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Hedonic and informative values of influencer marketing for tap water: the driving role of identification, authenticity and credibility

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Abstract

Purpose – Tap water is clean and safe. However, despite the efforts made by water utilities, policymakers and institutions to boost acceptance for tap water, many consumers hesitate to drink it. Drawing on value theory, this study aims to examine how social media influencers who evoke both hedonic and informative value perceptions can enhance positive perceptions of tap water consumption. It is proposed that persuasive stimuli combining identification, authenticity and credibility elicit both hedonic and informative appeals.

Design/methodology/approach – Using partial least squares and a non-linear analysis with artificial neural networks, the proposed research model is tested within a sample of 800 Instagram users from the USA and from Spain.

Findings – As hypothesized, identification, authenticity and credibility positively impact consumers' value perceptions. Also, hedonic value is the strongest predictor of positive perceptions of tap water consumption.

Originality/value – This research clarifies mixed evidence regarding the role of hedonic and informative values in shaping behavioral responses on social media and confirms that influencers should leverage both appeals when posting. It further suggests that combining identification, authenticity and credibility contributes to driving pro-social behaviors such as drinking tap water. Finally, the study indicates that influencers can serve as a powerful voice for policymakers and institutions seeking to transform views of tap water consumption.

Keywords Value, Identification, Authenticity, Credibility, Influencer marketing, Tap water

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Tap water (TW) is broadly regarded by global and local institutions as the best water to drink because it is of high quality and safer than bottled water (c.f. Abraham *et al.*, 2024; Geerts *et al.*, 2020). Despite public institutions' efforts to communicate the safety of reclaimed TW as a solution to droughts, consumers remain hesitant. In doing so, consumers overlook environmental trade-offs between tap and bottled water, including the water used to produce plastic bottles, household cost savings from drinking TW and the rigorous processes reclaimed water undergoes to ensure organoleptic quality and health standards before reaching faucets. Outside short-term, drought-related emergencies, institutions likewise call for sustained public support to build water-smart economies and develop water resilience strategies that empower consumers for more efficient water decision-making (e.g. European Commission, 2025).

Marketing and communication efforts promoting the benefits of reclaimed water (or simply TW) for drinking, cooking and other household uses are still in their early stages (Rodríguez-Ardura *et al.*, 2026; Xu *et al.*, 2024). Although still nascent, these efforts represent a strategic opportunity to strengthen the competitiveness of water institutions, utilities and other sustainability-oriented stakeholders. Influencer-generated content can enhance consumers' perceived value of TW, helping these actors build public trust and foster consumer engagement in water resilience strategies.

However, the increasing global interest in sustainable lifestyles makes this an opportune moment to promote TW consumption. Further, much remains to be explored regarding influencers' role in encouraging healthy and environmental behaviors (Schmuck, 2021) that foster societal welfare (Aw and Agnihotri, 2024), including sustainable TW drinking practices. Research in sustainable consumption, although beginning to emerge, is still fragmented and mixed (see e.g. Kaňková *et al.*, 2025; Munaro *et al.*, 2024). It has also highlighted the potential role of influencers and social media in improving TW taste perceptions, in addressing health concerns, and encouraging positive habits (Zvěřinová *et al.*, 2024). Through these focal marketing initiatives, influencers and institutions can cultivate a long-term and sustained water conservation culture (March and Saurí, 2026). Against this backdrop, this study seeks to advance understanding of how influencers can deliver value and promote the public good through increased TW consumption (Hudders *et al.*, 2021; Hudders and Lou, 2023).

In parallel to this, marketing communication research calls for studies scrutinizing how influencers prompt consumers' intended responses by simultaneously delivering hedonic and informative value in their content (Pan *et al.*, 2025). By contrast, existing influencer marketing (IM) studies typically focus on emotional or utilitarian appeals, and the few that examine both hedonic and cognitive, instructional mechanisms yield contradictory results (Barari *et al.*, 2025). Drawing on both the hedonic and informational dimensions of value initially conceived for studying shopping behaviors (Babin *et al.*, 1994) and broadly accepted within marketing and consumer behavior literature (Babin and Krey, 2020; Picot-Coupey *et al.*, 2021), the present study examines how Instagram influencers can evoke both hedonic and informative value perceptions in support of TW consumption. It shows that consumers' value appraisals may help achieve more sustainable consumption patterns, thereby positioning influencers as strategic partners for water stakeholders in fostering a shared commitment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (2015).

To do so, we consider three potential driving factors of both hedonic and informational benefits and IM effectiveness (Pan *et al.*, 2025). Particularly, we investigate how Instagram influencers elicit the intended behavior of drinking TW through a novel combination of three underlying mechanisms of persuasion: identification (de Graaf, 2023; Huang *et al.*, 2024),

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authenticity (Shoenberger *et al.*, 2021) and source credibility (Breves *et al.*, 2019). Together with authenticity and credibility – the main sources of influence within social media IM (Barari *et al.*, 2025; Munaro *et al.*, 2024) – we introduce the construct of identification for its significance in increasing consumers' attachment to the meanings and values transmitted by influencers and demonstrate that the specific interplay of these three antecedents jointly influences both hedonic and informative values.

Theoretical framework

Value creation is central to social change (Zainuddin and Gordon, 2020) and helps explain why consumers adopt or reinforce drinking TW. Value not only provides immediate benefits or gratification but also offers insight into consumers' decisions regarding products and lifestyles (Gkargkavouzi *et al.*, 2019; Govaerts and Ottar Olsen, 2023), as well as end-consumer preferences for tap versus bottled water (Brouwer *et al.*, 2021) and water versus other beverages (Onufrak *et al.*, 2014). Accordingly, value theory can also help explain consumers' acceptance of reclaimed water (Bolderdijk *et al.*, 2013; Xu *et al.*, 2024) and their preferences toward its uses (Li and Roy, 2021).

Shopping values research (Vieira *et al.*, 2018) distinguishes between two types of value (hedonic and utilitarian) that guide individuals' consumption decisions. Hedonic value refers to immediate satisfaction and other related pleasant feelings derived from engaging in a behavior (Rodríguez-Ardura *et al.*, 2025). Influencers evoke captivating experiences by presenting their lifestyle and daily routines in visually appealing ways, encouraging consumers to emulate those positive and pleasing experiences. This approach captivates and maintains followers' enthusiasm (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020), provides entertainment and enjoyment (Barta *et al.*, 2023), elicits affect (Vieira *et al.*, 2018) and generates emotive rewards of the encounter with the post. Through original content, influencers engage consumers (Rosengren *et al.*, 2020), stimulate their intellects about the benefits of adopting the intended behavior and project a vision and style that makes audiences feel satisfied with following the influencer (Leung *et al.*, 2022).

Conversely, utilitarian value captures the perceived usefulness and functional benefits that individuals obtain through or after consumption experiences. We draw here on M. R. Lee *et al.*'s (2014) concept of information value in social networks, which is rooted in value perception theory. Driven by task-oriented motivation, the value of information (i.e. perceived informativeness) increases as it more effectively satisfies the audience's cognitive needs. By addressing these needs, influencers position themselves as attractive and trusted sources of knowledge (Belanche *et al.*, 2021a) who provide valuable content to their audiences. When the content is novel and interesting (Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021), as well as substantive [i.e. relevant and complete (Zhang *et al.*, 2014)], consumers acquire knowledge that can readily apply in their daily lives, enabling them to make more proficient consumption decisions (Farivar *et al.*, 2023).

Health and environmental communication studies (e.g. Bullock and Shulman, 2021; Guenther *et al.*, 2021; Ropret Homar and Knežević Cvelbar, 2021) have shown that influencers are more persuasive when audiences processes and interpret their content as intended. This suggests that influencers should carefully design their posting strategies to engage audiences in a pleasant manner while fostering the perception that they have acquired valuable information (Pan *et al.*, 2025). The underlying premise is that consumers derive greater value when the content promoting the cause is both hedonically appealing and cognitively stimulating, thereby supporting problem-solving processes that encourage TW consumption.

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Hypotheses and conceptual model

Identification entails experiencing the same feelings as the referents and aligning with their style, interests and actions (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Audiences develop strong connections with influencers by placing themselves in various aspects of the character's life, even in intimate situations (Chung *et al.*, 2023; van Laer *et al.*, 2019). Identification evokes aspirational feelings that enable consumers to project themselves as being, or becoming, the ideal or desired character (Koay and Lim, 2025). Consumers who identify with referents vicariously participate in influencers' daily lives for the hedonic appeal those experiences convey (Escalas and Bettman, 2017).

As observed by Dekoninck and Schmuck (2025), consumers are more likely to feel identified with green lifestyle ideals when influencers showcase attainable pro-environmental behaviors, whereas distant, unrealistic or overly demanding ideals discourage sustainable choices (Buvár *et al.*, 2023). In this context, consumers' gratification stems not primarily from the promoted behavior itself but from perceiving that they share a similar stance on a specific sustainability issue with the influencer (Huang *et al.*, 2024). This mechanism may be particularly relevant for TW drinking behavior, as drinking TW has no inherent hedonic appeal (Xu *et al.*, 2024) and is often a private action with limited need for public display (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). This challenges influencers to reframe TW consumption as a captivating, relatable and desirable drinking behavior. By closely resembling influencers, consumers adopt the influencer's perspective as their own. Accordingly, identification may contribute to self-construction, represent an affective merging of the self and the character and strengthen consumers' attachment to the hedonic meanings and values conveyed by influencers:

H1. Greater consumer identification with the Instagram post leads to greater hedonic value perceptions.

On Instagram, authenticity refers to the coherence between what the influencer feels, says and does (Ibarra, 2015). Being true to oneself and to one's audience forms the foundation of authenticity (Lee and Eastin, 2021; Wellman *et al.*, 2020). Hence, authenticity becomes a necessary element of every post and an essential characteristic of every influencer (Hudders *et al.*, 2021). In this vein, influencers who produce direct and organic content that is consistent with their image may evoke emotional attachment and other pleasant responses (Hofstetter and Gollnhofer, 2024) that make consumers feel closer to them. Authenticity is also associated with the veracity and transparency of the information, as well as the significance that consumers attach to honest and non-biased opinions (Lee and Eastin, 2021). Thus, influencers' candid presentation of the advantages and disadvantages of their experiences, together with the sharing of reliable, truthful and genuine content, enhances authenticity of Instagram stories (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016; Kreling *et al.*, 2022).

Audiences value authenticity in any pro-environmental mise-en-scène (Lu, 2024), appreciating down-to-earth representations that combine emotional resonance with substantive content (Dekoninck *et al.*, 2023) and persuade precisely because they acknowledge imperfections (Buvár *et al.*, 2023). A similar pattern can be expected in the context of TW consumption. When consumers perceive an influencer's content as authentic, they are more likely to experience it as a means of achieving personal and intrinsic gratification (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020). In turn, they may attribute symbolic meanings to the influencer's narrative that align more closely with their self-concept, bringing them closer to their ideal self-image and strengthening emotional attachment. Accordingly, stories that authentically promote TW consumption are expected to generate greater hedonic value for consumers.

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Furthermore, high-quality content that is congruent with the consumer's existing self-schemas should better enable them to make value-based decisions (Ibarra, 2015). Hence, we hypothesize that acquiring relevant and genuine knowledge from a direct referent also enhances informative value:

H2. Greater perceived authenticity of the Instagram post leads to greater hedonic value perceptions.

H3. Greater perceived authenticity of the Instagram post leads to greater informative value perceptions.

Credibility refers to consumers' willingness to accept information based on the congruence between the message and the characteristics of its source (Belanche *et al.*, 2021b). When influencers share messages that align closely with their established image, consumers are more likely to perceive them as knowledgeable, valid and trustworthy sources of information (Breves *et al.*, 2019). Perceived similarity between influencers and consumers (Lou and Yuan, 2019) together with the influencer's stance toward the promoted topic, fosters credibility, particularly when influencers communicate non-professional expertise (Wellman, 2024). It remains unclear, however, how influencers establish their expertise (Munaro *et al.*, 2024) and how they transfer their credibility to the messages they post (Boerman *et al.*, 2022). This issue is particularly relevant because credibility serves as a mental shortcut for evaluating pro-environmental initiatives (Schorn *et al.*, 2022).

We suggest that when consumers perceive trustworthiness and honesty in the source, credibility enhances both the utility and persuasiveness of the information (Belanche *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b). Since credible individuals are considered reliable information providers, influencers who deliver credible messages strengthen consumers' belief that it is worthwhile to acquire or reaffirm the shared knowledge. Accordingly, a positive and confident belief in the information source might enhance consumers' perceptions of the message's informative value:

H4. Greater perceived credibility of the Instagram post leads to greater informative value perceptions.

Hedonic and informative appeals can elicit positive responses in social media when the audience processes and interprets the content as intended (Guenther *et al.*, 2021; Ropret Homar and Knežević Cvelbar, 2021). In the context of IM, this requires a careful selection of posting strategies that engage the audience in a pleasant manner while fostering consumers' perceptions of acquiring beneficial insights (Pan *et al.*, 2025). Indeed, Leung *et al.* (2022) and Pan *et al.* (2025) recommend developing content that is both engaging and insightful – that is, combining hedonic and informative qualities. However, the few studies that have simultaneously considered hedonic and informative values for mediating consumption behaviors report mixed and sometimes contradictory evidence (c.f. Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2023; Lu *et al.*, 2024; Zhang *et al.*, 2024).

To reconcile this assorted evidence, we suggest that both forms of value may function jointly in driving consumers' responses. When influencers present visually appealing content alongside practical and useful information, they can achieve an effective balance between experiential gratification and informational utility. Thus, a positive perception of an influencer's value proposition that simultaneously evokes hedonic and informative value can more effectively lead consumers toward the intended behavior of adopting TW. Ultimately, we posit that the higher the experienced emotional appeal of the content toward the promoted

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cause and the greater the consumer's acquisition of knowledge for problem-solving in support of TW intake, the greater the perceived value acquired:

H5. Greater perceived hedonic value leads to an increase in a consumer's intention to consume tap water.

H6. Greater perceived informative value leads to an increase in a consumer's intention to consume tap water.

Figure 1 depicts the proposed research model.

Research methodology

Measures

To ensure content validity, we exclusively used measurement scales that previous studies had verified for reliability and validity, with psychometric properties exceeding recommended thresholds. The selected scales were adapted to the context of TW consumption. We relied on de Graaf *et al.* (2012) for identification; Shoenberger *et al.* (2021) for authenticity; Belanche *et al.* (2021a) for credibility; Barta *et al.* (2023) and Mathwick *et al.* (2001) for hedonic value; Zhang *et al.* (2014) for informative value; and Moon and Kim (2001) and Nunes *et al.* (2021) for behavioral intentions. Responses were based on seven-point Likert scales (ranging from 1, "completely disagree," to 7, "completely agree"). To minimize common method biases, we refined the questions and provided clear definitions for unfamiliar concepts. After ensuring equivalence between English and Spanish and performing parallel back-translation procedures for content validity, we circulated the questionnaire in the target languages.

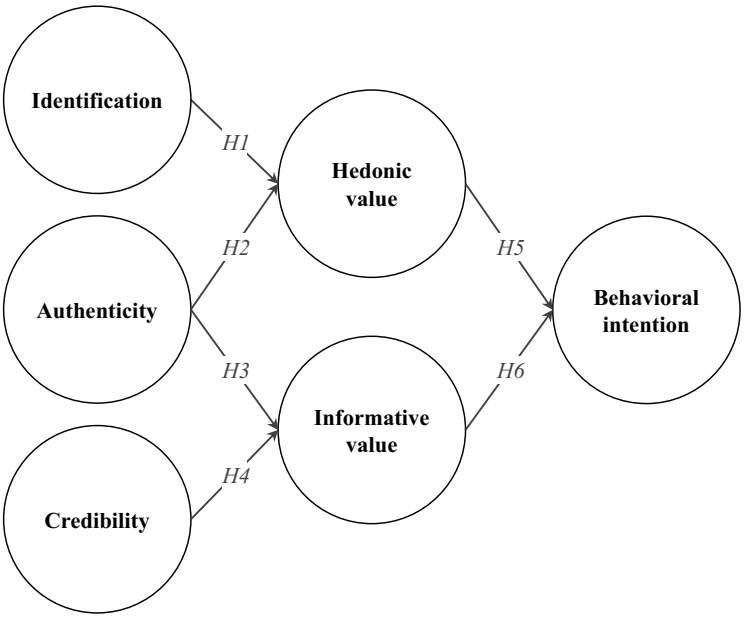

Figure 1. Research model
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Data collection

The questionnaire was preceded by a fictitious Instagram post, created *ad hoc* to ensure all participants shared the same understanding of TW. In the post, a picture of an influencer drinking TW from a glass was accompanied by a text that highlighted influencer's reasons to drink TW (e.g. high quality) and the benefits of switching to TW (e.g. cost savings). We targeted adult Instagram users in the greater metropolitan areas of Phoenix and Barcelona who actively use the platform for non-work purposes, as both regions experience recurring droughts and periods of water stress. We included four attention-check questions to reduce random responding and ensure that participants careful consider and carefully read all questions. We recruited participants from an online panel. After sending a friendly reminder to those who did not finish the survey, we eliminated incomplete questionnaires and those with inconsistent responses, retaining 800 valid ones.

We examined the sample's composition by age and gender (Table 1), concluding that there were no non-response biases, and that the sample accurately represented the target population.

We used Harman's single-factor test and the correlation matrix procedure to verify that the data was free from common method variance. All factors have unrotated variance explained values smaller than 50%, and all pairwise correlations between constructs are below 0.90 (see Table 2).

Table 1. Characteristics and representativeness of the sample

Variables	Sample (%)	Population (%)*	Correlation	*p*-value
Age				
18–24	23.25	26.13	0.776	
25–34	25.45	23.89		
35–44	29.20	28.13		
45–54	22.10	21.85		
Gender				
Female	56.30	54.51		0.304
Male	43.70	45.49		

Source(s): Statista (2024); The Social Media Family (2023). Authors' own work

Table 2. Discriminant validity analysis*

Construct	Identification	Authenticity	Credibility	Hedonic value	Informative value	Behavioral intentions
Identification	*0.823*	0.595	0.565	0.747	0.551	0.571
Authenticity	0.633	*0.827*	0.767	0.579	0.751	0.557
Credibility	0.618	0.852	*0.888*	0.603	0.717	0.560
Hedonic value	0.807	0.606	0.654	*0.880*	0.506	0.569
Informative value	0.613	0.843	0.799	0.558	*0.898*	0.523
Behavioral intentions	0.622	0.613	0.613	0.615	0.582	*0.893*

Note(s): *HTMT under the diagonal, square root of the AVE on the diagonal (italic) and correlations between the dimensions above the diagonal
Source(s): Authors' own work

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Estimation method

Building on the work of Rodríguez-Ardura *et al.* (2025), we used a novel approach that makes it possible to bring together the advantages of using PLS as an effective causal-predictive method with the capacity of artificial neural networks (ANNs) to account for non-linear relationships. While PLS is particularly useful for testing measurements and assessing predictive relevance, ANNs complement these advantages by detecting hidden patterns in the data, capturing potential non-linear dependencies and minimizing prediction errors.

First, we conducted a conventional assessment of the measurement model and, next, we trained unsupervised ANNs to capture the non-linear relationships between the measurement items and the constructs. Then, we used the scores generated to test the significance of the causal paths in the PLS structural model.

Finally, we examined the potential non-linear dependencies between behavioral intentions and the other constructs in the model by training supervised ANNs with five inputs (i.e. identification, authenticity, credibility, hedonic value and informative value), one output (behavioral intentions) and one hidden layer (see Figure 2). Through a trial-and-error process, we identified that two hidden nodes in the hidden layer yielded the best results, satisfying Blum's (1992) requirement, as it falls between the number of inputs and the number of outputs.

Data was scaled to a range between 0 and 1 using the min-max scaling method. The three-layer perceptron training algorithm used the logistic function as the activation function and the resilient backpropagation algorithm with weight backtracking. The sum of squared errors was the differentiable error function to minimize.

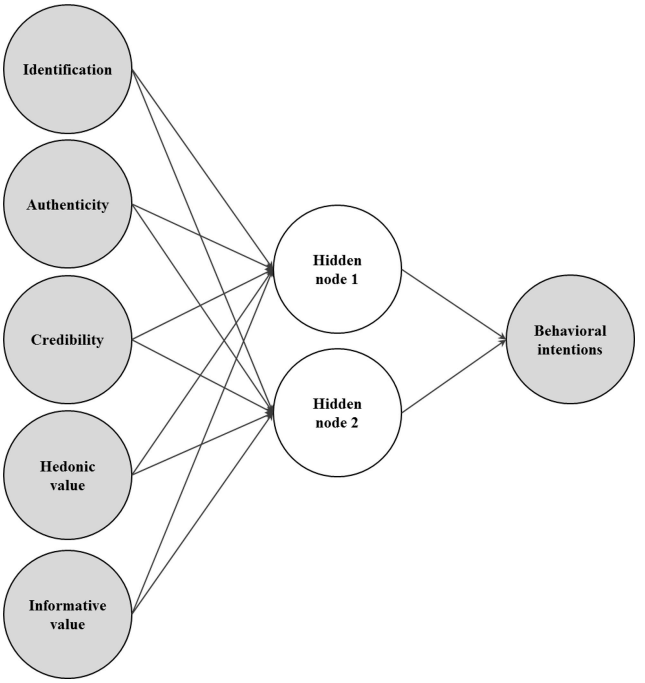

Figure 2. ANN model
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Measurement model validation

The measurement model demonstrates strong internal consistency reliability. Cronbach's α and Dillon-Goldstein's ρ values range from 0.88 to 0.95, exceeding the minimum accepted threshold of 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the first eigenvalues for each construct are greater than 1, while the second eigenvalues are all below (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2014). The discriminant validity of the measurement model was first established by the cross-loading matrix, which revealed that each indicator's loading on its designated construct was higher than its loadings on any other constructs. Next, we applied Fornell and Larcker's criterion, confirming that the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each latent variable exceeded its correlations with other constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In addition, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio matrix verified that all values were well below the threshold of 0.9 (see Table 2).

Each item's loading on its designated construct exceeds 0.70 with communalities above 0.50. In addition, the AVE for each construct exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.50. Accordingly, all criteria recommended by Hair *et al.* (2019) are satisfied, confirming the convergent validity of the measurement model.

Next, following Rodríguez-Ardura *et al.* (2025), we used an unsupervised ANN to measure the constructs non-linearly. This ANN model included a single hidden layer with one node, using the hyperbolic tangent as the activation function.

Results

Assessment of the linear structural model

Given that the R^2 values for the three PLS regressions are all clearly greater than 0.30 (Figure 3), the model demonstrates moderate predictive accuracy (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Stone−Geiser's Q^2 values exceed 0.35, indicating that the predictive relevance of the path model for the endogenous latent constructs is high (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, the

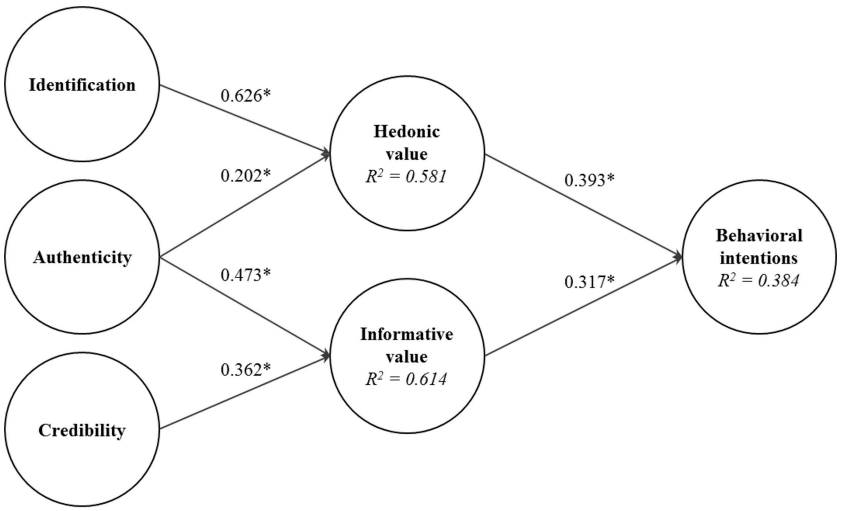

Figure 3. Path coefficients of the PLS model

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SRMR of the structural model is 0.05. These results support the validity of the linear structural model (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Since the sample does not follow a multivariate normal distribution, we assessed the significance of the PLS path coefficients using the bootstrapping procedure, with 5,000 resamples. The results presented in Table 3 show that all p-values are substantially below 0.05 and below the Benjamini-Hochberg α correction values (Benjamini and Hochberg, 1995). Consequently, all hypothesized causal paths are statistically significant from a linear perspective, supporting *H1–H6*.

Because each regression includes multiple predictors, we measure their effect size on the dependent variables using f^2. Based on Cohen's (1988) cut-off values, we assert that identification has a large impact on hedonic value ($f^2 = 0.604$); authenticity has a small influence on this construct ($f^2 = 0.060$), but a medium effect on informative value ($f^2 = 0.238$); credibility has a small impact on informative value ($f^2 = 0.142$); and behavioral intentions receives a medium influence from hedonic value ($f^2 = 0.183$) and a small effect from informative value ($f^2 = 0.123$). These effect sizes indicate that hedonic value is the primary mechanism that elicits behavioral intentions towards TW consumption.

Non-linear path analysis

For the ANN model, we conducted 10-fold cross-validation, using a 90:10 split between training and testing data. Specifically, the data set was divided into ten equal and mutually exclusive folds. In each iteration, the model was trained on nine folds and tested on the remaining fold. The mean absolute error (MAE) values for both the training and testing data sets were below 20% (0.185 and 0.190, respectively), an acceptable range in social science research (Sonkar *et al.*, 2026). These results indicate that the model achieves accurate predictions, and that input variables predict behavioral intentions by capturing potentially non-linear relationships.

Sensitivity analysis

Following Garson's (1991) algorithm, we performed a sensitivity analysis to assess the significance of each input factor on the prediction of behavioral intentions (Table 4) and check for unexpected patterns. The average importance (AI) of the input factors was calculated by averaging the importance values obtained from each iteration of the ten-fold

Table 3. Results from the bootstrapping resampling procedure for PLS causal paths

Hypotheses	Causal linear paths	Coefficients (original)	Coefficients (bootstrapping)	Standard errors	*p*-values	Benjamini-Hochberg α corrections
H1	Identification → Hedonic value	0.625	0.626	0.034	0.000	0.050
H2	Authenticity → Hedonic value	0.203	0.202	0.039	0.000	0.042
H3	Authenticity → Informative value	0.473	0.473	0.047	0.000	0.033
H4	Credibility → Informative value	0.361	0.362	0.046	0.000	0.025
H5	Hedonic value → Behavioral intentions	0.395	0.393	0.037	0.000	0.017
H6	Informative value → Behavioral intentions	0.317	0.317	0.036	0.000	0.008

Source(s): Authors' own work

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Table 4. Neural network and PLS sensitivity analyses

Method	Importance index	Identification	Authenticity	Credibility	Hedonic value	Informative value
ANN analysis	AI	0.224	0.186	0.157	0.257	0.176
	ANN-NI	87.236	72.309	61.257	100.000	68.741
PLS analysis	Total effects	0.246	0.23	0.115	0.393	0.317
	PLS-NI	62.595	58.524	29.262	100.000	80.662

Source(s): Authors' own work

cross-validation process. We then derived the normalized importance (NI) by expressing each factor's relative importance as a proportion of the maximum relative importance among all factors.

The findings of the ANN analysis strongly reinforce the results of the PLS: all input variables contribute to explain behavioral intentions, being the hedonic value the most influential. However, the NI values reveal differences between the PLS and the ANN. In the linear analysis, informative value is the second most important factor (80.66%), whereas in the non-linear, it becomes the fourth (68.74%). The other constructs maintain the same order: identification is more important than authenticity, and authenticity more than credibility.

Conclusion

Discussion

This research shows that influencers who simultaneously deliver hedonic and informative value through their posts can shape followers' behavioral intentions toward TW consumption. The findings indicate that hedonic value is strengthened when consumers identify with the influencer and perceive the content as authentic (*H1*, *H2*), supporting the view that self-resemblance and perceived genuineness make pro-environmental content experientially appealing. Informative value, in turn, is enhanced when the influencer's communication is perceived as both authentic and credible (*H3*, *H4*), suggesting that consumers derive greater knowledge-related value from content they perceive as genuine, trustworthy and reliable. Overall, the results confirm that identification, authenticity and credibility are distinct yet complementary antecedents of consumers' value perceptions.

Hedonic and informative values are found to mediate behavioral responses. This supports the notion that social media can influence consumer preferences toward TW (Zvěřinová *et al.*, 2024). From a marketing perspective, it suggests that social media influencers can foster transformative consumption patterns by promoting sustainable habits and gently guiding consumers toward more environmentally responsible choices.

The findings further show that Instagram can effectively convey value-driven messages that integrate hedonic and informative appeals, thereby helping to clarify the mixed empirical evidence reported in previous IM studies. Compared with informative value ($\beta = 0.317$, $p = 0.000$), hedonic value ($\beta = 0.393$, $p = 0.000$) is the strongest predictor of TW consumption intentions – a pattern that resonates with the emphasis placed on the experiential and affective value facets proposed in personal shopping value research.

The importance of activating hedonic value perceptions is confirmed by both the linear and the non-linear analyses. However, the ANN provides a more fine-grained assessment of the relative influence of the persuasive mechanism leading to TW consumption intentions. It shows that authenticity, which has already been recognized in prior IM research as an important antecedent of consumption intentions (Li *et al.*, 2025) operates alongside consumers' identification with the influencer as the most salient drivers of behavioral

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intentions. This finding is particularly relevant because identification has received comparatively little attention in IM research, yet it appears to play a decisive role in making pro-environmental content personally meaningful and emotionally engaging.

Theoretical contributions

This research provides evidence that Instagram influencers can effectively persuade consumers to adopt the sustainable behavior of drinking TW when audiences interpret and internalize the influencers' value-based appeals. These appeals, both hedonic and informative, enable consumers to acquire information in a pleasurable manner. The study's primary contribution to value theory lies in demonstrating the mediating role of hedonic and informative values in enhancing behavioral intentions toward TW consumption. These dual appeals serve as a meaningful avenue for influencers to connect with their audiences and guide them toward the intended behavior.

The delivery of hedonic and informative value arises from the combined influence of three underlying persuasive stimuli: identification, authenticity and credibility. Therefore, the study introduces a new theoretical perspective to persuasion theory. By clarifying the factors that strengthen persuasive impact, it also contributes to the growing literature on the effectiveness of IM (Pan *et al.*, 2025) and IM communication (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, it highlights identification as a primary persuasive mechanism that deserves recognition alongside authenticity and credibility as a major source of influence on social media (Barari *et al.*, 2025; Munaro *et al.*, 2024). The study also illuminates how these persuasive stimuli interweave marketing content with hedonic and informative purposes (Isaac and Calder, 2025), thereby advancing understanding of the antecedents within the nomological network of value.

This research also extends marketing frameworks and IM beyond traditional commercial focus. Specifically, it contributes to the emerging literature on non-business-oriented IM aimed at sustainable causes (Boerman *et al.*, 2022; Schmuck, 2021). By demonstrating how influencers can encourage individuals to adopt beneficial behaviors – such as drinking TW as a value-based choice – the study expands the *bright side* of IM (Hudders and Lou, 2023). Moreover, by focusing on this individual enacted yet socially significant behavior, it contributes to research that applies a marketing perspective to global challenges, supporting the transformative and *heroic* potential of marketing (Plangger *et al.*, 2025).

Finally, this study introduces IM, largely overlooked in water research, as a promising approach for designing value-driven messages that can mitigate negative perceptions and concerns about TW consumption. It also serves as a counterpoint to the growing body of research favoring bottled water over TW (Olatunde *et al.*, 2025), challenging the paradoxical consumer tendency to pay for bottled water when TW is safer, cheaper and of higher quality (Abraham *et al.*, 2024; Moya-Fernández *et al.*, 2021).

Practical and policy-related implications

Individuals' first-hand experiences during water restriction periods, coupled with growing awareness that water reaches faucets after reclamation and purification, have changed perceptions of TW. TW is no longer regarded as a product noticed only in its absence (Brouwer *et al.*, 2019). The growing adoption of sustainable consumption practices and pro-environmental lifestyles presents an ideal moment for institutions to promote TW consumption and reverse persistent consumer reluctance.

IM emerges as a valuable tool for policymakers and institutions seeking to encourage TW consumption. Influencers can advance this societal goal by overcoming consumers' apathy and increasing the perceived personal relevance of sustainable water consumption. The

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interpersonal nature of influencer communication positions influencers as effective opinion leaders in the field of water-related communication. To leverage this potential, water stakeholders should ensure that influencer campaigns foster perceptions of identification, authenticity and credibility. Accordingly, institutions face a dual challenge: selecting credible influencers who can effectively advocate for TW while ensuring that the content they create is authentic, trustworthy and resonates with consumers, ultimately encouraging them to emulate the influencers' behavior.

Influencers should not be regarded as an isolated means of reaching audiences, but rather as an integral part of companies' and organizations' broader integrated communication strategies, with the potential to guide consumers toward behaviors that serve the public interest. Accordingly, institutions and policymakers should aim not only to raise consumers' awareness in specific sustainability debates (Deb *et al.*, 2023), but also to foster audiences' engagement with environmentally friendly lifestyles. Such an approach can strengthen the competitiveness of water-related institutions within an increasingly sustainability-driven landscape by positioning them as credible, transparent and environmentally responsible organizations. To this end, these institutions should collaborate with influencers who consistently demonstrate a commitment to sustainability across different aspects of their lives and can naturally integrate TW consumption into a broader sustainability-oriented lifestyle, rather than portraying it as an isolated behavior. This approach is likely to strengthen perceptions of authenticity and sincerity while reinforcing the halo of goodwill surrounding both the institutions and the influencers. In turn, influencer communication can help reduce resistance to TW, strengthen the legitimacy of water resilience strategies and enhance consumers' trust in water-related institutions.

Furthermore, consumers' commitment to water resilience strategies requires influencer content that combines accessible, credible and engaging information about the price, quality and safety of TW with a relatable narrative style. For example, messages highlighting household cost savings, safety assurances and environmental benefits through humorous, attractive or personally resonant storytelling can make TW consumption appear both relevant and resource efficient. Narratives showing influencers overcoming common barriers, such as concerns about taste, safety or social appropriateness, may help followers imagine themselves making similar choices. Likewise, creative and participatory formats, including challenges, memes and calls to use public drinking fountains or request TW in restaurants, can translate sustainability goals into simple, actionable behaviors that consumers can readily adopt.

Policymakers and institutions should draw on evidence from both commercial and water communication contexts. Accordingly, influencers whose content naturally aligns with sustainability and pro-environmental themes are likely to be more effective at reaching and building trust with relevant consumer segments – including young consumers, heavy social media users and audiences with the potential to drive social change, even if they are less aware of water conservation issues (March and Saurí, 2026). By delivering meaningful content, influencers can reinforce positive attitudes among existing TW consumers and inspire behavioral change that positions TW intake as a value-based choice. Contrary to Claassen *et al.* (2022), we argue that habit formation in this context does not require an intermediary stage of increased bottled water consumption. Instead, increases in TW consumption should occur alongside reductions in bottled water use.

Limitations and avenues for future research

This study did not account for consumers' prior experiences and learning processes, which might influence their responses to influencer-generated content. Future research could

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address this limitation by examining how influencer-generated content shapes behavior in relation to individuals' awareness of themselves, society and the environment in everyday consumption practices. Future research could also examine whether the effects of influencer-generated content differ across private, social-signaling and system-changing forms of pro-environmental behavior, as well as how environmental value orientations shape consumers' responses to sustainability-focused influencer communication.

Because the study examines consumers' behavioral intentions toward TW in regions affected by droughts and water restrictions, future research should replicate the model in areas without such pronounced water constraints to better understand the role of situational factors, neglected in this study. In addition, the absence of cultural variables limits the generalizability of the findings but opens promising avenues for exploring how cultural scripts embedded in influencers' lifestyles motivate audiences to act (Lu, 2024).

Finally, Instagram proved to be a suitable visual platform for communicating value-laden narratives that promote TW consumption. However, because this study focused exclusively on Instagram, it cannot determine whether the platform is more effective than other social media for encouraging consumers to choose TW over alternative beverages. Cross-platform research would provide valuable insights into the role of platform-specific experiences as contextual influences.

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