






Effects of Non-Eco-friendly Influencers' credibility on the purchase intentions of sustainable personal care products

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Abstract. Influencers are effective in specialized markets as informative and persuasive tools, although their reach in sustainability-related sectors is limited and questioned. Therefore, this study examines the influence of source credibility in electronic word-of-mouth affecting purchase intention through trust and herd behavior in the sustainable personal care products sector. A quantitative study was conducted with 493 respondents using convenience non-probabilistic sampling. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS- SEM) was performed to test the hypotheses. The findings confirmed that expertise plays a significant role in electronic word-of-mouth and that electronic word-of-mouth has a strong impact on the herd behavior of consumers who are interested in sustainable products. This study expands our understanding of the effect of influencers on communication and consumer behavior in a market that has not been widely studied.

Keywords: Influencers, source credibility, herd behavior, sustainable products

1 Introduction

Global awareness of environmental issues has led personal care product companies to incorporate sustainable practices [1], to mitigate the negative impact of production waste [2]. Despite the positive projections for the sector, its growth remains slow due to various reasons focused on the misunderstanding of the meaning of a sustainable product [3] or distrust towards companies manufacturing it [4].

In this context, influencers are seen as opinion leaders and facilitate the rapid spread of messages and industry information [5]. Some influencers specialize in specific areas like food, beauty, cooking, or health, while others create engaging content about their daily lives or routines. There also exists a category of influencers not focused on this sector but with an equal impact on responsible and sustainable consumption [6]. By not focusing on ecological aspects, they can reach larger and more diverse populations, not confined to small audiences [7]. It is relevant to analyze the effect of influencers and social media as trust generators in the acquisition of products in sustainability-related sectors [8]. The electronic word-of-mouth generated by such messages directly affects customer trust [9], and encourages their followers to emulate behaviors observed in influencers or other followers [10].

Previous studies have shown that these factors can influence consumer behavior in sustainable industries such as hospitality [11], sustainable fashion [12], cosmetics [13]

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and skincare products [14], especially in Asian countries, where cultural factors contribute to a greater acceptance of these products [4]. However, there is limited literature on these factors in the realm of sustainable personal care products. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how source credibility and electronic word-of-mouth impact purchase intention and contribute to influencer marketing theory in an emerging market within the sustainability sector.

2 Literature Review and hypothesis development

2.1. Source credibility

Source credibility refers to the positive characteristics of the message sender and how it influences individuals' beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors [15]. In the context of sustainability, source credibility is important for building trust towards eco-friendly products [16]. It consists of three dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness [17].

The concept of source attractiveness refers to the positive stereotypes associated with an individual's physical appearance and personality [18]. In the realm of sustainable products, influencers who are perceived as attractive can effectively persuade their followers to purchase eco-friendly goods [19]. Scholars have found that source trustworthiness refers to the perception of honesty, impartiality, and reputation that an individual builds about a source [20]. Source expertise refers to the level of knowledge possessed by a source [21], enabling it to make accurate claims based on its experience and specific education in a particular area. This is especially relevant in the environmental context due to concerns about the accuracy of sustainable practices and the depth of knowledge that influencers need to convey [22].

2.2. Electronic word-of-mouth

The term "word-of-mouth" refers to consumers exchanging information [23]. In the digital realm, electronic word-of-mouth provides access to large quantities of constantly updated information through formats such as reviews, blogs, and social networks comments [24]. In the context of sustainable products, it involves users' willingness to recommend environmentally friendly products [25]. Researchers have suggested that users can be influenced by the attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise of the source and shape others' opinions [26]. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1a: Source attractiveness has a positive influence on electronic word-of-mouth in the sustainable personal care products sector.

H1b: Source trustworthiness has a positive influence on electronic word-of-mouth in the sustainable personal care products sector.

H1c: Source expertise has a positive influence on electronic word-of-mouth in the sustainable personal care products sector.

2.3. Herd behavior

Herd behavior is the replication of observed behaviors in other human beings [27]. In the commercial sphere, consumers are influenced by the beliefs and behaviors of a particular group, resulting in imitative behavior [28]. In the field of sustainability, herd behavior refers to people's tendency to acquire organic products when they perceive that others also purchase them to gain a favorable reputation [29]. Previous studies indicate that electronic word-of-mouth is a factor that influences herd behavior after observing that an item is popular in the virtual environment [10], [30]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Electronic word-of-mouth has a positive influence on herd behavior in the sustainable personal care products sector.

2.4. Trust

Since the earliest research, trust has been defined as the acceptance of relying on an exchange agent who acts with integrity and reliability [31]. In the realm of sustainable articles, trust reinforces confidence in a particular organic product [32]. In the cosmetics domain, it has a significant relationship with electronic word-of-mouth because consumers trust impartial opinions from external sources to reduce risks at the time of purchase [33]. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Electronic word-of-mouth has a positive influence on trust in the sustainable personal care products sector.

2.5. Purchase intention

Purchase intentions refers to the user's willingness to acquire a product or service based on their subjective evaluation [10]. In the realm of sustainable products, it is associated with the consumer's intention to purchase environmentally friendly personal care products [34]. The literature demonstrates the positive impact of electronic word-of-mouth on purchase intention in sectors such as organic food [35], sustainable fashion [36], or ecological products [37]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Electronic word-of-mouth has a positive influence on purchase intention in the sustainable personal care products sector.

The influence of following the crowd or engaging in herd behavior precedes and positively affects purchase intention [38], as users tend to imitate and trust the actions or behaviors of others [10]. This leads to the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Herd behavior has a positive influence on purchase intention in the sustainable personal care products sector.

In the context of organic or ecological cosmetics [13], [14] trust has a positive impact on purchase intention [39] because it reduces perceived uncertainty and risk [40]. In this regard, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Trust has a positive influence on purchase intention in the sustainable personal care products sector.

3 Method

This study employs a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between variables. The research was carried out in Lima. Before data collection, a pilot test was conducted to ensure the correct understanding of all items and to make necessary improvements. The target population included individuals knowledgeable about sustainable personal care products, such as cosmetics, skincare, hair care, deodorants, and perfumes, and familiar with influencers promoting sustainable products on social media. Data was collected using non-probabilistic convenience sampling [41], with 493 valid responses out of 566 individuals sampled. Data collection technique was done through questionnaires. The survey was conducted from August to September 2023, using offline and online questionnaires from beauty stores, natural cosmetics galleries, hair salons, organic fairs, online communities, and relevant social network groups.

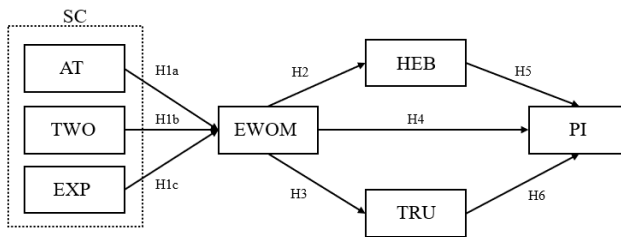


Fig 1. Instrument

The instrument was developed after an extensive literature review and translation from English to Spanish. This study measured source credibility using 3 dimensions: attractiveness, credibility, and expertise, each of which was measured with 5 items adapted from [42]. The adapted scale for electronic word-of-mouth comprised 4 items corresponding to [43]. For herd behavior, 4 items adapted from [10] were used. Trust was measured using 5 items adapted from [44]. Finally, purchase intention was measured with 4 items adapted from [45]. The Likert scale was used for items measurement, ranging from strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5).

4 Results

Based on the data collected this study revealed that 57.20% of the respondents were females, and 42.39% were males. The largest age group was 18-25, representing 37.93% of the participants. Additionally, the majority indicated a higher preference for skincare products, accounting for 36.92% of the total number.

The results of SEM model analysis are shown in Table 1. A two-stage PLS-SEM model was used. Table 1, we confirmed the reliability and validity of the reflective model, with loadings above 0.6 values permissible due to their exploratory nature [46]. The internal consistency was assessed through Cronbach's Alpha, Rho_a, and composite reliability [47]. Table 1 presents the values of each indicator which exceed the threshold recommended by the authors with a value greater than or equal to 0.7 except for the Cronbach's Alpha values of the EWOM construct which are regarded as satisfactory in exploratory research [46]. The validity of the scales was assessed using convergent validity, measured by the average variance extracted (AVE). Table 1 shows values were greater than 0.50 [48], [49] demonstrating an adequate convergent validity [47].

Table 1: Reliability and Validity of the Measurement Model

ITEM	loads	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	Reliability Composite	AVE	VIF
TWO1	0.778					1.831
TWO2	0.790					1.819
TWO3	0.720	0.834	0.857	0.883	0.602	1.536
TWO4	0.809					1.862
TWO5	0.778					1.650
EXP1	0.796					1.739
EXP2	0.769					1.866
EXP3	0.779	0.843	0.848	0.888	0.613	1.878
EXP4	0.820					1.950
EXP5	0.750					1.635
AT1	0.800					1.550
AT2	0.720					1.751
AT3	0.646	0.763	0.785	0.837	0.508	1.568
AT4	0.684					1.333
AT5	0.704					1.361
EWOM1	0.671					1.252
EWOM2	0.718					1.318
EWOM3	0.775	0.698	0.702	0.815	0.525	1.455
EWOM4	0.731					1.423
HEB1	0.738					1.455
HEB2	0.821					1.674
HEB3	0.704	0.725	0.727	0.829	0.550	1.329
HEB4	0.696					1.241

TRU1	0.777					1.676
TRU2	0.763					1.680
TRU3	0.723	0.807	0.810	0.866	0.565	1.520
TRU4	0.732					1.516
TRU5	0.761					1.608
PI1	0.811					1.680
PI2	0.786					1.615
PI3	0.664	0.760	0.773	0.847	0.582	1.326
PI4	0.784					1.489

Note: Trustworthiness = TWO, Expertise = EXP, Attractiveness = AT, Electronic word of mouth = EWOM, Herd behavior = HEB, Trust = TRU, Purchase intention (PI)

Table 2 reveals adequate discriminant validity. It was examined using heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) which is less than the recommended tolerable value of 0.90 [46], [48]. VIF results indicated no collinearity issues which are below the threshold of 5 suggested by [54]. According to [55] R^2 values were moderate for the endogenous variables EWOM=0.397, HEB=0.378, TRU=0.269 and the exogenous variable PI=0.367.

Table 2: Discriminating Validity

	AT	EWOM	TWO	EXP	TRU	IP	HEB
AT							
EWOM	0.598						
TWO	0.633	0.695					
EXP	0.606	0.740	0.754				
TRU	0.426	0.689	0.497	0.59			
IP	0.722	0.745	0.626	0.589	0.636		
HEB	0.506	0.855	0.514	0.640	0.702	0.575	

A bootstrapping of 5,000 subsamples was performed with a p-value less than 0.05 to estimate the statistical significance of the path coefficients. Based on the structural model and hypothesis testing, as observed in Table 3, hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c, H2, H3, H4, and H6 were accepted, except for H5.

Table 3: hypothesis testing

	Path coefficient	t-Statistics	f ²	P Values	Hypothesis
H1a: AT -> EWOM	0.172	2.913	0.333	0.004	Accepted
H1b: TWO -> EWOM	0.224	0.001	0.045	0.001	Accepted
H1c: EXP -> EWOM	0.346	0.000	0.111	0.000	Accepted
H2: EWOM -> HEB	0.615	0.000	0.608	0.000	Accepted
H3: EWOM -> TRU	0.519	0.000	0.368	0.000	Accepted
H4: EWOM -> PI	0.367	0.000	0.122	0.000	Accepted
H5: HEB-> PI	0.056	0.335	0.003	0.335	Not accepted
H6: TRU-> PI	0.282	0.000	0.082	0.000	Accepted

5 Discussion and conclusions

The results of this research highlight source expertise as the dimension with the greatest influence on electronic word-of-mouth, in line with previous studies on social media and online shopping [50], [51]. The findings suggest that an influencer who demonstrates a higher level of expertise on a topic is more likely to convince people to share information [52]. Therefore, in the realm of sustainable personal care products, knowledge is a key driver of electronic word-of-mouth.

The findings show that electronic word-of-mouth has a significant impact on herd behavior and trust, especially before making a purchase. The results are consistent with past studies in the virtual environment [10], [30]. In these contexts, consumers rely on the shared experiences of other users on social media to reduce uncertainty [53]. Comments, posts, or testimonials can stimulate the imitation of peer behavior [10], [30] as seen in live shopping streams or social commerce [38], [54]. However, our study suggests that while users may replicate behavior from others on social media, it does not necessarily lead to the final purchase of sustainable goods. This is especially true in industries related to body and skin care, where association and barriers to making a purchase decision through imitation play a significant role.

Finally, both electronic word-of-mouth and trust play key success factors for purchase intention in sustainable contexts. This supports previous research in the field of ecological products [36], [37], organic beauty products [4], and traditional cosmetics [13]. This suggests that the willingness to purchase is heavily influenced by the opinion of others. In some cases, these opinions must first establish a sense of security before they can encourage a purchase.

6 Implications, limitations and Future Research

This study contributes to understanding consumer purchasing behavior in the sustainability sector, focusing on lesser-studied factors such as source credibility, electronic word-of-mouth, and herd behavior. First, this research offers practical insights for companies aiming to improve and optimize the use of influencers as an effective communication tool and gain the maximum ROI before collaborating with

them. It is recommended to choose influencers based on their knowledge and expertise in the industry, as followers appreciate the credible and useful information they receive, especially in fields related to personal care. Therefore, if the influencers are not experts in environmental issues, marketing professionals should offer relevant training and information to ensure that influencers convey the right messages. In this research, influencers play a crucial role in generating electronic word of mouth among users, particularly in the 18 to 25-year-old demographic. Therefore, sustainable product campaigns should include a content marketing strategy that emphasizes authenticity and creativity while being adaptable to various platforms.

The findings emphasize that electronic word of mouth significantly influences the intention to purchase sustainable products. Therefore, marketing strategies and campaigns should take into account that consumers rely on previous information and are inclined to trust the opinions of others before making a purchase. Companies that offer sustainable products need to dedicate resources and funding to select effective tools for monitoring user feedback, as well as create responsible and relevant content that can amplify positive reviews and aid in the purchase decision-making process.

However, it is important to note the limitations due to the nature of the study. In this regard, the research is limited in its ability to draw general conclusions because of the use of non-probabilistic sampling and its focus only in the city of Lima. It is recommended that future studies should include countries with different cultures and demographic groups such as Millennials or Centennials. An interesting avenue for future studies would be to assess specific sectors like cosmetics or skincare in a sustainable context. Therefore, future studies should incorporate independent constructs like Social Media Influencers or Perceived celebrity authenticity, with dimensions such as similarity, fun, glamorous, connectivity, professionalism, originality, naturalness, or continuity.

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