from social media users exposed to sustainability influencer content. Data analysis will be conducted using SPSS and PROCESS Macro (Model 4) to test mediation effects. The study contributes to influencer marketing and sustainability literature by explaining how visible popularity cues translate into sustainable behavior adoption.

**Keywords:** Social Proof; Influencer Popularity; Audience Engagement; Sustainable Consumption; Mediation

### **Introduction**

Social media platforms prominently display metrics such as follower counts, likes, comments, and shares. These visible indicators of popularity and engagement act as social cues for followers. In sustainability contexts, such cues may signal that many individuals support and practice eco-friendly behaviors.

Social proof theory suggests that individuals rely on the behavior of others to guide their own actions, especially under uncertainty (Cialdini, 2009). When followers observe large

engagement on sustainability posts, they perceive sustainable behavior as socially accepted and desirable.

Perceived influencer popularity refers to the extent to which followers recognize an influencer as widely followed and admired. Visibility of audience engagement includes comments, discussions, and reactions on posts. These elements together create a perception that sustainability is widely practiced.

Perceived social proof of sustainable behavior arises when followers believe that many others are adopting sustainable practices. This perception can influence individuals to conform and adopt similar behaviors.

Despite the visibility of engagement metrics on social media, limited research has examined how influencer popularity and audience engagement translate into social proof and drive sustainable consumption adoption. This study addresses this gap.

## **Literature Review**

### **Perceived Popularity of Sustainability Influencer**

Influencer popularity is often judged through follower counts and engagement metrics. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that high popularity enhances perceived credibility and influence. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) noted that visible metrics shape perceptions of authority and relevance.

Cialdini (2009) emphasized that popularity cues act as shortcuts for decision-making, particularly when individuals lack complete information.

### **Visibility of Audience Engagement**

Audience engagement through comments, likes, and shares creates an interactive environment. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) observed that visible engagement increases perceived value of influencer content. Such engagement signals collective approval.

Dessart et al. (2015) highlighted that participatory engagement enhances social influence and persuasion.

## Perceived Social Proof of Sustainable Behavior

Social proof refers to the tendency to follow others' actions. Cialdini (2009) explained that individuals conform to behaviors perceived as common. In sustainability contexts, seeing many others engage in eco-friendly behavior increases its perceived legitimacy.

White et al. (2019) noted that social norms strongly influence sustainable behavior adoption.

## Adoption of Sustainable Consumption Practices

Sustainable consumption adoption involves integrating eco-friendly behaviors into daily life. Ajzen (1991) suggested that social influences significantly shape behavioral intentions. When followers perceive strong social proof, they are more likely to adopt sustainable practices.

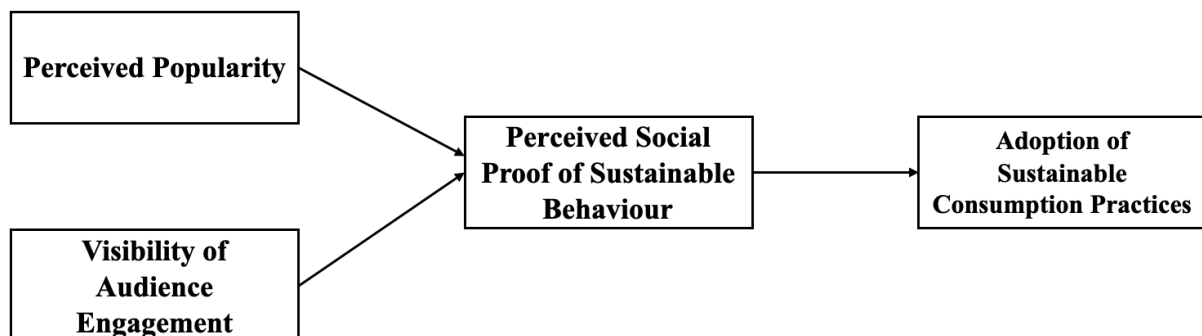
## Research Gap

While influencer popularity and engagement are visible on social media, limited studies examine how these factors create social proof and influence sustainable consumption through mediation mechanisms. This study fills this gap using PROCESS mediation analysis.

## Conceptual Framework

The framework proposes that influencer popularity and audience engagement positively influence perceived social proof, which in turn influences sustainable consumption adoption.

**Figure 1: 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 popularity on perceived social proof
- To examine the impact of audience engagement on perceived social proof
- To analyze the effect of social proof on sustainable consumption adoption

## **Hypotheses**

- H1: Perceived popularity of sustainability influencer positively impacts perceived social proof.
- H2: Visibility of audience engagement positively impacts perceived social proof.
- H3: Perceived social proof positively impacts adoption of sustainable consumption practices.
- H4: Perceived social proof mediates the relationship between influencer popularity, audience engagement, and sustainable consumption adoption.

## **Sample and Data Collection**

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

## **Measurement Instruments**

Measurement scales will be adapted from established studies related to social proof, social influence, and sustainable behavior.

## **Data Analysis**

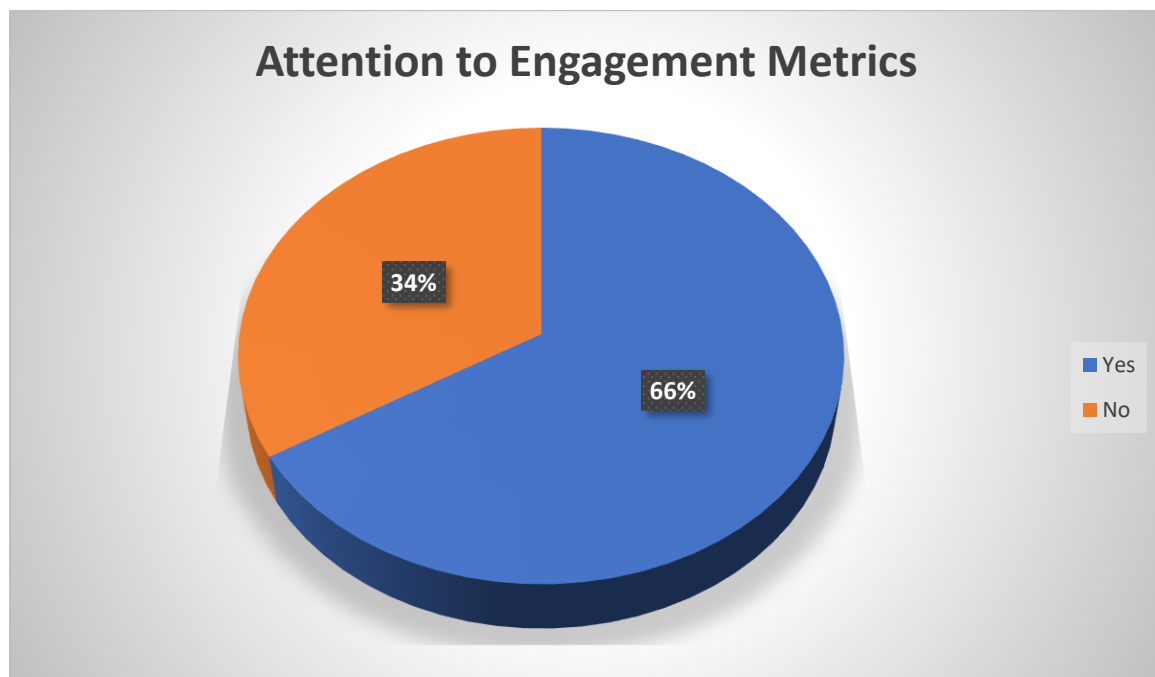
The data were coded and analyzed using SPSS (Version 26) along with PROCESS Macro by Hayes (Model 4) to test mediation effects. Preliminary analysis included reliability, descriptive statistics, and correlation analysis before conducting mediation testing (Hair et al., 2019; Hayes, 2018).

## Demographic Profile of Respondents

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 660)**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	352	53.3%
	Female	308	46.7%
Age	18–25 years	276	41.8%
	26–35 years	256	38.8%
	Above 35 years	128	19.4%
Observe Likes/Comments	Yes	438	66.4%
	No	222	33.6%

**Figure 2: Pie Chart Showing Attention to Engagement Metrics**



## Reliability Analysis

**Table 2: Reliability Statistics**

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
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Influencer Popularity	0.89
Audience Engagement	0.88
Social Proof	0.92
Sustainable Consumption	0.90

### Correlation Matrix

**Table 3: Correlation Matrix**

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Popularity	1			
2. Engagement	0.70**	1		
3. Social Proof	0.76**	0.78**	1	
4. Consumption Adoption	0.64**	0.66**	0.80**	1

**p < 0.01**

### PROCESS Mediation Analysis

**Table 4: Direct Effects on Social Proof**

Predictor	$\beta$	p-value
Influencer Popularity	0.34	<0.001
Audience Engagement	0.38	<0.001

**Table 5: Effect of Social Proof on Sustainable Consumption**

Predictor	$\beta$	p-value
Social Proof	0.79	<0.001

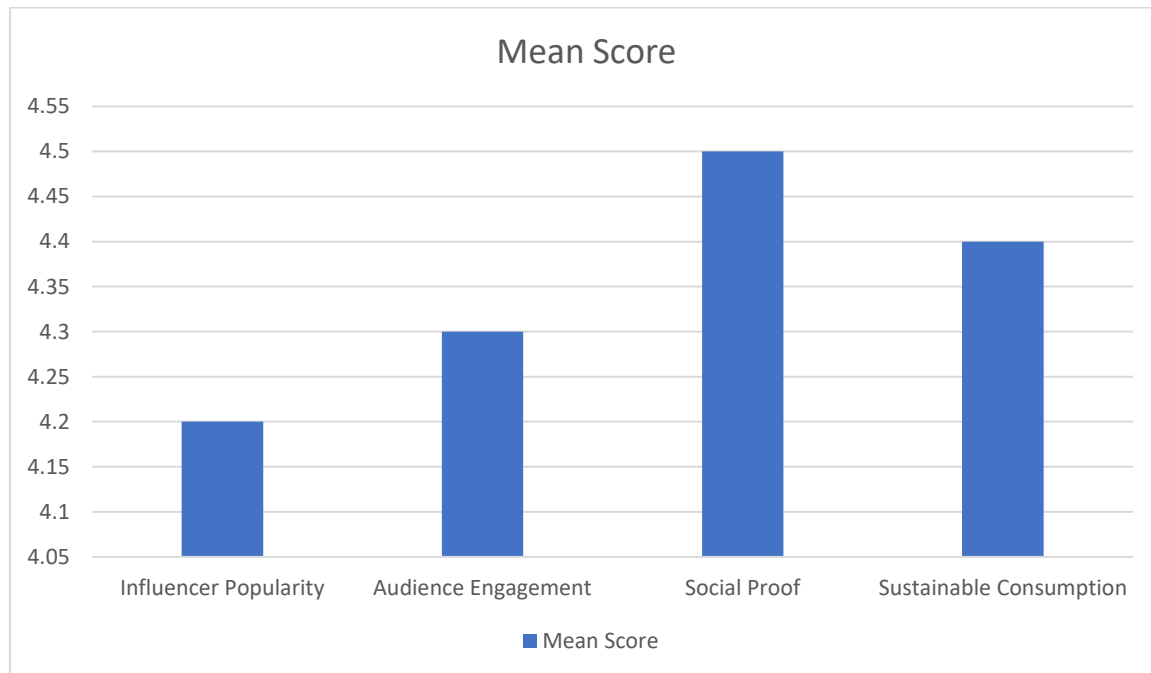
**Table 6: Indirect Effects**

Path	Indirect Effect	LLCI	ULCI
Popularity → Social Proof → Consumption	0.27	0.19	0.36

Engagement → Social Proof → Consumption	0.30	0.22	0.39
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Since confidence intervals do not include zero, mediation is confirmed.

**Figure 3: Bar Graph Showing Mean Scores**



### Findings and Discussion

The findings clearly demonstrate that visible cues of influencer popularity and audience engagement significantly shape perceptions of social proof among followers. Reliability and correlation results confirm strong relationships among constructs. PROCESS mediation analysis shows that both influencer popularity and audience engagement significantly influence perceived social proof, which in turn strongly predicts sustainable consumption adoption.

The mediation results confirm that followers rely on visible engagement metrics as indicators that sustainability is widely practiced and socially accepted. This perception reduces uncertainty and encourages conformity to sustainable behaviors. The bar graph highlights high mean values for social proof and sustainable consumption, reinforcing that respondents are strongly influenced by collective cues.

These findings strongly support social proof theory and social influence literature, demonstrating how digital engagement metrics translate into real behavioral adoption in sustainability contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the critical role of social proof in translating influencer popularity and audience engagement into sustainable consumption adoption. The findings demonstrate that followers do not merely observe sustainability content but actively interpret visible metrics such as likes, comments, and follower counts as signals that sustainable behavior is widely accepted and practiced. These signals create a perception of social proof, which significantly influences individuals to adopt similar eco-friendly practices.

The mediation analysis confirms that social proof acts as a key psychological mechanism linking influencer popularity and audience engagement with sustainable consumption. When followers perceive that many others support sustainability, they experience reduced uncertainty and increased motivation to conform to these behaviors. This emphasizes the importance of visible engagement cues in influencer marketing strategies related to sustainability.

The study contributes to existing literature by integrating social proof theory with influencer marketing and sustainable consumption research. Practically, the findings suggest that influencers and brands should encourage interactive engagement and highlight community participation to strengthen social proof perceptions. By leveraging visible engagement metrics, sustainability communication can be made more persuasive and effective in promoting environmentally responsible behaviors.

## **Future Scope**

- Comparative study between micro and macro influencers in creating social proof
- Longitudinal analysis of social proof effects on long-term sustainable behavior
- Cross-platform comparison of engagement metrics and social proof perception

## **Recommendations**

- Influencers should encourage visible engagement through comments and discussions

- Sustainability posts should highlight follower participation and reactions
- Brands should collaborate with highly engaging influencers to strengthen social proof

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