

Original Research Article

An Analytical Study of Social Media Influencer Marketing and Greenwashing Practices in FMCG Brands

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Abstract:

The rapid growth of social media influencer marketing has transformed the way Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) brands communicate with consumers. At the same time, increasing environmental awareness has encouraged brands to promote sustainability-related claims, raising concerns about greenwashing. This study analytically examines the relationship between social media influencer marketing and greenwashing practices in FMCG brands, with a focus on influencer credibility, consumer awareness, trust, brand credibility, and purchase intention. The study highlights the importance of transparent and authentic sustainability communication and examines how misleading environmental claims communicated through influencers may influence consumer perceptions and behaviour. The study emphasizes the need for evidence-based environmental claims, responsible influencer endorsements, and greater consumer awareness to promote ethical and credible sustainability marketing in the FMCG sector.

Keywords: Social Media Influencer Marketing, Greenwashing, FMCG Brands, Sustainability Communication, Consumer Trust, Brand Credibility, Environmental Claims, Consumer Behaviour, Green Marketing, Purchase Intention.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of social media has transformed the marketing strategies of Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) brands, with influencer marketing emerging as an effective means of engaging consumers and shaping their purchase decisions. Social media influencers are often perceived as relatable and credible sources of information, making their recommendations particularly influential. At the same time, growing environmental awareness has encouraged FMCG brands to promote sustainability-related claims concerning packaging, sourcing, production, and product benefits. However, when such claims are vague, exaggerated, or unsupported, they may contribute to greenwashing and mislead consumers about the actual environmental performance of products. This study examines the relationship between social media influencer marketing and greenwashing practices in FMCG brands, focusing on consumer awareness, influencer credibility, trust, brand credibility, and purchase intention. The study highlights the importance of transparent, authentic, and evidence-based sustainability communication to promote responsible marketing practices in the FMCG sector.

2. Research Problem

The increasing adoption of social media influencer marketing has transformed the promotional strategies of FMCG brands. Influencers provide brands with access to highly engaged digital communities and enable companies to communicate product information through personalized and relatable content. At the same time, increasing environmental awareness has encouraged FMCG companies to incorporate sustainability messages into their marketing communication.

However, the growing popularity of environmental claims creates a potential risk of greenwashing. Sustainability claims promoted through influencers may sometimes be vague, exaggerated, incomplete, or insufficiently supported by evidence. Because consumers often associate influencers with authenticity and trust, they may accept such claims without critically evaluating their accuracy. The central research problem addressed in this study is therefore the need to understand whether social media influencer marketing contributes to consumer awareness or acceptance of potentially misleading sustainability claims within the FMCG sector. The study also seeks to examine whether perceptions of greenwashing influence consumer trust, brand credibility, brand attitude, and purchase intention. It further considers the ethical responsibilities of influencers and FMCG brands in communicating environmental information.

3. Research Gap

Existing research on influencer marketing has largely examined influencer credibility, source attractiveness, consumer engagement, brand awareness, advertising disclosure, and purchase intention. Studies such as Lou and Yuan (2019) and Weismueller et al. (2020) demonstrate the importance of influencer credibility and disclosure in shaping consumer responses.

Similarly, research on greenwashing has examined misleading environmental claims, consumer confusion, perceived environmental risk, corporate reputation, and green trust. Delmas and Burbano (2011), Chen and Chang (2013), and de Freitas Netto et al. (2020) provide important conceptual and empirical foundations for understanding greenwashing. However, these two research areas have often been investigated separately. Comparatively limited research has examined the intersection of social media influencer marketing and greenwashing practices, particularly within the FMCG sector.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the role of social media influencer marketing in promoting FMCG brands.
2. To analyse the nature of sustainability-related messages communicated by influencers on social media platforms.
3. To examine consumer awareness and perceptions of greenwashing practices in FMCG influencer marketing.
4. To analyse the impact of perceived greenwashing on consumer trust and brand credibility.
5. To examine the relationship between influencer credibility, sustainability communication, and consumer purchase intention.
6. To develop a framework for transparent and ethical sustainability communication through social media influencer marketing.

5. Scope of the Study

The study focuses on selected FMCG brands that actively use social media influencer marketing and communicate sustainability-related claims.

The geographical scope may focus on consumers in India, particularly social media users who purchase FMCG products.

The study considers major social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and short-form video platforms.

The study focuses on sustainability communication related to:

- Eco-friendly packaging
- Recyclability
- Plastic reduction
- Natural or sustainable ingredients
- Sustainable sourcing
- Environmental responsibility
- Carbon reduction
- Ethical production
- Waste reduction

The study examines consumer perceptions rather than making definitive legal conclusions regarding whether individual companies have engaged in unlawful greenwashing.

6. Importance of the Study

The study is significant from academic, managerial, consumer, and regulatory perspectives.

From an academic perspective, it contributes to the literature by connecting two important areas: social media influencer marketing and greenwashing. It provides a framework for examining how influencer credibility interacts with sustainability communication and consumer perceptions.

From a managerial perspective, the findings may assist FMCG brands in developing transparent and credible sustainability communication strategies. Brands can use the findings to understand the risks associated with vague environmental claims and the importance of evidence-based communication.

For influencers, the study highlights the ethical responsibility associated with endorsing sustainability-related claims. Influencers can play an important role in educating consumers, but they should avoid promoting environmental claims that they cannot reasonably verify.

7. Literature Review

7.1 Social Media Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has emerged as a significant component of contemporary digital marketing. Influencers are often perceived as opinion leaders who can affect consumer attitudes and behaviours through their content and personal relationships with followers.

Freberg et al. (2011) examined public perceptions of social media influencers and found that influencers may be viewed as credible and influential personalities within digital communities. Their findings demonstrate the importance of personality and perceived credibility in influencer communication.

Lou and Yuan (2019) examined the influence of message value and credibility on consumer trust in branded social media content. Their findings suggest that influencer credibility and the value of the information communicated through influencer content are important factors in developing consumer trust.

De Veirman et al. (2017) studied Instagram influencer marketing and found that the number of followers and perceived product relevance can affect consumer attitudes toward brands. This research demonstrates the importance of influencer characteristics in digital marketing effectiveness.

Weismueller et al. (2020) examined influencer endorsements and found that source credibility and advertising disclosure influence consumer purchase intentions. The study highlights the importance of transparency in sponsored influencer content.

7.2 Greenwashing

Greenwashing has become an important concern in sustainability marketing. Delmas and Burbano (2011) identified several organizational and external factors that can encourage greenwashing. These include market pressures, consumer demand, regulatory conditions, and competitive pressures.

de Freitas Netto et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of greenwashing literature and identified different concepts and forms associated with misleading environmental communication. Their research demonstrates that greenwashing is a multidimensional phenomenon involving communication, organizational practices, and consumer perceptions.

Chen and Chang (2013) examined the relationship between greenwashing and green trust. Their study indicates that greenwashing can increase consumer confusion and perceived risk, which may negatively affect green trust.

Nyilasy et al. (2014) investigated consumer perceptions of greenwashing and found that consumers' reactions are influenced by both green marketing communication and perceptions of corporate environmental performance.

7.4 Influencer Marketing and Greenwashing: Emerging Intersection

The intersection of influencer marketing and greenwashing represents an emerging research area. Influencers can increase the visibility of sustainability claims and make environmental messages more relatable to consumers.

However, their perceived authenticity may also create a higher level of trust in claims that consumers may not independently verify.

This creates an important ethical question: **Should influencers be responsible for verifying sustainability claims before promoting them?** The present study addresses this question by examining the relationship between influencer credibility, sustainability communication, perceived greenwashing, consumer trust, and purchase intention.

9. Selected FMCG Brands and Influencer Marketing

The FMCG industry represents one of the most active sectors in influencer marketing due to the frequent purchase and wide consumer base of its products.

FMCG Company	Selected Brand/Category	Influencer Marketing Application	Sustainability Communication
Unilever	Dove	Beauty and lifestyle creators	Packaging, responsible beauty, sustainability
The Coca-Cola Company	Coca-Cola	Celebrity and lifestyle creators	Recycling and packaging initiatives
Nestlé	Nescafé	Food and coffee creators	Sustainable coffee sourcing
Danone	Evian	Wellness and lifestyle influencers	Packaging and recycled materials
Honasa Consumer Ltd.	Mama earth	Beauty, parenting and lifestyle influencers	Natural and sustainability-related positioning

10. Greenwashing Practices in FMCG Influencer Marketing

Greenwashing in influencer marketing may occur through several forms of communication.

10.1 Vague Environmental Claims

Terms such as "eco-friendly," "green," "clean," or "sustainable" may be used without sufficient explanation or supporting evidence.

10.2 Hidden Trade-offs

An influencer may highlight one environmentally positive feature while ignoring other significant environmental impacts associated with the product.

10.3 Unsubstantiated Claims

Claims may be presented without reliable evidence, certification, or independently verifiable information.

10.4 Misleading Visual Communication

Images involving forests, plants, oceans, and natural landscapes may create an impression of environmental responsibility even when the product's environmental benefits are unclear.

10.5 Selective Sustainability Communication

Brands may emphasize a limited sustainability initiative while failing to communicate broader environmental challenges associated with their operations.

10.6 Influencer Amplification

When an influencer repeats a brand's environmental claim without adequate verification, the claim may appear more authentic because it is communicated through a trusted personal channel.

11. Research Methodology

The study adopts a **descriptive and analytical research design** to examine the relationship between social media influencer marketing and greenwashing practices in FMCG brands.

The study uses both primary and secondary data.

11.1 Primary Data

Primary data may be collected using a structured questionnaire administered to consumers who:

- Use social media platforms.
- Follow or view influencer content.
- Purchase FMCG products.
- Have encountered sustainability-related marketing claims.

A five-point Likert scale may be used:

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

11.2 Proposed Variables

Independent Variables:

- Influencer credibility
- Influencer authenticity
- Sustainability communication
- Advertising disclosure

Mediating/Moderating Variables:

- Consumer environmental awareness
- Perceived greenwashing
- Consumer scepticism

Dependent Variables:

- Consumer trust
- Brand credibility
- Purchase intention

11.3 Proposed Sample

The proposed sample may consist of **150–300 respondents** who actively use social media and purchase FMCG products.

The study may employ convenience sampling because of accessibility and practical limitations. However, the limitations of this sampling technique should be clearly acknowledged.

11.4 Secondary Data

Secondary data may be obtained from:

- Peer-reviewed academic journals
- Books
- Research papers
- Industry reports
- Corporate sustainability reports
- Regulatory guidelines
- Advertising standards
- Government publications
- Credible websites

12. Research Design, Results and Discussion

12.1 Research Design

The research design is descriptive and analytical. The descriptive component examines consumer awareness and perceptions of influencer marketing and greenwashing. The analytical component examines relationships between influencer credibility, sustainability claims, perceived greenwashing, consumer trust, brand credibility, and purchase intention.

12.2 Proposed Data Analysis

The following statistical techniques may be used:

- Frequency distribution
- Percentage analysis
- Mean and standard deviation
- Cronbach's Alpha
- Correlation analysis
- Regression analysis
- Factor analysis
- Graphical representation

12.3 Proposed Hypotheses

H₀1: There is no significant relationship between influencer credibility and consumer trust in sustainability-related FMCG claims.

H₁1: There is a significant relationship between influencer credibility and consumer trust in sustainability-related FMCG claims.

H₀2: Perceived greenwashing has no significant impact on consumer trust in FMCG brands.

H₁2: Perceived greenwashing has a significant negative impact on consumer trust in FMCG brands.

H₀3: There is no significant relationship between consumer awareness of greenwashing and purchase intention.

H₁3: Consumer awareness of greenwashing significantly influences purchase intention.

H₀4: Influencer credibility has no significant relationship with consumer perceptions of sustainability claims.

H₁4: Influencer credibility has a significant relationship with consumer perceptions of sustainability claims.

13. Results and Discussion

Important: The following section is a proposed academic interpretation and should be replaced or updated after actual questionnaire data are collected and statistically analysed.

The expected findings suggest that social media influencer marketing plays an important role in creating awareness of FMCG products and shaping consumer perceptions. Influencer-generated content may be particularly effective because consumers often perceive influencers as relatable and authentic sources of information. The study is also expected to demonstrate that influencer credibility can positively influence consumer trust in sustainability-related messages. However, this relationship may become negative when consumers perceive the environmental claims to be exaggerated, vague, or unsupported.

Consumer awareness is expected to play an important role in identifying greenwashing. Consumers with higher environmental awareness may be more likely to question sustainability claims and seek additional information before making purchase decisions. The study further anticipates that perceived greenwashing will negatively influence brand trust and brand credibility. Once consumers perceive that a brand has used misleading sustainability communication, they may become sceptical of future environmental claims.

14. Ethical Considerations

The study will follow appropriate research ethics.

- Participation will be voluntary.
- Respondents will be informed about the purpose of the research.
- Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained.
- Personal information will not be disclosed.

15. Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations.

First, convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the proposed sample may not represent all FMCG consumers across India. Third, responses collected through questionnaires are self-reported and may be influenced by social desirability bias. The study also focuses primarily on consumer perceptions and does not independently verify the environmental performance of each FMCG brand. Therefore, perceived greenwashing should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of actual corporate misconduct.

16. Implications of the Study

16.1 Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to the existing literature by integrating influencer marketing and greenwashing within a single conceptual framework. It extends understanding of how influencer credibility, consumer awareness, and perceived greenwashing interact to influence consumer trust and purchase intention.

16.2 Managerial Implications

FMCG companies should ensure that sustainability claims communicated through influencers are:

- Specific
- Clear
- Accurate
- Verifiable
- Supported by evidence
- Consistent with actual environmental performance

Companies should also provide influencers with accurate information and encourage responsible communication rather than relying solely on persuasive promotional language.

16.3 Implications for Influencers

Influencers should recognize that their credibility creates an ethical responsibility. Before promoting sustainability claims, influencers should examine whether claims are adequately supported and clearly disclosed as sponsored communication.

16.4 Policy Implications

Regulators should strengthen monitoring of digital environmental advertising and influencer marketing. Clear guidelines regarding environmental claims and paid sustainability endorsements can help protect consumers from misleading information.

17. Recommendations

For FMCG Companies

1. Use specific and evidence-based environmental claims.
2. Avoid vague terminology without supporting information.
3. Provide transparent sustainability data.
4. Ensure consistency between corporate sustainability practices and influencer communication.

For Social Media Influencers

1. Clearly disclose paid partnerships.
2. Avoid making unsupported environmental claims.
3. Verify sustainability information before promoting products.
4. Distinguish personal opinions from factual environmental claims.

For Consumers

1. Critically evaluate environmental claims.
2. Look for credible certifications and supporting evidence.
3. Avoid assuming that influencer endorsements guarantee environmental authenticity.
4. Compare sustainability information across different sources.

18. Conclusion

The present study highlights the growing intersection between social media influencer marketing and greenwashing practices in the FMCG sector. Influencer marketing has transformed the manner in which brands communicate with consumers by combining commercial messages with personal, relatable, and interactive content. As environmental sustainability becomes increasingly important to consumers, influencers are also being used to communicate sustainability-related claims.

However, the credibility associated with influencers creates both opportunities and risks. When sustainability claims are genuine, transparent, and supported by credible evidence, influencer marketing can contribute positively to consumer awareness and sustainable consumption. Conversely, when vague, exaggerated, or misleading claims are promoted through trusted influencers, the same communication mechanism may amplify greenwashing and create consumer confusion.

19. Future Research

Future studies may:

- Examine larger and more geographically diverse samples.
- Compare different FMCG categories.
- Compare Gen Z, Millennials, and older consumer groups.
- Study the role of influencer type—celebrity, macro, micro, and nano influencers.
- Compare Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok-based sustainability communication.
- Conduct experimental studies to examine consumer responses to genuine versus misleading claims.
- Use Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to test complex relationships.

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