

## Is the influencer an effective tool for sustainability communication?

### An empirical study in the field of made-in-Italy fashion

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#### Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of influencers in sustainability communication within the Italian fashion industry, utilizing the VisCAP model to assess their suitability in terms of visibility, credibility, attractiveness, and power. A survey targeting Generation Z users highlights which type of influencer – celebrities, content creators, or social media influencers – is most effective in conveying sustainability messages. The findings provide insights for companies on how to avoid greenwashing and enhance brand engagement through strategic influencer selection.

**Keyword:** *influencer marketing; social media; sustainability communication; fashion industry.*

#### Introduction

Given the challenges our planet is facing, sustainability communication is no longer an option for companies, but a fundamental prerequisite and integral part of their overall sustainability strategy (Belz & Peattie, 2010). This communication serves to inform stakeholders about companies' efforts to meet their expectations, and it is crucial not only in corporate communication (e.g. through sustainability reports) but also in marketing communications aimed at customers. Effective sustainability marketing communication can drive consumer engagement and promote pro-environmental behaviour (Bernard et al., 2023). This is particularly critical in high-impact industries such as fashion, which faces significant scrutiny due to its environmental footprint. Italy's fashion sector, which contributes 33.9% of the global industry's value (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2020), must integrate sustainability measures and develop targeted communication strategies (Gatto & Parziale, 2024; Milanesi et al., 2022).

In this context, brands do not have to decide '*if*' they want to communicate sustainability, but '*how*' to do so (Agarwal et al., 2024). The literature suggests that sustainability communication primarily occurs via social media (Awang et al., 2021), which facilitates direct consumer interaction and influencing behaviour (Testa et al., 2021; Fortin & Dholakia, 2005). Influencer marketing, where companies use influencers to promote their products or services (Leung et al., 2022), is emerging as a key strategy. Social media features various types of influencers (e.g., social media influencers, celebrities, content creators), each with unique characteristics and

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communication styles. Influencers help companies reach specific target audiences, enhancing brand engagement and driving both attitudinal (e.g., brand attachment) and behavioural (e.g., purchase intention, word of mouth) responses (Zhou et al., 2024). Furthermore, sustainability communication through influencers can raise awareness and interest in sustainability issues (Huber et al., 2022; Breves & Liebers, 2022). However, companies still struggle to communicate sustainability effectively (Szabo et al., 2021) and often hesitate to do so, fearing that it might lead to consumer skepticism and perceptions of greenwashing (Diaz-Bustamante-Ventisca et al., 2024).

Notably, consumers are more likely to perceive greenwashing when communication occurs via influencers, raising concerns about transparency and prompting regulatory scrutiny (Martinello, 2020). While empirical evidence on the effectiveness of influencers in sustainability communication is still limited, the choice of influencer is crucial for the success of these strategies.

This study seeks to address this gap by responding to the following research question: *Are influencers effective and appropriate tools for companies to communicate sustainability?*

The study will assess the effectiveness of influencers from the perspective of social media users, using Percy and Rossiter's (1980) VisCAP model to evaluate their suitability in conveying sustainability messages.

## **Background**

### ***Influencer Marketing***

Influencer Marketing has evolved from traditional marketing strategies that relied on opinion leaders and celebrities to influence large audiences (Lin et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019). With the advent of social media, this approach underwent a significant transformation, enabling individuals to reach and influence vast numbers of people, thereby creating a new dynamic of persuasion (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021). The increasing ineffectiveness of traditional communication channels and the growing consumer trust in user-generated content – perceived as more credible – have further driven companies to adopt this form of communication (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). The influencer, considered as an opinion leader, is an individual capable of guiding the decisions and behaviours of a group (Lin et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Historically associated with offline word-of-mouth, the influencer has gained renewed prominence with the rise of social media, becoming a pivotal element of digital marketing (Wiedmann & Mattenheimer, 2020). Various types of influencers exist, including celebrities, content creators, and Social Media Influencers (SMIs), primarily distinguished by the origin of their fame and the nature of their relationship with the audience (Leung et al., 2022; Lou & Yuan, 2019). **Table 1** summarises the relevant characteristics of each type of influencer.

Celebrities are public figures who have gained notoriety in other fields, such as cinema or music, and use social media as a platform to extend their visibility and influence (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). In contrast, content creators and social media influencers (SMIs) primarily build their reputations on social platforms, but they differ in their audience relationship and the goal of their activities. Content creators specialize in producing original, high-quality content in specific fields, attracting niche audiences

(Bhargava, 2022). While SMIs cultivate large followings by sharing personal experiences and lifestyles, fostering emotional connections with their audience (Lou, 2021).

### VisCAP Model

This study employs the VisCAP model (Percy & Rossiter, 1980), following Bakker (2018), to evaluate influencers in the context of sustainability communication. Originally developed to assess the alignment between an endorser's characteristics and the intended effects of an advertising campaign (Rossiter & Percy, 1997), the model examines four key dimensions: visibility, credibility, attractiveness, and power (Rossiter & Percy, 1997).

When applying the VisCAP model to influencers, *visibility* refers to the influencer's level of public recognition, which is crucial for increasing brand awareness. *Credibility* encompasses competence, indicating the influencer's perceived expertise, and objectivity, which reflects their perceived impartiality and trustworthiness (Percy & Elliot, 2016). *Attractiveness* covers likability and similarity, highlighting the extent to which the audience relates to the influencer (Percy & Elliot, 2016). Lastly, *power* evaluates the influencer's capacity to influence audience behavior.

Using the VisCAP model in this context will provide valuable insights into how various types of influencers—such as celebrities, content creators, and social media influencers (SMIs)—can be effectively integrated into a sustainable communication strategy.

**Table 1 - Influencer definitions and differences**

Category	Definition(s)	Main features	Criteria	Taxonomy	Type	References
Celebrity	Any individual who enjoys public recognition outside of social media and is leveraged by brands for their large follower base	High perceived competence levels	Origin of fame	Traditional celebrities		
		Relatively low involvement rates It earns fame in institutional contexts such as sports or entertainment, regardless of endorsement activities.	Number of followers	Celebrity influencer		
Content creator	An individual who creates and publishes original digital content on online platforms, based on their personal interests, experiences or expertise, with the aim of expanding their follower base and monetising their efforts.	May be remunerated by the platforms themselves through revenue sharing	Type of contents	Blogger		
		Creation of unique and creative content with the intention of entertaining the audience		YouTuber		
		Participates in the co-creation of value with other creators		Vlogger		
Social media influencer (SMI)	Common social media user who, through storytelling and relationship building, accumulates a substantial following. They use their credibility, authority, or expertise in a specific niche to influence the opinions, attitudes, and purchasing decisions of a broad audience, acting as an independent endorser and authoritative reference point	Fame is achieved through active content creation and online interaction, and is linked to specific attributes such as accessibility, reliability, credibility and experience.	Origin of fame	Micro-celebrity Online celebrity		
			Number of followers	Mega-influencer Macro-influencer Micro-influencer Nano-influencer		
		Influence over a large number of people through a combination of personal and network attributes	Advertising function	Portavoce: (a) Cartellone pubblicitario; (b) Stilista; (c) Ambasciatore		
		Their success depends on their ability to create engagement, i.e. reactions and interactions on the content they publish.		Co-creator: (a) Co-designer; (b) Consulente		
		Cultural model influencing beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, inspiring trends in society (trendsetter)		Co-proprietario: (a) Titolare unico; (b) Facilitatore		

Source: Author's own work

## **Methodology**

The authors employ a quantitative methodology based on administering a web-based questionnaire to the recipients of influencer communication, i.e. social media users. The sample focuses on Generation Z, identified as the most environmentally and ecologically conscious cohort (Casalegno et al., 2022). To ensure the representativeness of the sample, a stratified random sampling method is utilised (Cochran, 1977). The questionnaire is structured into several sections. The initial section is dedicated to collecting users' opinions on sustainability communication by influencers within the Made in Italy fashion sector. After that, the questionnaire is divided into three additional sections, each focusing on a specific category of influencer previously defined (celebrities, content creators and social media influencers). This division allows for a comparative analysis among the different types of influencers. In each section, participants will review examples of sustainability communication by influencers and subsequently respond to questions developed based on the VisCAP model, which encompasses the construct of visibility, credibility, attractiveness and power (Percy & Rossiter, 1980). The item within the model will be assessed using a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree). Finally, the collected data will be analysed using descriptive statistical techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of using influencers to communicate sustainability, focusing on identifying which type of influencers are most effective and what characteristics enhance their suitability. Comparative analysis of different influencer categories – including celebrities, content creators, and social media influencers – will determine which is most effective for sustainability communication. From a theoretical point of view, this study fills a gap in the literature on sustainable marketing communication by focusing on the role of influencers as communicative tools. It enriches existing research by providing a detailed classification of different types of social media influencers and empirically testing the VisCAP theoretical model in the context of sustainability communication.

From a managerial perspective, the study provides practical guidance for companies on selecting influencers for sustainability communication. By evaluating the advantages (e.g. brand awareness) and disadvantages (e.g. greenwashing), the VisCAP model provides actionable insights for choosing the most suitable influencer to meet specific communication objectives. This would ensure alignment between influencer characteristics, brand needs, and audience expectations.

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