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When Sustainability becomes Instagrammable: Extending the Source Credibility Model to Green Influencer Marketing in New Media

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ABSTRACT

Employing the heuristic-systematic information processing model (HSM), this study aims to add engagement as a new dimension in Ohanian's classic source credibility model (SCM). It further demonstrates its relevance through a mediation framework where content-focused messaging mediates greenfluencers' (sources) attributes and credibility in greenfluencer advertisements (CGA), i.e., sponsored green posts published through their profiles. Indian social media users who are also the followers of greenfluencers on Instagram are the target population. A cross-sectional mixed-methods approach is employed to confirm the scale items, and PLS-SEM was used to test the hypotheses. Results show that the classic attributes such as "attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise" are still significant for endorsers in new media. Additionally, the dimension of engagement enhances the model for new media applications, where it has emerged as a crucial source cue. It further shows that CGA is not merely a direct effect of source cues. But rather, it is mediated through content-focused messaging where source cues gain persuasive power only when embedded with message content. The study sheds light on Indian consumers' perceptions of CGA in new media. There are significant theoretical contributions by acknowledging the instant interaction affordance of new media to the literature on source credibility, persuasion in new media, and digital consumer behavior.

Keywords: Content-Focused Messaging, Green Influencers, Heuristic-Systematic Information Processing Model, Social Media, Source Attractiveness, Source Credibility, Sponsored Green Posts
JEL Classifications: M31, M37, Q56, D83

1. INTRODUCTION

The classic approach to make any advertisement credible is by endorsing it through a celebrity. This can also be seen on social media (SM), where individuals with a considerable number of followers and fame were endorsed in sponsored green posts. Unlike traditional celebrities who have established themselves through their success in certain industries (such as acting, music, or athletics), official organizations have not recognized internet celebrities (Leung et al., 2022). They gained credibility and celebrity status on SM through their authentic and engaging content. They constitute a different category of celebrity group as social media influencers (SMIs) (Hess et al., 2022). They are initially commoners who gained the status of internet celebrities through SM outlets among their fellow SM users, who later turned out to be influencers. This study focuses on the subset of SMI's known as "*green influencers*" *or* "*greenfluencers*" whose attributes are subject to being tested in the present study. They specialize in creating content on consuming green and positioned themselves as effective change advocates (Conlan, 2021; Pittman and Abell, 2021; Stubbs et al., 2022). They work to set an example for others and impart knowledge on living sustainably. They function as representatives of green advocacy, based on which the followers model their beliefs. Many studies have proven that endorsing influencers is an effective marketing strategy. Especially, greenfluencers are sustainability heroes on SM (Townsend, 2024). By incorporating brand endorsements into their personal narratives in sponsored green posts, they influence

followers (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Internet celebrities, in contrast to traditional celebrities, are less credible to consumers (Leung et al., 2022). However, consumers vest credibility in them as they are presumably competent and specialize in a domain.

According to Ozanne et al. (2019), source credibility is a crucial heuristic and informative signal that is particularly pertinent in online situations. This is especially critical in the case of greenfluencers, where consumer trust is fragile, and credibility concerns were heightened in sponsored green posts. Without understanding source attributes that drive credibility, marketers and policymakers risk overlooking source credibility-driven persuasive effectiveness. According to Influencer Marketing Hub (2024), SM platforms like Instagram have seen a 150% rise in sustainability-focused influencer content over the past 3 years. These trends highlight the growing importance of greenfluencers and their sponsored green posts in shaping consumer behavior.

The communication models developed before the SM era demand extensions to their existing conceptualizations. The source credibility model (SCM) was extensively adopted to explain how "attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise" shape persuasion. However, its application to SMIs presents new challenges. In contrast to traditional celebrities, SMIs actively interact with followers, and this engagement dimension has become a central marker of credibility in SM. Engagement is SM's unique advantage, allowing sources to educate, interact, and stay in touch with their followers instantly. It provides space for value co-creation (Eslami et al., 2022). Without engagement, SM is just another medium that replicates conventional information dissemination. Commenting and sharing content all became possible after the advent of SM. However, existing studies undermine this interactive component, leaving the classic credibility framework incomplete in the SM contexts. Accordingly, this study addresses the problem by extending the model with engagement as a new source credibility dimension. This enhances the original model as a reflection of platforms' interactive affordances. Along with source attributes, how the content is focused and posted plays a vital role in shaping perceptions of CGA. SMIs are often categorized as the most beneficial bunch for promoting sustainable goods through their presumably authentic content. Hence, "Content is King," which drives the source's authenticity. By testing content-focused messaging as a mediator between source attributes and CGA, the study advances the SCM for its application to new media.

Prior studies in SMI marketing have extensively used the SCM and the heuristic-systematic information processing model (HSM). Following the recommendations from earlier researchers, few studies have employed HSM as a framework in SMI marketing to conceptualize research models (Yeon et al., 2019; Son et al., 2020). The HSM implies that a message recipient uses two modes of information processing, namely, heuristic and systematic (Trumbo, 2002). The present study associates source credibility attributes, such as "attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise", with heuristic information processing, while engagement is associated with systematic information processing. In brief, source credibility is a significant heuristic that profoundly affects users' evaluation of information (Hovland et al., 1953). Source credibility can influence users' opinions and behaviors (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Moreover, focusing on source attributes is essential to understanding how users assess and engage with content and make decisions in a constantly evolving network of technology (Witte, 1992). Few studies have addressed how these two types of cues influence CGA and examined particular aspects of a source's credibility (Ohanian, 1990; Breves et al., 2019; Schouten et al., 2020).

Despite such significance, there is no SM specific communication model devoted to greenfluencer's CGA. While prior studies (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Lou and Yuan, 2019) have extended the SCM and tested mediation mechanisms such as attitude or parasocial interaction, the integration of engagement as an additional credibility dimension, and examination of content-focused messaging as a mediator in shaping CGA holistically is limited in the extant literature. The present study addresses this gap within the context of green influencers by providing a theoretical framework. Persuasion literature theories, namely, the source credibility and attractiveness theories, and the HSM framework, were relied for theoretical underpinnings. Extensions to the models help us stretch our minds to notice things that were previously unseen (Friestad and Wright, 1994). We aim to develop a model that deepens our understanding of the effect of both the cues, heuristic (i.e., "Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, and Expertise") and systematic (i.e., engagement with users), on credibility perceptions.

The following research questions are raised for this study-

- RQ1: How do the greenfluencers' attributes ("attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, engagement") influence followers' perceptions of CGA?
- RQ2: Does content-focused messaging mediate the relationship between greenfluencer attributes and the perceived CGA?

To address the questions raised, the following objectives are framed-

- Obj1: To test how attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, and engagement shape perceptions of CGA
- Obj2: To test the mediating role of content-focused messaging in linking greenfluencers' attributes to CGA.

The manuscript is structured as follows: First, the study establishes its theoretical underpinnings, and this is followed by the formulation of hypotheses. Second, the methods for data collection and data analysis were discussed. Third, the cause-and-effect relationship of the conceptualized variables is tested using PLS-SEM. Finally, through the discussion, the results and findings of the study attempted to provide significant theoretical implications.

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

In the context of assessing how an individual assimilates and processes information, HSM has been widely applied (Chaiken, 1980). According to Bohner et al. (2008), HSM comprises two modalities: heuristic information processing and systematic information processing. In the heuristic information-processing mode, evaluation is processed for cues that are unrelated to

content, with little to no cognitive effort. In contrast, an individual exerts a great deal of cognitive effort to assess content-related elements for results when systematically processing information (Chaiken, 1980). Previous studies have used both HSM modalities simultaneously, particularly when studying online communication (Lee and Hong, 2021; James et al., 2021). These two cues work as a persuasion mechanism to gain credibility. The persuasion process begins with the perception of the greenfluencers. Classic persuasion theories hold that source attributes serve as primary heuristics that shape how audiences subsequently evaluate messages. Hovland and Weiss (1951) demonstrated that credible sources enhance communication effectiveness, while Ohanian (1990) operationalized credibility into attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise.

2.1. Rationale for the Current Study

The HSM is chosen as an appropriate framework for the proposed conceptual model, intended to extend the Ohanian SCM. "Attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise" were manifested as heuristic information processing cues, as they involve less cognitive effort and are not related to the content. Taking into consideration the fact that engagement is a critical component to gain credibility, the present study conceptually updates the Ohanian model by adding "engagement" to capture the interactive relational layer alongside heuristic cues. Hence, eengagement with users is manifested as a systematic information processing cue, as there is a higher cognitive effort to evaluate content-related factors while engaging. Relying on the HSM, the main focus is on the substance of the persuasiveness of the message and its underlying content-focused in the present study. We operationalizes *engagement* as a single construct. This choice aligns with the study's focus on extending the model, where engagement functions as an additional credibility cue rather than a multifaceted behavioral typology. Heuristic (i.e., "Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, and Expertise" in the original model) and systematic (i.e., Engagement, the new construct added to the original model) information processing are manifested as credibility drivers towards the CGA through content-focused messaging.

2.1.1. Justification of causal ordering in the proposed model

The predominantly used causal ordering in influencer marketing proceeds from source attributes to content-focused messaging perception to perceived CGA information credibility, which is also grounded in the traditional Yale model of persuasion. Although it is possible that content could retroactively alter perceptions of the source (e.g., unreliable information lowering perceived expertise). In the present study's context, followers have their first encounter with the source, followed by the content. Furthermore, source credibility theory stresses that the perceptions of the source form initial heuristics, and followers process who is speaking before what is being said (Ohanian, 1990; Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Users in fast-paced feeds first encounter HSM cues or the source cues (e.g., attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, and engagement) that prime their interpretation of the subsequent message (Chaiken, 1980). CGA is then judged as an integrated outcome of these earlier evaluations (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Metzger and Flanagin, 2013). Alongside this, content perceptions act as a mediator between source cues and posts' credibility perceptions. For instance, if the influencer is trustworthy, even self-promotional content may not diminish credibility. This order is also consistent with cue-consistency theory and the HSM. Finally, the integrated outcome of the conceptual model is the perceived CGA. In the social media context, credibility judgments are not solely determined by the source or the content. Further, it is a *post hoc* evaluation of the message after processing both (Metzger and Flanagin, 2013, Metzger et al., 2003). For instance, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) showed how parasocial interaction and the credibility of an SMI affected the perception of content credibility. Thus, the causal ordering in the present study is both theoretically grounded and empirically validated across influencer and persuasion literature.

2.2. Hypotheses Development

2.2.1. Heuristic information processing cues

Attractiveness: Source attractiveness serves as a heuristic cue, allowing for judgments to be made with minimal cognitive effort. A greenfluencer's physical appearance acts as a superficial cue that drives credibility. While other research (DeSarbo, 1985; Caballero et al., 1989) has independently investigated the impact of sources' attractiveness on goods, services, and social causes, McGuire (1985) counts source attractiveness as one of the qualities of source credibility. How fashionable, charming, elegant, sensual, and appealing a source appears to be determined how attractive consumers find them (Wei and Lu, 2013). "Beauty is Power" describes the notion that one's physical appearance confers authority and, as a result, makes one's words and deeds seem trustworthy. Because individuals unconsciously want to associate themselves with presumably attractive people, this allows the "Attractiveness" heuristic to affect their perceptions (Kim et al., 2021; Ozanne et al., 2019). Hence, an attractive source can be persuasive, and this significantly influences the CGA.

H_1: The Source's perceived attractiveness has a direct positive effect on the perceived CGA.

Trustworthiness: Certain qualities exhibit a source's trustworthiness. It encompasses honesty, fairness, and integrity, making a source presumably trustworthy. In the context of influencer marketing, the degree to which a source is perceived as sincere, truthful, and reliable in their online presence is trustworthiness (Kim and Kim, 2021). Consumers' trust in the information posted can be understood as a measure of their confidence in the source's fairness and truthfulness at the time of delivery. The authenticity perceived by greenfluencers has a significant impact on how consumers react to their posts. Sponsored content can erode trust unless it is perceived as authentic. However, consumers value authenticity elements like integrity and truthfulness, which can counterbalance negative views of sponsored content.

H_2: The Source's perceived trustworthiness has a direct positive effect on the perceived CGA.

Expertise: According to Hovland et al. (1953), expertise as the effective assertions made by the communicator. Expertise builds up on the academic qualifications and intellectual capabilities of the source, such as experience and degree of understanding about the endorsed good. From the source's knowledge and experience in the relevant field (Erdogan, 1999), expertise is measured. The integration of source expertise with message completeness

Figure 1: Measurement model analysis using smart-partial least squares

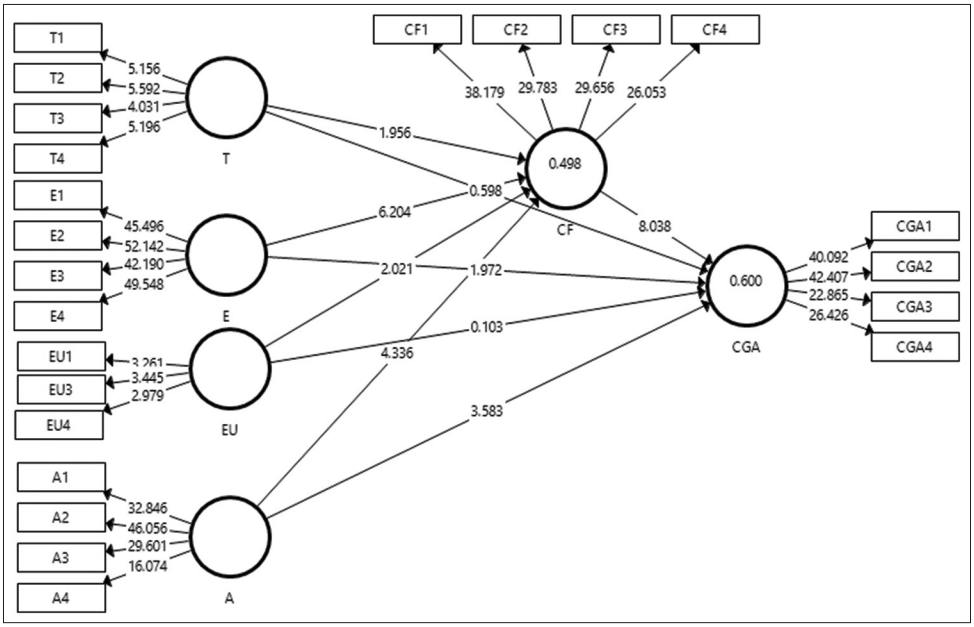
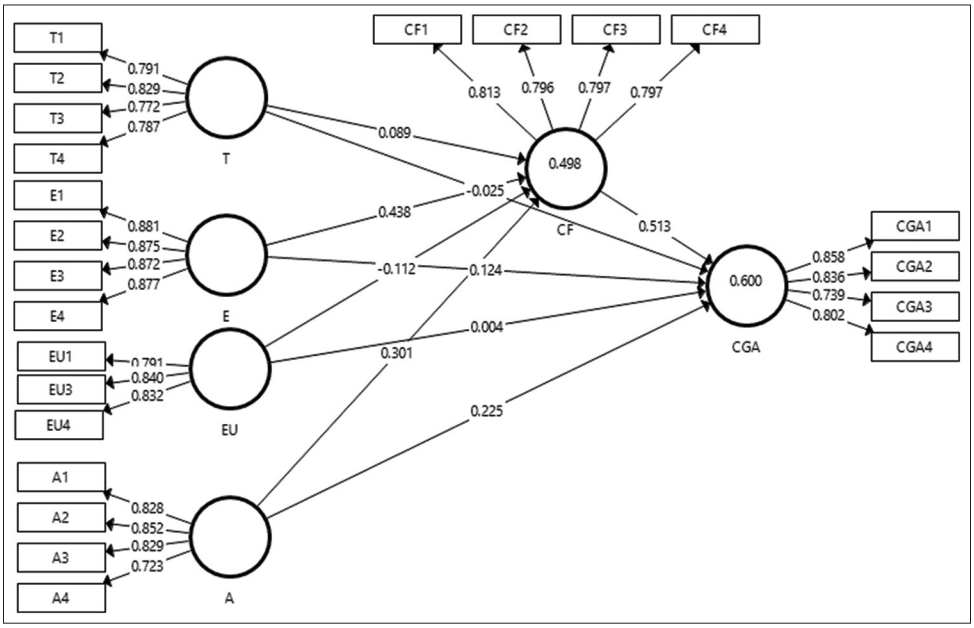


Figure 2: Mediation analysis (structural model) using smart-partial least squares



further enhances perceived credibility, which is crucial in online discussion (Poorisat et al., 2019). Hence, the expertise heuristic fosters credibility and impacts the persuasiveness of the content delivered.

H_3: The Source's perceived expertise has a direct positive effect on the perceived CGA.

2.2.2. Systematic information processing cue

Engagement - The added credibility-driven Systematic cue dimension.

Previous studies have been made on the consumers' engagement with sources, such as liking, sharing posts, and commenting as a behavioural engagement outcome (Gu and Duan, 2024). However, the present study treats it as a credibility-driving systematic information cue as it is message-related and needs conscious cognitive efforts (Xiao et al., 2018; Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006). Systematic cues in the case of SMIs include the robustness of posts' content, which has a direct impact on perceived information credibility. It has a significant impact on the followers' perception of message content and has been extensively studied as a systematic cue while processing the information (Hussain et al., 2017). SMIs can share their experience with their followers and make statements. In the present study, engagement is defined as a precursor of perceived content credibility, and a positive engagement strength and perceived information credibility has been found in the context of Facebook communication. Although Calder et al. (2016) stated engagement is a multidimensional

construct, the present study primarily focuses on the quality of posts as perceived informativeness, i.e., the followers' perceptions about information quality (Ducoffe, 1996). This content-driven interaction with users underpins it by expanding the credibility process to the interactive capabilities of SM. Relying on the HSM the present study manifests that engagement should be informative (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006), which will drive credibility. Hence, the impact of the engagement is tested alongside the traditional source credibility cues.

H_4: The Source's perceived engagement with users has a direct positive effect on the CGA.

2.2.3. Content-focused messaging

The influence of source cues often operates through followers' perceptions of content style. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), source attributes activate heuristic processing that frames subsequent evaluation of message features. For instance, a trustworthy influencer may make an environmentally focused message appear authentic, and an engaging influencer may render a customer-experience narrative more relatable. Recent studies confirm this sequence in SMI contexts. Casaló et al. (2018) found that influencer attributes shape perceptions of authenticity in posts, while Lou and Yuan (2019) showed that source credibility affects the perceived value of branded content. Thus, content-focused perception acts as a bridge through which source attributes influence ultimate credibility assessments. Informative content attracts consumers and makes posts more effective. The information quality of the posts blurs the lines between commercial and content creation.

Focus on the source's sustainable lifestyle and how the product produced by the body corporates helps them to view that as a pleasing element in sponsored green posts. Educational content with a lot of information enhances the CGA, as followers are more confident when greenfluencers provide comprehensive explanations regarding a body corporate's sustainability, rather than relying on marketing cliches. This not only strengthens the credibility of the sources but also contributes to refining the overall quality of communication and does justice to the definition of green-sponsored posts. Moreover, their emphasis on awareness and education helps establish a long-term, reputable image. Hence, the mediator is conceptualized as followers' perceptions of the informativeness of the posts.

H_5: Content-focused messaging positively influences the perceived CGA.

2.2.4. Credibility of the CGA

CGA represents the evaluative outcome of the persuasion process. Credibility judgments in digital environments are post-hoc, integrating both source heuristics and content-based evaluations (Metzger and Flanagin, 2013). This placement is consistent with the "source - message - receiver" ordering of persuasion models (Hovland and Weiss, 1951) and aligns with influencer marketing evidence. For instance, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) demonstrated that SMI credibility and parasocial interaction shape perceptions of content credibility, which in turn drives credibility. Authentic content is something that consumers crave on social media. Components that can boost CGA were identified. The most crucial component in determining the CGA is its perceived honesty. It has to do with both the source and the content that the source delivers. The most effective way to substantiate the claims and prevent consumers from growing doubt (DoPaço and Reis, 2012), is by focusing on information quality. Sources consider which information about the product would be important to consumers and ensure that the content conveyed is efficient. In addition to increasing consumers' interest and awareness of green consumption (Nazir and Wani, 2024), being informed by green advertising about a product's efficacy and environmental advantages can also have a favorable impact on how credible the posts published are perceived to be. The credibility of the posts is impacted by their clarity.

A viable claim must be precise and not made ambiguously. Detailing of the claims goes hand in hand with the previous point, clarity in claims. An endorser of a well-informed green claim must be able to back it up with extra data (such as CSR audit reports or other eco-label certifications) that is widely accessible to consumers who want to review it. The more detailed information and reliable references that are included in the green claims, the more it adds to the credibility. Posts that demonstrate commitment to the shift to sustainability quickly gain more respect. These posts need to be able to show that they are sincere and have the long term commitment in mind. This is communicated in the posts published by the body corporate's recent acts and their detailed action plans for the future. Urgency, i.e., immediate action is needed to address the environmental crisis. Sources who become the face of the body corporate stress in their communication strategy highlight the importance of these sustainable activities carried out and their urgency. An average consumer is suspicious of businesses' covert objectives behind the posts published. There is concern that companies may exploit the term sustainability primarily for profit. Sharing the core values of the body corporate with the consumers reflects the concern. Being informed by green advertising about a product's usefulness and environmental benefits can also positively affect how credible and truthful a post is perceived, in addition to raising consumers' interest and awareness of green products. Hence, in the present study, credibility is a subjective judgement.

H_{6a}: The relationship between attractiveness and perceived CGA is mediated by content-focused messaging.

H_{6b}: The relationship between trustworthiness and perceived CGA is mediated by content-focused messaging. Mediates.

H_{6c}: The relationship between expertise and perceived CGA is mediated by content-focused messaging.

H_{6d}: The relationship between engagement and CGA is mediated through content-focused messaging.

H_{7a}: The Source's perceived attractiveness positively influences consumers' perceptions of content-focused messaging.

H_{7b}: The Source's perceived trustworthiness positively influences consumers' perceptions of content-focused messaging.

H_{7c}: The Source's perceived expertise positively influences consumers' perceptions of content-focused messaging.

H_{7d}: The Source's perceived engagement with users positively influences consumers' perceptions of content-focused messaging.

3. METHODS AND DATA

We adopted a cross-sectional mixed-methods approach. It is intended to test causal relationships between source cues and

perceived CGA with content-focused messaging as the mediating variable. The scales were adapted from the extant literature, and confirmatory analysis was performed using PLS-SEM to test the hypothesis.

3.1. Contextual Research Settings

Why India? Indian consumers represent a unique and compelling context for examining credibility. As one of the fastest-growing digital economies, India has over 820 million internet users, with SM penetration expanding rapidly (Statista, 2025). Why Instagram? According to data released in Meta's platform insights, Instagram maintained a significant presence in India in 2025, with 415 million monthly active users (Instagram, 2026). This number highlights Instagram's position as one of the top SM platforms in the nation, with a large audience reach and great engagement. It was the most downloaded mobile app, a clear sign of its ongoing attraction to younger and new users (The Global statistics, 2025). Studying Indian Instagram users offers dual relevance: it captures the perspectives of a large, sustainability-aware but skeptical consumer base, and situating the user base within a platform captures perceived CGA more accurately.

3.2. Sample Size Determination

The present study tried to incorporate diverse age groups to broaden its scope and replicability. The SM user in India who follows greenfluencers on Instagram is vast and hard to identify, making the application of probability sampling impractical. Therefore, the data were collected using a snowball sampling method (Baltar and Brunet, 2012; Etikan et al., 2016; Heckathorn, 2011). As the population size was unknown, Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula, i.e., $S = X^2 NP(1-P) + d2 (N-1) + X^2 P(1-P)$, was used, and the minimum sample size required is 378.

3.3. Inclusion Criteria and Respondents' Consent

Respondents aged 18 and above who have freely agreed to participate in the study and given their informed agreement to complete it are included as respondents. The respondents had to be active SM users. The respondents also had to be followers of any greenfluencers. Consumers who view green influencers' posts published on SM platforms regularly were targeted. The respondents had to be Indian or have resided in India since childhood to restrict socio-cultural influence and nationality differences from the study results. Before the commencement of the interviews, oral consent was sought from the respondents. For the questionnaire, written consent was obtained in the Google Form by clicking the informed consent check box.

3.4. Instrument and Measures

The scales were adopted from various scholarly works published. The trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise items were adopted from Ohanian's (1991), Xiao et al. (2018), and Ki and Kim, (2019). The items for engagement with users were adopted from Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019). The items for CGA were adapted from Verleye et al., (2023). The content-focused messaging sales were adopted from Ducoffe (1996) and Lou and Yuan (2019). Although the original scale of the outcome variable CGA was developed in the context of corporate green advertising, its focus on perceived honesty, believability, and reliability aligns with CGA perceptions made through greenfluencers sponsored green posts. Similarly, all the items in different scales developed in different research settings were carefully adapted and modified to present the study's context. A 5-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting strongly disagree and 5 denoting strongly agree, was used to evaluate the items.

3.5. Data Collection

This study comprises two phases (an interview where n = 35, followed by a survey where n = 385) with two different sets of respondents. The data collection period spanned from January 2024 to March 2025. The interview was conducted offline with the interview schedule tool. Although the scales were adopted, in-depth interviews were conducted to verify and ensure the contextual relevance of the scales, as the original scales were developed in different contextual settings. Based on the interview date, the question flow was adjusted, and items in the scale were modified. This ensured that the statements were readable and captured the nuances of the constructs holistically. Later, the interview schedule was converted into a questionnaire for the survey. The survey was disseminated online.

3.6. Data Analysis Methods

The partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), a nonparametric second-generation multivariate analysis technique, is preferred for the study. PLS-SEM incorporates elements of both factor analysis and regression, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the connection between endogenous and exogenous variables (Hair et al., 2017; 2019; 2020; Sarstedt et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that PLS-SEM exhibits optimal performance when dealing with non-parametric data and does not necessitate multivariate normality of data to yield dependable results. Also, PLS-SEM provides higher flexibility in such complex models (Agyapong, 2021; Hair et al., 2019, 2020). Hence, PLS-SEM is used to examine the survey data. The analysis was done in the statistical software program Smart PLS-SEM Version 3.

3.6.1. Pilot study

Between the months of January 2024 and April 2024, the interviews were carried out to determine whether the scales are relevant from an Indian perspective towards the present study's context. The mode of administration of the question was through note-taking. It took 15 min to complete the interview with each respondent. We have confined our interviews to 30 respondents, as no new comments were received. An additional 5 respondents were included to reach saturation.

3.6.2. Main study

Followed by the In-depth interviews, a survey was conducted with a sample of 385 social media users between September 2024 and February 2025 to assess the proposed model's reliability and validity. Initially, a total of 416 responses were received from the respondents residing in India. However, the final dataset comprises respondents who were subjected to detailed scrutiny, specifically those who follow greenfluencers daily and engage with their content. Therefore, the final analysis was based on only 385 responses. 69.6% respondents were young adults, with female

respondents at 52.7% who marginally outnumbered males at 41.6%. However, the gender balance with respect to SM users appears to be reasonably good among the respondents. Urban dwellers dominated at 51.4%, followed by 32.2% semi-urban and 16.4% rural. The Table 1 presents a comprehensive summary of the respondents.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS INTERPREATION

This section elaborates on the convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability measures for the PLS-SEM model, which is followed by the mediation analysis and bootstrapping to test the hypotheses, respectively. The findings are presented in accordance with the recommendations made in the PLS-SEM handbook (Sarstedt et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2017; 2019; 2020).

Table 1: Demographic breakdown

Label	n=385	
	Percentage	Frequency
Age		
18-30	69.6	268
31-40	16.1	62
41-50	9.1	35
51-60	1.8	7
Above 60	3.4	13
Gender		
Man	41.6	160
Woman	52.7	203
Do not want to disclose	5.7	22
Educational qualification		
12th grade	3.6	14
Under graduation	14.5	56
Post-graduation	22.9	87
Post-graduation and above	28.1	108
Others	30.9	119
Locality		
Urban	51.4	198
Semi-Urban	30.1	116
Rural	18.4	71

4.1. Results of Reliability and Validity Measures

An important part of the PLS technique is evaluating the measurement model. Researchers can add, remove, or modify the items in the scale with the helpful warning that reported indicator variables might not be reliable. The convergent validity results are the first stage in assessing the measurement model (Table 2 and Figure 1). Firstly, the item-level analysis reveals that the commonality and indicator loadings surpassed the threshold of 0.5 and 0.7, respectively, at the item level. All of the item loadings are better than the typically identified threshold limit of 0.7, demonstrating the sturdy relationships that each indicator has with its corresponding construct. Especially, items A1 (0.828), A2 (0.852), and E1 (0.791), as an instance, indicate that they're correct items of their respective constructs. The Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.760 to 0.899, indicating strong inner consistency across all the constructs. A result above 0.7 is usually seen as reliable, an. "Expertise" has a high Cronbach's alpha of 0.899.

Secondly, the construct level analysis reveals that the convergent validity was satisfied since Cornbach's alpha, composite reliability, and AVE all exceed the corresponding threshold levels of 0.7, 0.7, and 0.5. AVE values are above the perfect threshold of 0.5. The square root of the AVEs for each construct was therefore higher than its correlations with other constructs (Table 2). The rho_A values indicate strong reliability and internal consistency, varying from 0.769 to 0.901, especially in the "Expertise" construct. The statistical indicators show that the items in the constructs are accurate and precisely defined representations of the underlying theoretical concept. Overall, the results indicate that the model

Table 2: Item statistics and measurement model assessment

Constructs	Indicators	Standardized factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Composite reliability Rho (p)	Average inner item correlation (Rho_A)
Attractiveness	A1	0.828	0.823	0.655	0.833	0.824
	A2	0.852				
	A3	0.829				
	A4	0.723				
Content focused	CF1	0.813	0.813	0.641	0.877	0.816
	CF2	0.796				
	CF3	0.797				
	CF4	0.797				
Perceived credibility of green advertisements	CGA1	0.858	0.825	0.656	0.884	0.834
	CGA2	0.836				
	CGA3	0.739				
	CGA4	0.802				
Expertise	E1	0.881	0.899	0.768	0.930	0.901
	E2	0.875				
	E3	0.872				
	E4	0.877				
Engagement	EU1	0.791	0.760	0.675	0.862	0.769
	EU3	0.840				
	EU4	0.832				
Trustworthiness	T1	0.791	0.811	0.632	0.873	0.831
	T2	0.829				
	T3	0.772				
	T4	0.787				

Table 3: Average variance extracted

Constructs	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P-values
Attractiveness	0.655	0.657	0.030	22.197	0.000
Content-focused	0.641	0.641	0.030	21.345	0.000
CGA	0.656	0.657	0.027	24.684	0.000
Expertise	0.768	0.767	0.025	30.760	0.000
Engagement	0.675	0.570	0.150	4.514	0.000
Trustworthiness	0.632	0.578	0.112	5.625	0.000

encompasses strong psychometric properties.

For all the constructs (Table 3), the P = 0.000. This implies that the differences between sample means and actual sample values are statistically significant. High t-statistics are observed in samples are providing strong evidence against the hypothesis.

4.2. Results of Discriminant Validity Measures

When two latent variables that reflect distinct theoretical ideas are statistically distinct, it is said to have attained discriminant validity. In short, it assures the uniqueness of each construct (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell and Larcker (Fand L) and Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT). According to the Fand L criterion, accepted discriminant validity is indicated by the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeding its correlations with each other construct (Table 4) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

According to the most recent criteria, the ratio of correlations between HTMT is used to determine the discriminant validity for each construct. The HTMT inference strategy suggest a liberal approach, that all HTMT values must be <1. Similarly, each HTMT value was below the 0.85 cutoff point (Henseler et al., 2015), confirming discriminant validity (Table 5). Both discriminant and convergent validity were surpassed, enabling us to evaluate the structural model. Hence, for all the constructs, the discriminant validity was established.

4.3. Mediation Analysis

The validity of the study's measurement model was examined through mediation analyses. To verify the validity of the measurement model, statistical measures such as average factor loading (AFL), composite reliability (CL), and average variance extracted (AVE) were employed. Six items were to be eliminated because of lower loadings and cross-factor loadings: EU2, CF5, CGA5, CGA6, CGA7, and CGA8. Before the measurement model's confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), these items were eliminated (see Figure 2).

4.4. Bootstrapping Path Coefficients

The second stage of the PLS-SEM is a structural modeling approach to look at the relationships between the constructs after establishing the statistical significance of the measurement model. The data fit the measurement model well. A substantial fit was found when bootstrapping for percentile and bias correction was done. First, the results of the direct effects were tabulated (Table 6).

H_1 (β = 0.379, t =5.421, P < 0.001) A -> CGA: a substantial positive correlation indicates that CGA have more credibility when the sources were perceived as attractive. H_2 (β = 0.021, t = 0.426, P > 0.001) T -> CGA: The path is not significant and it means that perceived trustworthiness has no significant influence on the CGA directly. H_3 (β = 0.348, t =4.929, P < 0.001) E -> CGA: statistically significant at the 0.05 level, this relationship is close and suggests that expertise may have some influence on the perceived CGA. More research may be needed to fully appreciate this interaction, i.e., engagement can detract from the content's focus. H_4 (β = −0.054, t = 1.054, of P > 0.001) EU -> CGA: The path is not statistically significant. User interaction affects the credibility of CGA subtly. H_5 (β = 0.514, t = 8.038, P < 0.001) CF -> CGA: Well-focused and informative content elevates positive perceptions that have a favourable impact on the CGA.

Table 4: F&L discriminant validity

	A	CF	CGA	E	EU	T
A	0.810					
CF	0.639	0.801				
CGA	0.645	0.736	0.810			
E	0.760	0.666	0.635	0.876		
EU	0.010	−0.046	−0.017	0.072	0.822	
T	0.062	0.101	0.052	0.076	0.353	0.795

Table 5: HTMT matrix

	A	CF	CGA	E	EU	T
A						
CF	**0.778**					
CGA	0.778	**0.895**				
E	0.884	0.774	**0.731**			
EU	0.056	0.090	0.047	**0.089**		
T	0.070	0.126	0.093	0.086	**0.456**	

Additionally, the direct effect of source attributes on content-focused messaging was also tested (Table 6). H_{7a} (β = 0.301, t =4.336, P < 0.001) A -> CF: The relationship between attractiveness and content focus is strongly positive, meaning that when attractiveness rises, content focus rises as well. H_{7b} (β = 0.089, t = 1.956, P > 0.001) T -> CF: Content-focused is not positively impacted by trustworthiness, meaning, consumers' trust is fragile on SM posts published. H_{7c} (β = 0.438, t = 6.204, P < 0.001) E -> CF: Expertise has a substantial positive impact on Content Focused, indicating that expertise enhances the potency of advertising content. H_{7d} (β = −0.112, t = 2.021, P < 0.001) EU -> CF: engagement with users has a positive effect on content focus.

Second, the results of the indirect effects were tabulated (Table 7). Results shows source attributes relationship between the credibility of green-sponsored posts advertisements (CGA) and content focused. The statistical acceptability of the mediation hypotheses is detailed below.

Table 6: Bootstrapping path coefficient (direct effects)

Hypotheses	Path	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P-values	Test result
Direct effects of source attributes on the credibility of green advertisements							
H_1	A->CGA	0.379	0.379	0.070	5.421	0.000	Supported
H_2	T->CGA	0.021	0.025	0.048	0.426	0.670	Not supported
H_3	E->CGA	0.348	0.348	0.071	4.929	0.000	Supported
H_4	EU->CGA	−0.054	−0.045	0.051	1.054	0.293	Not supported
H_5	CF->CGA	0.514	0.505	0.064	8.038	0.000	Supported
Direct effects of source attributes on content-focused messaging							
H_{7a}	A->CF	0.301	0.305	0.069	4.336	0.000	Supported
H_{7b}	T->CF	0.089	0.090	0.046	1.956	0.051	Not supported
H_{7c}	E->CF	0.438	0.431	0.071	6.204	0.000	Supported
H_{7d}	EU->CF	−0.112	−0.104	0.055	2.021	0.044	Supported

Table 7: Bootstrapping path coefficients (Specific indirect effects)

Hypotheses	Path	Original sample (O) or beta	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T-statistics	P-values	Results
H_{6a}	A->CF->CGA	0.115	0.155	0.042	3.687	0	Supported
H_{6b}	T->CF->CGA	0.046	0.045	0.023	1.968	0.05	Supported
H_{6c}	E->CF->CGA	0.225	0.217	0.044	5.118	0	Supported
H_{6d}	EU->CF->CGA	0.058	0.052	0.029	2.006	0.045	Supported

H_{6a} aims to test whether the source's attractiveness has a significant impact on the CGA with a mediating effect of content focus. The test results show ($\beta = 0.155$, $t = 3.687$, $P < 0.001$) that the values are statistically significant and the hypothesis was supported. The celebrity endorsement tactic, primarily used in traditional television-sponsored posts, has been scooped up by body corporates on SM. Businesses that have stepped up on the surface of this dynamic digital universe need fuel in the form of credibility and goodwill to continue their business in the long run. The results revealed that A -> CF -> CGA: the perceived attractiveness of the source positively impacts the perceived CGA through the mediating effect of focused content. This confirms that attractiveness has a positive effect on content both directly and indirectly. It fosters credibility through information richness. H_{6b} ($\beta = 0.046$, $t = 1.968$, $P < 0.001$) shows that the values are statistically significant and trustworthiness on the source and credibility of the source are mediated by content focused on the source. T -> CF -> CGA: Although the trustworthiness of the source doesn't confirm the CGA directly, it is fostered by content. Hence, with content-focused, the trustworthiness of the source increases the CGA. In the case of Expertise, H_{6c} ($\beta = 0.225$, $t = 5.118$, $P < 0.001$), the hypothesis was proven to be right. E -> CF -> CGA: Expertise through content focus dramatically improves the CGA. This implies that the source's expertise improved content quality, accelerating credibility. Well, the direct effect turned out statistically insignificant, this infers that the expertise of the source holds no value in the digital space if the contents in the posts were not presented efficiently with utmost clarity and detailing. H_{6d} shows ($\beta = -0.058$, $t = 2.006$, $P < 0.001$); hence, the relationship between engagement and credibility is mediated by content, and the hypothesis was supported. EU -> CF -> CGA: User engagement negatively impacts the integrity of the posts. There is no complementary mediation between these hypotheses' constructs. Publishing posts too often could overwhelm followers' feeds and lead to fatigue. The sources' posts may cause followers to lose interest in them, filter them out, or even grow irritated. On the other hand, those who post infrequently are not regarded as current information sources. Additionally, they are not present enough on followers' feeds to foster intimacy and trustworthiness. Overall, the model suggests that the perceived expertise, engagement with users, and trustworthiness of the source do not have a direct positive impact on CGA. The results confirm that attributes of the source have a positive impact on claims made in the sponsored green posts through content focused message as a mediation.

5. DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to develop a SM specific credibility based communication model. The discussion interprets the findings of the present study in light of the theoretical underpinnings, such as source credibility theory, source attractiveness theory, and the HSM, highlighting how credibility formation in greenfluencer communication differs from traditional endorsement settings and why a content-mediated, cognitively oriented framework is necessary. The findings contradict prior studies by demonstrating that source cues alone are not sufficient drivers of credibility. It reinforces a need for a communication model that accounts for message-level processing of the information. The SCT posits that attributes such as trustworthiness and expertise re heuristic cues that directly drive message acceptance. Although this assumption has been largely supported in conventional advertising contexts, the findings of the present study suggest that such direct effects are insufficient to build credibility in SM. The findings reveal that source attributes such as trustworthiness and engagement do not exert a significant direct effect on the perceived CGA. Rather than underestimating the relevance of these attributes, the researchers interpret it as a structural shift in how credibility is fostered on SM. Unlike traditional media, SM platforms are characterised by ample information, interactivity, and heightened scepticism, especially concerning the green-sponsored posts, which are often judged for

authenticity and substantiation. In such a situation, the credibility of the sources appears to be less reliant on who the influencer is and more on how credible the content itself is.

Greenfluencers publishes posts related to sustainability, environmental impact, and relevant domains where consumers are more cautious and cognitively engaged. Hence, the expertise and trustworthiness will lose its persuasiveness if they are not reflected in the coherence of the content itself. By foregrounding content-focused messaging, the study switches the credibility discourse from a source-centric perspective to a message-centric perspective, thereby extending Ohanian's SCM to better reflect the realities of SM communication. A key theoretical advancement of this study is the reconceptualisation of engagement with users. Within the framework of the HSM, engagement can be understood as a systematic cue that requires cognitive effort from users. Engagement activities, such as frequent post publishing, responding to comments, or encouraging interaction, shape how content is processed rather than serving as immediate indicators of credibility. Contrary to findings of prior research that equate engagement with positive outcomes, the findings demonstrate that engagement does not function as a direct credibility cue. However, it has an indirect, mediated, and context-dependent nature. When engagement enhances content focus, informational value, and clarity, it contributes positively to credibility. However, excessive or poorly managed engagement may detract from message coherence, leading to cognitive overload, distraction, or scepticism. Notably, the findings did not degrade the significance of engagement with users, but it elevates engagement from a superficial metric to a structural component of credibility construction, thereby justifying its inclusion as an additional dimension in an extended framework of source credibility tailored to social media environments.

6. CONCLUSION

The novelty of the study is the integration of heuristic and systematic cues. The credibility formation in greenfluencer communication results from both heuristic and systematic cues in SM, rather than from the static heuristic cues alone. In line with the existing studies, source attractiveness operates as an immediate heuristic signal, exerting both direct and indirect effects on credibility. However, trustworthiness, expertise, and engagement function through systematic processing routes that rely on content quality. This study delivered some significant theoretical contributions. First, it proposes and tests a SM specific credibility model for greenfluences sponsored green posts, to address a notable gap in green influencers and green advertising literature. Second, it integrates SCT and SAT by adding engagement with users as a distinct dimension. By advancing a theoretically grounded model, the study delivers a robust framework for understanding credibility in contemporary influencer-driven green advertising. Third, by grounding the model in the HSM framework, the study reconceptualizes credibility as a process-oriented construct shaped by content-focused messaging rather than as a static outcome of source attributes. Collectively, these contributions enrich the current theoretical understanding and provide avenues for future research exploring CGA formation through SM sponsored green posts.

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8. ETHICS APPROVAL

The study is approved by the Institutional Ethical Committee for Studies on Human Subjects (IECH) Ref.No.VIT/IECH/XIVa/2023/21.

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