

Eco-communication and greenfluencers in Ibero-America: an exploratory study

*Eco-comunicación y greenfluencers en Iberoamérica:
un estudio exploratorio*

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Abstract

Given the urgency of the socio-environmental crisis, greenfluencers have emerged as vital communication bridges; however, little is still known about how they form their symbolic bonds within the Ibero-American context. This study analyzes their digital practices through the lens of parasocial relationship theory, seeking to understand the emotional connection between these creators and their communities. To this end, a qualitative, exploratory, and comparative approach was employed, conducting in-depth interviews with eleven content creators from various countries across the region. The findings reveal that eco-communication on social media is not a mere dissemination of data, but rather an exercise in “cultural translation.” In this process, environmental knowledge is humanized as it is filtered through every day and personal narratives. The research demonstrates that the key to their legitimacy lies in the affective bond: the audience does not seek a distant technical authority, but rather a close peer with whom they can identify. Creators act as emotional managers, carefully balancing eco-anxiety with messages of hope to sustain the engagement of their followers. Finally, the study discusses the tensions that condition this labor, such as algorithmic challenges and the precariousness of digital work. It is concluded that the effectiveness of sustainability on digital platforms depends less on technical information and more on the strength of the parasocial relationship. It is this human bond that manages to sustain civic commitment in the face of misinformation and digital burnout.

Keywords

Communication, credibility, ethical, influencers, Instagram, parasocial, relational, sustainability.

Resumen

Ante la urgencia de la crisis socioambiental, los *greenfluencers* han surgido como puentes esenciales de comunicación, aunque todavía sabemos poco sobre cómo forman sus vínculos simbólicos en el contexto iberoamericano. Este estudio analiza sus prácticas digitales bajo el lente de la teoría de la relación parasocial, buscando comprender la conexión emocional entre estos creadores y sus comunidades. Para ello, se empleó un enfoque cualitativo, exploratorio y comparativo, realizando entrevistas en profundidad a once creadores de contenido de diversos países de la región. Los hallazgos revelan que la eco-comunicación en redes sociales no es una simple difusión de datos, sino un ejercicio de “traducción cultural”. En este proceso, el conocimiento ambiental se humaniza al filtrarse a través de narrativas cotidianas y personales. La investigación demuestra que la clave de su legitimidad reside en el vínculo afectivo: la audiencia no busca una autoridad técnica distante, sino un par cercano con quien identificarse. Los creadores actúan como gestores emocionales, equilibrando cuidadosamente la eco-ansiedad con mensajes de esperanza para mantener activa la participación de sus seguidores. Finalmente, se discuten las tensiones que condicionan esta labor, tales como los desafíos de los algoritmos y la precarización del trabajo digital. Se concluye que la eficacia de la sostenibilidad en plataformas digitales depende menos de la información técnica y más de la solidez de la relación parasocial. Es este vínculo humano el que logra sostener el compromiso ciudadano frente a la desinformación y el agotamiento digital.

Palabras clave

Comunicación, credibilidad, ética, influencers, Instagram, parasocial, relacional, sostenibilidad,

Introduction

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda by the United Nations represented a paradigm shift in our understanding of sustainability. For the first time, it was explicitly recognized that the success of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) does not depend solely on regulatory and institutional frameworks or technological advances, but on communication processes capable of generating true social ownership, active participation, and a shared sense of co-responsibility (Lobato, 2024). However, reality shows a persistent gap: citizens have not yet internalized these goals. This disconnect arises, to a large extent, because traditional institutional communication often uses technical and distant language, disconnected from the concerns and experiences of ordinary people (López-Carrión, 2024; López-Carrión and Martí-Sánchez, 2024). In this context, the socio-environmental crisis forces us to rethink not only economic development models and public policies, but also the bridges we build to talk about it, giving environmental communication a strategic role in mobilizing awareness of global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss (Cox, 2010; Cox and Pezzullo, 2016).

Faced with the rigidity of institutions, new and vibrant voices have emerged in the digital environment: greenfluencers. These content creators have transformed platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube into spaces for raising awareness, using personal and visual narratives that break with the formal registers of classic communication, spreading messages about sustainability, responsible consumption, and care for the environment (Boerman *et al.*, 2022; Conte *et al.*, 2025). From an eco-communication perspective, greenfluencers have been conceptualized as “cultural mediators” with the unique ability to translate complex environmental issues into understandable and emotionally resonant narratives (Hansen and Cox, 2015). However, this phenomenon identifies relevant tensions; the literature warns of the risks of commodification of green discourse, greenwashing, audience hemophilia (the tendency to connect only with those who already think alike), and the excessive individualization of environmental responsibility (Huber *et al.*, 2022; König and Maier, 2024). Despite the interest aroused, there are not sufficient qualitative studies that explore this reality from the voice of the creators, especially in the Ibero-American context.

To fill this gap, this study analyzes the eco-communication practices of greenfluencers in Ibero-America, based on their own stories and life expe-

riences. In particular, it seeks to answer: how do Ibero-American greenfluencers construct their sustainability messages and how do they weave their links with audiences on Instagram? To address this question, we integrate the theory of parasocial relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956) with a critical approach to eco-communication (Cox, 2010; Hansen and Cox, 2015). This allows us to understand digital environmental communication not as a simple transmission of data, but as a relational, symbolic, and situated process, where affection and trust are the true drivers of change.

From this perspective, parasocial theory is relevant for analyzing eco-communication on social media. It posits that audiences develop significant unilateral emotional bonds with media figures, which determine how a message is interpreted and how willing we are to act (Tukachinsky, 2010). In the case of environmental issues, this relationship acts as an emotional bridge, i.e., as a mediating mechanism between environmental communication and pro-environmental participation, especially among younger people, reinforcing the perception of authenticity and legitimacy of the message (Dekoninck and Schmuck, 2024; Knupfer *et al.*, 2023).

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on eleven greenfluencers from different countries in Ibero-America through semi-structured interviews. Through thematic coding, we seek to capture the complexity of their work: from the creative construction of the environmental message to the ethical tensions associated with content production and the configuration of links with followers.

The main findings suggest that the credibility of these actors does not stem from their technical expertise, but rather from the perceived consistency between what they say and what they live, as well as the constant care they take with the emotional dimension of their relationship with their followers. Likewise, recurring tensions are identified related to algorithmic pressure, the economic sustainability of the activity, and the ethical dilemmas associated with the commercialization of environmental content, which highlights the limits and contradictions of green influence on digital platforms.

Finally, this article is structured as follows: first, we explore the literature that articulates eco-communication and the theoretical framework of parasocial relationship theory; second, we detail the methodology used; third, we present the results of the qualitative analysis; and finally, we discuss the main findings, their theoretical contributions and practical implications, as well as the limitations of the study and avenues for future research in this field.

Greenfluencers and eco-communication

Eco-communication is not just a channel of information; it is a critical lens that allows us to examine how communication processes shape the relationships between society, the environment, and power structures. According to Cox (2010) and Hansen and Cox (2015), this discipline influences how ecological problems are defined, interpreted, and ultimately addressed collectively. By emphasizing its constitutive nature, eco-communication analyzes how media discourses and narratives produce meanings, values, and new forms of environmental citizenship.

From this perspective, environmental communication transcends the simple transmission of information about ecological risks. Its function is, in fact, structuring: it delimits what is considered a legitimate environmental problem, identifies who is responsible, and defines what social actions are desirable or possible (Cox and Pezzullo, 2016). Within the framework of the 2030 Agenda, this dimension takes on special relevance. Compliance with the SDGs does not depend solely on regulatory frameworks, but also on communication processes that resonate with citizens. However, evidence suggests that the SDGs have low penetration in the public consciousness when communication comes from traditional news media, whose language is often technical, abstract, and disconnected from people's everyday experiences (López-Carrión, 2024; López-Carrión and Martí-Sánchez, 2024). This causes a communication gap, motivating academic study on sustainable communication from technological sources such as social media.

In this scenario, greenfluencers emerge, defined as digital content creators who place sustainability at the center of their narrative. Unlike institutional communication, these actors use platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube to spread environmental values through personal experience and practical demonstration (Boerman *et al.*, 2022; Conte *et al.*, 2025). Their discourse does not stem from technical authority, but rather from everyday stories, which allows their messages to be perceived as relatable, authentic, and emotionally relevant by their followers.

From the perspective of eco-communication, greenfluencers act as cultural mediators. Their main task is to “translate” complex environmental issues, such as climate change, the circular economy, or the waste management crisis, into accessible stories set in everyday life. This process of narrative translation is vital, as it reduces cognitive barriers and the sense of distan-

ce between the grand ideals of sustainability and household routines (Conte *et al.*, 2025). However, this impact is heterogeneous and ambivalent. While some greenfluencers drive social transformation and critical environmental justice, others reproduce approaches focused purely on individual sustainable consumption, shifting responsibility from systemic structures to the personal decisions of followers (Huber *et al.*, 2022).

This ability to influence, however, does not stem solely from the content shared, but from the nature of the bond that the creator forges with their community. To unravel the architecture of this emotional connection and understand why these mediators manage to transform environmental awareness, we will now analyze the theory of parasocial relationships in the eco-communication of greenfluencers. This framework is essential for understanding how the symbolic bond between the greenfluencer and their follower becomes the driving force that sustains and legitimizes eco-communication in the digital age.

Theory of parasocial relationships in the eco-communication of greenfluencers

Originally proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956), the theory of parasocial relationships allows us to understand the unilateral, symbolic, and emotional bonds that audiences forge with media figures, such as celebrities, actors, singers, TV presenters, or social media content creators. Although these connections lack physical reciprocity, individuals experience them as deeply meaningful experiences that shape their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. In the social media ecosystem, this phenomenon is transformed: the link ceases to be a passive exposure and becomes a continuous, interactive, and personalized relationship (Tukachinsky, 2010).

In this digital context, perceived authenticity is crucial. Breves and Liebers (2022) confirm that when there is an intense parasocial relationship, followers tend to attribute emotional reasons to the greenfluencer, assuming that they genuinely love the cause, rather than seeing calculated or lucrative intentions. This vote of confidence facilitates the adoption of pro-environmental behaviors. Thus, green commitment does not arise from technical data, but from the quality of the relational fabric between the creator and the community. Recent research, such as Knupfer *et al.* (2023) and Le *et al.* (2025), reinfor-

ces this idea by pointing out that the parasocial relationship is the psychological mechanism that transforms the simple exposure of a message into real engagement, mediated by credibility and emotional identification.

The effectiveness of eco-communication therefore lies in the strength of the bond. For Dekoninck and Schmuck (2024), the strength of this connection acts as a bridge between environmental content and audience action. When followers perceive influencers as close and consistent peers, the message takes on greater moral relevance. In fact, Pereira *et al.* (2023) highlight that this emotional bond exceeds the impact of the sender's physical attractiveness or even technical expertise, positioning it as the factor most closely correlated with sustainable purchasing intent.

However, this bond is fragile in the face of suspicions of greenwashing. Consistency between the greenfluencer's identity and their communication history is essential to maintaining the trust of green consumers (Boerman *et al.*, 2022). In the face of possible ethical failures, a curious phenomenon arises: "environmental decoupling." According to Le *et al.* (2025), this mechanism allows the audience to separate the influencer's specific error from their overall mission, protecting the emotional bond to continue supporting their recommendations. Likewise, the literature suggests that trust varies according to the communication approach (Wu *et al.*, 2025). For Pittman and Abell (2021) and Wu *et al.* (2025), influencers with fewer followers but with a clear focus on long-term sustainability values generate more robust credibility than those focused exclusively on product attributes.

Furthermore, the literature indicates that the emotional component also has an impact on environmental communication. Exposure to nature experiences and inspirational leadership mobilizes followers beyond consumption, appealing to an emotional connection with the planet (Hartmann *et al.*, 2025a; 2025b). In this area, female greenfluencers have proven to be more effective than their male counterparts in transforming social behaviors in critical areas such as ethics, green food, and zero-waste lifestyles, starting from everyday management (Yıldırım, 2021).

Finally, the credibility of messages generated and shared on social media faces new challenges, such as the emergence of artificial intelligence and brand sponsorships. The use of virtual influencers can erode the perception of naturalness and authenticity (Narayanan, 2025). This can be counterproductive as it violates the "green schema" or the audience's mental expectation of naturalness, causing a lower perception of suitability and, consequently,

reducing the perceived authenticity of the environmental message (Narayanan, 2025). In this scenario, the legitimacy of environmental discourse could be managed through virtual influencers (Jiang *et al.*, 2024; Gerrath *et al.*, 2024; Kim *et al.*, 2024). Kim *et al.* (2024) demonstrate that, although human influencers are more credible in direct data messages, the use of personal narratives (storytelling) bridges the credibility gap, allowing even less real or virtual figures to resonate deeply if the story is empathetic and engaging. But beyond format, authors such as König and Maier (2024) warn of the risk that greenfluencers may limit themselves to speaking to already sensitized audiences. This underscores the need to explore communication strategies capable of broadening audience diversity, promoting more inclusive and diverse environmental engagement.

Materials and method

Given the exploratory and rarely addressed nature of digital eco-communication developed by greenfluencers in Ibero-American contexts, this study adopts a qualitative approach, which is particularly relevant for understanding emerging phenomena from the perspective of the actors themselves (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). This approach allows for the analysis of complex communication processes in their natural environment, capturing meanings, interpretations, and tensions that are difficult to grasp through standardized quantitative designs (Reineche *et al.*, 2016). In line with the study's objective, the research does not seek to establish causal relationships or make statistical generalizations, but rather to understand how greenfluencers interpret their communicative role, construct their environmental discourses, and manage the ethical, emotional, and structural tensions inherent in eco-communication.

The study focuses on the social media platform Instagram, given that it has established itself as a central space for the dissemination of environmental content, the promotion of sustainable lifestyles, the circulation of narratives linked to climate change, and the emergence of sustainable ventures. Likewise, the choice of the Ibero-American context responds to its high sociocultural diversity, the persistence of socio-environmental inequalities, and the growing presence of environmental content creators operating outside formal institutional frameworks, which makes the region a relevant setting for this research.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, with the aim of exploring in depth the perceptions, experiences, and eco-communicative practices of Ibero-American greenfluencers. This type of interview allows for combining a thematic structure with the flexibility to delve into emerging aspects during the conversation, which is particularly suitable for the analysis of complex and little-explored phenomena (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

Participants were selected through non-probability convenience sampling, considering the following inclusion criteria: (a) generating active content on sustainability, the environment, or pro-environmental practices; (b) maintaining a sustained presence on social media; and (c) residing in an Ibero-American country. The interviews were conducted by two research assistants, with prior informed consent and authorization for audio recording. Participation was voluntary, guaranteeing the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

Participants were added until theoretical saturation was reached, which was evident in interview number 11, at which point the information began to repeat discursive patterns without contributing new elements relevant to understanding the phenomenon under study, in accordance with widely validated criteria in qualitative research (Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Reinecke *et al.*, 2016).

The data collection instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide composed of standardized open-ended questions, which ensured thematic consistency between interviews and, at the same time, facilitated an in-depth exploration of the participants' individual experiences. The interview was organized into three main blocks: (a) general characterization of the interviewee and their career as a creator of environmental content, (b) construction of environmental discourse, motivations for communicating about sustainability, and relationship with audiences; and (c) tensions, challenges, and perceived limitations in digital eco-communication, including aspects such as emotional management, algorithmic pressure, communicative ethics, and the relationship with the market. Prior to its final application, the instrument was subjected to pilot interviews in order to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and sequence of the questions, allowing the research team to make adjustments and validate the final guide.

Given the qualitative approach of the study, no standardized measurement instruments requiring statistical evaluation of reliability and validity

were used. Instead, methodological quality was ensured through criteria of qualitative rigor, such as internal consistency of design, theoretical saturation, triangulation of sources, and the use of systematic analytical procedures, widely validated in qualitative research (Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Reinecke *et al.*, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The interviews lasted an average of 45 to 75 minutes, were audio recorded, and transcribed by the researchers, ensuring the fidelity of the participants' original discourse. Table 1 details the description of the sample. In order to strengthen the transferability of the results, the selection of participants considered diversity criteria linked to the trajectory and communicative profile of the greenfluencers. In particular, we sought to include creators with different types of environmental content (educational, informative, and experiential), heterogeneous levels of professionalization, and diverse socio-cultural contexts within the Ibero-American space. This variability allowed us to capture a wide range of digital eco-communication practices and relational experiences with audiences, contributing to a richer and more situated understanding of the phenomenon studied.

Table 1

Description of the sample

Interviewee	Country	Gender	Profession/activity
E1	Peru	Female	Environmental Engineer
E2	Chile	Female	Civil Engineer
E3	Peru	Female	Audiovisual Communicator
E4	Chile	Female	Journalist
E5	Chile	Female	University student
E6	Argentina	Female	Chemical engineer
E7	Ecuador	Female	Agricultural Engineer
E8	Argentina	Female	Accountant
E9	Argentina	Men	Nutritionist
E10	Chile	Female	Environmental Educator
E11	Mexico	Female	Undergraduate student in Biology

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is widely used in qualitative research in communication and cultural studies. This method allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns of meaning within the data, promoting a deep and systematic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The analytical procedure was carried out in six stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts and preliminary analytical notes, (2) initial coding by line, (3) grouping of codes into potential themes, (4) review and refinement of themes, (5) definition and refinement of final themes, and (6) analytical writing, integrating the findings with the research question and theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis combined inductive and deductive logic, allowing themes to emerge from the data, while interpreting them in light of eco-communication. Secondary data, such as observation notes and public digital content, were also incorporated in order to triangulate the information and strengthen the credibility of the analysis (Reinecke *et al.*, 2016).

The theory of parasocial relationship was used as an analytical framework to guide the interpretation of the data, allowing the operationalization of parasocial interaction based on discursive expressions linked to perceived closeness, emotional identification, trust, continuity of the bond, and the perception of symbolic reciprocity between greenfluencers and their audiences. These dimensions were identified inductively and deductively during the coding, emerging from the participants' accounts and subsequently interpreted in light of the theoretical framework.

Results

From a relational perspective, the results show that digital eco-communication on social media is much more than a flow of environmental information; it is a living process of building symbolic bonds between the greenfluencer and their community. From the thematic analysis of 11 semi-structured interviews with greenfluencers, seven macro-dimensions emerged that allow us to understand how ecological awareness is generated and what limits it faces in the age of algorithms: (1) eco-communication as a culture of environmental knowledge, (2) eco-communication with everyday narratives, (3) emotional management in eco-communication, (4) eco-communication and the digital

platform algorithm, (5) eco-communication as digital and professional work, (6) ethical eco-communication and legitimacy of information, (7) social and collaborative eco-communication. These macro-dimensions seek to understand how environmental communication is constructed and limited on digital platforms, in light of parasocial relationship theory.

(1) Eco-communication as a culture of environmental knowledge

Eco-communication reveals itself as a process of cultural translation. The results show that the main mission of greenfluencers is to “ground” technical or scientific complexity in order to adapt it to non-expert audiences. Here, the value lies not in the hierarchy of knowledge, but in the ability to explain and contextualize environmental knowledge in the routines of food, consumption, hygiene, or land care. As greenfluencers point out, if the message is not understood, the link is broken:

I started sharing videos because I felt that a lot of environmental information was written in very difficult, very technical language. I wanted to bring complex issues closer to ordinary people, explaining them with simple examples from everyday life so that anyone could understand them without feeling excluded. (E10)

Environmental information is often only accessible to people who have studied the subject. My intention was always to explain it in a simple way, without technical jargon, so that anyone could understand it. If it is not understood, it is useless, and people quickly lose interest. (E9)

(2) Eco-communication with everyday narratives

Far from abstract discourse, greenfluencers favor small, achievable actions. These narratives act as “entry points” that reduce the barrier of fear and guilt for not being “perfectly sustainable.” The role of eco-communication emerges as a change that is not imposed, but rather invites the recipient to reinforce their autonomy, favoring environmental participation that is compatible with the social and emotional conditions of followers. This strengthens the symbolic relationship between greenfluencers and followers, promoting identification and learning by observation. This is how greenfluencers interviewed 3 and 4 explain it.

The idea was never to tell people to change their whole lives, but to show them small things they can do on a daily basis. From how you shop, how you eat, or how you choose a product. These are small changes, but when you do them every day, they do have an impact. (E3)

I always say that it's not about being perfect or doing everything right. It's about starting with something that's possible in your daily routine. When people see that it's not so extreme, they're much more encouraged to try. (E4)

(3) Emotional management in eco-communication

The results show that the emotional dimension is a constituent part of digital eco-communication. Greenfluencers must manage not only the eco-anxiety of their followers, but also their own. Faced with the paralysis caused by catastrophism, participants opt for educational narratives that inspire hope. Likewise, self-care emerges as a key condition for the sustainability of eco-communication over time, given that emotional well-being is strained by public exposure, algorithmic pressure, and job insecurity. Emotional management is not only communicative, but also contributes to strengthening stable emotional bonds with audiences, fostering lasting parasocial relationships based on empathy and care. This is indicated by interviewees 8 and 10.

When everything is the end of the world, people freeze and walk away. That's why I try to communicate from a place of hope, from what can be done, without denying reality. (E8)

There are times when communicating environmental issues is emotionally draining [...] If I don't take care of myself emotionally, I can't continue to communicate responsibly. (E10)

(4) Eco-communication and the digital platform algorithm

The relationship with Instagram is ambivalent. While closeness is valued, there is latent frustration with algorithmic opacity. The findings reveal a power struggle: the algorithm seems to penalize politically contextualized or critical content, pushing creators to a crossroads between the relevance of the message and commercial visibility:

I realized that when I mentioned governments, countries, or more political issues, the reach dropped significantly [...] That makes you understand that the algorithm also decides what you can talk about. (E6)

We put a lot of effort into content and it has almost no reach. Then you upload something much simpler and it explodes. That shows you that the algorithm doesn't necessarily reward the most educational content. (E5)

(5) Eco-communication as digital and professional work

Eco-communication is professionalized digital work, but it is often precarious. Behind each video are hours of research, scripting, and editing that the audience rarely perceives. This precariousness is a direct threat to the sustainability of environmental voices on the internet, especially for young and independent profiles:

For a long time, I did absolutely everything myself: researching, recording, editing, responding to messages. People don't see all the work that goes into a video. Only now have I been able to delegate a little, but it's still very precarious and exhausting. (E10)

Most people think that creating content is just about recording a video, but that's not the case. There are hours of editing, thinking about what to say, responding to messages. Often, that work is not paid or recognized as real work. (E9)

(6) Ethical eco-communication and legitimacy of information

Greenfluencers express a strong commitment to truthfulness, the use of reliable sources, and self-regulation of shared content, especially in contexts where false or simplified information is widely circulated. This commitment can manifest itself in different ways: from rigorous scientific verification to the decision not to address certain topics when sufficient information is not available. Eco-communication is conceived as a practice of social responsibility in knowledge, where error affects not only individual credibility but the environmental field. At the same time, the fight against greenwashing is constant, forcing them to negotiate their ethics with brands and institutional discourses.

I am very afraid of sharing misinformation. I would rather not post something than post it incorrectly. I feel that when you talk about the environment, you have a responsibility because people trust what you are saying. (E5)

I don't share something if I'm not sure about the source. I prefer to do more research or even not post anything that day. I feel that when it comes to environmental issues, one mistake can generate a lot of misinformation. (E11)

(7) Social and collaborative eco-communication

Finally, the results highlight that eco-communication is not a competition for followers, but a network of mutual support. The meaning of the work lies in collaboration and qualitative feedback. In this space, the logic of "us" outweighs the logic of individual success, reinforcing the closeness and symbolic interaction that nourishes the parasocial relationship:

I don't feel like this is a competition. On the contrary, the more people are communicating about sustainability, the better. We have always tried to collaborate, share content, and support each other's accounts. (E7)

I have always felt that the environmental world is very collaborative. When you do a live stream or share content with another account, it is not to compete, but to reach more people together. Collaboration is part of the message we are conveying. (E2)

Discussion

The analysis of digital eco-communication practices developed by Ibero-American greenfluencers allows us to advance our understanding of digital environmental communication not only as an informative or persuasive process, but also as a relational, situated, and emotionally mediated practice.

In general terms, the findings confirm and expand on the existing literature by demonstrating that the symbolic effectiveness of digital eco-communication by greenfluencers does not depend exclusively on the environmental content transmitted ("what is transmitted"), but fundamentally on the quality of the emotional and symbolic bond that greenfluencers build with their audiences ("how it is transmitted: the symbolic-emotional bond," and "how that bond operates").

As proposed in the conceptual model in Figure 1, eco-communication on Instagram is centrally mediated by parasocial relationships. This result is consistent with previous research, highlighting the role of these bonds in shaping pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors, particularly among young audiences (Breves and Liebers, 2022; Dekoninck and Schmuck, 2024; Knüpfer *et al.*, 2023; Pereira *et al.*, 2023, Le *et al.*, 2025). However, this study goes further by showing that these bonds are constructed on a daily basis through narrative, emotional, and ethical dimensions situated in the socio-cultural context of Ibero-America.

One of the main contributions of the study is to show that digital eco-communication operates as a process of *cultural translation*. Greenfluencers act as mediators who adapt technical and normative discourses, such as those associated with the 2030 Agenda or the climate crisis, into accessible, experiential narratives situated in everyday life. This translation is based on the perception of closeness, coherence, and similarity between the communicator and the recipient of the message. From the perspective of parasocial relationship theory, environmental messages gain legitimacy not only because of their content, but also because of the symbolic place from which they are emitted, reinforcing trust and willingness to listen.

Everyday narratives are at the core of the digital eco-communication analyzed. By emphasizing small, gradual, and achievable actions, presented as entry points to more sustainable lifestyles, barriers to environmental action are reduced, avoiding individual blame and reinforcing processes of identification. The study expands the existing literature by linking these micro-practices to parasocial mechanisms of learning through observation and symbolic modeling. Here, followers not only receive information, but also observe, imitate, and adapt practices from figures with whom they have significant emotional ties. From the perspective of eco-communication, this allows us to understand the emergence of everyday environmental citizenship, based on experience and identification rather than abstract adherence to normative principles.

The emotional dimension emerges as another central axis of digital eco-communication. The results show that greenfluencers actively manage emotions such as anxiety, fear, and frustration, opting for hopeful, educational, and non-alarmist narratives. This strategy does not imply denying the seriousness of the socio-environmental crisis, but rather modulating its presentation to avoid emotional paralysis and citizen distancing. From the perspective of

parasocial relationship theory, this emotional management is strategic, as the bond requires emotional continuity, and systematically associating it with negative emotions could weaken it. This is relevant because, as can be seen in Figure 1, eco-communication on Instagram does not operate in isolation but is conditioned by power structures from the platforms (algorithm, visibility, the work generated from the platform), and the narrative, emotional, and ethical practices of greenfluencers do not have a direct impact on followers but rather through parasocial relationships. This acts as a central mediating mechanism explaining how and why environmental messages acquire legitimacy. Moreover, according to this, the results generated in followers are not radical changes, but gradual changes.

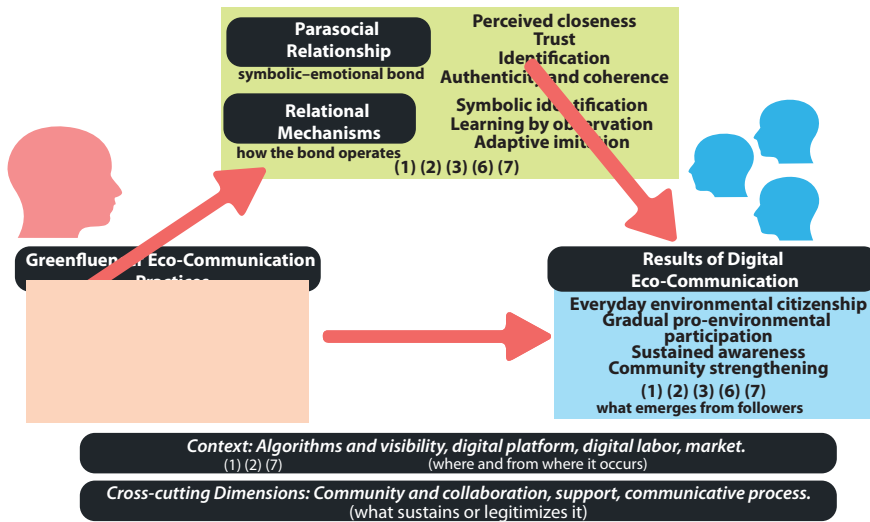
From a critical perspective, the model highlights the structural tensions that condition digital eco-communication (see Figure 1). Algorithmic opacity, the perception of penalization of environmentally critical content, and dependence on metrics create an environment that limits the depth of environmental discourse. These findings reinforce the idea that digital platforms are not neutral spaces, but powerful actors in shaping the digital public sphere. In this sense, digital eco-communication must be understood not only in terms of its transformative potential, but also in terms of its political, economic, and technological limitations.

Likewise, the results show that eco-communication involves a high volume of invisible digital work carried out under precarious conditions. This precariousness affects the continuity, diversity, and sustainability of environmental voices in the digital space, putting pressure on the ideal of open and pluralistic participation. In addition, communicative ethics and greenwashing reinforce the idea that greenfluencers operate as symbolic guardians of environmental knowledge. From the parasocial relationship perspective, this communicative ethics is central, since trust is a fragile relational resource; once eroded, the symbolic bond weakens and the legitimacy of the message is compromised.

Finally, the study shows that digital eco-communication by greenfluencers is sustained by collaborative networks rather than competitive logic. The community emerges as the main symbolic capital of eco-communication, challenging the algorithmic logic of individual success. This collective dimension broadens the traditional focus of parasocial relationship theory, usually centered on one-to-one links, by placing these links in broader relational ecosystems where collaboration reinforces the legitimacy of environmental discourse and amplifies its symbolic reach.

Figure 1

Conceptual model of digital eco-communication on Instagram mediated by parasocial relationships in Ibero-American greenfluencers



Note: Prepared by the author based on data analysis.

Conclusions

This study aimed to analyze the eco-communication practices of Ibero-American greenfluencers by integrating parasocial relationship theory and a critical approach. In answering the research question, we conclude that greenfluencers construct their messages through cultural and narrative translation, while their connection with the audience is based on emotional management and the ethical coherence of the message. The parasocial relationship is confirmed as a necessary bridge for environmental knowledge to be transformed into a daily and situated practice, identified by followers. This mediation arises from a symbolic and emotional bond and from relational mechanisms.

This study contributes to the literature in three main dimensions. First, it explicitly integrates parasocial relationship theory into the field of eco-communication, demonstrating that symbolic and emotional bonds are a central

component of digital environmental communication. Second, it provides qualitative evidence from a little-explored Ibero-American context, broadening the geographical and cultural scope of research on greenfluencers. Third, it introduces a critical view of the structural, emotional, and labor limitations of digital eco-communication, shifting the focus from persuasive effectiveness to the sustainability of the communication process itself.

Despite the findings, the study has limitations. The qualitative approach and sample size do not allow for statistical generalizations. Furthermore, it focused on the perspective of content creators on Instagram, without including the voice of audiences or dynamics from other platforms.

As future recommendations, it is suggested to use mixed or longitudinal designs that incorporate the perspective of followers. It is also relevant to explore the impact of emerging variables, such as artificial intelligence or virtual influencers, on the legitimacy of environmental discourse.

In conclusion, this work invites us to rethink digital eco-communication as a relational, ethical, and emotionally demanding process. The transformative potential of these actors depends both on the strength of the bonds they build and on the structural and technological conditions they face in the era of platforms.

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Authorship Statement - CRediT Taxonomy	
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Nataly Guíñez-Cabrera	Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; validation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence
The authors DECLARE that, in the preparation of the article <i>Eco-communication and greenfluencers in Ibero-America: an exploratory study</i> , no Artificial Intelligence tools were used in any stage of the research process.