

Greenwashing Practices in Company Marketing Communications

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5 Towards Green Influencer Marketing

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5 Towards Green Influencer Marketing

5.1 Introduction

In the current digital era, the growing importance of online communication (digital communication) is creating new opportunities for both practitioners and researchers (Strauss et al., 2024). The proliferation of social media has created an attractive medium for green product communication (or pro-environmental) and wider sustainable communication (Agarwal et al., 2024). Social media appear to be very promising for communicating pro-environmental issues due to their transparency. They are attractive communication media because they allow interactive dialogue between businesses and consumers (Herrada-Lores et al., 2024). This creates an unprecedented possibility to freely express opinions about companies and brands (Bartosik-Purgat, 2019).

Digital technologies play an important role in the promotion of sustainability, including sustainable consumption patterns. This is supported by environmental communication research (Comfort & Park, 2018), which is a multidisciplinary area that assumes that the media play a key role in shaping environmental issues.

Since brands and organisations started to develop green marketing communications on social media (Milfeld et al., 2024), greenwashing practices in green communications on social media have emerged. However, despite its attractiveness and importance, green and greenwashed (greenwashing) communication on social media have so far not received much attention among researchers. Research focuses on two streams: (1) company activities and (2) consumer reactions. In the case of green marketing communication, the first stream considers the processes, tools, and effectiveness of company marketing communication. The second stream concentrates on consumers' behaviour and the resulting consumer scepticism (Aji & Sutikno, 2015), their propensity to engage in opinion-giving activities (eWOM) (Kong et al., 2021), and their willingness to buy or pay more for green products (Gomes et al., 2023).

Organisations and companies have various tools and possibilities to generate and disseminate information on social networks (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka, 2023; Crapa et al., 2024). They can use sources sponsored by

themselves, like owned media (e.g. fan pages) and paid media (e.g. paid cooperation with celebrities or influencers) and earned media, those created by other consumers who share their opinions and experiences about goods and services (e.g. eWOM; electronic word of mouth communication) (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka, 2023, 2026; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Companies can use a wide range of communication tools and platforms, such as internet advertising, eWOM, and cooperation with social media influencers.

One form of green marketing communication is (green) influencer marketing. The popularity of influencers on social media makes influencer marketing commonplace in companies' communication strategies (Vrontis et al., 2021). Influencers can inspire consumers to engage in pro-environmental behaviour, or in contrast, can discourage them from being more green (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka, 2024). In parallel with the growing use of social media, influencer marketing in green communication has gained popularity among practitioners, and it has also become the object of research interest. Although there is growing research on green marketing, social media marketing, and social influencers, the literature on green and sustainable social media influencers is scarce (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). Researchers and practitioners should analyse new possibilities to improve trust in their green performance and products and facilitate green behaviour. Social media influencers are recommended as endorsers of this change (Breves & Liebers, 2022). However, despite the interest of researchers and practitioners, research on influencer marketing in the area of sustainable communications remains fragmented.

The aims of this chapter are twofold. First, it gives an overview of company green activities on social media, that is, tools that organisations and companies can use on social media for sustainable (or green, pro-environmental) communication, mainly green influencer marketing and its persuasion mechanisms. Second, it discusses the practices of social media influencers that result in promoting (un)sustainable consumption.

5.2 Social Media as Channels for Green Communication

Social media are used by billions of companies and consumers around the world. They have changed the way consumers interact with products and services (Jalali & Khalid, 2019). Due to the huge potential audience, marketers and organisations use social media as marketing channels. Social media have become vital marketing and communication channels for businesses, organisations, and institutions (Appel et al., 2020). They can be successfully used for sustainable communication (Jalali & Khalid, 2021) and for green product communication (Jiang et al., 2024). Companies often struggle to find a suitable, effective communication strategy (Amatulli et al., 2019). This involves several decisions, including ones related to media selection (media plan) and message development (appeal strategy). Although this is an ongoing topic in

marketing debates, less research has been devoted to how to communicate sustainability (Herrada-Lores et al., 2024), particularly on social media. There is a visible need to systematise and deepen knowledge on green (or pro-environmental) communication on social media.

5.3 How Can Social Networks Be Used for Green Communication?

Social media have become some of the most widely used communication channels for pro-environmental issues because of their interactive two-way nature, which facilitates dialogue (Herrada-Lores et al., 2024; Crapa et al., 2024). In addition, they reduce information asymmetry (Forliano et al., 2025). Social media platforms are also crucial in advocating sustainability because they offer unique settings for influential behaviour (Confetto et al., 2023). These platforms influence customers' lifestyles and decision-making processes (Jalali & Khalid, 2019). Social networks are especially important in promoting environmental-related issues among Generation Z, who are very involved in digital platforms (Suryaputra et al., 2024) and are highly sensitive to green concerns (Confetto et al., 2023).

Social media may be used to promote both green behaviour and green products (Figure 5.1).

Numerous studies have focused on how social media can be used to develop sustainable or green behaviour (Confetto et al., 2023). They can be used to raise environmental awareness and promote a green lifestyle based on the pro-environmental values of customers (Buvár et al., 2023; Chwialkowska, 2019; Suryaputra et al., 2024). In addition, social networks can affect both habits and pro-environmental behaviour (Confetto et al., 2023). However, although attitudes to sustainability and green performance are generally positive, consumers who adopt green routines and practices in their daily lives are still in the minority (Buvár et al., 2023). The attitude-behaviour gap is noticeable in customer consumption. For this reason, shaping green (or pro-environmental) behaviour is of the utmost importance. Green (or pro-environmental)

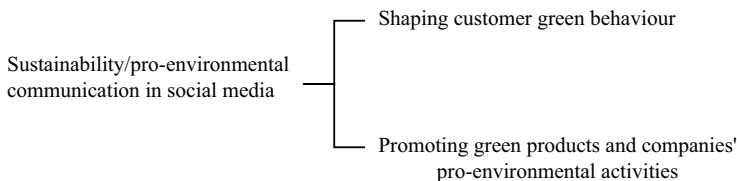


Figure 5.1 Key areas of pro-environmental communication on social networks.

Authors' own.

communication on social networks can focus on (re)shaping customer green behaviour. This refers to any activity that harms the environment as little as possible or even benefits the environment (Nivedhitha et al., 2024). Green behaviour involves a complicated ethical decision-making process, and it is considered a socially responsible behaviour type (Jalali & Khalid, 2021). This behaviour includes a wide array of individual actions in the private or public sphere in organisations (Lima et al., 2024), which are voluntary or required (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka & Tutko, 2021). They can be classified into four categories: activism, non-activist public sphere behaviour, private behaviour, and employee behaviour (Stern, 2000). Such customer behaviour involves the purchase of green products, for example, those made of recycled materials, and recycling organic food. Different actors can shape the attitudes and green behaviour of customers, such as companies, consumer organisations, and other customers. For example, some fashion businesses have redesigned marketing messages to reduce consumption (Kong et al., 2021). This sustainability driven demarketing strategy is detectable in Patagonia's "Don't buy this jacket" marketing campaign (Hwang et al., 2016; Kong et al., 2021).

However, companies actively promote their green performance and products on social media. Social media advertising is considered to be more effective than traditional digital media advertising (e.g. in online magazines) (Gomes et al., 2022). Thus, green marketing strategies consider environmental factors in the marketing mix. However, they sometimes communicate misleading or imprecise messages; instead of green marketing, they greenwash. There are different definitions of greenwashing and its forms. These practices are due to intentional and unintentional miscommunications or a lack of awareness of green business practices (Kwon et al., 2024). As greenwashing is misleading communication by companies aiming to appear more environmentally friendly than they are (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka & Proszowska, 2026), consumers should be aware of the deceptiveness of such marketing claims. This is a significant issue, and more than 70% of the claims analysed by Kwon et al. (2024) were misleading. They extended the content analysis of green advertising claims in magazines between 1989 and 1990 by Carlson, Grove, and Kangun (1993).

Customers spend much of their day scrolling through social media and being exposed to commercial content. Since social media are part of the green marketing activities of brands, social networks are exposed to green advertisements. For example, Kwon et al. (2024) investigate how corporations communicate their green efforts on social media using green advertising.

Given the rise in social media use, organisations and companies have started to extensively use social media to communicate their environmental practices to consumers (Kwon et al., 2024). Although they respond to consumer demand by actively promoting their green efforts on social media, it is necessary to focus on mechanisms that induce individual pro-environmental behaviour (Nivedhitha et al., 2024). Social media are considered to improve

environmentally conscious behaviour (Nivedhitha et al., 2024). However, although research has highlighted the importance of social media in green communication, there is a need to clarify how to use social media as channels to promote green behaviour (Li et al., 2024).

Social media are platforms where green brands and products are promoted (Kılıç & Gürlek, 2024), and users can find both valuable and false information. As these channels are the proper ones for sustainability or green (pro-environmental) communication, it is essential to consider what and how to communicate sustainability via social media (Herrada-Lores et al., 2024). This is because social media marketing differs from traditional marketing (Kong et al., 2021). They provide easier access to target groups and require little financial cost to have dialogue with consumers. Therefore, sustainability (or green, pro-environmental) communication on social media deserves more attention.

Social media play a key role in influencing consumer purchase and consumption decisions (König & Maier, 2024a). They have become some of the basic social interaction tools for consumers. Therefore, social media are appropriate channels to promote green messages through customer interaction, networking, interpersonal relationships and eWOM. Social media play an important role in the consolidation of consumer collectives (Mardon et al., 2023; Luukkonen et al., 2024). Thanks to consumer collectives (Luukkonen et al., 2024) and homophily (Nivedhitha et al., 2024), they contribute to shaping sustainable consumption patterns (Luukkonen et al., 2024). Social consumer interactions via social media may include context-specific activities involving the transmission of sustainability-oriented content. For example, Nivedhitha et al. (2024) analyse the role of specific online communities in consumer engagement in context-specific activities. They agree that specific online communities (e.g. green online communities) can be more effective than generic social media in persuading consumers to perform green practices (e.g. green purchasing). Moreover, social media enable consumers to share their content with others globally (Gomes et al., 2022).

The specific type of social interaction between consumers is eWOM communication. This is defined as interpersonal communication among consumers about products and services via the internet, mostly on social networks. It consists of consumer recommendations, which have been enlarged by the growing use of social media. The persuasiveness of eWOM results from the credibility of the source of opinions and recommendations. Consumers tend to trust other individuals who use products more than marketer-generated content (Kong et al., 2021). However, reliance on recommendations by others depends on the credibility of eWOM messages and whether they are positive or negative. Positive eWOM encourages purchases while negative eWOM restricts them (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka, 2023).

Interactions between customers on social media may refer to pro-environmental issues. Consequently, the novel construct of “green word of mouth”

(green WOM, gWOM) emerged (Chen et al., 2014). It is defined as “the extent to which a customer would inform friends, relatives and colleagues about positive environmental messages of a product or a brand” (Chen et al., 2014). Green word of mouth is a communication tool that is often used by customers to convey messages related to the environment (Chen et al., 2014). Parallel to eWOM, gWOM messages are considered to be more credible than green marketing claims by companies (Promalessy & Handriana, 2024). Nowadays, there is research interest in gWOM (Promalessy & Handriana, 2024). Internet users may express their opinions on different social media platforms. For example, customers giving opinions on YouTube have positive emotions regarding environmental sustainability-themed messages (Becan, 2024).

A customer deceived by a company or brand can react in several ways. Misleading communication about the green performance of companies and false environmental messages about a specific product (greenwashing) can lead to brand avoidance (Sajid et al., 2024) or negative green WOM (ngWOM) (Chen et al., 2014; Sajid et al., 2024). This type of negative conversation among online communities involves the expression of their dissatisfaction or negative experiences on social media platforms caused by greenwashing (Sajid et al., 2024). This specific form of consumer interaction on social media is greenwashed word of mouth (greenwashed WOM; gwWOM) (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka & Proszowska, 2023). This is a new concept in the marketing literature coined by Singh et al. (2022). It is defined as communications between consumers about misleading pro-environmental marketing practices. Such environmentally framed eWOM messages are negative (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka & Proszowska, 2023). They may be treated as a counterpoint to green eWOM or as a form of green WOM, which refers to communication about the risk of greenwashing claims and to negative statements about products.

Negative green word of mouth caused by greenwashing may be analysed as a form of consumer dysfunctional behaviour (Aron & Kultgen, 2019; Lages et al., 2023). Greenwashing triggers negative green word of mouth, with green scepticism as a mediator (Promalessy & Handriana, 2024). In other words, consumers who notice false claims are likely to share their bad experiences with other internet users. Consequently, negative messages can shape a negative image.

False information that triggers negative conversations on social networks is different. For example, negative green word of mouth may be caused by companies that add false eco-labels to products (Moon et al., 2017). Moon et al. (2017) find that false eco-labels and their similarity or ambiguity may lead to negative emotions and result in consumer distrust or dissatisfaction. On the other hand, consumers may share information about fake green claims about a brand's performance. Consumers face the challenge of navigating around the pitfalls of greenwashing (Fella & Bausa, 2024). They have problems identifying greenwashing practices in content presented on social media.

5.4 How to Communicate Green Messages on Social Media?

Undoubtedly, consumers tend to rely on information on social media in their purchase decisions. The content embedded in social media can change consumers' attitudes and behaviour in the area of pro-environmental consumption. Promoting green values and sustainable consumption on social media is one of the influential ways to shape customers' green behaviour, especially young consumers. At the same time, companies tend to use social media for green communication to achieve their communication goals by providing information about green products or to prove their green performance. However, greenwashing practices and poorly prepared social media strategies can cause other undesirable effects. For this reason, organisations and companies should be interested in identifying the best practices to communicate their green claims on social media. Message design is an important element in a marketing campaign. In particular, social media messages may integrate textual, verbal and/or visual features with the possibility to structure the content with hashtags or supplement with hyperlinks and be supported by artificial intelligence tools.

There is a growing interest in the literature in how to use social media to communicate sustainability (Crapa et al., 2024; Herrada-Lores et al., 2024). Prior research provides evidence that social media can be used to positively influence sustainable (or green) purchase intentions and lifestyle adoption (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). One may find practical models and frameworks to assess the effectiveness of green advertising (Rathee & Milfeld, 2024). However, the question of what the message should be remains.

The formulation of green messages can have a meaningful impact on their effectiveness (Olbermann et al., 2024). A deeper understanding is needed of the elements of green advertising appeals and claims, and the type of persuasion strategy used.

Green messages in green marketing communication may refer to products, production processes, images or environmental facts (Herrada-Lores et al., 2024). Agarwal et al. (2024) propose a classification of messages regarding environmental (i.e. energy consumption) or social sustainability (i.e. zero waste).

Kwon et al. (2024) conducted a content analysis of green messages posted on Instagram (2019–2021). They find that companies promote their environmental efforts, with over 70% of the claims being greenwashing. These claims mostly appeal to future generations and refer to organisational responsibility. For this reason, advertising messages predominantly use visual elements (among other means of media enrichment: texts, photos, videos, and a combination of them) (Kwon et al., 2024).

Taking a different approach, Crapa et al. (2024) focus on the effects of (non-) green messages on different social media. They notice that generally green

messages stimulate a larger response than non-green messages. However, the effect varies across social media platforms. The greatest effect is observed on Instagram and the lowest on Twitter (at least for comments) (Crapa et al., 2024). In addition, depending on the social media platform, different combinations of message elements are important. For example, on Facebook, the use of different elements (text, photos and videos) in a green message is positive. On Twitter and Instagram, it is not so important. However, in these cases, different combinations resulting from the specifics of the platform are possible.

One of the key aspects of green messages is the dialogical potential of the message. Messages with dialogical elements generate brand engagement and purchase intentions (Crapa et al., 2024; Herrada-Lores et al., 2024).

Green advertising studies have examined countless message appeal strategies using different persuasive techniques, among others, the type of message (e.g. assertive messages (Milfeld & Pittman, 2024; Milfeld et al., 2024), the emotions embedded in the message (e.g. fear (Milfeld et al., 2024), and message framing (Amatulli et al., 2019). For example, Milfeld et al. (2024) introduce the concept of arrogant appeal. It is a message appeal which does not include inducing fear of impact (fear appeal) or instructing the recipient of a message to behave in a certain way (assertiveness). In contrast, an arrogant appeal draws on comparative advertising to suggest competitive inferiority in the advertised area (Milfeld & Pittman, 2024). These messages minimise ambiguity, are attention-grabbing and encourage behavioural compliance (Milfeld & Pittman, 2024). They often are imperative (e.g. “Turn off the lights when you leave the room”). Strategies used to exaggerate the environmental benefits of a product or service improperly may be greenwashing-oriented (Milfeld et al., 2024). For example, assertive messages can create an opposite effect, leading to resistance to the proposed change in pro-environmental behaviour (Milfeld & Pittman, 2024).

In the different context of emotional messages, Amatulli et al. (2019) analyse whether green communication promoting green products is positive or negative. They show that to engage consumers in green behaviour, negative messages are more effective than positive ones. This can be explained by avoiding embarrassment (Amatulli et al., 2019). This observation is in line with some research on marketing communication and green product communication (e.g. Budzanowska-Drzewiecka, 2023).

Discussion of the effectiveness of green communication on social media needs different generational cohorts to be taken into consideration (Muralidharan et al., 2024). As Muralidharan et al. (2024) claim, to date, little is known about the effects of green messages on different generational cohorts. Research shows that green messages should vary according to the environmental values (egoistic, altruistic, and biospheric) important for each cohort. For example, biospheric messages (plants and animals) are more persuasive for Gen-Z and Gen-Y, with Gen-X and Baby Boomers having no preference (Muralidharan et al., 2024).

5.5 Influencer Marketing for Green Communication

One of the increasingly evolving issues in social media marketing is influencer marketing (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Gomes et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2024; Pittman & Abell, 2021; Veirman et al., 2017). With the rise of the internet and the explosion of social media, influencer marketing has evolved into an influential form of marketing communication. While companies use social media to communicate green (pro-environmental) concerns, social media influencers can be used as an effective tactic to promote sustainability (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). Social media influencers are even perceived by some as the most effective tool in marketing strategies (Awang et al., 2021).

5.6 What Is Influencer Marketing? What Makes It an Effective Tool?

Influencer marketing is growing rapidly with the increasing popularity of influencers (Ferraro et al., 2024). It is a main part of many digital marketing campaigns because of its effectiveness in reaching consumers who avoid traditional digital advertising (König & Maier, 2024a). Scholars explore different aspects of influencer marketing, including the role of social media influencers in marketing strategies, their persuasive effect (e.g. on consumer purchase intentions), trustworthiness, expertise, and other features of source credibility.

Unquestionably, the focal element in influencer marketing is the social media influencer. Social media influencers can be seen as opinion leaders who influence the behaviour of consumers, who are their observers or followers. They are defined as individuals who post on their social media accounts in exchange for compensation (Cheng et al., 2024). Social media influencers are increasingly popular. They shape consumer behaviour and societal changes (Cheng et al., 2024). Many customers, especially young ones, spend hours on social media, where they can engage with social media influencers (Knupfer et al., 2023). The attractiveness of a particular social media influencer for an audience is a key aspect of company-influencer cooperation. For this reason, influencers try to ensure proper reach by performing social, information, and entertainment functions on social media (Han & Balabanis, 2024).

The effectiveness of influencer marketing, or more precisely, cooperation with social media influencers, depends on the type of influencer. Social media influencers specialise in specific areas. For example, encouraging young people to change their behaviour or to buy products needs cooperation with “kidfluencers” (Tur-Viñes et al., 2018), and in the case of a sustainable lifestyle, wellness influencers (Wellman, 2023). Green influencers (Kılıç & Gürlek, 2024; König & Maier, 2024a) may be more suitable. Influencers can also be divided into micro-influencers and macro-influencers according to the number of followers. Small companies usually employ micro-influencers, while larger companies are interested in collaborating with macro-influencers

(Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024). Micro-influencers are assessed for their credibility, relevance and high engagement in interaction with their followers. Customers may engage with social media influencers by commenting on their posts or writing them private messages (Knupfer et al., 2023).

Influencers are considered persuasive. Shaping the habits and behaviour of consumers can contribute not only to the perpetuation of socially desirable behaviour (Iqbal et al., 2025). They may use different content strategies to build online eco-conscious pro-environmental communities. For this reason, they may utilise educational reels on Instagram or viral sustainability challenges (#TrashTag, #PlasticFreeJuly). However, the dark side of influencer marketing may contribute to the promotion of harmful patterns of behaviour (e.g. promoting dietary supplements or encouraging over-consumption). However, research has largely focused on the positive aspects of influencers' influence on customers. It is much less common in the literature to attempt to systematise negative phenomena resulting from the actions of social media influencers and their consequences (Hudders & Lou, 2023; Han & Balabanis, 2024; von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2023). Research analysing the negative aspects of influencer activity can focus on the mechanisms of their persuasiveness and their consequences (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). The literature on immoral and controversial influencer behaviour and its consequences is quite scarce (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023).

Social media influencers may contribute to habits that lead to unsustainable consumption. This risk is particularly evident in the fashion industry (Revlon-Chion et al., 2020). Influencers can encourage impulsive or ill-considered purchases, leading to over-consumption (Revlon-Chion et al., 2020).

5.7 How Can Green Influencers Be Used as Persuasive Communicators?

A new concept of influencer marketing named “green influencer marketing” has recently emerged. It refers to both promoting sustainability and green products. Companies recognise the need to cooperate with social media influencers who advocate sustainability. They are named “greenfluencers.” However, the origin of the term “greenfluencer” remains unclear. Pittman and Abell (2021) highlight two factors which create ideal conditions for the rise of greenfluencers (Pittman & Abell, 2021). As drivers, they trade on the ongoing shift in social media marketing and greenwashing. Green influencer marketing and green influencers are considered to be increasingly important in persuading people to be environmentally sensitive (Olbermann et al., 2024). They may influence attitudes, environmental consciousness and pro-environmental behaviour (buying intentions or political activism) (Awang et al., 2021). Moreover, due to greenwashing, consumer confidence in green advertising has declined. For these reasons, companies have turned their attention to green influencer marketing. However, influencers who are not (only)

associated with sustainability have also been found to endorse sustainable or green brands (Breves & Liebers, 2022). Therefore, interest in green influencer marketing and green influencers is growing. However, the literature on green influencer marketing is very limited (Kılıç & Gürlek, 2024), and there is no well-established definition.

A key element in green influencer marketing is the green influencer. Green influencers (greenfluencers or sustainability influencers) are a specific subtype of social media influencers (Cheng et al., 2024; Knupfer et al., 2023). They are called by different terms such as green influencers (Buvár et al., 2023), environmental influencers (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023), eco-influencers (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024), sustainable social media influencers (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022), and sinnfluencers (Schorn et al., 2022). Moreover, greenfluencers may be classified based on their particular expertise, from promoting sustainable fashion or slow tourism or smart living to giving advice about waste reduction and low-carbon measures, or initiating environmental activism (Abate et al., 2025; Knupfer et al., 2023).

Generally, green influencers focus on promoting green-related issues such as sustainable lifestyles, eco-consciousness, and green products (Pittman & Abell, 2021). They combine entertainment and lifestyle content with environmental issues. Greenfluencers advertise green products through collaboration with ecologically sustainable companies (Olbermann et al., 2024). However, they also educate people about greenwashing. In other words, they can be business-oriented and focus on green products (Olbermann et al., 2024). Conversely, they can also be opinion leaders promoting a green lifestyle rather than specific products (Olbermann et al., 2024). Examples include environmental activists like Greta Thunberg (who is a mega-influencer on Instagram) and zero-waste lifestyle promoters like Lauren Singer (a macro-influencer on Instagram) (Pittman & Abell, 2021; Zhao et al., 2024).

Green influencers are a new type of opinion leaders who shape the audience's attitudes about environmentally friendly products with posts on social networks. Therefore, they may act as powerful agents of change. The rise of green influencers results from ongoing company interest in social media marketing and the problem of greenwashing. Companies see the potential for green campaigns on social media, particularly ones that employ collaboration with influencers who demonstrate expertise in environmental issues.

Although green influencer marketing does not have a well-established theoretical and conceptual basis, research shows the essential role of influencers in promoting sustainable consumption. To date, greenfluencers have been studied primarily in the context of advertising (Olbermann et al., 2024). The challenge remains to investigate their persuasive mechanisms and the effects of their pro-environmental messages, especially as the current communication practices of green influencers are not ideal to maximise engagement and sustainable behavioural intentions (König & Maier, 2024b). Castillo-Abdul et al. (2024) examine the main types of content of five eco-influencer accounts in different Western countries. They find that green influencers focus on

promoting veganism, spirituality, environmental and political claims, product advertising (their own and third-party), and personal life (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024).

Trust and credibility are critical issues in the effectiveness of influencers' communication. Pittman and Abell (2021) find that influencer type is important in acquiring trustworthiness. They show that high popularity is beneficial for regular influencers promoting products, but not necessarily for green influencers. Greeninfluencers with low popularity are more trusted, while non-green influencers with high popularity are more trusted. This means that green influencers with fewer followers are more persuasive in promoting sustainable products. However, green influencers mostly attract followers who are interested in sustainability. Instead, non-green influencers can reach a wider, more heterogeneous customer group (Buvár et al., 2023). In a different study, Boerman et al. (2022) explore how green influencers on Instagram could be used to stimulate pro-environmental behaviour. They focus on the effects of influencer-message congruence on influencer credibility (i.e. trustworthiness and expertise) and pro-environmental intentions. The results obtained show that influencer-message congruence increases influencer credibility and pro-environmental intentions. In addition, promotion of sustainable or green products or services by influencers as sponsored content must be declared (Schorn et al., 2022). However, it is not evident whether such disclosures limit the authenticity and credibility of social media influencers.

Greeninfluencers who aim to persuade individuals to adopt specific green behaviour may use different types of persuasion strategies. For example, green influencers may promote a sustainable lifestyle (or green lifestyle), which refers to both consumption and non-purchase behaviour. In this case, eco-influencers who are opinion leaders committed to disseminating environmentally themed content and are not necessarily members of social organisations or activists in the conventional sense (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024, p. 5) can promote a sustainable lifestyle through their examples. Moreover, Chwialkowska (2019) investigates how sustainability advocates, especially green lifestyle influencers, drive their followers to adopt a green lifestyle. She focuses on two types of influence: informational and normative influence. In other words, to shape the attitude- and behaviour-change process, modelling (passively acquiring knowledge) may be used or behaviour imitation (e.g. opinion giving and spreading the information on social media). Following her findings, normative social influence is important in later stages of green lifestyle adoption, when consumers have already been persuaded to engage in green behaviour.

Another persuasion strategy utilised by greeninfluencers is gain or loss message frames. In message frames, they can include a gain frame (i.e. what can be achieved by acting in a certain way) or a loss frame (i.e. what can be lost). According to Olbermann et al. (2024), gain frames should be used in green (pro-environmental) communication. They notice that loss frames reduce behavioural intentions via negative emotions.

The persuasiveness of a green influencer depends on the appeal of his or her message. For example, messages may be non-product-related environmental or product-related environmental (Pittman & Abell, 2021), and concrete or abstract (Kapoor et al., 2023). In one study, Kapoor et al. (2023) focus on the role of message appeals (concrete vs. abstract) in determining sustainable product purchase intentions. They find that a concrete message appeal results in higher purchase intentions.

Greenwashing may damage consumer trust in green claims on social media. Similarly, influencer scandals can reduce the credibility of sustainable (or green, pro-environmental) communication. This is one of the reasons for the attention paid to virtual influencers. A virtual influencer is a specific type of social media influencer (Jiang et al., 2024; Gerrath et al., 2024). Virtual influencers can be a reliable source to promote pro-environmental and sustainable behaviour (Gerrath et al., 2024). They are interesting alternatives to human influencers with a lower risk of being involved in scandals and unethical behaviour and a greater fit with green products (Jiang et al., 2024). They may serve as brand spokespersons (e.g. United Colours of Benetton hired Noonouri to endorse a sustainable summer clothing line; BMW invited Lil Miquela to endorse its new energy vehicle). The persuasiveness of nonhuman influencers for green (pro-environmental) communication is an unexplored area. Little is known about how consumers react to virtual influencer green messages. In one pioneering study, Jiang et al. (2024) find that human influencers are more persuasive in promoting sustainable behaviour. However, this effect occurs when a virtual influencer is perceived as a standalone influencer (i.e. not affiliated with a brand). In another study, Gerrath et al. (2024) explore how virtual influencers promote green issues depending on the audience. They concentrate on message warmth. The results obtained show that message warmth is positively associated with social-psychological distance, resulting in higher engagement with pro-environmental issues.

Green influencers are significant in promoting sustainable lifestyles, but their impact may vary depending on their audience (König & Maier, 2024a). Characteristics like age and environmental knowledge (König & Maier, 2024a) may vary the effects. For example, green influencers should focus mostly on reaching a non-green audience with little environmental knowledge when promoting green consumption (König & Maier, 2024a). Moreover, green influencer marketing is particularly important in communication with Generation Z (i.e. those born after 1995) (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023).

5.8 Conclusions

To conclude, responding to pressure and encouragement to act pro-environmentally, companies face significant challenges in effectively communicating their pro-environmental efforts while avoiding greenwashing. The concept of greenwashing has evolved into a multifaceted phenomenon (Forliano et

al., 2025). Initially, in the marketing literature, greenwashing referred mostly to advertising campaigns. Nowadays, it is linked to different actions implemented by various actors in various media, among others, social media. Indeed, the role of social media is becoming more and more significant in shaping pro-environmental behaviour. Due to their nature, social media allow information to spread rapidly, leading to immediate and serious reputational damage in an environmental crisis. However, the use of social media in green marketing and sustainable communication is more complex. The effectiveness of green communication strategies can vary significantly across different social media platforms and tools. Planning and implementing a proper green social media strategy needs knowledge about customer needs and reactions to green and false green claims.

Companies tend to incorporate social media to promote their green performance. They use a wide range of communication tools and platforms in their digital marketing campaigns. Among other things, companies enhance consumers' engagement in eWOM and use social media influencers. However, due to the common practice of greenwashing, a poorly prepared social media strategy can increase consumer knowledge about the misleading tactics of marketers and reduce marketing strategy outcomes. For this reason, there is an evident need for research on the effectiveness of green social media communication.

The rise of green influencer marketing and green social media influencers enables the implementation of green communication (or sustainable communication) through new channels. They are regarded as persuasive communicators and information disseminators whom consumers follow on their social networks. Although green influencer marketing does not have a well-established theoretical and conceptual basis, a growing body of research shows the essential role of influencers, especially green influencers, in promoting sustainable consumption. Greenfluencers have become influential actors tackling the environmental crisis by promoting sustainable lifestyles and advocating tailored products. At the same time, green influencers are attractive to companies selling green products. However, there is still a lack of research showing how individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender) influence perceptions of greenwashing on social media. Moreover, green influencers often reach out to similarly minded green followers, who are probably already consuming green products. Therefore, it remains unclear how green influencer marketing prevents environmental disinformation through greenwashing on social networks. Furthermore, the literature on the dark side of influencer marketing and influencers, linked to the advance of unsustainable consumption, is limited.

Researchers and companies are interested in a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of a newer type of endorser in green influencer marketing: virtual influencers. Indeed, to date, results show that virtual influencers are less effective than human influencers in communicating green products and services (Wang et al., 2025). However, the existing research is partial, and there is a need for further investigations.

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