

Original Article

The Role of Social Media in Promoting Sustainability

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ABSTRACT: *Since its inception, social media has fundamentally changed the way that organisations, governments and individuals communicate with one another and perceive environmentally sustainable practices. This paper explores how various platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter (X), LinkedIn, YouTube and TikTok influence awareness of sustainability among consumers and help to drive their buying decisions. The analysis will be based on secondary data, a review of the literature, and a survey of 200 individuals from diverse backgrounds within India. The purpose of this research is to determine the extent to which social media can be considered a credible, effective and scalable medium for the purpose of promoting sustainability. The results show that social media has a major impact on increasing public interest in sustainability, primarily for 18- to 35-year-olds. Environmental messages perform best on sites where short-form video content can be found, like TikTok and Instagram Reels. The paper also points out that LinkedIn and Twitter are important channels for companies disclosing their sustainability practices to their stakeholders. The research highlights concerns with 'greenwashing' deceptive sustainability claims and how social media can support, as well as help stop, companies from using this form of deception. Strategic recommendations for companies to utilise social media as a way to create an environmentally conscious culture and develop authentic sustainability communications will be provided. These recommendations will add value to the body of knowledge that exists at the intersection of Digital Marketing and Environmental Management.*

KEYWORDS: Digital Marketing, Environmental Management, Greenwashing, Social Media, Sustainability.

1. INTRODUCTION

As we become more connected through technology and our planet faces an environmental crisis, there is an increasing crossover between social media and sustainability. This intersection is a major area of research in both the academic community and in business strategies. The global accessibility level and immediacy of social media have changed the ways that sustainability messages are created, disseminated and consumed. Social media platforms which have over 5.4 billion global users (Datar portal, 2025) are the lifeblood of climate advocacy and transparency for corporations and consumers alike in 2025.

Historically, sustainability has been defined broadly as providing for current generations' needs while not compromising future generations' ability to meet theirs (Brundtland Commission, 1987). Because of changes in regulations, pressure from investors, and consumer demands for greater accountability, business leaders across nearly every industry have moved sustainability from the periphery of corporate dialogue to the centre of corporate strategy. In addition, rather than simply being a one-way communication channel, social media has contributed to the creation, challenge and co-creation of actual sustainability narratives in a dynamic, interactive environment.

The case of India, the world's largest/fastest growing digital market, shows how digital platforms can help raise awareness and stimulate action towards sustainability. With over 700 million internet users in India, the rapid growth of social media among younger age groups shows just how these platforms can be used to raise awareness and encourage action about sustainability. In addition to providing platforms and user bases, the Indian government's efforts (e.g., National Action Plan on Climate Change [NAPCC]), as well as corporate legislation mandating social responsibility compliance under Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013 (i.e., CSR spending requirements), have further driven organisations to want to communicate their sustainability efforts using accessible, scalable media.

However, the relationship between social media and sustainability is not always clear. The very nature of social media allows greenwashing strategically lying about environmental actions, as well as amplifying misinformation about sustainability, hindering genuine efforts toward sustainable development. In addition, because of how social media algorithms work favouring viral content that generates emotional response compared to more nuanced discussions about sustainability, there are challenges associated with the quality and depth of sustainable communications.

This article is an examination of how social media impacts promoting sustainability along three main areas: raising awareness and educating consumers; influencing consumer behavior; communicating to corporations about sustainability; all through a mixed-methods strategy of analysis of existing literature supplemented with analysis of results from surveys administered to users of different types of social media in order to form a well-rounded, evidence-based understanding of how social media enables business sustainability and where its limitations lie. This research study will be useful for MBA students, current marketing practitioners, sustainability managers and policy makers who wish to use the potential of electronic communications in a way that has meaningful, environmentally focused impact. By synthesising the fields of digital marketing, environmental management, and organisational behaviour, the results of the current research will assist in developing an emerging new and innovative interdisciplinary body of knowledge that will greatly influence the way businesses develop strategies in the 21st century.

Remainder of the article: Section 2 is a review of the current literature; Section 3 is a summary of research gaps; Section 4 is an outline of research objectives; Section 5 contains hypotheses; Section 6 describes methodology; Section 7 presents findings; Section 8 provides conclusions including implications and recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This is a substantial increase when taking into account how prevalent social media and sustainability have become in academic literature given our reliance on digital communication at the time period this was recorded, as well as our simultaneous search for solutions to environmental issues. Many scholars have researched this topic through different disciplinary lenses such as marketing, environmental psychology, organisational communication, or information systems.

2.1. SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION CHANNEL

In 2010, Kaplan and Haenlein created a base of classifications for social media usage that included collaborative, blogs, content communities, networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Others have applied this classification framework to sustainability communication, with an emphasis on the different types of communication opportunities available across the various platform types. For instance, Facebook and Instagram have both proven successful for encouraging emotional connections with the environment through visual, communal means (Cone et al., 2017). Conversely, X functions as an immediate news feed for current events of environmental politics and their corresponding advocacy efforts.

YouTube has served as a significant channel for increasing sustainability literacy in developing nations, as documented primarily via education documentaries and films aimed at youth (Sarabhai, 2019). Most notably, the study found that long-format videos enhance understanding of complex environmental issues like climate change mitigation and biodiversity loss, as well as principles related to the circular economy. With platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels, sustainability content creation is becoming more accessible (Okafor et al., 2023), allowing everyday individuals with low-budget equipment to project high-quality environmental messages that can be easily forwarded by micro-influencers without any formal training.

2.2. SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Researchers have developed a number of theories explaining how exposure to social media can lead to changes in how consumers perceive and behave toward purchasing sustainable products. For instance, the early research by Follows and Jobber (2000) developed frameworks tying consumers' environmental values to their intentions to purchase green products, and subsequent studies built on that research in digital settings. According to Nielsen's Global Sustainability Report (2018), more than two-thirds of global consumers and nearly three-quarters of Millennials indicated they would pay more for sustainable brands; and social media has amplified this trend by allowing brands to influence their customer base.

Twitter hashtags such as #FridaysForFuture, #ZeroWaste, and #ClimateStrike have demonstrated that grassroots social movements can exert considerable social pressure on companies to clarify and substantiate their pledges regarding sustainability (Kapoor et al., 2020). Such movements are indicative of the use of networked social movements (Castells, 2012), where dispersed digital communities synchronise collective action with corresponding real-world policy and business actions. Micro-influencers (i.e., Instagram accounts with 1,000–100,000 followers) drive more than three times the amount of engagement compared to celebrity endorsements for the promotion of environmentally-friendly products (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2021) – this is largely due to being perceived as more genuine and more embedded in the community.

2.3. CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION AND CSR DISCLOSURE

Academic interest in the strategic application of social media to support corporate social responsibility (CSR) communications has continued to grow. For example, in their research study conducted in India, Raj and Sharma (2022) found that organisations that provided detailed and online CSR disclosures via LinkedIn and Facebook (e.g., impacts, validation from independent agencies, and

testimonials from stakeholders) reported significantly higher levels of stakeholder trust than those that only provided this information through traditional means, such as an annual report. This finding supports the signalling theory provided by Spence (1973), which notes that providing stakeholders with credible and verifiable signals reflecting a company's sustainable performance enhances its reputation or builds its reputational capital.

At the same time, however, Delmas and Burbano (2011) reported that another significant risk associated with corporate sustainability communication is the potential for "greenwashing". Greenwashing refers to situations where a company attempts to take advantage of consumers' preference for environmentally-friendly products by making misleading environmental claims regarding their products without actually changing the way they conduct business. In addition, social media increases the risk of greenwashing and has also enhanced the ability to detect instances of greenwashing. With the rapid dissemination of content, often without verification, through social media and the growing presence of activist groups, investigative reporters, and informed consumers digging through company claims in real-time using digital fact-checking, the ability to detect instances of greenwashing continues to grow.

TABLE 1 Summary of Key Literature

Author & Year	Study Focus	Platform	Key Finding
Cone et al. (2017)	Consumer behaviour driven by social media eco-campaigns	Instagram, Facebook	Social media significantly increases green purchase intent
Sarabhai (2019)	YouTube as sustainability educator in emerging markets	YouTube	Video content drives awareness among the 18–30 age group
Kapoor et al. (2020)	Hashtag movements and corporate green accountability	Twitter (X)	Viral hashtags amplify pressure on brands to adopt ESG
Nguyen & Nguyen (2021)	Influencer marketing and eco-product promotion	Instagram, TikTok	Micro-influencers more trusted; drive 3× higher engagement
Raj & Sharma (2022)	Social media as CSR communication tool in India	LinkedIn, Facebook	Stakeholder trust rises with transparent CSR disclosures
Okafor et al. (2023)	Carbon literacy spread via short-form video	TikTok, Reels	Short videos highly effective for Gen Z climate education

This body of evidence shows that sustainable behaviour can be catalysed through social networks, albeit through a complex synergy. Additionally, despite digital channels being perceived as having significant potential to increase awareness about sustainability problems, influence consumer behaviour and foster transparent communication between businesses and consumers, fatalistic perceptions of technological drawbacks regarding information quality cut-off via algorithms, commercialisation of the sustainability discourse and manipulative communications costs were also some obstacles that might emerge.

3. RESEARCH GAP

Even though there have been multiple studies published in recent years about social media's impact on sustainability, much work is still needed to close some important gaps in the literature. First, the vast majority of the available studies to date have taken place in Western developed countries - most commonly in the United States, the UK, and Germany - with comparatively few studies focused on the unique characteristics of emerging markets like India's, where the adoption of social media is on a very different cultural foundation than in developed nations, as well as where reuse and recycling strategies present different sustainability challenges than those addressed in developed countries' studies. Additionally, of those studies focusing solely on India, they generally concentrate exclusively on urban consumers or corporations' CSR initiatives, largely ignoring other potentially impacted groups throughout the digital landscape in India.

Second, the large majority of social media-related research treats social media as if it were a single entity rather than as a group of very different entities that vary substantially in their forms of content, the algorithms that govern how content is curated, the mutually understood and accepted norms of a given community, and the demographic make-up of their users, all of which have a dramatic impact on how sustainability content is received and acted upon by their users. Consequently, the majority of the literature lacks empirical data upon which to make a detailed analysis of the effectiveness of each of the various social media platforms in communicating sustainability content to each of their respective audiences.

Finally, researchers have largely overlooked the time-based dynamic of social media and its impact on users' sustainability behaviours. Most studies measure the impact of social media on sustainability behaviours as a snapshot in time and do not track

how a user's ongoing interaction with a social media platform can ultimately transform his or her long-term behaviours and attitudes toward sustainability. The purpose of this paper will be to fill all three of the above-mentioned gaps in the literature.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To evaluate how much social media affects the level of knowledge and awareness that Indian citizens have regarding sustainability.
- To identify the best ways (platforms and content formats) to use social media to stimulate consumers' sustainable behaviours and intention to purchase "green" products.
- Evaluate how effective social media is in improving both the credibility and the effectiveness of CSR communications.
- To identify the extent to which greenwashing is prevalent and perceived by consumers through social media, and how this affects their faith in sustainability.
- To make recommendations for organisations looking to use social media to create real environmental change by engaging through live streams/microlensing and other authentic connections.

5. HYPOTHESES

- H1: There is a strong and positive correlation between people's exposure to social media and their level of awareness/knowledge of sustainability issues.
- H2: The screen type from which sustainability content reaches consumers will have a large impact on the extent to which that information motivates green purchases.H3: If a social media influencer meets certain credibility requirements, then consumers who follow this influencer will be more likely to accept the influencer's recommendations of sustainable products and practices.
- H4: CSR disclosure of progressive businesses posting verifiable corporate social responsibility information on media channels will feed trust from consumers through business to the community and other stakeholders.
- H5: Consumer perception of businesses that greenwash their views with sustainability content on social media will diminish trust in the authenticity of a business's sustainable practice claims while simultaneously dissuading consumers from purchasing that particular business as well.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

A mixed-methods study that is made up of secondary data analysis with primary quantitative research. The secondary data presented within this study was derived from peer-reviewed academic literature, industry reports (Nielsen, Edelman, DataReportal) and corporate sustainability disclosures and was used to develop a complete theoretical framework. The primary data involved a structured survey conducted with 200 respondents across major Indian cities such as Bengaluru, Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad and Chennai, with representative samples from each of the age groups, gender, educational levels and intensity of social media usage.

6.2. SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

Utilising stratified random sampling helped to ensure that there was a proportionate representation across a number of different demographic segments. The sampled demographic segments included: Age (18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46+), Gender, Educational qualification Undergraduate, Postgraduate, Professional and Social Media platform that was primarily used. The data collection took place through an online questionnaire administered through Google Forms; the questions were answered by respondents during a time window of three weeks (May-June 2026). The questionnaire consisted of 28 items that were measured using a five-point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree), with additional items included as multiple-choice questions that related to platform usage patterns and sustainability behaviours.

6.3. MEASURING INSTRUMENT

The survey was arranged into five sections corresponding to the objectives of the study and hypotheses: (a) Use of Social Media & Awareness of Sustainability, (b) The Effectiveness of the Type of Platform Compared to Preferences in the Content of the Platform, (c) The Credibility of the Influence and Intent to Make Green Purchases, (d) Corporate CSR Communication & Corporate Trust, and (e) Perception of Greenwashing and Its Consequences. The instrument was piloted using 25 participants and was found to have Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.78 across all five constructs of the instrument, indicating acceptable levels of internal consistency.

6.4. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS v27.0. Descriptive statistics means, standard deviations and frequency distributions were computed for all variables. Bivariate relationships between engagement in Social Media and Sustainability Outcomes (corresponding to H1) were examined using Pearson's correlations. One-way ANOVAs were used to compare purchase intentions in Green Products across different types of Social Media Platforms (H2). Multiple Regression Analyses were used to test hypotheses H3, H4, & H5 For H3, the following is the Regression Model:

$$GSB = \alpha + \beta_1(SME) + \beta_2(IC) + \beta_3(CCST) + \beta_4(GWP) + \varepsilon$$

GSB or Green Sustainability Behaviour; SME or Social Media Engagement; IC or Influencer Credibility; CCST or Corporate CSR Communication and Transparency; GWP or Greenwashing Perception; and α as the constant, β_1 through β_4 as regression coefficients, and ε as the error term. The model allows for the simultaneous examination of multiple determinants of a person's tendency toward behaving sustainably, accounting for demographic variables which may confound or compete with these variables in their effects on sustainability behaviour.

7. DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

TABLE 2 How Frequently do you Encounter Sustainability-Related Content

Response	Responses	Percentage
Multiple times daily	47	47%
Once time daily	15	15%
A few times a week	19	19%
Occasionally	10	10%
Rarely	9	9%
Total	100	100%

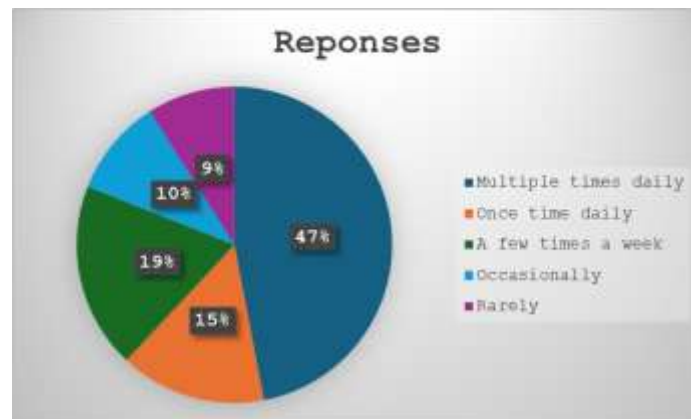


FIGURE 1 Distribution of Participant Responses

INTERPRETATION

As seen in the table provided above, almost half (47%) of survey participants reported coming across sustainability-focused media on Social Media sites multiple times a day, suggesting that there is a high amount of visibility for sustainable media on Social Media outlets in general. Just under a fifth (19%) of people surveyed saw information regarding sustainable practices and products a few times a week; while 15% saw such information just once per day; only 9% reported infrequently coming across sustainable-related items.

TABLE 3 Social Media has Increased My Awareness about Environmental Issues

Response	Responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	40	40%
Agree	54	54%
Disagree	3	3%
Strongly disagree	3	3%
Total	100	100%

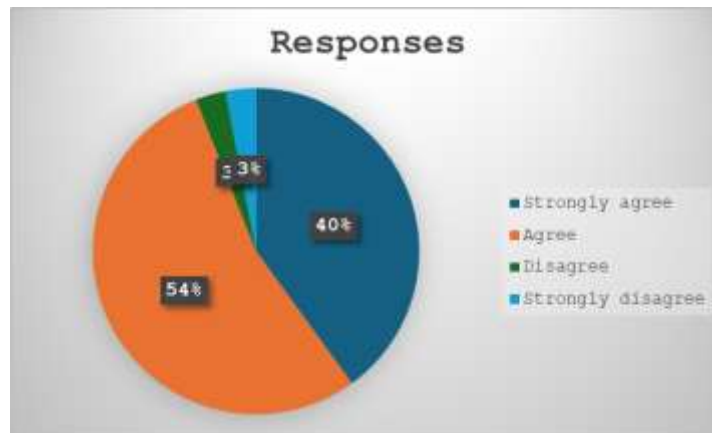


FIGURE 2 Distribution of Respondents' Levels of Agreement

INTERPRETATION

The vast majority of people who took our survey have a favourable opinion on the contribution of social media to environmental consciousness. Out of the survey responses, 94% agreed or strongly agreed that social media improves their awareness of environmental issues and just 6% disagreed. This reflects the role of social media as an effective dissemination method for ecological content.

TABLE 4 Which Factors Most Influence your Decision to Adopt Sustainable Practices

Factors	Responses	Percentage
Social media content	52	52%
Peer influence	8	8%
Cost of products	13	13%
Environment concern	26	26%
Brand reputation	1	1%
Total	100	100%

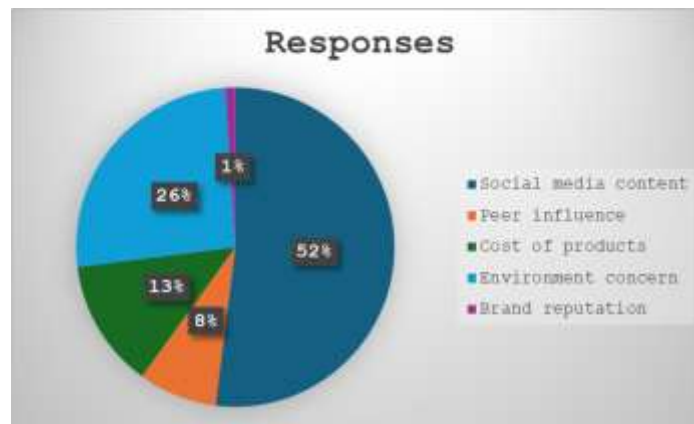


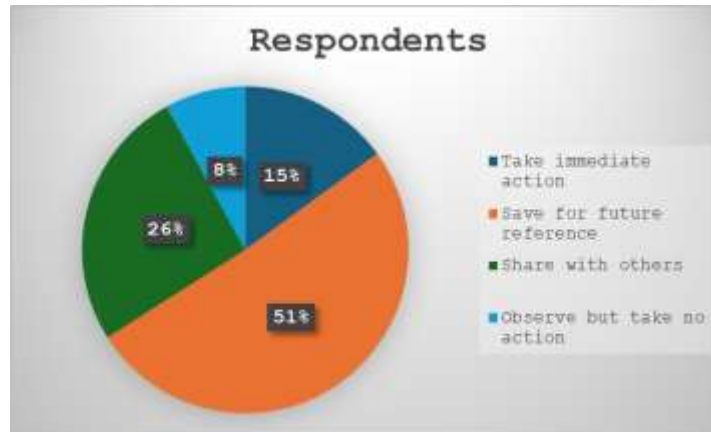
FIGURE 3 Percentage Distribution of Survey Responses

INTERPRETATION

Social media content is the key driver of sustainability behaviours; 52% say this alone has led them to act on their feed with something related to sustainability. The second most common reason was environmental concern (26%), the third reason and influencing 13% of respondents, related to the product's cost. Only 8% of respondents said that peer influence had an impact on their purchasing decision. Finally, only 1% of respondents stated that brand reputation directly impacted their purchasing decision. Overall, this suggests that sharing engaging content about sustainability on social media can greatly influence individuals' decisions to pursue environmentally friendly products.

TABLE 5 How do you Typically Respond when you See Sustainability Campaigns on Platforms like Instagram or Youtube.

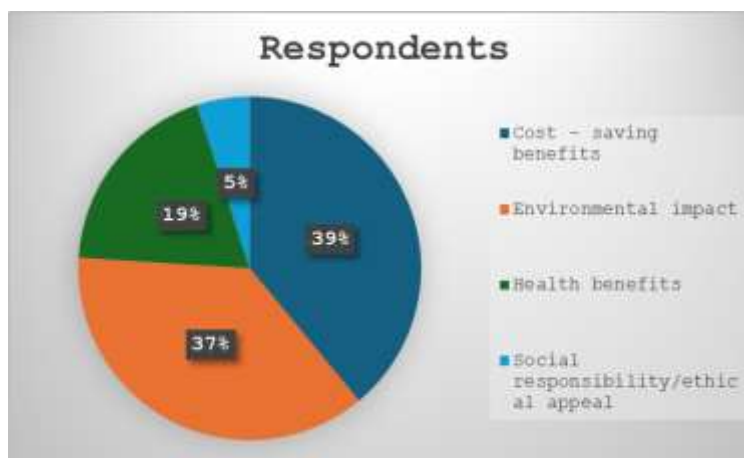
Response	Respondents	Percentage
Take immediate action	15	15%
Save for future reference	51	51%
Share with others	26	26%
Observe but take no action	8	8%
Total	100	100%

**FIGURE 4** Respondents' Preferred Actions after Receiving Information**INTERPRETATION**

A majority of people (51%) saved sustainability campaigns for future use. The next largest group (26%) shared the campaigns with others. About 15% of people acted right away after seeing a campaign. An additional 8% watched the campaign and did nothing. This shows that there is a lot of interest and interaction created by a sustainability campaign, but many people may choose to act at a later time rather than immediately.

TABLE 6 Which Type of Sustainability Message is most likely to Influence your Behaviour

Type of messages	Respondents	Percentage
Cost-saving benefits	39	39%
Environmental impact	37	37%
Health benefits	19	19%
Social responsibility/ethical appeal	5	5%
Total	100	100%

**FIGURE 5** Respondents' Action Preferences

INTERPRETATION

The primary drivers of sustainability messages for consumers are typically related to cost savings (39%) and then environmental impact (37%). The majority of consumers (19%) are also influenced by the health benefit associated with sustainable practices, while a very small number of consumers (5%) are impacted by the appeal to social responsibility and ethics. The results indicate that sustainability messages that emphasise both money savings and a positive impact on the environment are likely to be the most effective way to motivate consumers to make sustainable purchases.

7.1. FINDINGS

- The majority of respondents (47%) said they see multiple forms of sustainable content each day on social media, meaning they have access to a lot of information about sustainability and how it relates to the environment.
- Social media has made a major contribution to the awareness of sustainability in general, and 94% of respondents agreed that their awareness of environmental issues has increased due to social media.
- In terms of influencing the adoption of sustainability practices, social media is the most prominent source for 52% of respondents. The second strongest influence on adopting sustainable behaviour came from environmental concern at 26%.
- Cost is the third most significant influence on sustainability choices, as 13% of respondents indicated product cost influences their decision.
- The majority of respondents (51%) indicated that they save sustainability campaigns for future reference and will continue to be interested in sustainability-related content moving forward.
- Answering the question of whether they share sustainability campaigns with other people, approximately 26% of respondents report that they educate others on sustainability through sharing sustainability campaigns within their social networks.
- Of all respondents, 8% viewed sustainability campaigns but did not engage in any action, indicating very positive engagement levels.
- Cost-savings (39%) were found to be the most compelling form of sustainability messages.
- Messages regarding the environmental impact of products (37%) were also influential for sustainable behaviour.
- Health benefits influenced 19% of respondents to adopt sustainable behaviour and show that health and well-being are also an important driver.

8. CONCLUSION

This research paper has systematically reviewed social media's role in promoting sustainability in terms of awareness, consumer behaviour and corporate communication. This research paper examined the Indian digital landscape and systematically compared platforms for their effectiveness in promoting sustainability. As a result, it was established that social media is an effective and multidimensional force for promoting sustainability through education; social proof; the credibility of opinion leaders and real-time accountability. However, the effectiveness of social media at promoting sustainability is not uniform, as its effectiveness depends on a variety of platform characteristics, quality of content, authenticity of opinion leaders and the risk of greenwashing.

One of the most significant contributions of this research is the comparative analysis of platforms for communicating sustainability, where it was found that no single platform dominates all three areas of sustainability communication or across any demographic segment. Gen Z is best engaged with sustainability through TikTok and Instagram Reels, LinkedIn continues to be the gold standard for credible B2B and CSR communications, YouTube maintains its position as the leading educational platform, and Twitter (X) and Facebook continue to provide important spaces for accountability and community-led sustainability advocacy. The platform differentiation identified in this research provides actionable insights for sustainability practitioners/marketing managers to develop targeted and platform-specific communication strategies.

The discovery that consumer perceptions of "greenwashing" severely diminish brand trust, thereby decreasing sustainability behaviour, has major implications for strategic planning. As organisations launch into an age where consumers are more likely than ever to research products and hold companies accountable via numerous activist organisations, companies that continue to use "greenwashing" techniques through social media are at risk of damaging both their own brands as well as undermining consumer confidence in all brands' sustainability efforts. Thus, given the aforementioned information, there is a strong argument for incorporating third-party certification and impact measurement alongside radical transparency into all aspects of the organisation's sustainability communications.

The discovery that influencer credibility - especially "micro-influencer" credibility - strongly influences consumers' green purchasing behaviours suggests that brands whose products are sustainably produced should place additional emphasis on

developing authentic partnerships with their communities rather than relying solely on endorsements from highly-visible celebrities.

8.1. FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

There are a number of limitations of this study to note. The sample is diverse; however, the individuals in the sample were all from urban Indian centres, which may impact the ability to generalise to rural or semi-urban populations that likely have different digital access and social media usage patterns. In addition, the cross-sectional survey design is limited to capturing a snapshot in time as opposed to observing longitudinal changes in behaviour over time. Future studies should use longitudinal methodologies, platform-specific digital analytics, as well as experimental paradigms in order to more thoroughly establish causal links between social media participation and sustainability outcomes. Additionally, cross-cultural comparison studies examining the digital sustainability contexts in India and Southeast Asia would provide an additional contribution to the development of this emerging, interdisciplinary field.

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