

Article

# From Likes to Sustainability: How Social Media Influencers Are Changing the Way We Consume

Neringa Vilkaite-Vaitone 

Institute of Dynamic Management, Faculty of Business Management, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (VILNIUS TECH), Sauletekio av. 11, LT-10223 Vilnius, Lithuania; neringa.vilkaite-vaitone@vilniustech.lt

**Abstract:** Social media has become an integral part of our daily lives. Influencers have emerged as significant players in promoting sustainable consumption in recent years. With their reach and influence, they have the ability to sway consumer decisions and earn rewards from marketers. However, an influencer's perceived importance and credibility among their followers is essential to their ability to persuade others. In this study, we utilized network theory and the theory of mind to scrutinize the impact of an influencer's importance and credibility on sustainable consumption. We collected data from 427 consumers and conducted structural equation modeling (SEM) to test our hypotheses. Our findings indicate that an influencer's importance has a positive impact on their credibility, which subsequently has a favorable impact on cognitive, affective, and conative sustainable consumption. These results confirm the importance and credibility of influencers in promoting sustainable consumption and provide insights into how social marketers and influencers can optimize their sustainable marketing strategies.

**Keywords:** influencer credibility; cognitive sustainable consumption; affective sustainable consumption; conative sustainable consumption; network theory; theory of mind



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## 1. Introduction

The topic of sustainable consumption is gaining increasing attention due to the pressing issue of climate change and its impact on our consumption patterns. This has become a critical area of interest for both academics and practitioners alike, with scientists, business leaders, the media, and other stakeholders highlighting the importance of sustainable consumption. As consumers become more aware of the deforestation, water scarcity, loss of biodiversity, air pollution, and other challenges posed by environmental pollution and the depletion of natural resources [1], they are placing greater emphasis on factors such as eco-labeling, packaging recycling options, and organic compositions. These trends are driving society towards a more sustainable approach to consumption that is in harmony with the environment [2].

In recent years, influencer marketing has experienced a significant upswing, with influencers being increasingly utilized to promote sustainable consumer behavior [3]. These influencers can effectively convey their perspectives through various channels, including conferences, mass media, and social networks. With the widespread availability of the internet, the proliferation of mobile devices, and advancements in modern technology, social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and TikTok have become an integral part of the daily lives of a large segment of society and serve as a vital communication channel for influencers [4]. Through social media, influencers are able to disseminate information, inspire ideas, and shape the perceptions of others, potentially leading to behavioral changes [5–9]. Social media endorsements have proven to be effective in terms of costs and user engagement [4,10]. Information received from influencers as interpersonal sources has a greater impact on decision-making than traditional advertising

techniques [11]. According to Veirman [11], contemporary brands are increasingly shifting away from traditional advertising methods and turning their attention towards influencers as a means of promoting their products to a broader audience. This shift in strategy is motivated by influencers' higher levels of authenticity and credibility, which in turn result in lower resistance to the message. Social media can also be used to raise awareness and disseminate information rapidly to younger people who may be less receptive to traditional media [12]. Influencers have been the most significant factor influencing purchasing behavior for the past decade. The emergence of virtual influencers has only added to the popularity of social media influencers [13]. From these observations, it can be concluded that influencers have the potential to significantly impact sustainable consumer behavior.

The body of research on influencer marketing has burgeoned, revealing that influencers exert a considerable impact on consumer purchasing behavior. Nevertheless, the extent to which influencers influence sustainable consumption has been a hotly debated topic, with inconclusive findings. For instance, recent studies by Johnstone and Lindh [14] have found that influencers play a crucial role in shaping purchase intent for sustainable fashion. Kilipiri et al. [15] have shown that Instagram travel influencers are positively related to the selection of sustainable destinations. In the context of developing a sustainable urban freight sector, the influence of influencers is determined by their modus operandi and the objectives they pursue concerning urban freight issues [16]. The findings of Boerman et al. [17] have demonstrated that the credibility of greenfluencers does not directly impact pro-environmental intentions. The discrepancy in outcomes among studies examining the impact of influencers on sustainable consumption can be attributed to differences in their scope, extent, and sampling. It is worth noting that most existing research has focused on the impact of influencers on specific products, such as food [18–21], clothing [14,22], freight [16], and tourism [23], and has targeted specific demographics, such as children [24] and millennials [14,25]. Although these studies have yielded valuable insights, the literature to date has not provided a comprehensive answer to the question of whether influencers have a broad impact on sustainable consumption and, if so, how consumers' perceptions of influencers' characteristics affect various types of sustainable consumption. To fill this research gap, this study aims to assess the impact of influencer importance and credibility on sustainable consumption. This study is unique in its use of network theory and the theory of mind to examine the impact of influencers on promoting sustainable consumption. It sheds light on the significance and reliability of influencers in promoting sustainable consumption and provides valuable advice to social marketers and influencers on how to improve their sustainable marketing strategies.

This article delves into the influence of social media influencers on sustainable consumer behavior, without restricting the scope to specific products. According to Johnstone and Lindh's [3] research, sustainability is a complex and comprehensive concept that applies to all products, making it impractical to classify sustainable behavior solely based on product categories. The scholars viewed sustainable consumer behavior as a long-term and integrated lifestyle change that develops gradually, rather than a mere inclination towards specific products [3].

The present study employs network theory to explicate the phenomenon of influencers. This theory helps to identify influencers who play a vital role in a communication network and have the power to significantly influence others. The study combines network theory with the theory of mind to explore sustainable consumption. The latter helps to understand individuals' hidden psychological states and thought processes, which can be used to predict their behavior. Such an amalgamation of two theoretical paradigms extends the influencer marketing literature by highlighting that the influencer's significance alone is inadequate to attain sustainable consumption, as influencer credibility also plays a pivotal role. More crucially, the findings contribute to the literature by reaffirming the appropriateness and efficacy of cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions in predicting sustainable consumption. In practical terms, the research outcomes offer valuable insights that can aid marketers in optimizing the selection of appropriate influencers.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the subsequent section deliberates on the theoretical framework and formulates the hypotheses. The following section presents the adopted research methodology. Subsequently, the research findings are analyzed. Finally, the paper concludes with a detailed discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Approach

Many organizations nowadays collaborate with influencers to endorse their products or services, a practice that has piqued the interest of scholars in recent years [4,26,27]. Zniva et al. [10] provide a comprehensive definition of influencers as individuals who interact with a specific target audience, regularly stimulate online engagement, and sell a product, service, or brand. In the realm of sustainable development, organizations that promote sustainable consumption can engage with influencers to implement their chosen promotional strategy. This study employs a theoretical framework that combines network theory and the theory of mind to shed light on the possible impact of influencers on sustainable consumption.

The field of network theory is focused on studying graphs that represent relationships between discrete objects [28,29]. According to this theory, nodes that occupy central positions within a network are typically considered to be influencers [30]. These individuals leverage their connections to shape the perspectives of others using both inbound and outbound links. Essentially, influencers are those who hold a key role in a communication network [31] and possess the ability to significantly influence others [32]. The efficacy of influencers in making a substantial impact on others has been established by Unilever's research [33], which found that three out of four people are more likely to adopt sustainable behaviors after consuming influencer content on the subject of sustainability. Given that network theory seeks to explore how the nature of relationships affects behavior [34], we believe that this framework has great potential for researching influencers as actors who impact consumption.

This article examines the concept of sustainable consumption behavior, drawing on the theory of mind as a foundation. This theory, coined by Premack and Woodruff [35], highlights individuals' personalized perceptions of their environment. By considering this theory, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of individuals' unobservable psychological states and thought processes, which allows us to predict their behavior [36,37]. Originally developed to explain preschoolers' understanding of beliefs and desires [38], the theory of mind has since been applied to sustainable consumption [2,39–41]. Through the use of this theory, we can conceptualize sustainable consumption as a multidimensional construct shaped by cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors [2,42].

The author posits that a thorough comprehension of the impact of influencers on sustainable consumption can be attained by utilizing both network theory and the theory of mind. Following the selection of the theoretical approach, we proceed to establish a conceptual model and formulate hypotheses, which can further advance knowledge in this field.

### 2.2. Research Hypotheses

The current literature has primarily focused on assessing the impacts of influencers on various phenomena. For instance, Venciute et al. [43] employed quantitative market research to gain insights into the effects of influencer marketing on consumer purchasing behavior. Linear regression was applied to test the data collected from a survey of over 7500 individuals. Structural equation modeling is another commonly used method for analyzing data when evaluating the impact of influencers on purchasing [44,45]. Nevertheless, measuring the influence of influencers on sustainable consumer behavior can present challenges, despite the plethora of studies that have been conducted to reveal the effects of influencers on consumer purchasing behavior. Goldsmith [46] contends that evaluating an influencer's impact requires more than just measuring their leadership skills or the degree

of their leadership. It also involves examining their overall reach, power, and efficacy. The influencer's significance and credibility, both of which are established by their followers' perception of them, determine the strength of the effect of influencer.

According to recent studies, influencers are often perceived by their followers as relatable and approachable figures, akin to long-distance friends [47,48]. This perception is largely fostered by influencers' tendency to address or tag their followers in their posts, creating a sense of closeness and peer-like relations [5,47,49]. This perceived closeness may have implications for the perceived importance of influencers, who are often seen as sources of inspiration, role models, and unique personalities [5]. It is widely accepted that influencers must be important to their audience in order to gain their admiration. Research suggests that the importance of influencers may decrease with age, such that younger respondents are more likely to view influencers as highly important [3].

The credibility of influencers plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of their endorsements [13,50]. It is a valuable asset for influencers [5] and a key factor in the success of influencer marketing [10]. Being perceived as credible means that an influencer is seen as trustworthy and believable [51]. However, the requirement to disclose sponsored content in some instances may weaken credibility. For instance, Schorn et al. [52] discovered that disclosure has a direct effect on influencer credibility.

Researchers [7,26,47,53] have suggested that credibility comprises two main components: trustworthiness and expertise. Trustworthiness is linked to perceptions of the endorser's integrity, honesty, and believability, while expertise refers to their relevant skills, knowledge, or experience. AlFarraj et al. [51] added a third component to influencers' credibility, namely attractiveness.

According to Sanchez-Fernandez and Jimenez-Castillo [11], credibility is built through the creation of affective and relational bonds with the influencer. We can assume that such bonds imply that the influencer holds a perceived importance in the mind of their followers. This implies that importance of a social media influencer can transfer to the perceived credibility of the influencer. Therefore, we predict the following:

**H1.** *The importance of the influencer has a positive impact on his credibility.*

According to recent research by Ryu and Han [54], influencers who convey empathy and familiarity can have a stronger impact than traditional mass media. Additionally, influencers who possess specialized knowledge in their particular fields are perceived as more convincing and authentic compared to general celebrity endorsements on social media [55]. Moreover, previous research [3] has shown that the importance of influencers can positively affect sustainability awareness. We presume that increased awareness may lead to more sustainable consumption habits among followers, and thus propose the following:

**H2.** *The importance of influencers has a positive impact on followers' sustainable consumption.*

In general, research suggests that consumers are more likely to view a brand or product positively if it is endorsed by credible individuals [47,54]. Several studies, including those by Balaban and Mustatea [5] and Sesar et al. [7], have shown that influencer credibility is an important factor in influencing purchase intention. AlFarraj et al. [51] conducted empirical research in the esthetic dermatology industry in Jordan and found that the attractiveness and expertise dimensions of credibility had a significant impact on purchase intention. Influencers perceived as credible are highly effective in promoting products on social networks, as per Schorn et al. [52]. This effectiveness can be attributed to consumers' inability to verify the sustainability of the products themselves. Based on these findings, we hypothesize that influencer credibility can encourage followers to engage in sustainable consumption:

**H3.** *Influencers' credibility has a positive impact on followers' sustainable consumption.*

The conceptual model (Figure 1) includes three key constructs and three research hypotheses, which suggest that influencer importance positively affects influencer credibility (H1) and sustainable consumption (H2), and that influencer credibility is positively related to follower sustainable consumption (H3).

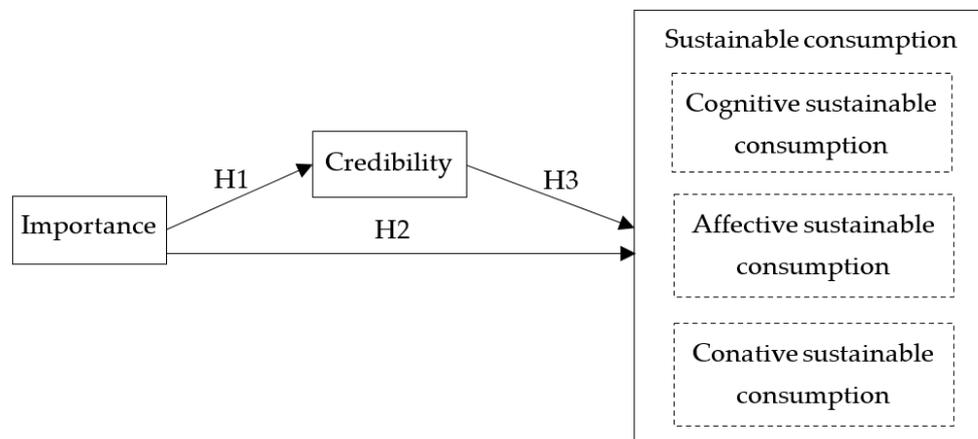


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The present study adopts an exploratory research design to discern the direct and indirect relationships between variables. To this end, a quantitative methodology has been selected to carry out an online survey.

#### 3.1. Questionnaire Development

In order to put the concepts into practice, the study utilized measures that had been previously established. The perceived importance of influencers was evaluated according to the Johnstone and Lindh [3] scale, while influencer credibility was determined using the adapted scale developed by Sokolova and Kefi [56]. To measure sustainable consumption, the Quaquab and Mohammad [2] scale was employed, and all items were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale. To ensure the variables had strong internal consistency, a Cronbach's alpha was calculated, with the results demonstrating high internal consistency.

#### 3.2. Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of research are of paramount importance, as they ensure the protection of human subjects and the integrity of the research process. To this end, the researcher has adhered to the following ethical principles:

1. **Confidentiality:** The anonymity of the research participants was ensured through the use of anonymous questionnaires. The identities of the participants were not disclosed at any stage of the research process.
2. **Autonomy:** The researcher respected the autonomy of the participants, allowing them to choose whether or not to participate in the study. Participants were also provided with the opportunity to seek additional information on the study and to withdraw from it at any time.
3. **Fairness:** the selection of participants was conducted in a fair manner and did not involve any form of discrimination based on personal characteristics, including age and gender.
4. **Informed consent:** Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the type of data collected, and how it would be used and analyzed. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point.

5. Data protection: The researcher ensured that participants' data were protected from unauthorized access and disclosure. Data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher.

### 3.3. Data Collection

The survey was conducted online in Lithuania, with the context deemed especially fitting for the research. This is due to the fact that 3 out of 4 marketers have verified using influencers in their marketing campaigns [57]. Furthermore, social networks have become critical sources of information for consumers when making purchasing decisions. As evidenced, 26% of Lithuanians rely on social network content to inform their buying behavior [58].

The present study focuses on Lithuanian consumers who follow at least one influencer on social media. Due to constraints, the entire population could not be analyzed, and thus, participants aged 18 and above were recruited through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. Furthermore, snowball sampling was employed, where some participants were encouraged to share the questionnaire with friends and acquaintances who also fell within the target population.

In order to determine an appropriate sample size for the study, we ensured that the data were adequate, complete, and informative. To determine the sample size, we applied a common rule of thumb suggested by Hair et al. [59], which is a ratio of 5 to 10 respondents per measured variable. Since our study had twenty-nine observed items, a sample size of 290 would be sufficient to proceed with SEM analysis.

Online questionnaires were distributed via social network platforms to gather responses from participants. Those who chose to take part were informed of the purpose of the survey and were able to provide their answers anonymously and voluntarily between April and July of 2023. A total of 459 responses were collected, but after initial screening, 32 invalid questionnaires were excluded, leaving a final sample size of 427 respondents for data analysis.

### 3.4. Data Analysis Methods

The data of the study were subjected to rigorous analysis through the application of structural equation modeling (SEM) using the SPSS AMOS 29.0 software. The first step in the analysis involved assessing the reliability and validity of the measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The evaluation comprised an in-depth assessment of reliability, convergent validity, internal consistency, and discriminant validity to ensure the quality of the measurement model. Once the validity and reliability were established, the subsequent step involved evaluating the causal effects and mediating role. The structural model was then examined to validate the conceptual model and research hypotheses.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Demographic Profile of the Sample

To establish the demographic profile of the sample, gender, age, education, and occupation were taken into account. Table 1 displays the demographic breakdown of the participants.

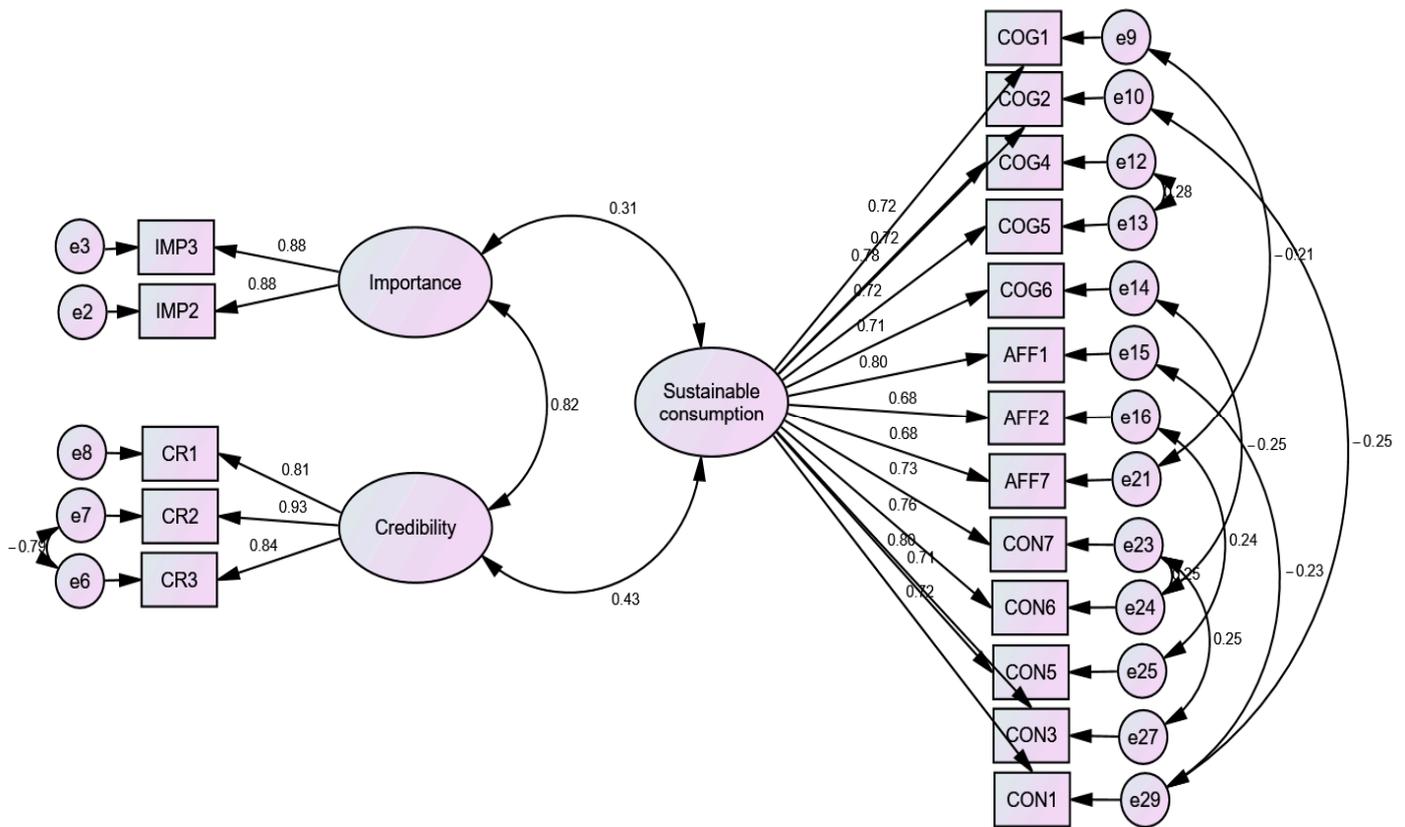
According to the profile data, the majority of respondents were female. Within the sample group, 64% were between the ages of 21 and 40. The educational level of the sampled consumers was predominantly at the university degree level. Additionally, 71% of the respondents were employed at the time of the research.

**Table 1.** Sample structure.

Variables		N	%
Gender	Female	271	63.47
	Male	154	36.07
	Other	2	0.47
Age	18–20	56	13.11
	21–40	274	64.17
	41–60	80	18.74
	>60	17	3.98
Education	Primary/Secondary	49	11.48
	Vocational training	52	12.18
	University	326	76.35
Occupation	Student	44	10.30
	Employee	303	70.96
	Unemployed	17	3.98
	Entrepreneur/Self-employed	32	7.49
	Retired	8	1.87
	Other	23	5.39

4.2. Measurement Model Evaluation

We conducted a CFA to assess the psychometric properties of our latent construct measures. After using the CFA technique to finalize our item selection process, we retained a solution of 18 items from an original pool of 29 (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Measurement model.

All model fitness indices were within the recommended thresholds. The value of  $\chi^2$  (df = 123,  $p = 0.000$ ) was equal to 435.955, and the  $\chi^2$ /df ratio was 3.544, which falls below the recommended value of 5 for model parsimony [60]. The comparative fit index (CFI)

value of 0.938 exceeded the suggested threshold of 0.90, and the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) was 0.923, which is above the recommended cutoff of 0.90 [61]. The root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) was 0.077, which is less than the limit of 0.08 [62].

The model’s internal consistency across its three constructs was demonstrated through Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (CR). The estimates for each construct exceeded the recommended cutoff values of 0.70 for Cronbach’s alpha [63] and 0.70 for CR [59]. To test convergent validity, two measures were implemented: standardized factor loadings (FLs) and average variance extracted (AVE). The estimated FLs for each indicator were greater than the threshold value of 0.70 [63], ranging from 0.680 to 0.934. The AVE for all constructs exceeded the conventional threshold of 0.5 suggested by Fornell and Larcker [64], with a minimum value of 0.537 and a maximum value of 0.769, which confirms adequate convergent validity. All of the aforementioned indicators are provided in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Validity of construct measures.

Latent Variables with Indicators	M	SD
Importance ( $\alpha = 0.869$ ; AVE = 0.769; CR = 0.870)	3.55	0.878
IMP2. It is important that influencer is trustworthy and honest	3.56	0.926
IMP3. I often base buying decisions on the statements of influencer that I trust	3.54	0.942
Credibility ( $\alpha = 0.865$ ; AVE = 0.695; CR = 0.872)	3.88	0.873
CR1. I find influencer expert in his domain	3.90	0.985
CR2. I find influencer efficient in his job	3.95	0.977
CR3. I find influencer trustworthy	3.79	0.989
Sustainable consumption ( $\alpha = 0.937$ ; AVE = 0.537; CR = 0.938)	4.28	0.661
COG1. I believe wasting food and other consumables is unethical	4.47	0.796
COG2. I am aware that excess consumption can cause a shortage of natural resources	4.49	0.815
COG4. I believe that individuals should care for the future generation	4.39	0.844
COG5. I believe that it is our responsibility to care for the natural environment	4.50	0.776
COG6. I know that natural resources decreasing at an alarming rate	4.26	0.910
AFF1. I feel good when I can control my whims for buying unnecessary things	4.25	0.889
AFF2. I don’t like to waste food or beverage	4.41	0.951
AFF7. I feel happy to give priority to the environmental welfare	3.93	0.904
CON1. I intend to reduce the misuse of goods and services (e.g., I switch off the lights and the fan when I am not in the room)	4.22	0.980
CON3. I will avoid consumption activities that can lead to environmental pollution	3.98	0.940
CON5. I will keep trying not to waste my food and beverage	4.37	0.882
CON6. I will spend my money wisely in order to avoid wastage and excessive purchases	4.24	0.865
CON7. I will keep contributing to environmental welfare in all respects	4.18	0.807

M—mean, SD—standard deviation;  $\alpha$ —Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ; CR—composite reliability; AVE—average variance extracted.

In order to ensure discriminant validity, we conducted an analysis to verify that each construct was distinct from the others. Specifically, we examined the square roots of the AVE and compared them to the inter-construct correlations, as presented in Table 3. The resulting diagonal elements, which represent the correlations between each construct and its own measures, were found to be greater than the off-diagonal elements, indicating that there was no overlap between the constructs. This ensured that each construct shared more variance with its own measures than with the measures of other constructs, thus establishing discriminant validity.

**Table 3.** Discriminant validity.

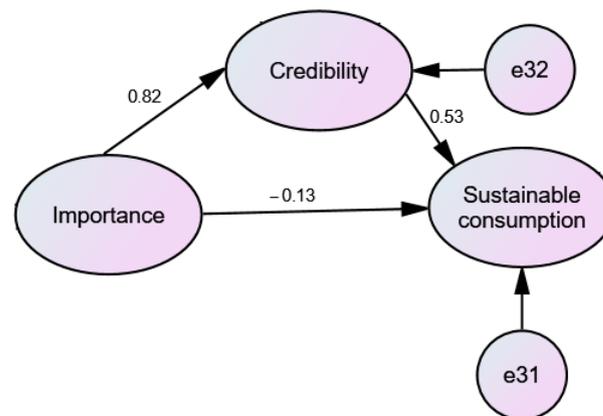
Latent Variables	Importance	Credibility	Sustainable Consumption
Importance	<b>0.877</b>		
Credibility	0.831	<b>0.834</b>	
Sustainable consumption	0.301	0.444	<b>0.733</b>

The diagonal elements in bold represent the square root of the average variance extracted for the respective construct.

This study utilized Harman's single-factor test [65] to assess for common method bias. The test included 18 scale items across three constructs: importance, credibility, and sustainable consumption. During exploratory factor analysis, all 18 items were examined using an unrotated factor solution. The results indicated that a single factor did not emerge and the first factor only accounted for 43.367% of variance, which falls below the recommended threshold of 50% [65].

#### 4.3. Hypotheses Testing

The hypothesized relationships outlined by the conceptual framework were evaluated using structural equation analysis. The goodness-of-fit indices indicated the suitability of the model for the provided dataset ( $\chi^2 = 435.955$ ;  $df = 123$ ;  $CFI = 0.938$ ;  $TLI = 0.923$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.077$ ). Figure 3 graphically presents the outcomes of the hypothesis testing.



**Figure 3.** Hypotheses testing results.

The findings reveal a positive and significant relationship between perceived influencer importance and credibility ( $\beta = 0.820$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), providing support for Hypothesis 1. This suggests that the importance of an influencer is a relevant factor in determining their credibility in the eyes of their followers. Notably, the high path coefficient indicates a direct effect of influencer importance on influencer credibility. The discriminant validity between the latent constructs was tested before computing the path coefficients, and the high path coefficient confirms the meaningfulness of the relationship between influencer importance and credibility.

The results indicate that the importance of an influencer does not significantly influence sustainable consumption ( $\beta = -0.112$ ;  $p = 0.202$ ), failing to support Hypothesis 2. On the other hand, Hypothesis 3 is validated, as perceived influencer credibility has a positive and significant impact on sustainable consumption ( $\beta = -0.456$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Mediation analysis was used to determine the direct and indirect effects between independent and dependent variables. Its purpose is to assess the degree of mediation that occurs when a third variable is introduced into the relationship between two variables. Structural model evaluation in AMOS allows for the calculation of values, as shown in Table 4. The bootstrapping procedure, which involves taking 5000 samples, was utilized in this study.

The strength of mediation can be determined via variance accounted for (VAF), as proposed by Hair et al. [59]. Results from the study suggest that the relationship between the perceived importance of influencers and followers' sustainable consumption behavior is a full mediation, as per the 80% threshold described by Hair et al. [59]. The VAF was found to be 143%, which is above the threshold for full mediation.

**Table 4.** Direct, indirect, and total effects.

Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Importance → Credibility	0.816	0.000	0.816
Importance → Sustainable consumption	−0.130	0.435	0.305
Credibility → Sustainable consumption	0.534	0.000	0.534

## 5. Discussion

In recent years, influencer marketing has garnered significant attention from both scholars and practitioners. With the increasing collaboration between brands and influencers, a more natural and effective way of offering products to potential customers has emerged [26]. Sustainable brands have also started to leverage this trend by identifying suitable influencers to endorse their brands, attract consumers' interest, and expand their social media presence. What is more, influencers, with their credibility and large numbers of followers, have the ability to effectively communicate sustainability to a broad audience. They can play a vital role in addressing the skepticism and apathy that a large number of consumers feel regarding sustainability. Influencers have the potential to make sustainability more accessible and approachable.

Despite the growing interest in the area of influencer marketing, there is still a need for more research on how consumers' perceptions of influencers can lead to sustainable consumption. The role of influencers in promoting sustainable lifestyles and eco-consciousness is a relatively new research area in the field of sustainability communication [12]. Against this backdrop, this study aimed to examine the impact of perceived influencer importance and credibility on sustainable consumption. A conceptual model depicting the relationships between influencer importance, credibility, and cognitive, affective, and conative sustainable consumption was developed and tested using survey data collected from 427 consumers.

The hypothesis that suggested a positive link between influencer importance and credibility was confirmed, highlighting the importance of influencers being perceived as essential in order to be credible to their target audience. However, our study did not find any significant impact of influencer importance on sustainable consumption. Even though previous research by Johnstone and Lindh [3] suggested a relationship between perceived influencer importance and sustainability awareness, our study found that while sustainability awareness can be increased, it does not necessarily lead to sustainable consumption behavior. These results suggest that influencer importance, as a significant characteristic of an influencer, may impact followers' sustainable consumption behavior not directly but through other variables.

On the other hand, the study validated the expected impact of influencer credibility on all types of sustainable consumption, i.e., cognitive, affective, and conative. This is consistent with prior research that has also confirmed the positive impact of influencer credibility on sustainable consumption [5,47,54]. The study results also indicate that perceived influencer credibility mediates the relationship between influencer importance and sustainable consumption, reinforcing the importance of developing credibility as an influencer. This finding indicates that credibility is a significant factor in influencing followers' sustainable consumption behavior and highlights the importance of considering the role of credibility when striving for effective influencer marketing campaigns aimed at promoting sustainable consumption.

This study is a valuable contribution to the research on social media influencers and their role in promoting sustainable consumption. It provides one of the first empirical evidence-based analyses of how perceived influencer importance and credibility can encourage sustainable consumption. Unlike previous studies, this research explores the systematic impact of influencer credibility on sustainable consumption, extending the theoretical horizon. This study concludes that both influencer importance and credibility are necessary for the effective promotion of sustainable consumption. By combining network theory with

the theory of mind, this research offers a deeper understanding of how influencers shape the opinions of others and impact consumer decision-making. Through both incoming and outgoing relationships, influencers have the power to influence not only product choices but also overall sustainable behavior, leading to significant and lasting changes in daily consumption habits.

The results of this study hold great importance for both businesses that use influencers to communicate their message and the influencers themselves, who bear the responsibility of promoting sustainable and responsible consumption. While the intended purpose of the present study was not to question the use of social networks, they are, indeed, considered an integral part of contemporary society. Nevertheless, organizations and their marketing professionals should exercise caution in evaluating the potential risks of misinformation and miscommunication that may be propagated by an influencer. As such, the importance and credibility of influencers' characteristics assume paramount significance in this regard.

As marketers face the challenge of selecting the most suitable influencer to collaborate with [66], it is crucial for them to utilize the findings of the research to make informed decisions and enhance their influencer marketing strategies. In order to meet sustainability expectations, it would be wise for organizations to partner with influential and reputable figures in their sustainable consumption campaigns. However, it is important for businesses to carefully evaluate the content created by potential influencers before making a selection, as relying solely on the number of followers can be misleading and does not accurately reflect an influencer's impact. Influencers can also improve their credibility and significance by demonstrating expertise. As an example, an influencer who endorses sustainable fashion can exhibit expertise in sustainable production techniques, materials, and ethical practices. The influencer's credibility can be enhanced by consistently providing valuable content that aligns with their values across all communication channels.

The present research findings have significant implications for advancing public knowledge and awareness of social media and its potential role in promoting sustainable consumption behavior. This study highlights the importance of consumers' awareness regarding the influence of credible and prominent social media influencers on their consumption decisions. This knowledge empowers consumers to adopt a more discerning approach when selecting which influencers to follow and how to engage with their posts.

This study highlights limitations that require careful consideration. Firstly, the selection of influencers may have impacted the findings. Future research should investigate whether sustainable consumption is affected differently by influencers of varying sizes (mega, macro, micro) and functions (informer, entertainer). Additionally, while the study focused on the importance and credibility of influencers, further research could explore variables such as reputation, authenticity, and communication transparency. Other relevant factors, including social network usage frequency and congruence between influencers and consumers, could also be incorporated. Furthermore, the survey data were collected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. Snowball sampling was also employed. These methodological choices could have impacted the results. Therefore, future studies could be based on more rational and objective sampling techniques. Lastly, the study only examined human influencers, but the emergence of virtual influencers [13,67] warrants similar research to examine the impact of virtual influencer characteristics on sustainable consumption.

## 6. Conclusions

This study delved into the perceived significance and reliability of influencers and how these affect their followers' sustainable consumption patterns. Drawing from network theory and the theory of mind, a conceptual model was developed to predict the direct impact of an influencer's importance and credibility on sustainable consumption. The literature review led to the conclusion that an influencer's importance regarding sustainable consumption might only be mediated by their credibility. The results showed that the

positive influence of influencer importance is contingent on having influencer credibility as a mediating factor.

Overall, this research underscores how marketers can motivate individuals to consume sustainably. However, relying solely on an influencer's high credibility is not enough. To encourage sustainable consumption, the influencer's perceived importance must also be considered.

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