



## Green frustration: emotional tensions of sustainable marketing among greenfluencer followers

Frustración verde: las tensiones emocionales del marketing sostenible en seguidores de greenfluencers

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### Abstract

This qualitative study examines the ambivalent emotions experienced by followers of greenfluencers on Instagram in the context of current sustainable marketing. Using a thematic analysis of 13 semi-structured interviews with users in Chile, the study identified emotions such as frustration, concern for the environment, guilt, unattained aspiration, and moral discomfort in the face of sustainable discourses. These feelings arise when content projects ecological ideals perceived as difficult to achieve, normative,

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or inconsistent with followers' daily reality. The results show that while greenfluencers can act as mobilising agents of change, they also generate emotional problems that affect commitment to sustainable practices. This research offers a more complex understanding of sustainable marketing and proposes an emotionally responsible approach to content design and strategies on social media, concluding that sustainability must be communicated from a perspective of authenticity, empathy, and accessibility.

**Keywords:** sustainable marketing, green influencers, consumer emotions, social media, responsible consumption

### Resumen

Este estudio cualitativo examina las emociones ambivalentes que experimentan los seguidores de greenfluencers en Instagram, en el contexto del marketing sostenible actual. Utilizando un análisis temático de 13 entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a usuarios de Chile, se identificaron emociones como frustración, preocupación por el medio ambiente, culpa, aspiración no alcanzada e incomodidad moral frente los discursos sostenibles. Estos sentimientos surgen cuando los contenidos proyectan ideales ecológicos percibidos como difíciles de alcanzar, normativos o incoherentes con la realidad cotidiana de los seguidores. Los resultados evidencian que, aunque si bien los greenfluencers pueden ser agentes movilizados del cambio, también generan problemas emotivos que afectan el compromiso con prácticas sostenibles. Esta investigación contribuye a una comprensión más compleja del marketing sostenible, proponiendo un enfoque emocionalmente responsable para el diseño de contenidos y estrategias en redes sociales. Se concluye que la sostenibilidad debe comunicarse desde la autenticidad, la empatía y la accesibilidad.

**Palabras clave:** marketing sostenible, greenfluencers, emociones del consumidor, redes sociales, consumo responsable

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary marketing is undergoing a transformation due to the climate emergency, the global pressure and society's increasing scrutiny of brands. In this context, sustainable marketing has emerged as a vital approach that seeks to unite values of environmental, ethical and social care within business tactics (Belz & Peattie, 2012). However, this is not only a discursive or strategic shift, but also an emotional and cultural one, as demands towards companies come from increasingly complex expectations from consumers who also experience contradictions, anxiety and frustrations on their way to more sustainable ways of living.

One of the most important emerging phenomena in this shift is the rise of greenfluencers, digital influencers who promote green lifestyles and practices friendly to the environment through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok or YouTube (Narayanan, 2025; Yıldırım, 2021). Greenfluencers or sustainable influencers are seen as a key agent for a shift towards more sustainable consumption (König et al., 2024a). Through their visibility, the closeness felt and narratives of authenticity, greenfluencers have shown a strong ability to encourage environmentally beneficial acts among their followers (Hartmann et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2025) and even drive green action (Knupfer et al., 2023).

Recent studies have revealed that these influencers can cause positive emotions such as hope, inspiration or connection to nature, which impacts the willingness to take climate action (Hartmann et al., 2025; Hartmann et al., 2024). For example, "virtual nature" experiences that occur through photographs of natural landscapes can increase emotional attachment to the environment and consequently promote climate action through a greater sense of urgency and environmental empathy.

However, the effect of greenfluencers is not univocally positive. There is a growing consensus in the literature warning about the ambivalent effects of their discourse, especially when sustainable messages are perceived as idealized, elitist or difficult to replicate in everyday life (Huber et al., 2022; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2024). These perceptions can give rise to negative emotions such as frustration, eco-anxiety, environmental guilt or feelings of inadequacy, which, far from motivating, can block or discourage behavioral change. For example, it has been identified that when followers develop very intense parasocial relationships with influencers, attention shifts from the environmental content to the emotional bond, which can dilute the impact of the message in terms of behavior (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2024).

Likewise, the phenomenon of "preaching to the choir" has been problematized by König & Maier (2024b), who argue that many greenfluencers end up impacting only already convinced audiences, with little impact on those who have not yet adopted green practices. This limits their transformative capacity and can intensify frustration among those who, although they feel identified with the message, are unable to implement it in their daily lives due to structural, economic or psychological barriers.

On the other hand, Haastrup & Marshall (2024) highlight that greenfluencers represent a new form of digital climate leadership, where authenticity is no longer based on celebrity status, but on ethical consistency, vulnerability and daily commitment to sustainability. This shift in influencer culture also implies greater exposure to moral judgments, which can intensify emotional pressure on followers who internalize these standards as unattainable ideals.

Despite the boom in research on the potential of greenfluencers, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the emotions experienced by their followers in the daily

interaction with these contents. This article seeks to contribute to that discussion by proposing a critical and emotionally situated view of sustainable marketing in social networks, focusing on the affective tensions generated by following green influencers. The objective is to analyze, from a qualitative perspective, how followers emotionally process sustainability messages on the social network Instagram, identifying the feelings of frustration, discomfort, eco-anxiety or contradiction that emerge in their digital experience, and discussing their implications for the design of more empathetic, realistic and emotionally sustainable marketing strategies.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Sustainable marketing and greenfluencers

Sustainable marketing has emerged as a strategic and ethical response to current environmental and social challenges. Unlike traditional marketing, its objective is not limited to generating economic value, but also seeks to promote ecological and social benefits, aligning production, communication and consumption with the principles of sustainable development (Belz & Peattie, 2012). In this context, social networks have become key spaces for environmental education, where figures such as greenfluencers, influencers who promote ecological practices, play a growing role.

Greenfluencers disseminate content that inspires responsible consumption and climate action through platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, appealing to values such as authenticity, personal commitment and emotional connection with their audiences (Kapoor et al., 2023; Yıldırım, 2021). Recent studies have identified that their influence not only promotes sustainable behaviors, but also mobilizes positive emotions such as hope, enthusiasm or environmental empathy, which increases the willingness to act in the face of the climate crisis (Hartmann et al., 2024; Knupfer et al., 2023). Including areas such as tourism (Abate et al., 2025; Ding et al., 2024).

On the other hand, the perception of authenticity has been consolidated as a determining factor in the effectiveness of sustainable messages (Giambastiani et al., 2025). Microinfluencers, for example, are often seen as more relatable and trustworthy due to their lower degree of commercial exposure, which favors a more genuine emotional bond with their followers (Pittman & Abell, 2021). However, when the content promotes unattainable ecological standards or exaggerates the morality of the discourse, it can generate emotional saturation and rejection (Hastrup & Marshall, 2024).

This phenomenon has been described as a form of "emotional greenwashing," in which sustainable communication resorts to moral pressure rather than practical solutions, negatively affecting message receptivity (Huber et al., 2022).

Green influencers must balance inspiration with accessibility, recognizing the structural, economic or personal limitations of their audiences. Their leadership should not only be based on individual exemplarity, but also on the ability to communicate with empathy and transparency, building an inclusive, gradual and emotionally sustainable narrative of change (Hartmann et al., 2025).

## **2.2. Emotional influence and parasocial relationships**

A central aspect in the influence of greenfluencers is the development of parasocial relationships (PSR) with their followers. These one-way relationships, based on a perception of closeness, intimacy and authenticity, increase receptivity to the messages disseminated by influencers, as the follower feels that he or she knows the sender personally and trusts his or her recommendations (Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Breves et al., 2021). This emotional connection can be a powerful tool to promote green behaviors, especially when it is underpinned by shared values and everyday experiences. However, parasocial relationships can also intensify negative emotions when sustainable content is perceived as overly normative, aspirational, or disconnected from the follower's reality. Research shows that these types of links can provoke frustration, eco-anxiety or environmental guilt, especially if the lifestyle projected by the influencer is unattainable for the average user (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2024; Huber et al., 2022). This tension between admiration and inappropriateness can deteriorate the consumer's emotional well-being and even weaken their engagement with the environmentalist content.

Moreover, when parasocial relationships are very intense, the focus of the message may shift from the content to the emotional bond itself, thus reducing the effectiveness of the pro-environmental message (Knupfer et al., 2023). Therefore, the persuasive power of these relationships must be managed responsibly, avoiding the idealization of the influencer and promoting a more diverse and realistic representation of sustainable practices.

## **2.3. Emotional greenwashing and moral pressure**

In their attempt to mobilize responsible practices, some sustainable discourses in social networks incur in what has been called emotional greenwashing: the use of communicative strategies based on guilt, moral duty or social pressure to induce green behaviors (Antonetti & Baines, 2015). Unlike traditional greenwashing, which alludes to incongruence between message and corporate action (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), this emotional form focuses on generating individual discomfort as a driver of change.

This type of communication, although it can generate short-term impact, has proven to have counterproductive effects when messages are perceived as coercive, unattainable or disconnected from the consumer's reality (Severo et al., 2021). On platforms such

as Instagram or TikTok, green aesthetics often become a symbol of self-demand, where sustainability is presented as a standard of perfection. When greenfluencers fail to acknowledge structural, economic, social or cultural inequalities, which limit the environmental action of their audiences, the content may be perceived as exclusionary or blaming (Huber et al., 2022).

These tensions can lead to frustration, emotional saturation or distancing from the message. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink environmental communication strategies not only in terms of their persuasive effectiveness, but also in terms of their psychological, ethical and emotional impact.

#### **2.4. Confirmation bias and scope of influence**

Several studies have warned that the influence of greenfluencers is mostly concentrated in audiences that already have pro-environmental attitudes, a phenomenon known as preaching to the choir (König & Maier, 2024b). This confirmation bias reduces the transformative potential of sustainable communication, as it reinforces pre-existing beliefs without generating real change in those who have not yet adopted responsible practices.

This echo chamber effect can restrict the reach of the sustainable message and contribute, paradoxically, to the frustration of those who, although they feel identified with the content, face barriers to implement it. In this context, it has been suggested that one way to broaden the impact is to incorporate influencers not specialized in sustainability, but with more diverse audiences. These influencers can communicate green messages more effectively to less convinced audiences, as long as they do so from authenticity and with dynamic social norms (Buvár et al., 2023).

Overcoming this limitation requires diversification in both broadcasters and narrative formats, promoting collaborations between brands, greenfluencers and generalist content creators to build a more inclusive and accessible sustainability.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research approach and design**

This study adopts a qualitative approach of an interpretative nature, aimed at exploring in depth the ambivalent emotions that emerge in greenfluencers' followers from their interaction with sustainability content in social networks. The qualitative approach is suitable for understanding the subjective meanings that people attach to their experiences, emotions, and behaviors in specific social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

An exploratory-descriptive design was employed, since the objective is not to generalize results, but to identify emotional patterns and understandings that can enrich the

theoretical analysis of sustainable marketing from the consumer experience. The methodology was guided by the principles of interpretative phenomenological research, which seeks to capture how individuals make sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

### 3.2. Participants and selection criteria

The sample consisted of 13 participants (11 women and 2 men) between 20 and 54 years old, residents of Chile and Mexico, who actively follow greenfluencers on Instagram. All participants were selected by non-probabilistic convenience sampling and met the following criteria: having an active account on Instagram, following at least one greenfluencer with regular content on sustainability and showing explicit interest in environmental issues and conscious consumption.

This sampling technique is common in exploratory qualitative research, as it allows access to subjects who possess rich and relevant information for the phenomenon under study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants in this study.

**Table 1.** Characterization of the sample (source: own elaboration)

| Interviewee | Gender | Age          | Nationality | Activity                            |
|-------------|--------|--------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| E1          | Female | 37 years old | Chilean     | Veterinary Doctor                   |
| E2          | Female | 20 years old | Chilean     | University student                  |
| E3          | Female | 54 years old | Mexican     | Anesthesiologist                    |
| E4          | Female | 26 years old | Chilean     | Psychologist                        |
| E5          | Female | 36 years old | Chilean     | Housewife                           |
| E6          | Female | 32 years old | Chilean     | Public employee                     |
| E7          | Male   | 23 years old | Chilean     | Business advisor and consultant     |
| E8          | Female | 31 years old | Chilean     | Student                             |
| E9          | Female | 32 years old | Chilean     | Engineer in Business Administration |
| E10         | Female | 20 years old | Chilean     | Student                             |
| E11         | Female | 27 years old | Chilean     | Radiologist                         |
| E12         | Male   | 25 years old | Chilean     | Student / Sporadic designer         |
| E13         | Female | 23 years old | Chilean     | Commercial Engineer                 |

### **3.3. Data collection technique**

The information was obtained through semi-structured interviews, conducted between December 2023 and March 2024 in virtual mode. This technique allowed inquiring into personal, emotional and evaluative aspects related to the experience of following greenfluencers, facilitating spontaneity and depth in the answers (Kallio et al., 2016).

The interviews were guided by a protocol built from a review of previous studies on motivations for following influencers (Morton, 2020; Lee et al., 2022) and theories linked to emotional experience in marketing. The script addressed aspects such as: reasons for following sustainable content, emotions experienced (positive and negative), perception of authenticity, social pressure, influencer consistency, frustrated aspiration, among others.

Previously, the protocol was validated through two pilot interviews with participants of the target profile, which allowed refining questions, ensuring linguistic clarity and cultural appropriateness.

### **3.4. Ethical procedure**

The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed with prior authorization and informed consent of all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity of the data were guaranteed, complying with the ethical principles of qualitative research (Orb et al., 2001). Names were coded and pseudonyms were assigned to protect the identity of the interviewees.

### **3.5. Data analysis**

The transcripts were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (TA), following the stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generation of initial codes, 3) search for themes, 4) review of themes, 5) definition and naming of themes, and 6) production of the final report. This method allows us to identify patterns of meaning relevant to the objectives of the study.

The analysis was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the voices of the participants without imposing prior categories. Particular attention was paid to negative emotions, tensions, contradictions and experiences of unfulfilled aspiration or eco-anxiety.

## **4. RESULTS**

The interview study identified a series of mixed emotions that followers experience when consuming content about green influencers on social media. These emotions, ranging from frustration to aspirational contradiction, show the emotional nuances of green marketing and the tensions that appear between the ecological ideal and the

daily life of users. The main themes and representative textual fragments are presented below.

#### **4.1. Saturation, moralization and distrust: triggers for alienation**

Several participants expressed feeling overwhelmed by the intensity or frequency of sustainable content, or by the moralizing tone of some greenfluencers. This creates a frustrating experience that can even lead to distancing with the account.

"Something unsatisfactory could be the excessive amount of content she uploaded sometimes, it became monotonous and saturated me, in fact I stopped following her for a while" (E13).

On the other hand, a participant mentions: "One of the things that bothers me is when they lie and you realize that they are lying (...) and it has caused me not to follow it" (E5).

#### **4.2. Discomfort with criticism of followers or lifestyles**

Some followers report uncomfortable or annoying moments when they feel alluded to by influencers' criticism of common practices, which generates an emotional tension between admiration and rejection.

"There was a situation when a person who is an influencer criticizes the followers a bit (...) one follows these influencers given that one wants to adopt those habits. So when there is criticism it bothers me" (E9).

"She uploads a lot of content criticizing purchases from Shein (...) sometimes she is so blunt and so acidic to say it, like 'don't buy those clothes so [poor quality]' that it bothers, but in the end I still like her (...) that's why you end up following her" (E11).

This reaction of discomfort before a tone that is perceived as judgmental is a clear example of emotional greenwashing, whose concept appeals to moral pressure or guilt to mobilize action, with the risk of generating rejection in the audience (Antonetti & Baines, 2015).

#### **4.3. Frustrated aspiration: when the sustainable lifestyle is not replicable**

A frequent emotion was the unachieved aspiration, when followers wish to adopt the sustainable habits shown, but fail to do so due to lack of time, resources or motivation. This generates a sense of distance between the projected ideal and their daily reality.

"That is, there is like the initiative to want to do it, but the motivation to do it is lacking. I could say that I am autonomous but not 100%" (E2).

"Something for me negative, would be the segmentation of sustainable fashion, the little variety there is in terms of more updated fashion, sustainable fashion is sometimes very vintage or old" (E13).

"Changing the mentality and behavior is a process that can take time, sometimes one puts barriers or obstacles to do it, implementing it immediately costs, but it can be taken calmly and put into practice gradually" (E13).

#### **4.4. Eco-anxiety and sense of environmental urgency**

Some interviews revealed a component of environmental anxiety derived from the content, especially when there is an awareness of the magnitude of the ecological problem and a perceived individual inability to fully address it.

"Global warming has to do with a lot of things, but within it it also has to do with not taking care of household waste (...) personally, I try to take care of that through vermicomposting" (E6).

"Suddenly it is a bit frustrating not to be able to achieve all that (...) I mean, I would have to change too many things in my house and sometimes it is frustrating not to be able to achieve the standards that suddenly one proposes oneself" (E1).

#### **4.5. Contradiction between influencer authenticity and commercial perception**

Some participants express displeasure when content is perceived as commercial or inauthentic, especially if the influencer hides their advertising link or promotes products they do not use.

"When they show you half the information and then the other half they sell it to you in a workshop it doesn't work for me, I don't like it" (E5).

"It may be in a way some inconsistency that I consider, not relevant as with what he preaches, and in this case I would not be practicing" (E4).

This breakdown in influencer credibility directly affects the perception of authenticity, a fundamental pillar for the development of effective parasocial relationships (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). When followers perceive a hidden commercial interest, the emotional bond is weakened, affecting the receptivity of their sustainable message.

These findings evidence that the emotional relationship with greenfluencers is not exclusively positive or inspirational, but also includes affective tensions, discomforts, and contradictions that affect engagement with sustainable messages. In the next section, we discuss how these emotions can be strategically managed in responsible marketing practices.

### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The results obtained in this qualitative research provide insight into the fact that the relationship between followers and greenfluencers is not free of emotional tensions. Although much of the literature has positively valued the role of sustainable influencers in promoting responsible habits (Yıldırım, 2021), our findings reveal a less explored

dimension: the emotional ambivalence and feelings of frustration, pressure or inadequacy that arise when interacting with this type of content.

First, the participants' stated frustration at not being able to achieve the standards of sustainable living that influencers promote coincides with Knupfer et al. (2023), who observed that parasocial relationships with greenfluencers can motivate environmental activism, but also generate psychological barriers when expectations are perceived as unattainable.

This dissonance between inspiration and reality reinforces the idea that pro-environmental content can have contradictory effects if it is not accompanied by accessible narratives adapted to different social and economic contexts.

Another important finding is the perceived moral pressure in sustainability discourses that are highly normative. Some participants mentioned feeling uncomfortable with the harsh or exaggerated tone of some messages. One can interpret this type of reactions, as an indication of emotional greenwashing, that is, the appeal to guilt or shame to move sustainable behaviors (Anto netti & Baine s, 2015). Research such as the by Huber et al. (2022) warns that this type of communication focused on individual responsibility, instead of addressing structural dimensions of the ecological problem, can generate rejection or environmental fatigue.

In addition, a clash was noted between the perceived authenticity of influencer and their business practices, especially when the advertising nature of the content is hidden. This fact has been mentioned by Pittman & Abell (2021), who demonstrated that greenfluencers with fewer followers are generally seen as more trustworthy thanks to being perceived as less focused on profiteering and more emotionally connected to their audiences.

On the other hand, emerging eco-anxiety as a form of anxiety stems from environmental awareness and has been noted in recent research as an unintended consequence of digital climate activism (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). This anxiety, while it can be mobilizing, can also be paralyzing when messages do not include practical, incremental, and collective solutions. In this regard, Dekoninck and Schmuck (2024) found that strong parasocial relationships with influencers can reduce the focus on informational content and reinforce emotional connection, which can attenuate or exacerbate the impact of the message depending on the influencer's communicational style.

Another aspect that deserves attention is König and Maier's (2024b) critique of the phenomenon of "preaching to the choir," i.e., the limited ability of greenfluencers to influence unconverted audiences, as their messages tend to resonate primarily with followers who already possess green attitudes.

This reinforces the need to diversify narratives and target audiences, as well as promote collaborations with influencers outside the green niche, as suggested by Buvár et al.

(2023), who found that even non-specialized influencers can be effective if they communicate sustainable practices with credibility and authenticity.

Finally, it is crucial to consider the role played by digital platforms themselves in generating these emotional tensions. The architecture of networks such as Instagram, with algorithms that prioritize aesthetically neat and aspirational content, can contribute to amplifying idealized sustainability discourses. This platform dynamic encourages social comparison and can exacerbate the frustrated aspiration and eco-anxiety detected in participants, becoming a structural factor that sustainable marketing must recognize and, where possible, counter with more realistic and diverse narratives.

As a way to address these tensions, the most recent literature on inspirational leadership in social networks proposes that the impact of greenfluencers is not limited to the promotion of products or advice, but also depends on their ability to emotionally and ethically mobilize their followers (Hartmann et al., 2025). This dimension, termed "inspirational green leadership," could be an avenue for reducing eco-frustration by transforming anxiety or guilt into empowerment and collective action.

Taken together, the findings of this research invite us to rethink sustainable marketing communication strategies from a more empathetic, emotionally responsible and contextualized approach. While greenfluencers possess transformative potential, they must also be aware that their discourse can generate discomfort if it is perceived as demanding, elitist or disconnected from the everyday reality of their audiences. To maximize their positive impact, it is essential to balance inspiration with accessibility, and engagement with authenticity.

Practical implications for emotionally responsible sustainable marketing

From an applied perspective, this study indicates that green influencers and the brands that collaborate with them need to develop emotionally sustainable communication strategies. This implies making visible the real difficulties of living sustainably, offering accessible and diverse alternatives, and promoting a narrative of change that is more inclusive, empathetic and gradual. It also highlights the importance of strengthening authenticity and transparency as fundamental pillars to maintain credibility and emotional connection with audiences.

Specifically, for greenfluencers, it is recommended to adjust communication strategies to reduce frustration in audiences. This involves: fostering authenticity through vulnerability, also showing difficulties and failures on the road to sustainability; prioritizing accessible, incremental solutions rather than perfectionist ideals; and using an empathetic tone that inspires rather than a normative one that can generate guilt.

For brands that collaborate with greenfluencers, it is suggested to apply these findings in their campaigns, from which, it is recommended to: select influencers that demonstrate a genuine and transparent connection with their communities; co-create content that reflects diverse and achievable realities, avoiding the promotion of a single,

elitist standard of sustainability; and take an active role in educating about structural barriers, shifting the focus away from purely individual responsibility.

Nevertheless, this study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample was mostly composed of women (11 out of 13 respondents), which may introduce a gender bias in the understanding of the emotions and perceptions analyzed. In addition, being a small sample and selected by convenience sampling, we do not seek to generalize the findings, but rather to understand particular experiences in depth.

On the other hand, it is likely that the participants, by actively following greenfluencers, already present a previous sensitization towards sustainable discourses, which may have influenced the way they interpret and process environmental content. Acknowledging these limitations allows us to situate the findings within an interpretive framework, inviting future research to expand the diversity of profiles, contexts and platforms studied.

In sum, the sustainable marketing of the present and future must not only inspire, but also emotionally care for those who consume it. Understanding the ambivalent emotions that emerge in digital interaction with greenfluencers can contribute to designing more effective and ethical messages, capable of generating real change without producing discomfort or exclusion.

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