



Communicating sustainability: how brands can influence consumers' purchasing decision

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Abstract

Brands use digital marketing communication and tools, including social media, to effectively convey information about their sustainable practices in response to growing consumer demand for sustainability. This approach allows brands to incorporate sustainability messages into their promotional strategies, meeting the growing demand for environmentally friendly products. A study of 423 individuals, including 149 males (35.2%), 273 females (64.5%) and 1 participant of other gender (0.2%), with an average age of 42.74 years (SD=15.94%), examined the relationship between sustainability communication, digital marketing, brands' use of social media and consumers' purchasing decisions. The results of the study suggest that communicating sustainable practices through digital marketing can positively influence consumers' purchasing decisions. By taking advantage of digital marketing platforms such as social media, brands can increase their sustainability visibility and reputation. In addition, digital marketing allows brands to build trust with consumers by providing transparent and authentic information about their sustainable practices.

Keywords: digital marketing; social media; sustainable communication; sustainability; structural equation modeling (SEM).

1. Introduction


In today's society, sustainability has become an increasingly important consideration for consumers when making purchasing decisions, as they become more aware of the impact their choices have on the environment, society, and future generations. This increased awareness created a demand for brands that communicate their sustainable practices to attract and retain customers. Communicating a company's sustainable practices plays a crucial role in influencing consumers' brand choices and purchasing decisions (Mann et al., 2021). By effectively communicating their sustainability efforts, brands can increase their visibility, reputation, and trust among consumers (Mann et al., 2021).

An effective way for brands to communicate their sustainability efforts is through the use of digital marketing strategies. Digital marketing provides brands with a platform to reach a global audience and engage with consumers in real time. Through websites, social media platforms, and corporate social responsibility reports, brands can share information about their sustainable practices and initiatives (Mann et al., 2021).

In addition, the use of social networks by brands has become a powerful tool in communicating about sustainability, as social networks allow brands to relate directly to their target audience, share interesting content, and promote sustainability initiatives. By taking advantage of social media, brands can create a sense of community and encourage consumers to participate in their sustainability efforts. Research shows that consumers are more likely to support brands that align with their values and demonstrate a commitment to sustainability (Wang et al., 2022). By actively engaging with consumers on social media, brands can create trust and loyalty, ultimately influencing their purchasing decisions. That said, the main objective of this study is to contribute to the understanding of the role of sustainability communication adopted by brands, the use of digital marketing and social networks, and its influence on consumers' purchasing decisions. This article is divided into four main parts. First, the literature review is presented with a general approach to sustainability communication by brands, the use of digital marketing and social networks and the factors that influence consumers'

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purchasing decisions. The second part presents the research method adopted for this investigation, followed by the presentation and discussion of the results and finally, in the fourth part, the main conclusions and suggestions for future studies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainability communication by brands

A brand is a symbolic representation of a product, company, or person that plays a significant role in helping consumers identify and distinguish between different offers on the market. It involves intangible elements, such as perceptions, values, and emotions associated with the entity being promoted. In addition, the brand has its own characteristics that are close to the value of cultural identity (Heding et al., 2020). In academic terms, the brand can be defined as a strategic construction that seeks to establish differentiation and recognition through effective communication with the target audience (Wood, 2000).

In recent years, brands have been influenced by significant technological advances that have placed them in a constantly changing field. Consequently, they had to adapt their image and reputation accordingly in order to achieve their business objectives and promote sustainability. This dynamic environment requires the continuous evaluation of organizational strategies in the direction of sustainable practices. Organizations are increasingly aware of the importance of sustainability for long-term success. They understand that the adoption of sustainable measures not only benefits the environment, but also increases their competitive advantage in response to the growing demand for environmentally conscious products and services by consumers (Mancuso et al., 2021).

Communication about sustainability plays a crucial role in promoting and encouraging sustainable practices among individuals, organizations, and societies. In addition, sustainability communication is not only a responsibility, but also an opportunity for organizations to build stronger communities and develop more effective strategies to promote sustainability.

Brands are increasingly recognizing the importance of communicating about sustainability in shaping consumers' perceptions and purchasing decisions, because by communicating their sustainable practices, brands can assert themselves as socially responsible and environmentally aware entities (Mancuso et al., 2021). This provides them with a competitive advantage in the market and gives consumers a reason to choose their products or services over those of the competition (Alamsyah et al., 2020). By effectively communicating their sustainability efforts and initiatives, brands can increase their visibility and reputation with consumers (Flores-Hernández et al., 2020). This fact not only increases brand recognition, but also creates trust among consumers, since consumers consider that the brand is committed to sustainable practices (Alamsyah et al., 2020).

Therefore, based on these previous studies, the following hypotheses were established:

Hypothesis 1. It is estimated that communication about sustainability is directly influenced by digital marketing.

2.2. Digital marketing and social media

By effectively communicating their sustainable practices, companies can influence consumers' brand choices and purchasing decisions (Mann et al., 2021). This is achieved by increasing brand visibility, reputation, and trust through various communication channels, such as websites, corporate social responsibility reports, and social media platforms. Research has demonstrated that sustainability communication through social networks is particularly important due to its global reach and the ability of stakeholders to actively engage in the co-creation of communication and to express their opinions, experiences, and values (Mann et al., 2021). In addition, the use of social networks as a tool for communicating sustainability is aligned with the growing trend of digitalization and the shift to online communication and promotion in the marketing sector (Mann et al., 2021; Sewpersadh, 2023).

The use of social networks allows organizations to communicate interactively with their stakeholders, including consumers, to build a positive reputation and brand image (Gupta et al., 2021). Through social networks, organizations can engage with their stakeholders in a bidirectional communication process, which helps promote a sense of trust and transparency (Gupta et al., 2021).

An important strategy in marketing communication for sustainability is the use of social networks and content generated by users (Mohamed et al., 2023). By understanding and working with the content generated by users on social media platforms, organizations can potentially benefit from the influence and reach of these platforms to promote sustainable practices (Mohamed et al., 2023).

Digital marketing and social networks have become powerful tools for communicating about sustainability. These platforms allow easy and wide dissemination of information and allow organizations to connect with a wide range of

consumers who increasingly use social networks as a source of information and a means of expressing their opinions (Ague et al., 2022; Mancuso et al., 2021).

In addition, social media platforms facilitate engagement and interaction between consumers, allowing them to share their experiences, knowledge, and concerns regarding sustainability (Lee et al., 2021). This co-creation of communication can help build a stronger community and develop more effective communication strategies to promote sustainability.

Therefore, based on these previous studies, the following hypotheses were established:

Hypothesis 1.1. It is estimated that sustainability communication is indirectly related to the reasons that influence consumers' purchasing decisions through digital marketing.

Hypothesis 2. It is estimated that sustainability communication is directly related to the reasons that influence consumers' purchasing decisions.

2.3. Influencing factors in consumer purchasing decisions

When it comes to consumer buying decisions, there are a variety of factors that can influence the choices that consumers make. These factors can be classified into personal, sociocultural, economic, and psychological factors (Kızıl et al., 2022). Personal factors refer to the characteristics and traits specific to an individual that influence their purchasing decisions (e.g., age, sex, lifestyle, personality) (Ramli et al., 2020; Wikantari, 2022). Sociocultural factors refer to the influence of society and culture on consumers' purchasing decisions (e.g., social norms, values, beliefs, cultural traditions) (Ural et al., 2020). Economic factors also play a significant role in consumers' purchasing decisions (e.g., income level, professional status, price sensitivity) (Kisawike, 2021). Psychological factors also have a substantial impact on consumers' purchase intent (Adedoja et al., 2022). These factors include perception, motivation, attitudes, and learning.

Perception refers to the way consumers perceive products and brands, and this perception can influence their purchasing decisions (e.g., a consumer may consider that a particular brand is of high quality and reliable, which leads them to choose that brand over others) (Liu et al., 2019). Motivation refers to the underlying needs or desires that drive consumers to make certain purchases (Aji et al., 2019). Attitudes and beliefs play an important role in shaping consumers' preferences and choices (e.g., a consumer with a positive attitude toward ecological products may give priority to purchasing environmentally sustainable options) (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021).

The impact of marketing communication on sustainability and responsibility is crucial to promote the adoption of sustainable practices and influence consumer behaviors. By effectively communicating the benefits of sustainable products and services, organizations can encourage consumers to make environmentally and socially responsible choices (Mihajlovic, 2020). In addition, marketing communication strategies can play a significant role in preventing inappropriate behavior and in motivating a change towards sustainability (Gupta et al., 2021) (e.g., organizations can use marketing communication to educate consumers about the negative impacts of certain products or practices and highlight more sustainable alternatives).

By using an appropriate tone and conveying accurate information, marketing communication can empower consumers to make informed decisions and contribute to sustainable development (SanMiguel et al., 2021). The acquisition of knowledge about consumers is a key factor for successful marketing communication, since organizations need to understand consumers' concerns about sustainability and their purchasing behaviors related to sustainability in order to effectively adapt their marketing messages (Boz et al., 2020).

This communication occurs through several marketing channels known for their unique ability to influence consumer opinions. Thus, properly understanding the crucial concept of the brand is essential for companies to develop efficient strategies to strengthen their competitive position in the market (Belgrade & Puspita, 2021). To effectively interact with consumers on issues related to sustainability, organizations can use various communication channels, such as social media platforms (Dissanayake et al., 2019). By taking advantage of these platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, brands can interact with customers more directly, while transmitting their social responsibility efforts through campaigns (Ardiansyah & Sarwoko, 2020).

Therefore, based on these previous studies, the following hypotheses were established:

Hypothesis 3. It is estimated that sustainability communication is directly related to the use of social networks by brands.

Hypothesis 3.1. It is estimated that sustainability communication is indirectly related to the reasons that influence consumers' purchasing decisions through the use of social networks by brands.

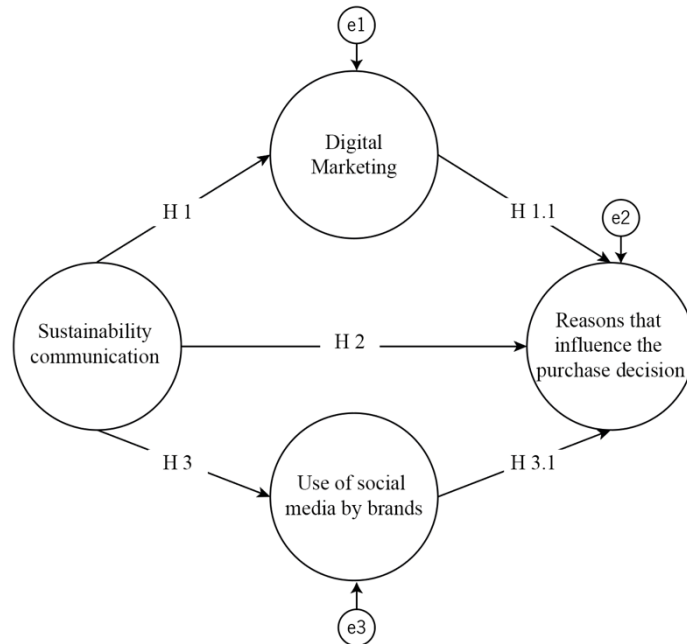
3. Methods

3.1. Research model

The theoretical framework of this study was designed in order to meet the objective of this research, namely, to contribute to the understanding of the role of sustainability communication adopted by brands, the use of digital marketing and social networks, and its influence on consumers' purchasing decisions.

The verification of the five hypotheses proposed in the previous section will provide a more specific and clear understanding of the relationship between the variables presented in this study. Specifically, a structural equation modeling analysis was carried out, and the statistical analyses were carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS), version 28.0 for Mac and the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS), version 28.0 for Windows. Figure 1 presents the hypotheses and the research model of the study.

Figure 1. The proposed conceptual framework



3.2. Data collection

The data was collected randomly in Portugal between January and April 2022, using a self-report questionnaire built and distributed through the online research platform Google Forms. The participants answered questions aimed at evaluating sustainable communication, digital marketing, the use of social networks by brands, and the reasons that influence consumers' purchasing decisions.

The sample consisted of 423 participants, 149 (35.2%) male, 273 (64.5%) female, and 1 (0.2%) participant of another sex. The participants' age is between 18 and 73 years, with an average age of 42.74% (SD = 15.94%), 420 (99.3%) of Portuguese nationality, 2 (0.5%) of Brazilian nationality and 1 (0.2%) of Italian nationality.

Table one shows the geographical distribution of the participants in Mainland Portugal, with the majority from the North region, 174 (41.1%), with six missing cases, however.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants

Characteristics		Frequency	%
Mainland Portugal Region	North	174	(41.1%)
	Center	114	(27%)
	Lisbon Metropolitan Area	80	(18.9%)
	Alentejo	20	(4.7%)
	Algarve	15	(3.5%)
	Azores Autonomous Region	8	(1.9%)
	Madeira Autonomous Region	5	(1.2%)

Source: Author's calculation based on SPSS 28.0

Regarding literary qualifications, 166 (39.2%) have a doctorate, 100 (23.6%) have a degree, 86 (20.3%) have a master's degree, 38 (9%) have a post-doctorate degree, 31 (7.3%) have a secondary education, 1 (0.2%) has a specialization and,

finally, 1 (0.2%) has a bachelor's degree. With regard to marital status, the majority of participants, 175 (41.4%) are married.

3.3. Measures

The questionnaire for this study will consist of a description of the study, questions about the variables, and questions about the participants' sociodemographic data.

Based on the literature review presented above, a common multi-item questionnaire was constructed to assess the constructs under study, measured on a five-point Likert-type response scale, where one means "strongly disagree" and five means "strongly agree". Specifically, to assess sustainability communication, a scale consisting of six items was constructed (e.g., "Sustainability must be communicated digitally."), to assess the use of digital marketing, a scale consisting of four items was constructed (e.g., "Measuring digital marketing results is perceived as very important for companies"), to assess the use of social networks by brands, a scale consisting of four items was constructed (e.g., "Information exchange.") and to assess the reasons that influence the decision to purchase, a scale consisting of six items was constructed (e.g., "Word of mouth").

4. Presentation and discussion of the results

Anderson and Gerbing (1988) recommended confirmatory factor analysis as a valuable method to assess the reliability and validity of measurement scales. This technique allows researchers to assess the reliability, consistency, and accuracy of their measurements, examining to what extent they conform to theoretical expectations. Specifically, this study used confirmatory factor analysis to assess the reliability and validity of its measurement scale, according to the Anderson and Gerbing (1988) framework. This approach allowed us to examine whether or not the measure accurately represented the intended constructs through statistical calculations based on observed data.

Table two shows the correlations between the variables under study, the internal consistency indices of the variables of the structural model, for the total sample (n=423), the mean values, and the standard deviations. The magnitude of the relationships indicates the presence of moderate relationships (.30 < r < .50) e fortes (r > .50) (Cohen, 1988) between the variables, without the existence of multicollinearity. Furthermore, the correlations are statistically significant (p < .01), thus fulfilling the linearity assumption. It appears that Cronbach's Alpha (α) has a value between .73 and .88, that is, reasonable to good values.

Table 2. Correlations between study variables, mean values, standard deviations, and internal consistency indices (N=423)

Constructs	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	M	SD	α
(1) Sustainability communication	1	1	1	1	24.79	3.59	.88
(2) Digital marketing	.54**	1	1	1	16.88	2.27	.86
(3) Use of social media by brands	.42**	.40**	1	1	14.26	2.82	.83
(4) Reasons that influence the purchase decision	.39**	.28**	.37**	1	23.36	3.32	.73

Note: ** p < .01

Source: Author's calculation based on SPSS 28.0

Confirmatory multigroup analyses were then carried out to assess the psychometric properties of the measures, and it was possible to verify the adjustment indices of each instrument in table three.

Table 3. Adjustment indices by measuring instrument (N=423)

Constructs	GFI	CFI	RMSEA	AIC
(1) Sustainability communication	.98	.99	.06	48.01
(2) Digital marketing	.99	.99	.10	25.45
(3) Use of social media by brands	.95	.92	.23	62.19
(4) Reasons that influence the purchase decision	.96	.80	.10	70.92

Source: Author's calculation based on SPSS 28.0

To evaluate the adjustment indices of the measurement instruments, as well as the model's adjustment indices, we used the following indices: Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) (e.g., Gilson et al., 2013; Marôco, 2010). Bootstrapping analyses were also carried out with 500 samples, with a confidence interval of 95% (Cheung & Lau, 2007; Marôco, 2010).

Considering the values presented in the table above (table three), according to Marôco (2010), we can state that the questionnaire that seeks to assess sustainability communication and the use of digital marketing, has very good GFI and CFI values (≥.95) and good RMSEA values (.05 < RMSEA < .10). In turn, the questionnaire that seeks to assess the presence of brands on social networks presents good GFI and CFI values (.90 < GFI < .95) and unacceptable RMSEA values

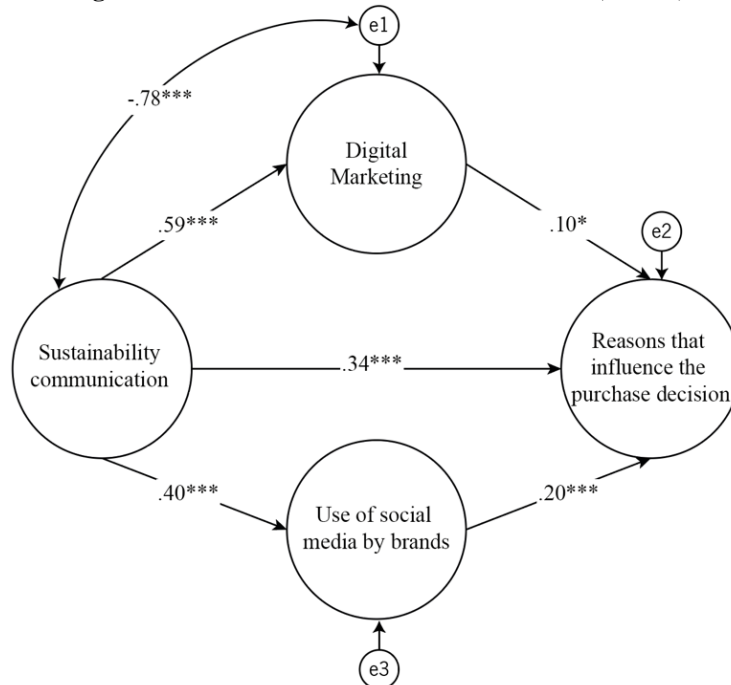
(>.10), finally the questionnaire you want evaluate the reasons that influence the purchase decision, has very good GFI values ($\geq .95$), CFI has a poor value ($.80 < CFI < .85$) and good RMSEA values ($.05 < RMSEA < .10$).

These results allowed us to move on to path analysis, which was then carried out in order to assess whether the structural model was well adjusted to the data and whether the hypotheses defined later are verified, thus confirming the existence, or not, of the relationships proposed between the constructs.

The structural model, without outliers, presented a very good GFI value ($\geq .95$; for the present sample .98), a very good CFI value ($\geq .95$; for the present sample .96), an unacceptable RMSEA value ($> .10$; for the present sample .18), and an AIC value of 31.70. Although the RMSEA value is unacceptable, this is an index sensitive to the sample size and the complexity of the model (Chen, 2007). In this line of thinking, we decided to accept the model based on the GFI and CFI values, since this is a more robust index (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). In a more concrete way, figure two shows the standardized estimates between the constructs of the final structural model, without outliers.

The results point to statistically significant relationships between the constructs, and it is possible to verify that there is a direct relationship between sustainability communication and digital marketing (beta = $.59^{***}$), which suggests that an effective digital marketing strategy can positively influence sustainability communication efforts. This implies that organizations that implement effective digital marketing strategies are more likely to successfully communicate their sustainability initiatives to their target audience. In addition, the results obtained also indicate that sustainable consumer behavior can be motivated through the implementation of appropriate strategies, such as the understanding and use of content generated by users on social networks (Mann et al., 2021). Implementing strategies such as user-generated content on social media can help organizations promote engagement and collaboration with their audience, allowing them to effectively convey their sustainability efforts and objectives. Therefore, organizations that want to promote sustainable behaviors and responsibilities should consider incorporating digital marketing strategies into their global communication strategies (Mancuso et al., 2021). By adopting an efficient digital marketing strategy, organizations can ensure that all relevant information about their green products and services is readily available to consumers (Wang et al., 2022). The greater the clarity and accessibility of information on sustainable products and services, the easier it will be for consumers to make sustainable decisions.

Figure 2. Final structural model without outliers (N=418)



Note: *** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$

Therefore, the impact of communication on sustainability and responsibility is significant. Implementing effective digital marketing strategies can positively influence sustainability communication efforts and motivate responsible and sustainable behaviors. In addition, targeting consumers who are specifically interested in having a positive impact on environmental issues through their purchases can increase the effectiveness of marketing strategies related to sustainability (Alamsyah et al., 2020).

In figure two, it is also possible to verify a statistically significant relationship between sustainability communication and the reasons that influence the purchase decision ($\beta=.34^{***}$), highlighting the importance of effective marketing communication to influence consumer behavior in relation to sustainable consumption.

Consumers are more receptive to marketing strategies that promote sustainability and responsible consumption (Alamsyah et al., 2020). Additionally, the shift to digital marketing has proven to be particularly effective in influencing consumer behavior. Research has demonstrated that digital marketing, including the use of social networks and interactive communication channels, has a positive impact on consumers' attitudes and behaviors in relation to sustainability (e.g., Gupta et al., 2021; Mann et al., 2021). By adopting an efficient digital marketing strategy, organizations can ensure that all relevant information about their green products and services is readily available to consumers. This greater clarity and accessibility of information on sustainable products and services makes it easier for consumers to make informed and sustainable decisions.

There is a statistically significant relationship between sustainability communication and the use of social networks by brands (beta =.40**), indicating that the use of user-generated content on social networks can be a powerful strategy to promote sustainability and responsible behavior. Currently, consumers are very involved in social media platforms and the content generated by users plays a crucial role in shaping their perceptions and behaviors (Gupta et al., 2021). Organizations can take advantage of this fact by actively engaging in the content generated by users on social networks and using it as a platform to communicate their sustainability efforts.

This strategy not only increases brand authenticity and reliability, but it also motivates consumers to make sustainable choices.

In addition, the use of user-generated content on social networks allows for a more interactive and personal engagement with consumers, promoting a sense of community and a shared responsibility for sustainability.

Regarding indirect effects, it is possible to verify that sustainability communication is indirectly related to the reasons that influence consumers' purchasing decisions through digital marketing (beta =.16*), highlighting the importance of incorporating sustainability messages and initiatives into digital marketing strategies. By integrating sustainability communication into their digital marketing efforts, organizations can effectively influence consumers' perceptions and behaviors, ultimately leading them to more sustainable purchasing decisions (SanMiguel et al., 2021).

One of the main strategies to avoid inappropriate behavior and motivate a change towards sustainability is the use of interactive marketing communication on social networks (Dissanayake et al., 2019). This strategy allows organizations to engage with their target audience in a more personalized and interactive way, encouraging dialogue and education about sustainability and responsible behavior (Dissanayake et al., 2019). This can be achieved through features such as live chats, interactive questionnaires, behind-the-scenes videos, and user-generated content campaigns that encourage consumers to share their own sustainable practices and inspire others to do the same.

It appears that communication about sustainability is indirectly related to the reasons that influence consumers' purchasing decisions through the use of social networks by brands (beta =.07*), suggesting that the incorporation of messages about sustainability into digital marketing efforts may have a positive impact on consumer behavior. In addition, digital marketing allows precise segmentation and targeting of the public, ensuring that sustainability messages reach the right people at the right time (Wood, 2000).

This ultimately improves the effectiveness and efficiency of communication, increasing the likelihood of influencing consumers' attitudes and behaviors regarding sustainability. Digital marketing plays a crucial role in promoting sustainability and responsibility, effectively communicating sustainability messages and initiatives to consumers.

This fact can improve consumers' awareness and understanding of sustainable practices, promoting a sense of responsibility and encouraging them to make more sustainable choices in their purchasing decisions.

Taking into account these results and the figures shown in figure two, it is possible to confirm all the hypotheses initially formulated.

5. Conclusion

Incorporating sustainability messages and initiatives into digital marketing strategies has become increasingly important in today's rapidly evolving business landscape. By taking advantage of interactive marketing communication on social networks and using digital marketing tools, organizations can effectively interact with their target audience and influence consumer perceptions and behaviors towards more sustainable choices.

Research has demonstrated that the use of social media platforms, such as live chats and user-generated content campaigns, can create a more personalized and interactive experience for consumers, leading to greater awareness and understanding of sustainable practices. In addition, digital marketing allows precise segmentation and targeting, ensuring that sustainability messages reach the right individuals at the right time.

By using these strategies and techniques, organizations can not only communicate their sustainability efforts, but also inspire and motivate consumers to adopt more responsible behaviors.

In conclusion, the impact of marketing communication on sustainability and responsibility is significant. It can influence consumer attitudes, increase awareness and understanding of sustainable practices, and ultimately lead to more responsible purchasing decisions. In addition, it is important to explore effective sustainable marketing communication strategies to generate demand for environmentally friendly offers in different sectors.

Companies must give priority to communication about sustainability to create brand loyalty, mitigate risks, and reduce expenses, and communication between companies and consumers is always transparent and rigorous. The relationship between a company's sustainable practices and the satisfaction of consumer demands is noteworthy, underlining the importance of sustainable digital marketing to distinguish brands and cultivate customer loyalty. In addition, this marketing approach can effectively address environmental and social risks, while improving a company's reputation by openly communicating its sustainability efforts with transparency.

In addition, digital marketing allows the real-time monitoring and monitoring of the impact and effectiveness of sustainability messaging campaigns. By analyzing customer preferences and behavior, organizations can continuously improve their sustainability initiatives and adapt their marketing strategies to achieve their communication objectives. The study suggests that future research should investigate other factors that are associated with the relationship between digital marketing error and sustainability communication (as shown in figure 2), in order to understand what other factors may explain this relationship.

In addition, the current sample used in this study was non-probabilistic for convenience. As such, care must be taken when generalizing the results beyond this specific group of participants. To resolve this limitation in a future perspective, further studies with structured data collection methods should be considered in the future. The use of random sampling techniques would increase the probability of obtaining representative results that can be effectively generalized to different populations or contexts. By conducting research that explores additional factors that contribute to the discrepancy between sustainability communication and digital marketing and by using representative samples with structured data collection methods, researchers can gain a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the relationship between sustainability communication and digital marketing.

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