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Navigating Digital Sustainability: Influencer Marketing and Global Goals

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ABSTRACT:

In order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), businesses are essential, and social media influencer marketing has become a crucial tactic for advancing sustainability. This conceptual study investigates how social media promotes green corporate practices and shapes consumer views of environmental sustainability. Businesses may increase awareness and participation with SDGs by utilising influencer partnerships, content sharing, and marketing. However, adoption is hampered in underdeveloped nations by issues including resource limitations, inadequate internet connection, and digital illiteracy. Web of Science, Taylor & Francis, Emerald, Sage, Elsevier, and other credible and excellent databases were reviewed for this conceptual work. This study emphasises the advantages and disadvantages of using social media for long-term, sustainable growth. The results offer guidance to scholars, businesses, and governments on how to best use social media for promoting SDGs.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Social Media Influencer Marketing, Environmental Sustainability, Consumer Perception.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is critical for the survival of humanity and the preservation of the planet's ecosystems. In this context, social media platforms have rapidly emerged as powerful communication tools, shaping not only urban areas but also rural regions (Golmohammadi et al., 2023). The digital revolution has interconnected the world, transforming both business operations and personal communication. Social media is now an essential part of daily life, influencing how people interact and how businesses engage with consumers. To

ensure the well-being of future generations, both businesses and individuals must contribute to the conservation of natural resources and the protection of global ecosystems. Sustainability, defined as maintaining and improving environmental quality for future generations, requires companies to adopt environmentally friendly practices, which in turn attracts more consumers as societal awareness of environmental issues grows (Bruno & Dabrowski, 2016; Okuah et al., 2019). The SDGs, established by the United Nations in 2015, emphasize collaborative efforts to address global challenges such as climate change, responsible consumption, and economic growth. Businesses play a pivotal role in achieving these goals through their operational practices, supply chain management, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. A significant challenge for businesses lies in effectively communicating their sustainability efforts to consumers, who are increasingly conscious of environmental issues and expect brands to align with sustainability principles. Social media influencer marketing (SMIM) has emerged as a powerful strategy for businesses to bridge this communication gap. By leveraging influencers, businesses can create an authentic connection with consumers, build trust, and foster sustainable behaviors. Influencers act as trusted voices who can shape perceptions and encourage responsible consumer behavior, especially when they advocate for eco-friendly products and sustainable living practices.

Social media influencers, who have built substantial followings and established credibility, are key players in this process. They humanize sustainability efforts, making them more relatable and compelling for audiences. Brands that partner with influencers advocating for sustainability can enhance their credibility and consumer trust, supporting SDGs more effectively. SMIs have become highly influential, with their reach and persuasive power making them ideal for promoting sustainable practices and eco-friendly products (Malik et al., 2023). They often share informative content on topics such as zero-waste lifestyles, green energy, and ethical consumption, collaborating with brands to promote products and inspire collective action toward sustainability. As such, businesses that align themselves with sustainability-focused influencers can drive meaningful change in consumer behavior. Given the increasing reliance on social media for information and purchasing decisions, social media communication has emerged as an essential tool for raising awareness about sustainability. It can help drive positive behavioral changes, influencing businesses, individuals, and society to adopt more sustainable practices (Radi & Shokouhyar, 2021). However, while social media influencers have proven effective in promoting sustainable behaviors, there is still limited research on how they can shape consumer perceptions of environmentally friendly products. Understanding the role of SMIs in influencing consumer awareness of environmental sustainability and supporting green business practices is crucial for advancing the SDGs. Addressing this gap, this study explores the research question:

"How can social media influencer marketing be leveraged to enhance consumer awareness of

environmental sustainability and support sustainable business practices in the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?"

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 Consumer Awareness on Sustainable Consumption:

There is increasing pressure on corporate organizations to adopt sustainable practices due to rising consumer demand for environmentally friendly products. While many consumers express willingness to support eco-friendly initiatives, studies show that a significant portion, especially in developing countries, remains unaware of the severity of environmental issues and their role in addressing them (Song et al., 2022; TravelPerk, 2023). For instance, a 2021 survey by Simon-Kucher (2021) revealed that although 85% of consumers were loyal to socially responsible companies, they lacked knowledge about sustainable consumption. Similarly, Accenture's 2019 survey found that 81% of consumers had limited understanding of sustainability but were willing to pay more for sustainable products. In developing countries, barriers such as the perceived high cost of sustainable products and lack of knowledge hinder consumer intention to purchase eco-friendly items (Wang et al., 2019).

These findings highlight the need for awareness and education on sustainability, the SDGs, and the importance of eco-friendly consumption to encourage pro-sustainability behavior and support the SDGs. Social media, with its wide reach, plays a crucial role in this process. Studies, such as by Radi and Shokouhyar (2021), show that raising awareness through social media can foster pro-environmental behavior. Yamane and Kaneko (2021) also found that when consumers are aware of the SDGs, they are more likely to favor companies aligned with these goals. Consumer understanding of sustainability directly impacts their willingness to purchase sustainable products, making it more likely for companies to invest in eco-friendly options if they know there is demand.

2.2 Rise of Social Media and Its Role in Shaping Consumer Behavior Towards Sustainability:

The rise of social media has significantly transformed consumer behavior, moving away from traditional communication channels like television, radio, and print media (Foroudi et al., 2022; Radi & Shokouhyar, 2021). This shift has altered the communication landscape, evolving from a one-way, business-driven model to a dynamic, interactive, and peer-to-peer exchange (Trivedi et al., 2020). As a result, social media has become a powerful tool for influencing consumer attitudes, particularly towards sustainability. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok enable brands and social media influencers (SMIs) to engage directly with consumers, raising awareness about eco-friendly products and sustainable practices.

SMIs, with their credibility and large followings, play a vital role in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors regarding sustainability (Gil-Soto et al., 2019; Sun & Wang, 2020). By aligning with sustainability values, influencers can educate their audiences and foster responsible

consumption. In addition, social media's interactive nature allows businesses to effectively communicate their sustainability efforts, encouraging consumer support for brands committed to environmentally friendly practices (Szabo & Webster, 2021). However, to maintain authenticity and avoid greenwashing, it is crucial for businesses and influencers to manage their content carefully. Overall, social media, through influencers and direct engagement, plays an essential role in promoting sustainability and driving positive consumer behavior.

2.3 Role of Businesses in Achieving Sustainable Development and the SDGs:

Sustainability, or sustainable development, refers to the practice of developing, producing, and consuming goods and services in a manner that meets the needs and desires of the current generation without hindering the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Ordonez-Ponce et al., 2021). The concept has gained significant attention recently due to growing environmental concerns, climate change, and increasing social inequalities. As a result, businesses are facing mounting pressure from key stakeholders, including governmental bodies and society at large, to integrate socially and environmentally responsible values into their strategies, structures, policies, and management systems (Kong et al., 2021). For companies to remain successful, it has become essential to adopt strategies and practices that address social and environmental issues in a more holistic manner. Numerous calls have been made for corporations to take a more active role in sustainable development (Mio et al., 2020). While profitability remains a key objective for businesses, long-term success may be jeopardized if they fail to address social and environmental challenges. Consequently, the sustainability agenda must extend across the entire organization and its value chain (Ghosh & Rajan, 2019). Szabo and Webster (2021) argue that due to their unique capabilities—such as financial resources, industry-specific knowledge, and managerial expertise—corporations play a critical role in achieving the SDGs. This underscores the importance of the private sector's involvement, collaboration, and commitment to the 2030 Agenda for the SDGs. Furthermore, Schramade (2017) highlights that Goal 12, which focuses on ensuring sustainable consumption and production, underscores the significant role businesses play in achieving sustainable development.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER MARKETING AND SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS PRACTICES:

3.1 Overview of Social Media Influencer Marketing:

With the rise and rapid expansion of social networking and media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, and Instagram, a new form of consumer influencer has emerged: social media influencers (SMIs) (Ahmad et al., 2019). A social media influencer is an individual who has developed a large following on social media through the content they create and has gained the ability to influence their audience (Malik et al., 2023). These influencers engage with their followers

by sharing their personal views, expertise, and often promoting products they endorse. Due to their substantial follower base and the influence they wield, many leading organizations often rely on them to promote their brands or increase brand awareness (Voorveld, 2019). The widespread use of social media platforms and the billions of daily internet users have made the social media influencer industry one of the most powerful and effective tools for shaping consumer perceptions and purchase decisions (Okuah et al., 2019). By December 2022, the industry's estimated value had more than doubled compared to 2019, reaching 16.4 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2023). The rapid and impressive growth of SMIs can be attributed to their influence on followers as trusted experts (Malik et al., 2023). For example, a Statista (2023) survey indicates that about 70% of teenagers prefer SMIs over traditional celebrities, and 53% of women are more likely to purchase products recommended by these influencers. Additionally, a study by Szabo and Webster (2021) highlights the impact celebrities have on their followers' purchasing intentions, further supporting the significant role of SMIs in influencing consumer behavior (Lim et al., 2017).

3.2 Potential synergy between influencer marketing and sustainability:

The synergy between influencer marketing and sustainability is evident in how social media influencers (SMIs) promote eco-friendly practices and products, shaping consumer behavior and raising awareness. By engaging authentically with their followers, influencers have become key advocates for sustainability. Research shows that consumers, particularly Gen Z, are more inclined to support brands that align with their sustainability values (Deloitte, 2024). Influencers are pivotal in encouraging responsible consumption, challenging societal norms around environmental issues, and driving a shift toward more sustainable lifestyles. Businesses can leverage influencer marketing to enhance their corporate social responsibility (CSR) image, promoting sustainable products and building credibility. However, authenticity is crucial, as consumers can easily detect inauthentic or "greenwashed" messages, which can damage a brand's reputation. The integration of influencer marketing with sustainability contributes to the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by educating the public on responsible consumption, climate action, and sustainability.

Research by Okuah et al. (2019) underscores the influence of SMIs in raising awareness and shaping public perception of positive environmental behavior. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2020) highlight the importance of SMIs in promoting sustainable fashion. Yıldırım (2021) further supports these findings, showing that female green influencers effectively drive consumer behavior toward sustainable choices in areas like food, travel, cosmetics, and overall lifestyle decisions through digital platforms. The growing body of evidence highlights the role of social media and influencers in advancing sustainability efforts.

3.3 Case Studies of Brands Successfully Using Influencers for Sustainability Campaigns:

For instance, Ocean Bottle and its partner Plastic Bank are leveraging TikTok's reach through their #econfession campaign to prevent 80 million kg of plastic from polluting the oceans (Peel-Yates, 2022). Prominent eco-conscious influencers like Leah Thomas use their platforms to engage followers on issues like environmental justice and equality (The Good Grade, 2022). Furthermore, Kathryn Kellogg, an Instagram influencer, has built a large following by sharing tips for living a waste-free life, in addition to collaborating with brands on sustainability marketing (Peel-Yates, 2022). Many corporate organizations have also used social media to promote sustainable practices and environmentally friendly products, such as Allbirds, Everlane, Starbucks, Johnson & Johnson, Patagonia, TOMS, TRIBE, and Tentree. For instance, Allbirds, a Silicon Valley startup, gained attention by emphasizing sustainability and engaging consumers through social media (Peel-Yates, 2022). The company uses natural materials like merino wool and eucalyptus to produce its footwear and employs social media influencers to attract eco-conscious Millennials and Generation Z (Peel-Yates, 2022).

3.4 Opportunities and Benefits of SMIM for SDG Awareness:

Social Media Influencer Marketing (SMIM) offers several opportunities and benefits for increasing awareness and engagement with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By leveraging the power of influencers, SMIM can effectively communicate sustainability messages, reach diverse audiences, and drive positive behavioral changes. Influencers, especially those who advocate for sustainability, can connect with their followers on a personal level, making sustainability-related topics more relatable and actionable. Below are the key opportunities and benefits that SMIM offers for SDG awareness:

- **Widespread Reach and Influence:** SMIM allows brands and organizations to tap into the large and engaged audiences of social media influencers. Influencers have the ability to reach millions of followers, including those from younger generations such as Gen Z, who are particularly concerned about sustainability (Deloitte, 2024).
- **Enhanced Consumer Engagement:** Through relatable content, influencers can foster deeper connections with their audience. By sharing educational content and promoting sustainable lifestyles, they drive engagement, which ultimately increases awareness and action toward the SDGs.
- **Shifting Consumer Behavior:** Influencers can significantly influence consumer purchasing decisions by promoting eco-friendly products and responsible consumption. As consumers are increasingly drawn to brands with sustainability practices, influencers can guide them toward making more sustainable choices, directly contributing to SDG 12 (responsible consumption) and SDG 13 (climate action).
- **Improved Brand Credibility:** Collaborations between brands and influencers can help

businesses enhance their corporate social responsibility (CSR) image. When influencers advocate for sustainable products and causes, they lend credibility to the brand, increasing consumer trust and loyalty.

- **Boosting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** SMIM can help brands align with SDGs by promoting products and services that contribute to environmental sustainability. Brands that work with influencers who prioritize sustainable practices can strengthen their commitment to SDGs and showcase their involvement in global sustainability efforts.
- **Community Building for Collective Action:** Influencers create communities that allow their followers to take collective action toward sustainable causes. By encouraging groups of people to work together, influencers can amplify the impact of sustainability initiatives.

3.5 Challenges and Barriers in Using SMIM for Sustainability:

Social media influencers (SMIs) can play a significant role in promoting sustainability, but their use also presents challenges. While influencers have the power to shape consumer behavior, they may promote unethical or unsustainable products for personal gain. There's also the risk of greenwashing, where influencers misrepresent unsustainable products as eco-friendly. Additionally, over-exaggerated claims by influencers can harm brands and result in negative backlash. Choosing the wrong influencer can also damage a brand's reputation. In developing countries, challenges like digital illiteracy, limited internet access, and resource constraints can further hinder the effectiveness of influencer marketing for sustainability.

- **Greenwashing Risk:** One of the most significant challenges of using social media influencers to promote sustainability is the risk of greenwashing, where influencers unknowingly or intentionally promote products that are falsely advertised as environmentally friendly. This misrepresentation can deceive consumers into thinking they are making sustainable choices when, in reality, the product or brand does not live up to sustainability standards. Greenwashing undermines the credibility of influencers and damages consumer trust, which can have long-term negative effects on both the influencer's and the brand's reputation.
- **Misaligned Values:** When companies select influencers whose values or past behavior do not align with their sustainability goals, the effectiveness of the marketing campaign may be compromised. For example, an influencer known for promoting non-sustainable behaviors or controversial opinions may create a disconnect with the target audience, resulting in backlash or diminished brand credibility. Aligning with the right influencer whose ethos matches the brand's message is critical for maintaining authenticity and ensuring the campaign resonates with consumers.
- **Unethical Promotion:** Some influencers may prioritize personal gain over the promotion of

genuinely sustainable products, leading to unethical marketing practices. In some cases, influencers might promote products that have minimal environmental benefits or are outright harmful, solely for financial compensation. This not only jeopardizes the integrity of the influencer but also risks spreading misleading information about sustainable practices, undermining the larger movement toward responsible consumption.

- **Overexaggerated Claims:** Influencers, in their eagerness to promote a product, may overstate its sustainability benefits, making exaggerated claims about its positive environmental impact. While this can initially attract attention, such overpromises often lead to negative backlash when consumers realize the claims were unsubstantiated. This harms both the influencer's and the brand's reputation, and can lead to legal repercussions or public relations issues.
- **Digital Literacy Issues:** In many developing regions, limited digital literacy can pose a barrier to the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns. Consumers may not have the skills or knowledge to critically evaluate sustainability claims made by influencers, leading them to make ill-informed purchasing decisions. This is especially problematic when influencers are promoting products that appear sustainable but are not, as these consumers may be more susceptible to greenwashing.
- **Limited Internet Access:** Internet access plays a crucial role in the success of social media influencer campaigns. In regions with limited or no access to the internet, the reach and effectiveness of influencer marketing are severely hindered. Influencers may struggle to make an impact in these areas, which reduces the overall effectiveness of sustainability campaigns. To overcome this challenge, brands need to tailor their strategies to ensure that their messages can reach and influence broader, more diverse audiences.

4. IMPLICATIONS:

This study highlights the growing significance of social media influencer marketing (SMIM) in promoting sustainability and supporting the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of the key implications of this research is that businesses can leverage SMIM to engage and educate consumers on sustainability-related issues, fostering a more informed and responsible consumer base. The authenticity of influencers, especially those who advocate for environmental causes, plays a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions and influencing purchasing decisions. By partnering with influencers who align with their sustainability values, brands can strengthen their credibility and trustworthiness, thus enhancing their corporate social responsibility (CSR) image. Furthermore, SMIM provides an effective tool for raising awareness about sustainable consumption and production, contributing to the global movement towards achieving SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production). However, businesses must

also be cautious about the risks of greenwashing and ensure their sustainability claims are substantiated to maintain consumer trust. In developing countries, the challenges of digital illiteracy, limited internet access, and resource constraints must be addressed to maximize the reach and impact of SMIM campaigns aimed at promoting sustainability.

5. CONCLUSION:

Social media influencer marketing offers a promising avenue for promoting sustainable business practices and advancing the SDGs, particularly in terms of environmental sustainability. The study underscores the significant role that social media influencers (SMIs) can play in educating consumers, shaping their attitudes towards eco-friendly products, and encouraging responsible consumption. As consumer awareness of sustainability grows, influencers can act as powerful advocates for change by making sustainability more relatable and actionable. The integration of influencer marketing with sustainability initiatives not only helps businesses strengthen their brand credibility but also aligns them with the broader global movement towards environmental conservation. Despite the potential of SMIM to drive positive consumer behavior, there are inherent challenges, such as the risk of greenwashing, misaligned values, and unethical promotion, that must be managed carefully. For SMIM to be truly effective in advancing sustainability, it is essential that businesses and influencers work together to promote genuine, impactful sustainability practices.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION:

This study is conceptual in nature and relies on a review of existing literature, which presents a limitation in terms of empirical data to support the theoretical frameworks discussed. Future research could explore the actual impact of SMIM on consumer behavior and sustainability awareness through primary data collection, including surveys or experiments with social media users. Additionally, the study's focus on developed markets highlights a gap in understanding the challenges and opportunities of SMIM in developing countries, where issues such as digital illiteracy and limited access to the internet may limit the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns. Future research could examine the role of SMIM in promoting sustainability in these regions and explore strategies for overcoming these barriers. Another area for future investigation is the role of different types of influencers, such as micro-influencers versus macro-influencers, and how their engagement with followers may vary in terms of promoting sustainability. Research could also delve into the potential impact of influencer transparency, such as clear disclosure of paid partnerships, on consumer trust and engagement in sustainability campaigns. Finally, the study's focus on environmental sustainability opens opportunities for exploring other dimensions of sustainability, such as social and economic sustainability, and how influencer marketing can contribute to a holistic approach to achieving the SDGs.

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