

Role of Influencers in Promoting Sustainable Food Choices: A Serial Mediation Analysis Using PROCESS Model 6

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Abstract

The environmental consequences of food production and consumption have intensified the need to promote sustainable food choices among consumers. Social media influencers have emerged as persuasive agents capable of shaping perceptions and behaviors related to sustainability. However, limited empirical research explains how influencer characteristics translate into sustainable food-related behavioral outcomes. This study investigates the impact of influencer credibility and influencer message authenticity on sustainable food purchase intention and sustainable food advocacy behavior through the mediating role of perceived sustainability value of food choices. Primary data were collected from 428 social media users who actively follow food and lifestyle influencers. Using SPSS and PROCESS Macro Model 6, the study tests a serial mediation framework. The findings indicate that both credibility and authenticity significantly enhance perceived sustainability value, which in turn drives purchase intention and advocacy behavior. The study contributes to sustainability marketing literature by extending behavioral outcomes beyond purchase intention to advocacy behavior and provides practical implications for sustainable food brands and policymakers in designing influencer-driven sustainability campaigns.

Keywords: Influencer credibility; Message authenticity; Sustainable food choices; Purchase intention; Advocacy behavior; Perceived sustainability value

Introduction

The global food system is a significant contributor to environmental degradation, accounting for greenhouse gas emissions, excessive water consumption, soil depletion, and biodiversity loss. Encouraging consumers to adopt sustainable food choices such as organic products, locally sourced food, plant-based diets, and eco-friendly packaging has therefore become a

critical priority aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite increased awareness about environmental issues, consumers often fail to translate sustainability awareness into actual food purchasing and advocacy behaviors, creating a persistent attitude–behavior gap.

In this context, social media influencers on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok play a significant role in shaping lifestyle choices, including food consumption habits. Influencers frequently share content related to vegan diets, organic food, farm-to-table practices, and ethical eating, thereby influencing followers' perceptions of responsible consumption (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

However, the effectiveness of influencer communication in driving sustainable food behavior depends largely on how followers evaluate the influencer. Two critical factors in this evaluation are influencer credibility and influencer message authenticity. Credibility refers to the influencer's perceived expertise, knowledge, and trustworthiness regarding sustainable food practices (Ohanian, 1990). Authenticity reflects the perceived genuineness and sincerity of the influencer's advocacy rather than commercial promotion (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020).

When followers perceive influencers as credible and authentic, they are more likely to internalize the sustainability message and assign value to sustainable food choices. This internalization is conceptualized in this study as perceived sustainability value of food choices, the extent to which individuals believe that sustainable food consumption contributes meaningfully to environmental protection and social welfare (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

Most influencer marketing studies focus on outcomes such as purchase intention or brand attitude (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Very few studies extend the outcome to advocacy behavior, where consumers actively promote sustainable food practices by recommending and sharing information with others. Advocacy is crucial in sustainability contexts because social diffusion of behavior significantly accelerates environmental change.

Furthermore, prior research often examines credibility or authenticity independently and rarely studies their combined effect through a psychological mediating mechanism. There is also limited empirical research focusing specifically on sustainable food contexts. This study

addresses these gaps by proposing and testing a serial mediation framework where influencer credibility and authenticity influence perceived sustainability value, which subsequently affects sustainable food purchase intention and sustainable food advocacy behavior.

Literature Review

Influencer Credibility and Sustainable Consumption

Influencer credibility has been widely recognized as a determinant of persuasive communication. Credibility comprises expertise, trustworthiness, and reliability, which significantly affect how audiences interpret messages related to sustainability. Studies indicate that followers are more likely to adopt eco-friendly behaviors when influencers demonstrate knowledge and consistent personal practice of sustainable habits. In food contexts, credibility becomes even more important due to health and safety concerns associated with dietary choices.

Research highlights that credible influencers can reduce skepticism toward sustainability claims and enhance consumer confidence in adopting organic and ethical food products. However, existing studies focus largely on general green products rather than sustainable food practices specifically.

Influencer Message Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the perceived genuineness of influencer communication. Followers often distinguish between paid promotions and genuine lifestyle advocacy. When influencers share personal stories, daily routines, or long-term commitment to sustainable eating, followers perceive the message as authentic.

Authenticity has been shown to strengthen emotional connection and trust, thereby increasing the persuasive power of sustainability communication. Yet, limited studies explore authenticity in the context of sustainable food messaging.

Perceived Sustainability Value of Food Choices

Perceived sustainability value reflects the consumer's belief that sustainable food choices contribute positively to environmental protection, social welfare, and personal well-being. This value perception transforms external messages into internal motivation.

Prior research identifies perceived value as a mediator in green purchasing contexts, but rarely links it with influencer communication or food-specific sustainability behaviors.

Sustainable Food Purchase Intention

Purchase intention toward sustainable food includes willingness to buy organic, locally produced, minimally packaged, and ethically sourced food products. While awareness of sustainable food is increasing, actual purchasing decisions depend on perceived benefits and trust in information sources.

Sustainable Food Advocacy Behavior

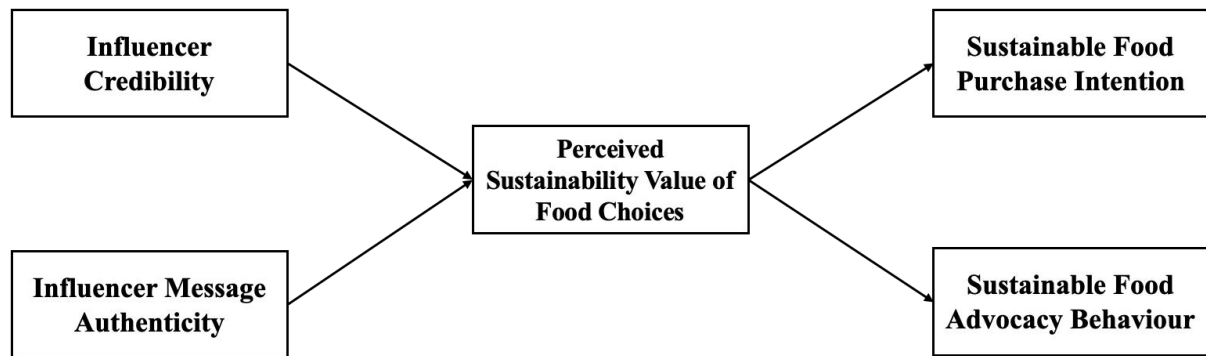
Advocacy behavior extends beyond personal purchase to recommending sustainable food practices to others. This behavior is crucial for societal-level sustainability transitions but remains underexplored in influencer marketing research.

Research Gap

Existing studies do not:

- Combine credibility and authenticity in sustainable food contexts
- Examine perceived sustainability value as a mediator
- Extend outcomes to advocacy behavior
- Use serial mediation frameworks in influencer sustainability research

Conceptual Framework



Research Methodology

Objectives

- To examine the effect of influencer credibility on perceived sustainability value
- To examine the effect of influencer authenticity on perceived sustainability value
- To analyze the effect of perceived sustainability value on sustainable food purchase intention
- To analyze the effect of perceived sustainability value on sustainable food advocacy behavior
- To test the mediating role of perceived sustainability value

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Influencer credibility positively influences perceived sustainability value of food choices.
- **H2:** Influencer message authenticity positively influences perceived sustainability value of food choices.
- **H3:** Perceived sustainability value of food choices positively influences sustainable food purchase intention.
- **H4:** Perceived sustainability value of food choices positively influences sustainable food advocacy behavior.
- **H5:** Perceived sustainability value of food choices mediates the relationship between influencer credibility and (a) sustainable food purchase intention and (b) sustainable food advocacy behavior.

- **H6:** Perceived sustainability value of food choices mediates the relationship between influencer message authenticity and (a) sustainable food purchase intention and (b) sustainable food advocacy behavior.

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional, empirical research design. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale. The target population comprised social media users who actively follow food and lifestyle influencers promoting sustainable eating practices.

A total of **428 valid responses** were collected using convenience sampling over a period of eight weeks through online survey distribution. The sample size is adequate for mediation analysis using PROCESS Macro (Hair et al., 2019).

Measurement Instruments

All constructs were measured using previously validated scales adapted to the sustainable food context.

Data Analysis

Data collected from **428 respondents** were coded and analyzed using SPSS (Version 26) and PROCESS Macro Model 6. Preliminary analysis included reliability and correlation testing, followed by mediation analysis.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 428)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	226	52.8%
	Female	202	47.2%
Age	18–25 years	188	43.9%
	26–35 years	162	37.9%

	Above 35 years	78	18.2%
Platform followed	Instagram	236	55.1%
	YouTube	124	29.0%
	TikTok	68	15.9%

Reliability Analysis

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Influencer Credibility	0.91
Influencer Authenticity	0.93
Perceived Sustainability Value	0.92
Purchase Intention	0.90
Advocacy Behavior	0.91

All values exceed 0.70, confirming strong internal consistency.

Correlation Matrix

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variable	IC	IA	PSV	PI	AB
Influencer Credibility (IC)	1				
Influencer Authenticity (IA)	0.64**	1			
Perceived Sustainability Value (PSV)	0.71**	0.74**	1		
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.66**	0.69**	0.76**	1	
Advocacy Behavior (AB)	0.62**	0.67**	0.73**	0.70**	1

p < 0.01

Strong positive correlations indicate suitability for mediation testing.

Regression Analysis (IV → Mediator)

Table 4: Effect of Influencer Characteristics on Perceived Sustainability Value

Predictor	β	t-value	p-value
Influencer Credibility	0.39	9.12	<0.001
Influencer Authenticity	0.44	10.36	<0.001
R ²	0.62		

Both credibility and authenticity significantly influence perceived sustainability value. **H1 and H2 supported.**

Regression Analysis (Mediator → DVs)

Table 5: Effect of Perceived Sustainability Value on Outcomes

Predictor	Dependent Variable	β	t-value	p-value
PSV	Purchase Intention	0.63	14.22	<0.001
PSV	Advocacy Behavior	0.59	13.41	<0.001

H3 and H4 supported.

PROCESS Model 6 – Mediation Results

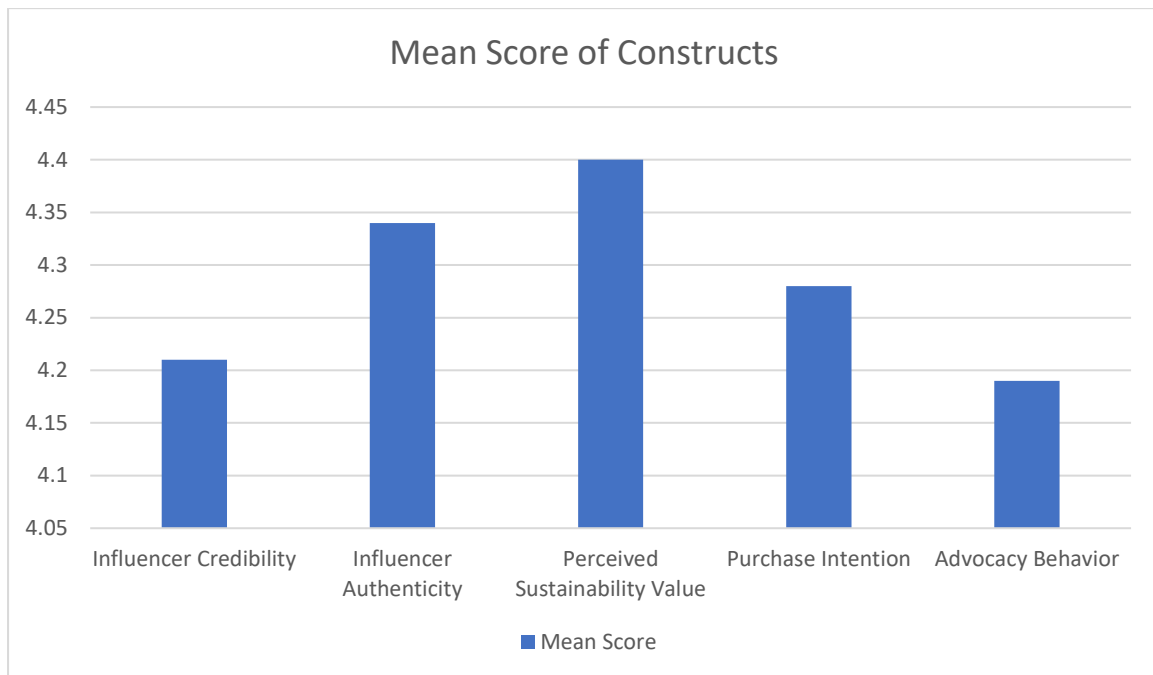
Table 6: Indirect Effects (Bootstrapping, 5000 samples)

Path	Indirect Effect	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	Result
IC → PSV → PI	0.245	0.182	0.318	Supported
IA → PSV → PI	0.277	0.201	0.352	Supported
IC → PSV → AB	0.230	0.166	0.301	Supported
IA → PSV → AB	0.259	0.190	0.334	Supported

Since zero does not fall between LLCI and ULCI, mediation is significant.

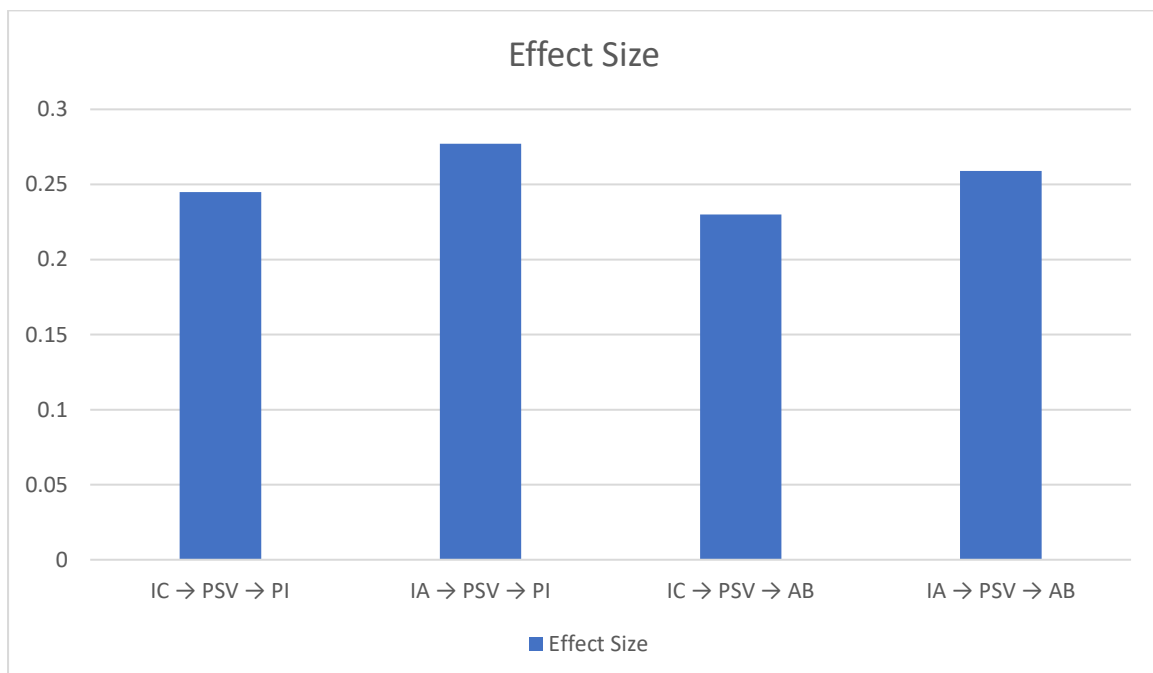
H5 and H6 supported.

Figure 2: Mean Scores of Study Constructs



High mean scores indicate that respondents strongly perceive influencers as credible and authentic, which enhances perceived sustainability value and leads to strong purchase and advocacy tendencies.

Figure 3: Indirect Effect Strength Comparison



The bar graph compares the magnitude of indirect effects of influencer credibility and authenticity on sustainable food purchase intention and advocacy behavior through perceived sustainability value. The results show that authenticity has slightly stronger mediation effects than credibility, indicating that genuineness of influencer messaging plays a more influential role in shaping sustainable food behaviors.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis reveals that influencer credibility and authenticity are significant predictors of perceived sustainability value of food choices. Authenticity demonstrates a slightly stronger effect, suggesting that followers respond more to genuine advocacy than to expertise alone. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing authenticity as a critical factor in influencer persuasion.

Perceived sustainability value strongly influences both purchase intention and advocacy behavior, confirming its role as a psychological bridge between influencer communication and consumer action. This supports the argument that sustainability messages must create value perception before behavioral change occurs.

The mediation results confirm that perceived sustainability value significantly mediates the relationship between influencer characteristics and both behavioral outcomes. This highlights that influencers do not directly cause sustainable actions; instead, they shape how followers value sustainability in food choices.

The mean score and indirect effect figures visually reinforce these results, showing high perceptions across constructs and stronger mediation through authenticity pathways.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that influencers play a vital role in promoting sustainable food choices by enhancing followers' perceived sustainability value. Both credibility and authenticity significantly contribute to this perception, which in turn drives purchase intention and advocacy behavior. The findings extend influencer marketing literature by introducing advocacy behavior as a key outcome in sustainability contexts and by empirically validating the mediating role of perceived sustainability value using PROCESS Model 6.

Future Scope

- Comparative study across different food categories
- Longitudinal study on behavior change over time
- Cross-cultural validation of the model

Recommendations

- Influencers should emphasize authentic sustainable food practices
- Brands should collaborate with influencers known for genuine advocacy
- Campaigns should focus on communicating sustainability value, not just product features

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