Social Media's Impact on Sustainability Engagement: Brands, NGOs, and Influencers

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: *Sustainability; Social Media; Digital Engagement; Consumer Behavior; Brands; NGOs, Influencers*

As social media becomes a dominant channel for advocacy and marketing, its role in promoting sustainability is increasingly vital. This study examines how brands, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and influencers utilize social media platforms—Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter)—to engage audiences in sustainability campaigns. By conducting a comparative content analysis of 30 accounts (10 per category), this research identifies key persuasive strategies, engagement levels, and audience sentiment toward sustainability messaging. Preliminary findings suggest that influencers generate higher engagement and trust among audiences, while NGOs are perceived as the most credible sources of sustainability advocacy. Brands, despite their extensive reach, often face skepticism due to concerns over greenwashing. Posts that incorporate emotional storytelling and direct calls to action tend to receive higher engagement compared to purely informational content. Additionally, visual content such as short-form videos on TikTok and Instagram Reels attracts significantly more audience interaction than text-based posts on X.By analyzing these dynamics, this study provides insights into the effectiveness of digital sustainability campaigns and offers recommendations for optimizing social media strategies to enhance public participation in sustainability efforts. The findings will support organizations, policymakers, and content creators in developing more impactful sustainability messaging in the digital era.

1. Introduction

As social media becomes a dominant channel for advocacy and marketing, its role in promoting sustainability is increasingly vital. This study examines how brands, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and influencers utilize social media platforms—Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter)—to engage audiences in sustainability campaigns. By conducting a comparative content analysis of 30 accounts (10 per category), this research identifies key persuasive strategies, engagement levels, and audience sentiment toward sustainability messaging.

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policymakers, and content creators in developing more impactful sustainability messaging in the digital era.

2. Method

This study employs a comparative content analysis of 30 social media accounts across Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), representing brands, NGOs, and influencers (10 per category). The research systematically examines sustainability-related posts from the past six months, tracking key engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and views. Additionally, the study analyzes persuasive strategies used in these campaigns, categorizing content based on emotional appeals, logical arguments, and calls to action. A sentiment analysis of audience responses is conducted to assess public perception of sustainability messaging, distinguishing between positive, neutral, and negative reactions. The findings are then compared across the three categories to determine which type of social media entity is most effective in driving engagement and influencing behavior. The study's mixed-method approach provides both quantitative insights (engagement metrics) and qualitative perspectives (content themes and audience sentiment), offering a comprehensive evaluation of digital sustainability advocacy.

3. Result and Discussion

The analysis of social media sustainability campaigns is expected to reveal significant differences in engagement levels, persuasive strategies, and audience sentiment across brands, NGOs, and influencers. While influencers are anticipated to generate the highest engagement due to their personalized and visually engaging content, NGOs may emerge as the most credible sources of sustainability advocacy, particularly when presenting data-driven arguments and urgent calls to action. In contrast, brands, despite their broad reach and strategic marketing, may experience mixed audience responses, as corporate sustainability messaging often faces skepticism, particularly when perceived as greenwashing (Carlson et al., 2021).

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which explains how consumers process persuasive messages through central and peripheral routes. Influencers are likely to activate the peripheral route, where audiences are persuaded by aesthetics, relatability, and emotional appeals rather than logical arguments. NGOs, on the other hand, may activate the central route, appealing to audiences who seek credibility and data-driven arguments (Huang et al., 2020). Brands must strike a balance between these approaches to maintain authenticity while effectively conveying sustainability commitments.

Engagement metrics, including likes, shares, comments, and views, will be analyzed across Instagram, TikTok, and X to determine which sector has the most impactful sustainability messaging. Visual representations such as graphs and tables will illustrate which content types—videos, infographics, or personal narratives—receive the highest interaction rates. Studies suggest that short-form video content, particularly TikTok Reels and Instagram Stories, tends to outperform static posts and text-based content due to its interactive nature and algorithmic prioritization (Chwialkowska, 2019).

Beyond engagement, the study examines the persuasive strategies used in sustainability messaging. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt behaviors when they observe them being modeled by others. Influencers leveraging emotional storytelling and personal experiences can make sustainability advocacy more relatable and actionable (Wang et al., 2022). NGOs, known for their factual and research-driven approach, may rely heavily on logical appeals and educational content to support their messaging. Brands, while incorporating corporate social responsibility narratives, must carefully balance transparency and credibility to maintain audience trust.

Audience perception will also play a key role in understanding which sustainability campaigns are most effective. A sentiment analysis of user comments will categorize reactions into positive, neutral, or negative responses, providing insight into how different sectors are perceived by the public. Studies indicate that influencers tend to receive more positive sentiment scores due to their perceived authenticity, while brands often experience polarized responses, with some consumers appreciating their sustainability efforts and others remaining skeptical (Kapitan et al., 2022).

By examining these aspects, this study will provide a comprehensive analysis of digital sustainability campaigns and their effectiveness in engaging audiences and driving behavioral change. The findings will contribute to bridging the gap between digital advocacy and real-world sustainability action by offering practical recommendations for brands, NGOs, and influencers to enhance their communication strategies. Ultimately, this research aims to inform more impactful sustainability messaging, ensuring that online campaigns translate into meaningful environmental awareness and long-term public engagement in sustainability efforts.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights the impact of social media sustainability campaigns by comparing the effectiveness of brands, NGOs, and influencers in engaging audiences and shaping perceptions of sustainability messaging. Supported by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), the findings suggest that while influencers generate higher engagement, NGOs hold the strongest credibility, and brands must navigate audience skepticism regarding greenwashing. These insights provide valuable recommendations for optimizing digital sustainability communication, including the need for emotionally engaging content, transparent messaging, and interactive strategies to encourage public participation.

The methodological approach—integrating engagement metrics, content analysis, and sentiment evaluation—can serve as a framework for future research on digital advocacy and consumer behavior. The implications extend beyond academia, offering practical applications for marketers, environmental organizations, and policymakers in designing more effective sustainability campaigns. Future studies could explore the long-term behavioral impact of sustainability messaging, examining whether high social media engagement translates into tangible pro-environmental actions. By refining digital advocacy approaches, this research contributes to bridging the gap between online sustainability efforts and real-world environmental change, ensuring that social media platforms serve as powerful tools for sustainable awareness and action.

5. References

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