

Effectiveness of Travel Social Media Influencers: A Case of Eco-Friendly Hotels

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Abstract

With social media becoming the primary channel for travelers to acquire travel-related information, tourism service providers are increasingly partnering with social media influencers (SMIs) as part of their digital marketing strategy. The present study investigates the effectiveness of SMIs by examining the role that two message factors—argument quality and sponsorship status—have on travelers’ perceptions of a hotel’s commitment to sustainability and their intention to stay at the hotel. Results from four studies show that when eco-friendly hotels sponsor SMIs, an attribute-value message is more effective than a simple recommendation message in influencing travelers’ perceptions and intentions. Given the latest Federal Trade Commission regulations regarding sponsorship disclosure practices, the findings offer valuable insights for tourism providers using SMIs. The study findings suggest that SMIs should create sponsored messages that provide rational and objective information about the hotel’s sustainability practices to stimulate travelers’ related cognitions and persuade them to patronize the hotel.

Keywords

social media influencer, argument quality, sponsorship, Instagram, eco-friendly hotel

Introduction

Growing environmental concern has prompted travelers to seek out tourism service providers who practice sustainability (Holmes, Dodds, and Frochot 2019). Recent studies have shown that travelers prefer environmentally responsible hotels, and some are willing to pay more for a hotel’s environmental practices (e.g., Balaji, Jiang, and Jha 2019; Casado-Díaz et al. 2020). Indeed, many hotels have adopted environmentally friendly practices to cater to their guests’ pro-environmental attitudes. However, given the abstract nature of sustainability and growing skepticism toward green practices, eco-friendly hotels increasingly rely on social media influencers (SMIs) to persuade travelers to make pro-environmental travel decisions (Xu and Pratt 2018).

SMIs are independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes based on their experiences and opinions by creating and sharing brand-related content (e.g., messages, photos, blogs, videos) on their personal social media channels (Ge and Gretzel 2018). They are more likable, credible, and cost-effective than traditional advertising and, as a result, have become an essential component of social media marketing campaigns in destination marketing (Bokuniewicz and Shulman 2017; Gretzel 2018). Despite their growing importance, little research has been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of SMIs in persuading travelers to make pro-environmental travel choices.

This research gap is addressed in part by the current study. Based on McGuire’s (1989) communication–persuasion

matrix, we investigate the effects of argument quality in SMIs’ social media messages on travelers’ perceptions of a hotel’s commitment to sustainability and their intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel. Furthermore, in light of the recent FTC (Federal Trade Corporation) regulation on sponsorship disclosure practices (FTC 2017), we investigate how sponsorship status influences message argument quality. The preceding emphasis appears warranted given the significant increase in the number of eco-influencers and the dramatically increased use of the hashtag “#sustainabletourism” (from 32 posts in 2012 to 39,201 posts in 2018 on the social media platform Instagram) (Palazzo et al. 2021).

Previous research has shown that the persuasive strength of the arguments provided in messages plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of sustainability communication (Toelkes 2018). Although sustainability messages can be framed in a variety of ways, we believe that the argument quality of SMI messages can be enhanced by using

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either rational and objective information (an attribute-value message) or emotional and subjective information (a simple recommendation message) about an eco-friendly hotel's sustainability practices (Park and Lee 2008). As a result, we investigate the effectiveness of an attribute-value message versus a simple recommendation message in influencing travelers' perceptions of and intention to stay at an eco-friendly hotel. Although the quality of message arguments has been extensively studied concerning online consumer reviews (Jiang et al. 2020; Jun and Holland 2012; Ruiz-Mafe, Chatzipanagiotou, and Curras-Perez 2018), its role in messages posted by third-party actors such as SMIs has been largely ignored. Furthermore, the few studies that have looked at the efficacy of message argument quality in sustainability communication in the tourism and hospitality context have yielded contradictory results (Wang and Lehto 2020; A. Yoon et al. 2019). Consequently, more research is required to improve the understanding of argument quality in sustainability messages posted on social media by SMIs.

Another critical factor that may influence the effectiveness of SMIs in persuading travelers is the motivations for posting messages. SMI messages can be sponsored or non-sponsored, depending on whether SMIs receive monetary or other forms of compensation from the eco-friendly hotel for sharing the sustainability message on social media. Sponsored messages, like native advertisements, are paid brand endorsements. Nonsponsored messages, on the other hand, are not commercially motivated and are more comparable to traditional online consumer reviews (Stubb and Colliander 2019). To prevent the audience from being misled by the message's persuasive intent, SMIs must disclose their relationship with the sponsor through disclosure statements (FTC 2017). However, previous research has found that disclosing sponsorship causes consumers to activate defensive coping strategies, resulting in unfavorable brand perceptions, negative brand attitudes, and reduced purchase intentions (Evans et al. 2017). Despite this, little is known about when a sponsored message can effectively persuade travelers to stay at eco-friendly hotels. The current study addresses this research gap by investigating the effectiveness of argument quality when an eco-friendly hotel sponsors an SMI to share the sustainability message on social media.

Based on McGuire's (1989) communication-persuasion matrix, the present study examines the role of two message input factors—*argument quality* and *sponsorship status*—on travelers' perceptions of a hotel's *commitment to sustainability* and *intention to patronize* the eco-friendly hotel. The study offers several contributions to the literature. First, it adds to our understanding of the effectiveness of travel-related SMIs (Xu and Pratt 2018). Second, it reveals the underlying constructs that influence travelers' intentions to make pro-sustainable travel decisions (Balaji, Jiang, and Jha 2019). Third, it adds to our understanding of the efficacy of message framing (Wang and Lehto 2020; A. Yoon et al. 2019) by examining the efficacy of attribute-value messages

and simple recommendation messages when posted by a third-party actor—in this case, an SMI. Fourth, because of the new FTC regulation, there is a growing interest in determining how sponsored messages can persuade travelers (Stubb and Colliander 2019). Furthermore, previous research has shown several factors to influence sponsorship disclosure (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019). The current study adds to this body of knowledge by investigating the interaction effects of argument quality and sponsorship status on traveler outcomes. Finally, while McGuire's (1989) communication-persuasion matrix has been used in advertising and communication research (Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman 1981; Slater and Rouner 2002), we apply it to analyze the persuasiveness of messages posted by SMIs on social media in the tourism and hospitality context.

The current project also provides practical insights that can assist tourism marketers and service providers in effectively using SMIs as a marketing tool to persuade travelers to make pro-sustainable travel choices. Furthermore, its findings provide guidance for framing sponsored social media messages. The remainder of the article is divided into the sections listed below. We begin with a theoretical foundation for the study, followed by hypothesis development. The results of four studies designed to test the proposed hypotheses are then presented. The article concludes with a discussion of the study's findings and implications and future research directions.

Literature Review

Influencer marketing. Influencer marketing uses opinion leaders or individuals who have a large following to raise brand awareness, form favorable brand attitudes, and increase purchase behavior (Jang et al. 2020). Although targeting opinion leaders, role models, influential individuals, and celebrities to change consumer attitudes is not new in the marketing and tourism domains (Gretzel and Bowser 2013; Oh 1997; Roy, Dryl, and Gil 2021; Yang 2018), the rise of social media has created new opportunities for influencer marketing. According to previous research, influencers or opinion leaders are viewed as reference groups that influence others because of their central position in communication networks. The influential role of opinion leaders and celebrities has attracted considerable scholarly attention to augment understanding of how people are swayed to engage in specific actions.

Kelman (1961) proposed in his seminal work that people may adopt the behaviors of an influencer depending on how they perceive their relationship with him or her. Furthermore, he proposed three processes by which individuals respond to social influence and opinion change: compliance, identification, and internalization. Individuals who comply accept influence from another person or group to gain a favorable response from this person or group. Identification is the process by which an individual adopts

another person or group's behavior to establish or maintain a "self-defining relationship" with that person or group (Kelman 1961, p. 63). Internalization reflects an individual's acceptance of influence because it is consistent with his or her value system and thus intrinsically rewarding. Kelman's (1961) model provides a theoretical foundation for explaining how influential people or opinion leaders influence others.

According to McCracken (1986, 1989), an influencer's effectiveness is partly determined by the meanings with which he or she is endowed. His meaning transfer model was proposed to explain how celebrities or opinion leaders transfer cultural associations associated with their work to the brands they endorse, thereby adding value to the brand and increasing its perceived credibility because of the celebrity's symbolic power. In other words, the influencer process is viewed as a cultural process in which cultural meaning is transferred from the celebrity to the brand and, ultimately, to future consumers. Similarly, Scheer and Stern (1992) proposed an influence framework to understand the power dynamics that influencers use to persuade consumers. Their process consists of four stages: (1) influence attempts by an influencer, (2) the follower's attitudinal response to influence attempts, (3) the follower's desire to comply, and (4) the follower's behavior. The above studies suggest that influencers wield power through resources such as attractiveness, prestige, expertise, and information, which serve as sources of power that followers value.

Social media influencer. SMIs create brand-related content (e.g., text, images, location check-ins, hashtags) and share it on their social media channels (Xu and Pratt 2018). In essence, SMIs are information savvy and knowledgeable about the latest developments in specific areas, allowing them to have a significant influence on the decisions of followers and prospective followers. SMIs lack the depth of cultural meaning that traditional celebrities can draw from their mainstream media exposure. SMIs' popularity and clout are determined by the personal brand they have created for themselves through social media content (Ge and Gretzel 2018). Although a celebrity's credibility and social attractiveness are important factors in celebrity endorsement success, SMIs' appeal is determined by the extent to which they build their "personal" brand attractiveness through their efforts. As a result, successful SMIs use engaging content to build warm and personal relationships with their followers (Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu 2019).

SMIs hold a unique position between service providers and consumers, engaging and influencing followers by creating and disseminating brand-related content. They play an important facilitating role for the service provider or brand by engaging and collaborating with followers in value cocreation activities. Furthermore, SMIs serve as third-party independent endorsers for the service provider (D. Y. Kim and Kim 2021). Ge and Gretzel (2018) proposed that for SMI to

be effective, they should have a clear understanding of social media rhetoric, proficient social media language skills, a keen understanding of followers' needs and interests as users, and engaged followers on a personal level.

Rhetoric refers to how SMIs construct a message to make it persuasive (Villarino and Font 2015). Social media language is a form of informal, nonstandard, and personal communication used on social media platforms (Villaruel Ordenes et al., 2019). Understanding followers' needs and interests enables SMIs to use language that resonates with their audience when creating persuasive messages. SMIs should also engage the audience on a personal level, as this will help draw them into meaningful conversations about the topic or brand with their followers (Ge and Gretzel 2018).

McGuire's communication–persuasion matrix. McGuire (1989, 2000) proposed a communication–persuasion matrix, which describes the process of persuading consumers via communication campaigns. This matrix includes communication input and persuasion output factors that determine the effectiveness of a communication campaign. The input communication factors are "the independent variables and persuasive message options that can be manipulated" (McGuire 1989, p. 44). The message, source, channel, receiver, and destination are all input communication components.

The message includes the source's appeal, organization, structure, and style characteristics in creating a persuasive message (McGuire 2001). The source refers to the communicator's characteristics. Source characteristics such as credibility, attractiveness, power, unanimity, and relationship with the sponsor can improve the message's effectiveness (McGuire 2001; Lou, Tan, and Chen 2019). The channel is the media or communication platform through which the persuasive messages are disseminated. The receiver embodies characteristics of the target audience such as demographics, personality, and lifestyle (McGuire 2001). Finally, the destination reflects the desired actions or attitudes elicited by the campaign.

The input communication factors collectively influence the output persuasion factors. These components include being exposed to the communication, attending to the communication, liking the communication, comprehending the communication content, generating related cognitions, learning how to use the communication, agreeing with the communicator's position, storing this new position, retrieving it when needed, deciding to act on the new position, acting on it, and engendering it (McGuire 1989).

McGuire's (1989, 2000) communication–persuasion matrix serves as the foundation for this study. We specifically look at the impact of two message factors on two output persuasion factors: argument quality (attribute-value vs. simple recommendation) and sponsorship status (sponsored vs. nonsponsored). The first factor is people's related cognitions about the message, specifically travelers' perceptions of a

hotel's commitment to sustainability. The second factor is people's reaction to the message: their intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel. In this study, other input factors are controlled or fixed: the source is the SMI, the channel is the Instagram social media platform, and the receivers are the followers and prospective travelers.

The communication–persuasion matrix (McGuire 2000) is particularly suited to examining the effectiveness of influencer marketing in the context of eco-friendly hotels for several reasons. First, the communication–persuasion matrix integrates various factors and interdependencies critical for predicting the outcomes of a communication campaign in a systematic manner (Eisend 2011). Second, it provides a conceptual framework for conducting a thorough assessment of the input communication and output persuasion factors in persuading consumers. Third, despite its limited application in tourism and hospitality, the matrix has been widely used in advertising and communication research (Jha, Dutta, and Koksai 2019; Zhou et al. 2021), as it allows for in-depth examination of the communication–persuasion process and is especially useful in determining the effectiveness of the message, source, content, design, and diffusion channel (Muturi 2016).

Argument quality. Argument quality refers to the persuasive power of the contentions embedded in the SMI message. It reflects consumers' perceptions of the persuasive strength of the arguments presented in the message (Bhattacharjee and Sanford 2006). Previous research has shown that consumers deliberate the merits of the arguments and information presented in a message. Such deliberation influences their perception of the message, source, and brand (Shin et al. 2017). Messages with high argument quality are more likely to be accepted as factually correct. Thus, in conditions characterized by a high likelihood of elaboration, argument quality is a strong determinant of informational influences and attitude change (Hur et al. 2017). Furthermore, strong arguments in a message serve as a central cue for the message's elaboration. This increases the message's relevance and usefulness, making it more effective than a message with poor argument quality (Bhattacharjee and Sanford 2006).

As proposed by Park and Lee (2008), the attribute-value and simple recommendation classification of argument quality is used in this study. Attribute-value messages are logical, objective, and concrete because they are based on specific facts about a product (Park and Lee 2008, p. 388). They are concerned with describing the specific features or characteristics of a product. In the current study, attribute-value messages provide travelers with concrete, representative information about the eco-friendly hotel's sustainability practices and initiatives, such as saving water and supporting local farmers. Simple recommendation messages are emotional, subjective, and abstract because they are based on a consumer's feelings about a product (Park and Lee 2008, p. 388).

They represent benefit-focused content that emphasizes the emotional aspects of the product or service experience. As such, they make subjective and intimate emotional arguments based on the SMI's personal experience and beliefs about the eco-friendly hotel's sustainability practices.

Sponsorship status (sponsored vs. nonsponsored). Because SMIs frequently share their experiences and opinions about various brands on social media, audiences are unsure whether such posts reflect SMIs' genuine brand experience or are a result of compensation for promoting the brand. To help consumers recognize the persuasive intent of SMI messages and avoid being misled, the FTC established guidelines that require SMIs to disclose whether brand-related content posted on social media platforms is sponsored by a third-party source (FTC 2017).

Messages SMIs post on social media can be sponsored or nonsponsored, depending on the relationship with the third-party source (the eco-friendly hotel in the current study) (Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa 2017). Sponsored messages are paid advertisements in which the sponsor creates or shares brand-related content with followers at a cost to the sponsor (eco-friendly hotel here). Nonsponsored messages are personal brand-related messages created and shared with followers without the involvement of a third party. As a result, sponsored messages are considered paid media, whereas nonsponsored messages are considered earned media. SMIs provide sponsorship information on social media platforms by either marking the post as "paidadvertisement" or by using hashtags such as #ad, #sponsored, #sponsoredpost, and #hosted (De Jans et al. 2020). Because travelers are skeptical of eco-friendly hotels' greenwashing efforts, we consider sponsorship status as a critical variable that determines SMI effectiveness.

Perception of hotel's commitment to sustainability. Travelers' perceptions of a hotel's commitment to sustainability refer to the extent to which travelers feel that the eco-friendly hotel is committed to sustainability practices (Merli et al. 2019). The hotel undertakes sustainability actions to advance the social good beyond the hotel's interests, as required by law (Farmaki and Farmakis 2018). Tourism and hospitality service providers have demonstrated varying degrees of commitment to sustainability practices (e.g., unscrupulous window displays, public announcements of participation in activities devoid of substance, veritable efforts yielding favorable outcomes for both business and the environment) (Gao, Mattila, and Lee 2016). Consideration of travelers' perceptions of the hotel's commitment to sustainability may compel hotel management to act in an authentically socially responsible manner, as doing so can influence the extent to which travelers believe the hotel values environmental concerns and conducts sustainability practices and initiatives for the benefit of both the hotel and society (Coles, Fenclova, and Dinan 2013; Wells et al. 2016).

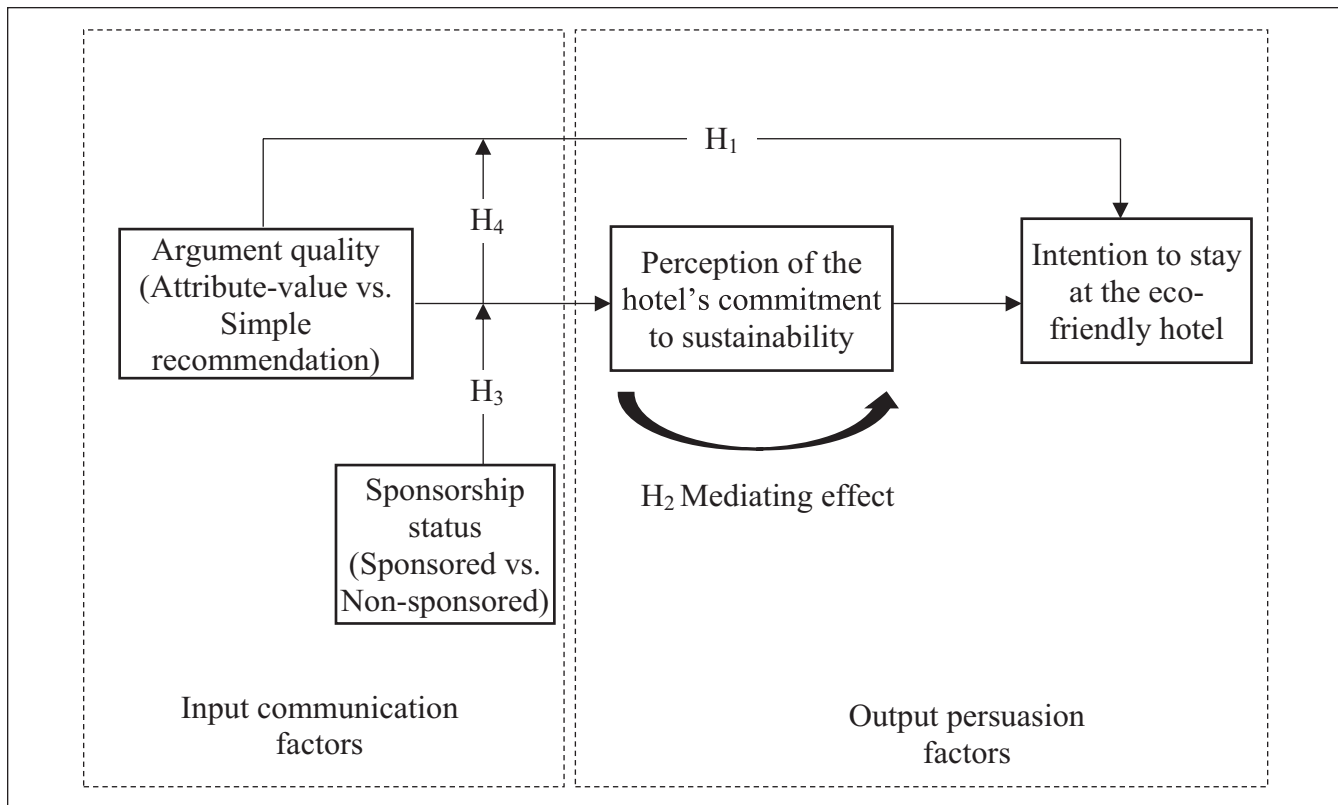


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

Hypotheses Development

The conceptual model of the study is depicted in Figure 1. We contend that argument quality (attribute-value vs. simple recommendation) of sustainability messages posted by SMIs on social media influences the traveler's intention to stay at an eco-friendly hotel. This relationship is mediated by their perceptions of the eco-friendly hotel's commitment to sustainability. Furthermore, sponsorship status (nonsponsored vs. sponsored) moderates the relationship between argument quality and the hotel's commitment to sustainability.

Message argument quality and intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel. In analyzing message argument quality as an attribute-value message and a simple recommendation message, the current study considers both message appeal (rational and emotional) and informational cues. Park and Lee (2008) demonstrated that attribute value messages are considered more informative than simple recommendation messages because they provide rational, specific, clear, and relevant information. Similarly, Andreu, Casado-Díaz, and Mattila (2015) found that rational appeals communicate environment-related corporate social responsibility initiatives more effectively than emotional appeals. A. Yoon et al. (2019) found that messages that convey objective and logical information are more effective than those evincing consumers' personal experience and emotional feelings in a responsible tourism context.

According to H. Zhang et al. (2014), messages with an emotional appeal result in more favorable attitudes and higher purchase intentions than those with a rational appeal. Furthermore, Luan et al. (2016) observed that while attribute-based messages are effective for search products, simple or emotional messages are more effective for experience products, such as eco-friendly hotels in our case. Hardeman, Font, and Nawjin (2017) discerned that emotional, rather than rational, appeals influence long-term holiday choices.

Despite the contradictory findings, we argue that attribute-value messages are more effective than simple recommendation messages for a sustainability message posted on social media by SMIs about an eco-friendly hotel. Strong arguments elicit more positive feelings about an advocated position, whereas weak arguments elicit more negative feelings (Lien and Chen 2013). This suggests that the attribute-value message may serve as a cue for followers about the SMI's willingness to provide a valid assessment of the eco-friendly hotel's sustainability practices; thus, the message is perceived as credible. The informational cues and the rational and objective arguments about the sustainability practices presented in the attribute-value messages will elicit positive perceptions and create a favorable image, which may persuade travelers to stay at the eco-friendly hotel.

The accessibility–diagnosticity model may also be used to explain the effectiveness of attribute-value messages (Feldman and Lynch 1988). According to this model, the

likelihood that a consumer judgment will be based on the input from a piece of information is determined by (1) how accessible the input is, (2) how accessible alternative inputs are, and (3) how relevant the input is. Attribute-value messages improve the accessibility of the input (such as sufficiency of reasons, factualness, and objectivity of sustainability practices), which improves the message's diagnosticity (Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991). Because diagnosticity is associated with the message's information depth, reliability, readability, and understandability (Liu and Park 2015), travelers will be more likely to adopt the attribute-value message and patronize the eco-friendly hotel SMIs recommend in their post.

Previous research has revealed that travelers are skeptical of green advertising because of the prevalence of misleading environmental claims and greenwashing (Rahman, Park, and Chi 2015; Rozier-Rich and Santos 2011). As a result, scholars have proposed that when service providers communicate more about their environmental and sustainability practices, they attract more attention from critical stakeholders (Morsing and Schultz 2006), which reduces the legitimacy of the claims. Doubts about a company's environmental activities may deter travelers from supporting such efforts, thereby limiting their positive reactions to the service provider. Furthermore, while recent studies have advocated for service providers to use social media to legitimize environmental initiatives (Dunn and Harness 2019), the unique characteristics of social media may pose challenges for disseminating sustainability messages. If this is the case, then posting an attribute-value message would most likely be effective, as it can overcome skepticism about green claims because of its highly rational, informative utility. This increases the credibility of the message, thereby attracting support from social network members. The result is a favorable attitude toward and increased intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel. However, when a simple recommendation message is posted, SMI followers and prospective travelers may perceive the emotional and subjective arguments as ambiguous and biased, which leads to increased distrust and doubt (Schmuck, Matthes, and Naderer 2018). Based on the preceding discussion, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: When the SMI posts an attribute-value message on social media, it leads to a higher intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel than when the SMI posts a simple recommendation message.

The mediating role of perceived commitment of the eco-friendly hotel to sustainability. We posit that travelers' perceptions of the hotel's commitment to sustainability mediate the relationship between argument quality and intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel. According to the elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), messages with objective, rational, and valid arguments are perceived as more credible and persuasive. The compelling arguments in

favor of sustainability initiatives may activate the central cognitive processing route, which results in a long-term attitude shift (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). For example, Andreu, Casado-Díaz, and Mattila (2015) discovered that CSR messages with rational appeals increase customer awareness of the service provider's CSR efforts more than emotional appeals. As a result, customers have a more favorable attitude toward the service provider and are more likely to use it. Furthermore, previous research has shown that a rational appeal aids in elaborating arguments, resulting in changes in consumer attitudes and behaviors (Zinn and Manfredi 2000). D. Yoon, Kim, and Fu (2020) demonstrated that the information utility in green advertisements could induce cognitive judgment by vividly illustrating the green hotel's sustainability practices. Additionally, because attribute-value messages employ rational or objective cognitive appeals, they are likely to elicit cognitive evaluations of sustainability practices and the green hotel.

Prior research has shown that consumers have positive behavioral responses (e.g., purchase intentions, willingness to pay a premium) toward a service provider committed to social and environmental sustainability (Rhou and Singal 2020). According to Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010), when price, quality, and other marketing mix elements were equal between two brands, 87% of customers were willing to switch to the brand they perceived to have a stronger commitment to social responsibility. Other researchers have found a positive causal relationship between consumer beliefs about a brand's commitment to sustainability and purchase intention, brand preference, and brand loyalty (Öberseder, Schlegelmilch, and Murphy 2013; Han et al. 2020). As a result, the strong argument quality of attribute-value messages may serve as a central cue in stimulating related cognitions associated with environmentally friendly hotel practices. This leads to favorable attitudes and an increased intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel. Based on the preceding discussion, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Travelers' perceptions of the eco-friendly hotel's commitment to sustainability mediate the effect of message argument quality (attribute-value vs. simple recommendation) on their intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel.

The moderating role of sponsorship status. In response to changing advertising practices, the FTC created a social media advertising policy and accompanying guidelines that require influencers' messages sponsored by a brand to be fully disclosed (FTC 2017). By revealing that a message is sponsored, consumers will be cognizant of its commercial content and aware of the influencer's hard-to-discern persuasive attempts (Lou, Ma, and Feng 2021). However, existing research indicates that disclosing the sponsorship status of a brand-related message posted by SMIs on social media has a negative impact on consumer outcomes. Hwang and Jeong

(2016) found that revealing sponsorship for blog posts has a negative effect on persuasion: a simple disclosure (e.g., stating it as a “sponsored post”) has a greater negative impact on source credibility and individuals’ attitudes toward the message than stating it as an honest opinion. Furthermore, Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa (2017) demonstrated that disclosing the sponsorship status of Facebook posts increases distrust of the message and decreases the intention to accept the message. According to these studies, revealing the sponsorship status of SMI messages can result in unfavorable attitudes toward the message and the advertised brand, as recipients perceive the message’s commercial intent. Furthermore, disclosure of sponsorship may activate persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), eliciting coping mechanisms such as resistance and skepticism, which result in lower parasocial interaction and behavioral intentions (Zhang and Hanks 2017).

In this study, we propose that when SMIs post sponsored messages that disclose their affiliation with an eco-friendly hotel (as a “sponsored post” or “paid ad”), an attribute-value message should overcome the skepticism and distrust associated with sponsored posts—and thus improve consumer perceptions of the hotel’s commitment to sustainability. We contend that strong arguments about the sustainability practices in the attribute-value message will serve as a key cue in elaborating the message (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Such messages will be regarded as highly relevant and useful by followers. The detailed information and arguments presented in the attribute-value message will improve message utility. As a result, followers may believe that SMIs provide valuable, trustworthy, and authentic textual information that describes the eco-friendly hotel’s sustainability practices. Consequently, attribute-value messages should reduce traveler skepticism and resistance to the sponsored message, resulting in favorable perceptions of and intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel. In contrast, followers are likely to have negative evaluations of the SMI message and the eco-friendly hotel because simple recommendation messages lack strong objective arguments and create perceptions of distrust and profit-oriented motives underlying the sponsored message. Based on the preceding discussion, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: For sponsored messages, attribute-value messages result in higher travelers’ perceptions of the hotel’s commitment to sustainability than simple recommendation messages.

Hypothesis 4: For sponsored messages, attribute-value messages result in higher intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel than simple recommendation messages.

Overview of the Studies

Four studies were carried out to test the proposed hypotheses. Study 1 was an exploratory study that looked at the

impact of message argument quality and sponsorship status on the number of likes for travel-related sustainability messages posted on Instagram in 2019. Using a controlled experiment, study 2 investigated the effects of argument quality on travelers’ intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel (hypothesis 1) and tested the mediating role of the hotel’s commitment to sustainability (hypothesis 2). Study 3 examined the moderating role of sponsorship status in the effects of message argument quality on the hotel’s commitment to sustainability (hypothesis 3) and travelers’ intention to stay at the hotel (hypothesis 4). Study 4 looked at the boundary condition of the SMI type (nano-influencer vs. celebrity influencer) in the hypothesized relationships. SMIs are classified as celebrity influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers based on the number of followers they have (Campbell and Farrell 2020). In study 4, we investigated whether SMI type influences the effect of sponsored attribute-value messages on travelers’ perceptions and intentions. Because influencers with a large number of followers are perceived as credible and popular and are ascribed with higher opinion leadership, we investigated whether SMI type influences the effect of sponsored attribute-value messages on travelers’ perceptions and intentions.

Study 1: An Exploratory Analysis of SMI Posts on Instagram

An exploratory field study was conducted to gain preliminary insights into the role of argument quality and sponsorship status of SMI posts on Instagram concerning the number of likes received. Instagram is one of the most widely used social media platforms around the world. Firms are increasingly using it to promote their products and services because it has the highest interaction of any social media platform. Furthermore, it has witnessed a significant increase in the number of influencers and non-celebrities who have amassed a sizable following due to their social media activity (De Cicco, Lacobucci, and Pagliaro 2020). As a result, we chose Instagram as the context for this investigation.

We scoured through various global media reports to identify popular travel-based SMIs and extracted Instagram messages posted by these SMIs in 2019. More than 300 hotel-related posts were extracted from these SMIs, and the authors identified posts about eco-friendly hotels manually. This process resulted in 83 messages posted by 16 travel-based SMIs about eco-friendly hotels on Instagram in 2019. The number of followers for these 16 SMIs ranged from 1,213 to 145,000. The number of Instagram messages posted by the SMIs in the sample ranged from 222 to 5,331. Four of the 16 travel-based SMIs in the sample had verified badges, which indicate their celebrity or global brand status.

The number of likes for the 83 messages posted for the eco-friendly hotels ranged from 76 to 5,185. The number of comments ranged from 0 to 242 for these 83 posts. Only 10 (12%) of the 83 messages posted by SMIs disclosed

sponsorship status. To disclose sponsorship status, the SMIs used a variety of hashtags, including #sponsored, #sponsoredstay, #ad, #hosted, and #collaboration. The remainder did not reveal the sponsorship status.

Two authors who were not involved in the manual extraction of the Instagram messages reviewed the messages independently and coded them as an attribute-value message or a simple recommendation message. The criteria were the degree to which the message contained objective, rational, emotional, and subjective information about the eco-friendly hotel. Any coding disagreements were resolved through discussion. Approximately 35 (42%) of the messages were coded as attribute-value messages, while the remaining 48 (58%) were coded as simple recommendation messages.

We examined the differences in the number of likes for argument quality and sponsorship status of messages because the number of likes represented user engagement and usefulness of the information presented in the message (Seo et al. 2019). A *t*-test with an independent sample reveals a marginal difference in the number of likes for argument quality ($t_{81} = 1.75$, $p = 0.10$): attribute-value messages received more likes ($M = 1217.34$, $SD = 1495.99$) than simple recommendation messages ($M = 755.58$, $SD = 905.20$). The number of likes for sponsorship status did not differ significantly ($M_{\text{sponsorship disclosed}} = 670.30$, $SD = 699.56$; $M_{\text{sponsorship not disclosed}} = 988$, $SD = 1256.22$; $t_{81} = 0.78$, $p = 0.44$). We found no significant interaction effect between argument quality and sponsorship disclosure on likes ($p > 0.05$).

The findings of study 1 provide preliminary support for the notion that attribute-value messages are more engaging than simple recommendation messages posted by SMIs about eco-friendly hotels. We found no evidence of a significant effect for sponsorship status. One possible explanation is that only 12% of the SMIs disclosed that the eco-friendly hotel sponsored the messages. Although the findings shed light on the role of sponsorship disclosure, the actual sponsorship status of the nondisclosed messages was unclear. Thus, in an experimentally controlled design, we conducted studies 2–4 to investigate the effects of argument quality and sponsorship status on travelers' perceptions and intentions.

Study 2: Effects of Message Argument Quality

Study 2 examined the effects of message argument quality on the intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel (hypothesis 1) and the mediating role of the perceived hotel's commitment to sustainability (hypothesis 2) in a controlled experiment.

Method. A single-factor (message argument quality: attribute-value vs. simple recommendation) between-subjects experimental design was undertaken in November 2019. We referred to SMI posts on Instagram to develop the stimuli for argument quality (see Appendix A for the stimuli). Both an attribute-value message and a simple recommendation had similar word counts of 150–160 words but

differed in their argument quality. A pretest with a sample of 100 respondents (58.0% female; average age = 31.3 years) reveals that the attribute-value message was considered as more rational ($M_{\text{attribute-value}} = 5.17$, $SD = 1.08$; $M_{\text{simple recommendation}} = 4.48$, $SD = 1.34$, $F_{1,98} = 7.43$, $p < 0.01$) and objective ($M_{\text{attribute-value}} = 4.62$, $SD = 1.32$; $M_{\text{simple recommendation}} = 3.83$, $SD = 1.51$, $F_{1,98} = 7.40$, $p < 0.01$). The simple recommendation message, however, was regarded as more emotional ($M_{\text{attribute-value}} = 4.83$, $SD = 1.36$; $M_{\text{simple recommendation}} = 5.53$, $SD = 1.29$; $F_{1,98} = 6.89$, $p < 0.01$) and subjective ($M_{\text{attribute-value}} = 4.00$, $SD = 1.69$; $M_{\text{simple recommendation}} = 4.88$, $SD = 1.45$; $F_{1,98} = 7.46$, $p < 0.01$). The pretest findings confirm the successful manipulation of the attribute-value message and simple recommendation message, which were used in study 2.

Participants of study 2 were recruited through Prolific Academic (www.prolific.co), an online marketplace. Prolific was chosen for this study because it provides easy access to the study population. Furthermore, it follows strict procedures to ensure data quality. Previous research has shown that data collected through online marketplaces is more reliable than data collected through undergraduate survey panels (Rouse 2015; Legendre et al. 2020). Participants were paid £0.70 through Prolific Academic for completing the survey.

The following screening questions were used to recruit participants from Prolific Academic for the study: (1) US nationality, (2) Instagram membership, (3) followers of at least one SMI on Instagram, (4) international travel in the previous year, and (5) use social media at least four times per week. We chose Instagram as the study context because it provides a more conducive environment for posting travel-related information than other social media platforms (Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu 2019). Furthermore, Instagram is the most popular social media platform for SMIs to post brand-related messages because of its visual aesthetics and storytelling capabilities (Lee and Kim 2020). To control existing SMIs and participants' hotel knowledge and experience, we used a fictitious SMI name (Joe or Sophie) and a fictitious hotel brand name (Hotel Green Leaf).

A total of 120 respondents who met the criteria based on the five screening questions participated in the study. Four respondents were omitted, as they failed to answer the attention check question correctly. As a result, a usable sample of 116 respondents (46.6% female; average age = 33.5 years) was retained. The survey questionnaire took respondents an average of five minutes to complete. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. In the first section, participants reported their social media behavior, travel behavior, and environmental concerns (a five-item scale adapted from Huang and Liu 2017). In the second section, participants were informed that they were planning to travel soon and came across a message for Hotel Green Leaf, an eco-friendly hotel, that had been posted by Joe or Sophie (gender-matched with the respondent's gender), a travel-related SMI they were

following on Instagram. Participants were assigned to one of the two message argument quality conditions (attribute-value message vs. simple recommendation message) at random. Following that, they responded to questions about their intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel (three-item scale adapted from Jeong and Shin 2020) and their perceptions of the hotel's commitment to sustainability (four-item measure adapted from Sparks, Perkins, and Buckley 2013). In the third section, respondents were asked to assess the scenario's realism, message argument quality, and message informativeness (adapted from Jun and Vogt 2013) (see Appendix B).

Results

The argument quality manipulation worked as intended. The attribute-value message was rated more objective and rational ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 0.93$) than the simple recommendation message ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.36$), $F_{1,114} = 86.86$, $p < 0.01$. Furthermore, the attribute-value message ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 0.89$) was assessed as more informative than the simple recommendation message ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.37$), $F_{1,114} = 81.89$, $p < 0.01$. Perceived realism was high ($M = 4.74$) and did not differ across the two conditions ($F_{1,114} = 1.77$, $p = 0.19$).

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) with argument quality as a fixed factor and intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel as the dependent variable shows a significant direct effect ($F_{1,114} = 165.43$, $p < 0.01$): intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel was higher when the SMI posted an attribute-value message ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 0.67$) than when posting a simple recommendation message ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.04$). This provides support for hypothesis 1.

To test hypothesis 2, we used PROCESS Model 4 with 10,000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes 2013) with argument quality as an independent variable, intention to stay as the dependent variable, and the perception of the hotel's commitment to sustainability as a mediator. We found support for hypothesis 2. Specifically, the perceived hotel's commitment to sustainability mediates the effect of argument quality on the intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel (indirect = 0.34, $SE = 0.13$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 0.11 to 0.63).

Prior research has demonstrated that travelers differ in their levels of concern about environmental issues; those with a high level of concern are more likely to be involved in the advertised environmental issues (H. Kim, Borges, and Chon 2006). Following this, we conducted a post hoc analysis to test whether environmental concern moderates the effects of argument quality on the hotel's commitment to sustainability perceived by travelers and the intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel. The results of PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes 2013) show that environmental concern significantly influences the mediating role of the hotel's commitment to sustainability perceived by travelers (index of moderated mediation = 0.15, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI = 0.03 to 0.29).

Specifically, for travelers with high levels of environmental concern (above 4.72, 87.07%), the quality of the message argument has a greater influence on the traveler's perception of the hotel's commitment to sustainability.

Discussion

The findings of study 2 reveal that the attribute-value message is more effective than the simple recommendation message in persuading travelers to stay at an eco-friendly hotel. Furthermore, we observed that an attribute-value message elicits cognitions related to the perceived commitment to sustainability of the eco-friendly hotel. We also found that for travelers with high levels of environmental concern, the attribute-value message has a stronger impact on stay intentions due to perceptions of the hotel's commitment to sustainability. Although study 2 provided support for the role of argument quality, the role of sponsorship status remained unanswered.

Study 3: Effect of Sponsorship Status

Study 3 examined the role of sponsorship status (sponsored vs. nonsponsored) in determining the effect of message argument quality on the traveler's perception of a hotel's commitment to sustainability (hypothesis 3) and intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel (hypothesis 4).

Method. We used the same data collection method as in study 2. However, there were three distinctions. First, we used a 2 (message argument quality: attribute-value vs. simple recommendation) $\times$ 2 (sponsorship status: sponsored vs. nonsponsored) between-subjects design. The hashtags #paid-partnership, #sponsored, and #sponsoredpost were used to manipulate the sponsorship status. The hashtags #notapaid-partnership, #notsponsored, and #nonsponsoredpost were used to identify nonsponsored posts. Second, in addition to the measurement items used in study 2, a manipulation check question for sponsorship status and perceived trust was asked (see Appendix B). Third, we controlled environmental concern, as study 2 found it to influence the traveler's perception of the eco-friendly hotel.

Participants who met the screening criteria and had not previously participated in a study were recruited through Prolific Academic to participate in study 3 in December 2019. Participants were compensated with £1.00 via Prolific Academic for their participation in the study. A total of 200 participants were invited to take part in the study. The questionnaire took respondents an average of six minutes to complete. Twenty-three participants were omitted because they did not correctly answer the attention check question, took less than three minutes to complete the survey, or engaged in straight-lining. As a result, the final sample included 177 people (53.2% of whom were female, with an average age of 34.7 years).

Results

The manipulations worked as intended. Results of the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) show a significant main effect of the argument quality condition (Wilk's Lambda = 0.83, $F = 17.80$, $p < 0.01$) and sponsorship status condition (Wilk's Lambda = 0.80, $F = 21.24$, $p < 0.01$) and a nonsignificant interaction effect between argument quality and sponsorship status (Wilk's Lambda = 0.98, $F = 2.20$, $p = 0.11$). The univariate analysis reveals a direct effect of argument quality on the manipulation check question for argument quality ($F_{1,173} = 29.43$, $p < 0.01$) but not on that for sponsorship status ($F_{1,173} = 1.77$, $p = 0.19$). Specifically, an attribute-value message ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 0.86$) was viewed as more objective and rational than the simple recommendation message ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.28$). Similarly, we found a direct effect of sponsorship status on the manipulation check question for sponsorship status ($F_{1,173} = 39.66$, $p < 0.01$) but not on that for argument quality ($F_{1,173} = 0.15$, $p = 0.70$). Specifically, sponsored posts ($M = 6.28$, $SD = 0.90$) were more likely to be considered as paid advertisements than nonsponsored posts ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.73$). The perceived realism did not differ across the conditions ($M = 4.51$, p 's > 0.08).

An ANOVA with argument quality and sponsorship status conditions as fixed factors, the hotel's commitment to sustainability as the dependent variable, and environmental concern as a covariate shows a significant main effect of argument quality ($F_{1,172} = 123.01$, $p < 0.01$) and a significant interaction effect between argument quality and sponsorship status ($F_{1,172} = 5.93$, $p < 0.05$). We did not find a significant main effect of sponsorship status ($F_{1,172} = 0.27$, $p = 0.61$). The analysis of the interaction effect reveals that for sponsored messages, posting an attribute-value message ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 0.48$) results in a higher perception of the hotel's commitment to sustainability than did a simple recommendation message ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.58$), $F_{1,84} = 127.71$, $p < 0.01$. This supports hypothesis 3. Plotted in Figure 2 is the interaction between argument quality and sponsorship status.

Another ANOVA reveals a significant main effect of argument quality on the intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel ($F_{1,172} = 25.05$, $p < 0.01$). However, a nonsignificant main effect of sponsorship status ($F_{1,172} = 0.02$, $p = 0.90$) and a nonsignificant interaction effect ($F_{1,172} = 1.49$, $p = 0.22$) were observed. These findings did not support hypothesis 4.

A post hoc analysis using PROCESS Model 7 with 10,000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes 2013) reveals a significant moderated mediation effect (index of moderated mediation = 0.19, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI = 0.02 to 0.42). Specifically, we observed that participants' perceptions of the hotel's commitment to sustainability mediate the effect of argument quality on the intention to stay at the hotel for both sponsored (indirect = 0.52, $SE = 0.18$, 95% CI = 0.15 to 0.87) and nonsponsored (indirect = 0.33, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI = 0.10 to 0.60) messages.

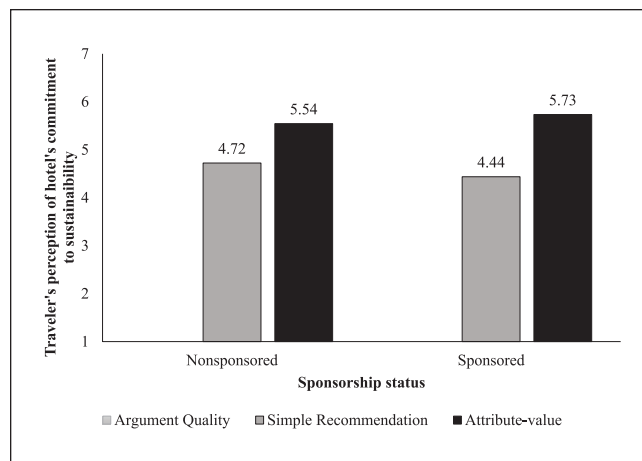


Figure 2. Study 3 interaction effect between argument quality and sponsorship disclosure.

Another post hoc analysis with argument quality and sponsorship status as fixed factors and perceived trust as the dependent variable shows a significant main effect of sponsorship status ($M_{\text{sponsored}} = 3.77$, $SD = 1.66$; $M_{\text{nonsponsored}} = 4.37$, $SD = 1.43$, $F_{1,173} = 7.75$, $p < 0.01$) and a significant interaction effect between argument quality and sponsorship status ($F_{1,173} = 5.20$, $p < 0.05$). The contrast analysis reveals a significant difference in perceived trust for sponsored posts such that trust toward an attribute-value message ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.60$) is higher than that toward a simple recommendation message ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.62$), $F_{1,173} = 7.84$, $p < 0.01$. However, no significant difference was found in perceived trust for nonsponsored messages between the attribute-value message ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.49$), and the simple recommendation message ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.38$) $F_{1,173} = 0.15$, $p = 0.70$.

Discussion

Study 3's findings support the effect of sponsorship status on the influence of argument quality on travelers' perceptions of the hotel's commitment to sustainability, which leads to enhanced intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel. That is, when the hotel sponsors the SMI to post the message on social media, an attribute-value message results in higher perceptions of the hotel's commitment to sustainability than when the SMI posts a simple recommendation. We also saw a similar effect, albeit to a lesser extent, for nonsponsored posts. Furthermore, we observed that travelers trust sponsored attribute-value messages more than sponsored simple recommendation messages. This adds to our understanding of how travelers evaluate sponsored messages. Given this, we conducted study 4 to see if the effects of argument quality and sponsorship status are consistent across different SMI types (nano-influencer vs. celebrity influencer).

Study 4: The Boundary Condition of the SMI Type

Study 4 examined the effects of argument quality and sponsorship status on the traveler's perception of the hotel's commitment to sustainability and intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel and the boundary condition of the SMI type (nano-influencer vs. celebrity influencer).

Method. We adopted a data collection approach similar to what was used in study 2, with three exceptions. First, we conducted a between-subjects experiment with 2 (message argument quality: attribute-value vs. simple recommendation) $\times$ 2 (sponsorship status: nonsponsored vs. sponsored) $\times$ 2 (SMI type: nano-influencer vs. celebrity influencer). We operationalized the SMI type as nano-influencers with 1000+ followers and celebrity influencers with more than 2 million followers according to Campbell and Farrell (2020). Second, in addition to the questions posed in study 3, respondents in study 4 were asked to answer a manipulation check question about the SMI type. Third, we did not match the gender of the SMI with that of the respondent as in earlier studies, but we controlled for the effects of gender and environmental concern.

Respondents who met the five screening criteria (see study 2) but did not participate in the previous studies were recruited to participate in study 4 for a £1.00 compensation in December 2019. A total of 375 people were invited to take part. The questionnaire was completed in an average of eight minutes by respondents. Twenty respondents were omitted because they did not correctly answer the attention check questions or completed the questionnaire in less than four minutes. This resulted in a sample of 355 people (66.8% female; average age = 26.6 years).

Results

The manipulations were successful. The attribute-value message was rated as more objective and rational ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.24$) than the simple recommendation message ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.30$), $F_{1,353} = 18.04$, $p < 0.01$. The SMI message was rated as more of a paid advertisement by participants in the sponsored condition ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.30$) than the nonsponsored condition ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.73$), $F_{1,353} = 34.19$, $p < 0.01$. Furthermore, respondents in the celebrity condition rated the influencer as more reputable ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 0.92$) than the nano-influencer condition ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.19$), $F_{1,353} = 150.24$, $p < 0.01$. The perceived realism was high ($M = 5.38$) and did not differ across the conditions (p 's > 0.24).

An ANOVA with argument quality, sponsorship status, and SMI type as fixed factors, perception of the hotel's commitment to sustainability as the dependent variable, and gender and environmental concern as covariates reveals a significant main effect of message argument quality ($M_{\text{attribute-value}} = 6.02$, $SD = 0.71$; $M_{\text{simple recommendation}} = 5.39$, $SD = 0.97$; $F_{1,345} = 51.26$, $p < 0.01$) and SMI type ($M_{\text{celebrity influence}} =$

5.79 , $SD = 0.90$; $M_{\text{nano-influencer}} = 5.60$, $SD = 0.95$; $F_{1,347} = 4.13$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, we observed a significant two-way interaction effect between argument quality and sponsorship status ($F_{1,347} = 5.16$, $p < 0.05$). Results of the contrast for the two-way interaction effect show that for sponsored posts, an attribute-value message ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 0.59$) leads to higher perceptions of the hotel's commitment to sustainability than a simple recommendation message ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 0.82$), $F_{1,174} = 60.63$, $p < 0.01$. This provides further support for hypothesis 3. No other direct, two-way interaction or three-way interaction effects are significant (p 's > 0.12). Both covariates have a significant effect on the hotel's commitment to sustainability ($p < 0.05$).

Another ANOVA with the intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel as the dependent variable shows a significant main effect of message argument quality ($M_{\text{attribute-value}} = 4.82$, $SD = 1.34$, $M_{\text{simple recommendation}} = 4.33$, $SD = 1.40$; $F_{1,345} = 15.09$, $p < 0.01$) and sponsorship status ($M_{\text{nonsponsored}} = 4.75$, $SD = 1.35$; $M_{\text{sponsored}} = 4.38$, $SD = 1.38$; $F_{1,345} = 6.95$, $p < 0.01$). We did not find a significant direct effect of the SMI type; its interaction effects with argument quality and sponsorship status are not significant either (p 's > 0.37). Among the control variables, only environmental concern has a significant effect ($p < 0.01$).

The post hoc analysis using PROCESS Model 10 with 10,000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes 2013) reveals that the SMI type does not moderate the mediation effect of the hotel's commitment to sustainability in the relationship between argument quality and sponsorship status on the intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel, as the 95% confidence interval for the index of partial moderated mediation includes zero (index of partial moderated mediation = -0.01 , $SE = 0.14$, 95% CI = -0.27 to 0.25).

Discussion

The findings of study 4 reveal that when a celebrity influencer posts the message, a traveler's perception of the hotel's commitment to sustainability is higher than when a nano-influencer posts the message. That factor does not influence the effect of argument quality and sponsorship status on the hotel's commitment to sustainability perceived by travelers. Regardless of the type of the SMI, the attribute-value message is more effective than the simple recommendation message in persuading participants. This rules out the role of the SMI type on the effects of argument quality and sponsorship status on the traveler's perception of the hotel's commitment to sustainability and their intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel.

General Discussion

This study sheds light on the effectiveness of eco-friendly hotels' use of SMIs to communicate their sustainability practices to current and prospective travelers via social media. We investigate how two message input factors (argument

Table 1. Summary of Results of Studies 2–4.

Study 2: Effect of Message Argument Quality (n = 116)				
Cell	Attribute-value message (n = 61)		Simple recommendation message (n = 55)	
	PHCS: 6.00 (0.75) IS: 5.54 (0.67)		PHCS: 4.88 (1.12) IS: 3.47 (1.04)	
Study 3: Effect of sponsorship status (n = 177)				
	Attribute-value message		Simple recommendation message	
Cell	Sponsored (n = 46)	Nonsponsored (n = 45)	Sponsored (n = 40)	Nonsponsored (n = 46)
	PHCS: 5.73 (0.48) IS: 4.64 (1.23)	PHCS: 5.54 (0.56) IS: 4.34 (1.30)	PHCS: 4.44 (0.58) IS: 3.43 (1.03)	PHCS: 4.72 (0.82) IS: 3.67 (1.19)
Study 4: The boundary condition of the SMI type (n = 355)				
Celebrity influencer (n = 178)				
	Attribute-value message		Simple recommendation message	
Cell	Sponsored (n = 43)	Nonsponsored (n = 43)	Sponsored (n = 45)	Nonsponsored (n = 47)
	PHCS: 6.11 (0.52) IS: 4.67 (1.33)	PHCS: 6.10 (0.83) IS: 5.02 (1.28)	PHCS: 5.36 (0.80) IS: 4.17 (1.21)	PHCS: 5.60 (1.11) IS: 4.53 (1.42)
Nano-influencer (n = 177)				
	Attribute-value message		Simple recommendation message	
Cell	Sponsored (n = 44)	Nonsponsored (n = 42)	Sponsored (n = 44)	Nonsponsored (n = 47)
	PHCS: 5.99 (0.65) IS: 4.70 (1.37)	PHCS: 5.87 (0.82) IS: 4.90 (1.22)	PHCS: 5.06 (0.83) IS: 3.98 (1.48)	PHCS: 5.53 (1.14) IS: 4.60 (1.42)

quality and sponsorship status) affect travelers' perceptions of and intention to stay at an eco-friendly hotel by using McGuire's (1989) communication–persuasion matrix. Based on data about actual messages posted on Instagram by travel-related SMIs and three controlled experiments (Table 1), we obtained several novel findings that travel service providers can use to increase traveler engagement through influencer messages on social media.

First, for messages posted by SMIs, attribute-value messages that provide objective and rational information are more effective than simple recommendation messages in persuading travelers. Second, when the eco-friendly hotel sponsors these SMI messages, posting an attribute-value message rather than a simple recommendation message is more likely to result in a favorable perception of the eco-friendly hotel. One plausible explanation is that travelers are more likely to trust the objective and rational information provided in sponsored attribute-value messages. Third, the underlying mechanism that determines the favorable outcomes of sponsored attribute-value messages is travelers' perceptions of the hotel's commitment to sustainability. Finally, we found that the effects of sponsored attribute-value messages on the traveler's perception of and intention to stay at

an eco-friendly hotel are not influenced by the type of the SMI (nano-influencer vs. celebrity influencer) who post such messages. These findings have significant implications for academics and practitioners, which will be discussed in the sections that follow.

Theoretical implications. The current study adds to the literature in several ways. First, it expands our understanding of using SMIs to persuade travelers (Xu and Pratt 2018; Chu, Deng, and Cheng 2020). We look specifically at when and how SMIs can persuade travelers to stay at eco-friendly hotels. Second, while factors that influence the traveler's intention to stay at eco-friendly hotels have been extensively studied (Hornig et al. 2017; Teng, Lu, and Huang 2018), little attention has been paid to sustainability communication strategies (Line, Hanks, and Zhang 2016). According to Collins and Potoglou (2019) and Ponnareddy et al. (2020), travelers prefer hotels that engage in sustainability initiatives and provide information about sustainability practices. The current study adds to the preceding stream of empiricism by investigating the effectiveness of sustainability communication on social media. Because sustainability initiatives and practices have high levels of ambiguity and complexity (Font and McCabe 2017), effective

communication of such efforts is an essential tool for travel service providers to manage travelers' expectations and persuade them to patronize the service provider.

Third, we extend McGuire's (1989) communication–persuasion matrix into the tourism and hospitality domain by investigating how message input factors (argument quality and sponsorship status) shape two key outcome factors: travelers' perceptions of the hotel's sustainability practices and their intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel. Despite its limited application to tourism and hospitality research, McGuire's (1989) communication–persuasion matrix has been widely used in advertising and communication research to identify specific communication components that enhance persuasiveness. As a result, we investigate the persuasiveness of two communication factors in sustainability communication—message argument quality and message sponsorship status—on social media.

Fourth, this study adds to the body of knowledge on message framing in the context of sustainability communication (M. Zhang et al. 2018). In communicating sustainability practices of an eco-friendly hotel, we use message framing based on the extent to which rational (attribute-value) and emotional (simple recommendation) arguments are offered (Park and Lee 2008; Wang and Lehto 2020). Because previous research on the effectiveness of rational and emotional appeals has yielded conflicting results (Matthes, Wonneberger, and Schmuck 2014; Tanford, Kim, and Kim 2020), we argue that certain contextual factors might play a role in determining their effectiveness. As a result, we hypothesize and demonstrate that an attribute-value message is more effective than a simple recommendation message in the context of sustainability messages posted on social media by SMIs.

Finally, in light of the FTC regulation that governs sponsorship disclosure (FTC 2017), there is a growing interest in determining how sponsorship status and disclosure influence marketing outcomes. By examining the effects of sponsorship status of SMI messages on travelers' perceptions of a hotel's commitment to sustainability and their intention to stay at the eco-friendly hotel (Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa 2017; De Jans et al. 2020; Kay, Mulcahy, and Parkinson 2020), we contribute to this body of literature (Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa 2017; De Jans et al. 2020). Although previous research has suggested that consumers have a higher level of distrust and skepticism toward sponsored messages (Zhang and Hanks 2017), we found that when SMIs post attribute-value messages and provide rational and objective information, traveler trust could increase, which results in more favorable perceptions of the eco-friendly hotel's sustainability initiatives.

Managerial implications. We offer valuable insights for managers of eco-friendly hotels using SMIs to persuade travelers on social media. If an eco-friendly hotel sponsors SMIs' social media posts, they should encourage SMIs to provide objective information about the hotel's sustainability practices and initiatives, as well as rational arguments for choosing the hotel based on its sustainability practices. This would

increase the followers' perceptions of the hotel's commitment to sustainability and their behavioral intention to patronize the hotel.

Second, managers should consider the environmental beliefs of SMIs and their followers when implementing influencer marketing. Because attribute-value messages lead to more favorable perceptions of the eco-friendly hotel among travelers who are concerned about the environment, eco-friendly hotels should consider the fit between their influencers and their sustainability efforts. SMIs who display a greater concern for sustainability are likely to have followers who hold similar beliefs. In this case, the sponsored attribute-value message would be more effective. Finally, while previous research has suggested that celebrity influencers can help reach a wider audience, the current study shows that, regardless of the type of the SMI, attribute-value messages have a similar impact on the traveler's perception of the eco-friendly hotel. As a result, managers could use different types of SMIs (e.g., nano-influencers, mega-influencers, celebrity influencers) on social media to maximize reach and manage the cost of persuading travelers on social media.

Limitations and future research directions. There are some limitations of this study that point to future research directions. First, we only looked at the message factors of McGuire's (1989) communication–persuasion matrix. Future research could look into the effects of other message factors (e.g., explicit recommendation, first-person perspective), source factors (e.g., eco-friendly hotel vs. SMI), and channel characteristics on the effectiveness of SMIs in persuading travelers to stay at eco-friendly hotels. Second, the context of our study may have influenced the analysis. Given that social media platforms differ in terms of their primary user group, engagement, and richness (Lalicic et al. 2020), scholars should consider alternative social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) in the future to investigate differences in how SMIs can effectively persuade travelers.

Third, we conducted an exploratory study with a few selected Instagram posts from travel-related SMIs. The following work should consider using big data and social media analytics to extract a larger sample of SMIs' posts for analysis. Fourth, while the current study focuses on related cognitions and behavioral intentions, Kumar and Pansari (2016) demonstrated that customer engagement increases return on investment. As a result, researchers should look into performance outcomes for sponsored attribute-value messages posted by SMIs, such as sales and ROI. Fifth, we compared the argument quality of an attribute-value message with that of a simple recommendation message. Further empirical research could be conducted to investigate the effectiveness of mixed appeals and the structure of these messages to improve the understanding of SMI persuasiveness.

Sixth, while we attempt to provide insights for managers to motivate travelers to stay at eco-friendly hotels, there are undeniably other solutions or remedies for global warming and related environmental issues. Because the success of

the tourism and hospitality industries is linked to addressing environmental issues (d’Amore 1993), the traveler’s preference for eco-friendly travel products and services will help to mitigate such concerns to some extent (Cui et al. 2020). As a result, researchers should look into the marketing of other travel-related sustainable products and services to gain a better understanding of how sustainability communication should be structured. Finally, while the current study focuses on

the persuasiveness of SMIs, the success of a communication program is determined by the degree to which tourism service providers are committed to sound and reputable environmental practices. Because various travel service providers focus on different sustainability issues (e.g., energy consumption, waste disposal), future endeavors should investigate the effectiveness of sponsored attribute-value messages when communicating about disparate sustainability initiatives and practices.



Sophie_sustainable_traveller ✓
Hotel Green Leaf







209 likes

Sophie_sustainable_traveller Do you wish to live in a planet with burning forests, rampant heatwaves and rising sea level? Climate change is not a far-off problem. It is happening now and it is happening everywhere! It's about time we get into action. And making pro-environment choices even as we travel and holiday is a great start. This hotel runs on 100% renewable energy and the water it uses comes from its own rainwater harvesting. The hotel has a mandatory linen (towels and sheets) reuse program in all its room, helping them save tons of water. Even all the appliance used (guest rooms, kitchen and dining area) are Energy Star appliances. The coolest are its lush gardens that are planted with drought resistant native plants which consume minimum water. Do come and stay in this hotel and do your bit for the planet

Attribute-value message



Joe_sustainable_traveller ✓
Hotel Green Leaf







209 likes

Joe_sustainable_traveller Do you wish to live in a planet with burning forests, rampant heatwaves and rising sea level? Climate change is not a far-off problem. It is happening now and it is happening everywhere! It's about time we get into action. And making pro-environment choices even as we travel and holiday is a great start. I am so excited to stay in this environmentally sustainable beautiful hotel!! It is a sheer joy to observe all the very cool things this hotel is doing save our planet. By choosing to stay in this environment friendly hotel, there is an amazing feeling of satisfaction. It is my way of exhibiting that I love and care for the environment and I am doing my small bit. I feel so much closer to mother nature right now, almost becoming one with it. Come and stay in this hotel and feel the joy of nurturing and protecting nature. Do your bit for the planet

Simple recommendation message

Appendix A. Study 2 stimuli.

Appendix B: Study Measures

Argument Quality: Study 2, 3, and 4

The message posted by SMI presents

1. Subjective/Objective information
2. Weak rationale/Strong rationale

Informativeness: Study 2, 3, and 4

The message posted by SMI is

1. Uninformative/Informative

Sponsorship: Study 3 and 4

The message posted by the SMI is

1. Paid advertisement.

SMI status: Study 4

The SMI is

1. Reputed.
2. Has many followers.

Message Trust: Study 3

1. I believe the information provided in the message posted by the SMI is trustworthy.

Perceived commitment to sustainability: Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.90$), 3 ($\alpha = 0.95$), & 4 ($\alpha = 0.87$)

1. The hotel really cares about sustainable practices.
2. The hotel seems to respect environmental standards.
3. The hotel seems to comply with environmental regulations completely and promptly.
4. The hotel seems to emphasize the importance of its responsibilities to the environment.

Intention to stay at eco-friendly hotel: Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.92$), 3 ($\alpha = 0.92$), & 4 ($\alpha = 0.92$)

1. I want to visit eco-friendly hotel when traveling in the future.
2. I would recommend the eco-friendly hotel to family and friends.
3. I would say positive things about the eco-friendly hotel to others.

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