The Greenfluencer Effect: How Instagram Messages Affect Purchase Intention and Attitudes Toward Sustainable Fashion

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Abstract: This paper experimentally examines how different greenfluencer message types (emotional, informational, social, and neutral) on Instagram affect purchase intention and attitudes toward sustainable fashion, with a particular focus on non-sustainable consumers. In an online experiment, 202 participants were randomly assigned to one of four fictitious Instagram posts and completed pre- and post-measures of attitudes and purchase intention. The results show that none of the message types improved purchase intention or attitudes; instead, most effects were negative. However, attitudes remained positively associated with purchase intention. The findings suggest that greenfluencer communication does not automatically promote sustainable consumer responses and is not more effective among non-sustainable consumers.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Sustainable Fashion, Consumer Attitudes, Purchase Intention

1. Introduction

The fashion industry is one of the world's largest polluters, marked by high water use, chemical emissions, and a significant carbon footprint (Kemi & Zilahy, 2023; Klug, 2018). Although companies increasingly adopt sustainable materials and fair-trade practices (Shen et al., 2012), their impact remains limited without corresponding changes in consumer behavior.

Social media has become an important channel for sustainability communication, with platforms such as Instagram and TikTok offering low-barrier opportunities to reach consumers (Heilen et al., 2022; König & Maier, 2024). In this context, influencers are often perceived as more authentic than traditional advertisers (Knupfer et al., 2023; Lou & Yuan, 2019). More specifically, greenfluencers—content creators focusing on sustainability-related topics—are assumed to encourage more sustainable consumption, including in fashion (König & Maier, 2024).

At the same time, sustainability communication also faces challenges. Consumers may respond with skepticism (Zinkhan & Carlson, 1995), and sustainability messages can be perceived as moralizing or patronizing (Voci & Karmasin, 2024). Prior research further suggests that greenfluencer communication may be particularly relevant for less sustainability-oriented consumers (König & Maier, 2024), while repeated exposure to sustainability content can also shape behavior through social influence (Chung et al., 2020).

While previous research has examined emotional and functional appeals in green advertising (e.g., Hartmann et al., 2005), little is known about how different greenfluencer message types affect consumers in the context of sustainable fashion, particularly non-sustainable consumers. Therefore, this study investigates the following research question: *Which type of greenfluencer message is most effective in influencing skeptical or non-sustainable fashion consumers' purchase intentions and attitudes toward sustainable fashion?*

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Sustainable Fashion and Consumer Behavior

Sustainable fashion refers to clothing produced under environmentally and socially responsible conditions (Joergens, 2006). It is often positioned as a counter-model to fast fashion (Carey & Cervellon, 2014). Although ethical considerations have become more relevant in purchase decisions (Dickson, 2001), actual buying behavior remains largely driven by pragmatic factors such as price and quality (Beard, 2008).

Motivations for sustainable fashion consumption are diverse. Research shows that consumers integrate values such as environmental protection, social justice, health benefits, self-expression, and moral satisfaction into their purchasing decisions (Lundblad & Davies, 2016). The Theory of Consumption Values (TCV) identifies five core value dimensions—functional, social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional—that shape consumption decisions (Sheth et al., 1991). Empirical findings indicate that emotional, conditional, and ecological values are the strongest drivers of sustainable fashion purchases, whereas functional, social, and epistemic values exert

comparatively weaker effects (Bielawska & Grebosz-Krawczyk, 2021). In this study, TCV serves as the theoretical lens for understanding how different greenfluencer messages may activate different consumption values. Emotional messages mainly address emotional value, informational messages relate more strongly to functional and epistemic value, and social messages primarily appeal to social value.

Despite these motivations, numerous barriers persist. Price sensitivity, aesthetic concerns, limited knowledge about sustainable production processes, doubts regarding the credibility of sustainability claims, and the well-documented attitude–behavior gap hinder the translation of positive attitudes into actual purchase behavior (Abreu et al., 2022; Busalim et al., 2022; Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2018; Lundblad & Davies, 2016; Shen et al., 2012; Zarei & Maleki, 2018). These challenges highlight the critical role of communication in making sustainable fashion more accessible and appealing, particularly to skeptical consumers.

2.2 Greenfluencers, Sustainable Messages, and Purchase Behaviour

Greenfluencers are a specialized subgroup focusing on sustainability-related topics and promoting environmentally responsible products and lifestyles (Cavazos-Arroyo & Melchor-Ascencio, 2023; König & Maier, 2024; Yildirim, 2021). Their effectiveness is mainly attributed to perceived credibility and authenticity-based communication (Sailer et al., 2022), which may help reduce consumer skepticism and foster trust compared to traditional brand communication (Rosengren & Campbell, 2021).

Prior research suggests that greenfluencers may be particularly effective among consumers with low prior sustainability engagement (König & Maier, 2024). At the same time, not all sustainability messages are equally effective (Randle et al., 2019). Message framing refers to the selective emphasis of issue-relevant information (Entman, 1993) and can be operationalized in different ways.

In this study, three message types are considered. *Emotional messages* aim to evoke affective responses such as pride, empathy, or guilt (Cutler & Javalgi, 1993) and may strengthen emotional product associations (X. Zhang et al., 2024). *Informational messages* provide facts, problem descriptions, and solution-oriented arguments (Helmig & Thaler, 2010; Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Stafford & Day, 1995), whereas *social messages* emphasize norms, responsibility, and benefits for others (Reifegerste & Rössler, 2014; Jäger & Weber, 2020; Yang et al., 2021; Habermeyer et al., 2023).

Prior research has shown that both emotional and rational sustainability appeals can influence attitudes and behavioral intentions, although findings remain mixed and appear to depend on context and target group (Schramm & Wirth, 2006; Wehrli et al., 2014; Burböck et al., 2019; Ahmadi et al., 2023; Mas Manchón et al., 2015; Gierl et al., 2000; Gionfriddo et al., 2023; Jacobson et al., 2019). Influencers can positively affect attitudes and purchase intentions when perceived as credible and authentic (Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024; W. Zhang et al., 2021). However, empirical evidence on which greenfluencer message types are most effective in the context of sustainable fashion remains limited.

3. Research Model and Hypothesis

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model describes how environmental stimuli trigger internal states that lead to behavioral responses (Zhu et al., 2019). It is widely used in consumer research and is well suited to analyzing the effects of visual, textual, and social stimuli on purchase-related outcomes (Hsin Chang & Wen Chen, 2008). This study combines the TCV with the SOR framework (see Figure 1). While TCV provides the theoretical basis for explaining value-driven responses to sustainable fashion communication, SOR is used as a conceptual framework to structure how message stimuli affect internal evaluations and behavioral outcomes. The research model is inspired by Chang and Chen (2008).

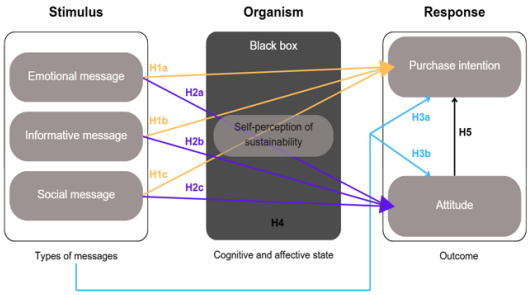

Figure 1: Research model (own illustration)

As the internal processes are not directly observable, the organism is treated as a black box (see Figure 1). The tested message types can be understood as different value-based communication appeals.

Based on the research model and prior empirical findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a–c: Emotional, informational, and social greenfluencer messages lead to significant changes in consumers' purchase intention toward sustainable fashion.

H2a–c: Emotional, informational, and social greenfluencer messages lead to significant changes in consumers' attitudes toward sustainable fashion.

H3a: The effect of greenfluencer messages on purchase intention differs across message types over time (pre- vs. post-exposure).

H3b: The effect of greenfluencer messages on attitudes toward sustainable fashion differs across message types over time (pre- vs. post-exposure).

H4: The effects of greenfluencer messages on purchase intention and attitudes are stronger among consumers with low sustainability orientation than among those with high sustainability orientation.

H5: Attitudes toward sustainable fashion are positively associated with purchase intention for sustainable clothing.

4. Research Desing and Methodology

This study uses a quantitative online experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions presented as realistic Instagram posts by a fictitious greenfluencer (see Figures 2–5). Pre- and post-measures and a self-assessment of sustainability orientation enabled the analysis of change over time and differences between sustainable and non-sustainable consumers.

4.1 Stimulus Development

The stimuli were designed as realistic Instagram posts (see Figure 2-4), each displaying the same image of a sustainable clothing item from the fictitious brand *purewear*. The visual stimulus was held constant across all conditions, while the accompanying caption varied depending on the message type.

Figure 2: Emotional message

Figure 3: Social message

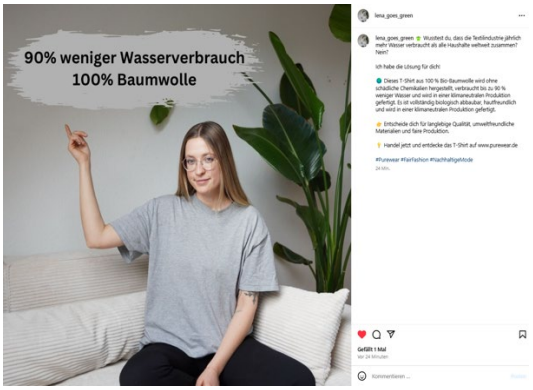

Figure 4: Informal message

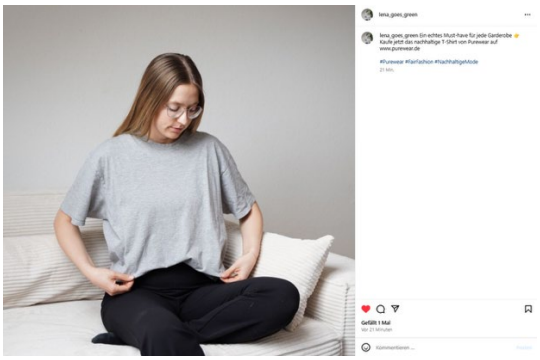

Figure 5: Neutral message (control group)

The emotional and informational messages were conceptually aligned with prior research by Ahmadi et al. (2023), while the social message incorporated normative and responsibility-based elements. A neutral post served as a control condition.

A constant visual setup with systematically varied text ensured that effects could be attributed to message framing rather than imagery. Caption wording was informed by an analysis of existing influencer Instagram posts.

Before the main study, the stimuli were pretested with 11 participants to assess whether the four posts were perceived as emotional, informational, social, or neutral. The pretest largely confirmed the intended classification, although the neutral condition was perceived less distinctly than the other message types.

4.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected via an online survey created in Unipark between March 6 and March 18, 2025. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling via social media, personal networks, and survey-sharing platforms. Random assignment to one of the four experimental conditions was implemented automatically within the survey. In total, 234 individuals participated, 208 completed the survey, and 202 valid datasets were retained after data screening. No direct monetary incentives were offered.

4.3 Measures

All constructs were operationalized using established measurement scales (see Table 1). All scale items were measured on seven-point Likert scales.

Table 1: Survey items and sources

Construct	Items	Source
Purchase intention (pre/post)	“How likely are you to purchase a sustainable T-shirt (post: from purewear)?” “How likely are you to consider sustainability aspects in your purchase decision?” “How likely are you to consciously choose a sustainable T-shirt (post: from purewear)?”	Adapted from Vieth (2009), based on Grewal et al. (1998)

Construct	Items	Source
Attitude toward sustainable fashion (pre/post)	"I generally have a positive attitude toward sustainable fashion." "I have a favorable opinion of purchasing sustainable fashion." "I like the idea of buying sustainable fashion."	Leclercq-Machado et al. (2022)
Manipulation check (post-stimulus)	"To what extent do you agree that the message was emotional/informational/social/neutral?"	Based on Wu and Wang (2011)
Sustainability orientation to classify sustainable and non-sustainable consumers.	"To what extent would you describe your lifestyle as sustainable/environmentally friendly?" "To what extent would you describe your clothing consumption as sustainable/environmentally friendly?"	Adapted from Bleys et al. (2018)
Barrier item (optional, non-sustainable consumers only)	Barriers to purchasing sustainable clothing (e.g., price, design)	Self-developed item (SDI)
Attention check	Control question on the color of the T-shirt shown in the stimulus	SDI
Open-ended feedback	"What did you particularly like about this post, or was there anything that bothered you?"	SDI

4.4 Data Analysis and Results

To test H1–H3, a series of 2 (time: pre vs. post) × 4 (message type: emotional, informational, social, neutral) mixed-design ANOVAs were conducted. To examine whether the effects differed between sustainable and non-sustainable consumers (H4), the same analyses were performed separately for both subgroups. H5 was tested using correlation and regression analyses.

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS. Assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variance, and sphericity were assessed based on visual inspection, Shapiro–Wilk and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests, and Q–Q plots, in line with methodological recommendations in the literature. Although the hypotheses focused on the three theoretically derived message types, the neutral condition was additionally included and analyzed as a control group.

4.4.1 Effects of Message Types on Purchase Intention (H1a–H1c)

To test H1a–H1c, separate paired-sample *t*-tests were conducted for each message type to examine changes in purchase intention from pre- to post-measurement (see Table 2). The results show that both the emotional message (H1a) and the social message (H1c) led to a statistically significant change in purchase intention, although the effect sizes were small. The informational message (H1b), by contrast, did not result in a significant change in purchase intention. Therefore, H1a and H1c were supported, whereas H1b was not supported.

For comparison purposes, the neutral control condition was also analyzed. Despite the absence of explicit message framing, the neutral stimulus led to a significant decline in purchase intention ($t(48) = -3.15$, $p = .003$), indicating a general negative shift following stimulus exposure.

Table 2: Paired-sample *t*-tests purchase intention

Hypothesis	Group	Variable	*t* (df)	*p*-value	Effect size (Cohen's *d*)
H1a	Emotional	Purchase intention	−2.41 (49)	.020	−0.340
H1b	Informative	Purchase intention	.290 (51)	.776	0.040
H1c	Social	Purchase intention	−2.45 (50)	.018	−0.340

4.4.2 Effects of Message Types on Attitudes Toward Sustainable Fashion (H2a–H2c)

To test H2a–H2c, paired-sample t-tests were conducted for each message type to assess changes in attitudes within each group (see Table 3). The results indicate that all three message types led to statistically significant changes. Thus, H2a, H2b, and H2c were supported. However, contrary to theoretical expectations, attitudes declined in all conditions. The strongest negative effect was observed in the informational message condition ($d = -0.76$), followed by the emotional ($d = -0.41$) and social ($d = -0.34$) conditions. The neutral control condition also exhibited a significant deterioration in attitudes ($t(48) = -5.25$, $p < .001$). Overall, attitudes toward sustainable fashion decreased consistently across all experimental groups after stimulus exposure.

4.4.3 Table 3: Paired-sample t-tests attitude

Hypothesis	Group	Variable	*t* (df)	*p*-value	Effect size (Cohen's *d*)
H2a	Emotional	Attitude	−2.91 (49)	.005	−0.410
H2b	Informative	Attitude	−5.47 (51)	< .001	−0.760
H2c	Social	Attitude	−5.60 (50)	< .001	−0.340

4.4.4 Interaction Effects of Message Type and Time (H3a, H3b)

To test H3a and H3b, mixed-design ANOVAs with repeated measures were conducted, with time (pre vs. post) as the within-subject factor and message type as the between-subject factor.

- *Purchase intention (H3a):* The analysis revealed no significant interaction effect between message type and time (p = .061). Thus, changes in purchase intention did not differ significantly across message types, and H3a was not supported. However, a significant main effect of time (p < .001) was observed, indicating an overall change in purchase intention across all conditions. The between-subjects effect was not significant (p = .381). Estimated marginal means suggested that the neutral condition exhibited the strongest decline in purchase intention, whereas the informational message showed minimal change. These differences, however, were not statistically significant.
- *Attitudes toward sustainable fashion (H3b):* Similarly, the mixed ANOVA revealed no significant interaction effect between message type and time (p = .352). Therefore, H3b was not supported. A significant main effect of time (p < .001) indicated a general deterioration in attitudes toward sustainable fashion across all groups. The between-subjects effect was significant (p = .021); however, post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni correction revealed no significant pairwise differences between message types (all p > .05). Overall, attitudes became more negative after stimulus exposure across all conditions, with the strongest decline observed in the neutral group.

4.4.5 Differences Between Sustainable and Non-Sustainable Consumers (H4)

To test H4, two separate mixed-design ANOVAs were conducted using purchase intention and attitudes as dependent variables. Time served as the within-subject factor and message type as the between-subject factor.

- For *sustainable consumers*, no significant interaction effect between time and message type was found for purchase intention (p = .431). A significant main effect of time (p < .001) indicated a general decline in purchase intention across all message types. Similarly, no significant interaction effect was found for attitudes (p = .155), while the main effect of time was significant (p < .001). Overall, sustainable consumers exhibited more negative attitudes after stimulus exposure, particularly in the neutral condition.
- For *non-sustainable consumers*, neither a significant interaction effect (p = .156) nor a significant main effect of time (p = .311) was found for purchase intention. Thus, the messages neither produced differential effects nor an overall change in purchase intention. The informational message showed a slight positive trend, but this effect was not statistically significant. For attitudes, no interaction effect was observed (p = .954), while the main effect of time was significant (p < .001), indicating a general decline in attitudes across all message types.

Across all four models, no significant interaction effects between time and message type were identified. Consequently, H4 was not supported. Greenfluencer messages did not exert stronger effects on non-sustainable consumers.

4.4.6 Relationship Between Attitudes and Purchase Intention (H5)

To test H5, the relationship between attitudes toward sustainable fashion and purchase intention was examined. As assumptions for parametric correlation were not met, Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were calculated separately for the pre- and post-stimulus measurements (see Table 4).

- *Prior to stimulus exposure*, a significant positive correlation was found between attitudes and purchase intention (ρ = .553, p < .001, n = 202), indicating that more positive attitudes were associated with higher purchase intention.

- *After stimulus exposure*, this relationship remained significant (ρ = .559, $p < .001$, $n = 202$). Thus, consumers with more favorable attitudes toward sustainable fashion consistently reported higher purchase intentions.

H5 can therefore be confirmed.

Table 4: Spearman's rank correlation H5

Measurement Point	Spearman's ρ	*p*-value	*N*
Pre-stimulus	.553	< .001	202
Post-stimulus	.559	< .001	202

5. Discussion, Limitations, and Implications

The results show that greenfluencer messages, regardless of framing, did not improve purchase intention or attitudes toward sustainable fashion. Instead, a significant deterioration was observed across most conditions. Interpreted through TCV, emotional, informational, and social messages may have addressed different consumption values, but none of these value appeals led to the expected positive effects. This indicates that skeptical consumers may require more credible or personally relevant sustainability communication.

These findings challenge the assumption that influencers play a central role in promoting sustainable lifestyles on social media platforms in a positive way and in reducing consumers' skepticism toward messages addressing specific topics (König & Maier, 2024; Rosengren & Campbell, 2021). Notably, this pattern emerged consistently across all message types, including the neutral control condition.

Although several hypotheses indicated statistically significant changes within individual groups (H1a, H1c; H2a–H2c), all observed effects pointed in a negative direction. One possible explanation is increased advertising skepticism (Goh & Balaji, 2016) or psychological reactance (Brennan & Binney, 2010) toward sustainability-related messaging. Consumers may perceive such messages as moralizing, repetitive, or strategically motivated, which can trigger resistance rather than persuasion. The absence of interaction effects in the mixed-design ANOVAs (H3a, H3b) suggests that varying the framing of greenfluencer messages alone was not sufficient to counteract these overarching barriers. While previous studies have shown that emotional, informational, or social appeals can positively influence sustainable attitudes and behavioral intentions under certain conditions (Burböck et al., 2019; Wehrli et al., 2014; Jäger & Weber, 2020), the present findings indicate that such effects are highly context dependent. In the price-sensitive and visually driven fashion market, single-exposure greenfluencer content may not be strong enough to overcome existing skepticism or competing consumption motives. The comparison between sustainable and non-sustainable consumers (H4) also failed to reveal differential effects. Contrary to prior findings suggesting that greenfluencers are particularly effective among less sustainability-oriented consumers (König & Maier, 2024), the present study did not find stronger effects for this group. Although the informational message showed a slight positive tendency among non-sustainable consumers, this effect was not statistically significant. Overall, short-term exposure to greenfluencer content did not produce distinct effects across consumer segments.

In contrast, the positive relationship between attitudes toward sustainable fashion and purchase intention (H5) was confirmed and remained stable both before and after stimulus exposure. This finding aligns with established studies that identify attitudes as a robust predictor of behavioral intentions (Muda et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2017). However, the results indicate that greenfluencer messages, at least in a single-exposure setting, are not sufficient to positively alter these attitudes.

This study has several *limitations*. This study has several limitations, including the use of fictitious influencers, a young convenience sample, a short-term design, and a single-item consumer classification. Potential stimulus-related biases also cannot be excluded.

From a *research perspective*, future studies should compare greenfluencers with conventional influencers, apply more fine-grained consumer segmentation, and use longitudinal designs with multiple stimuli.

Future research should focus less on whether greenfluencers work and more on when and for whom they are effective.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical approval was not required, as the study did not involve medical procedures, vulnerable populations, or sensitive personal data.

AI Declaration

ChatGPT and DeepL were used for translation and linguistic refinement only. All content was reviewed by the authors, who take full responsibility for the paper.

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