

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN BRAZIL, THE EUROPEAN UNION AND BULGARIA

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING COMO FERRAMENTA PARA A SUSTENTABILIDADE NO BRASIL, NA UNIÃO EUROPEIA E NA BULGÁRIA

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Abstract

Social and digital media have become essential tools for promoting sustainability and the circular economy. They are used in different ways depending on regional conditions. The goal of the article is to compare social media marketing activities for sustainable development promotion in Brazil and the European Union (EU), with a special focus on Bulgaria as a case study. Based on secondary data sources the article examines the impact of digital communication strategies on consumer awareness and adoption of the circular economy. The findings highlight distinct regional approaches to digital sustainability marketing.

Keywords: Circular Economy. Digital Platforms. Social Media Communication. Sustainable Marketing.

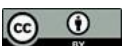
Resumo

As mídias sociais e digitais tornaram-se ferramentas essenciais para a promoção da sustentabilidade e da economia circular. Elas são utilizadas de maneiras diferentes, dependendo das condições regionais. O objetivo deste artigo é comparar as atividades de marketing em mídias sociais para a promoção do desenvolvimento sustentável no Brasil e na União Europeia (UE), com foco especial na Bulgária como estudo de caso. Com base em fontes de dados secundárias, o artigo examina o impacto das estratégias de comunicação digital na conscientização e adoção da economia circular pelos consumidores. Os resultados destacam abordagens regionais distintas para o marketing digital da sustentabilidade.

Palavras-chav: Economia Circular. Plataformas Digitais. Comunicação em Redes Sociais. Marketing Sustentável.

1 INTRODUCTION

Modern digital media has become a marketing tool supporting sustainable development, through which companies, politicians and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can promote sustainability goals, influence consumer purchasing behavior and incorporate circular economy (CE) initiatives. Online social networks such as Instagram,



TikTok, YouTube and WhatsApp are widely used by people worldwide, which makes them an important influential digital tool for creating and increasing consumer engagement with sustainability goals and policies, offering interactive channels for awareness and changing behavior. Evidence can be provided in the literature that social media enable new forms of participation and communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and have a positive impact on sustainable consumption and lifestyle patterns (Sipos, 2024; Scarpato & Simeone, 2020, Okeke, 2025).

The impact of social media on sustainability and the way it is implemented, however, varies greatly in regional contexts. The consideration of sustainable marketing in the context of digital transformation provides a valuable perspective for analyzing how businesses, NGOs, and policymakers communicate sustainability and circular economy (CE) practices in different regions. The philosophy of sustainable marketing extends beyond the traditional goal of profit maximization, with the focus being the creation of long-term value that benefits society and the environment (Belz & Peattie, 2012). In the same time, the rise of digital platforms is changing the way marketing strategies are created and implemented, allowing for two-way communication, wider reach, and active consumer engagement (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016).

There are several basic concepts underlying this analysis. First, social marketing, introduced by Kotler and Zaltman (1971), focuses on the use of marketing techniques to influence the behavior of people that will improve the social welfare. In the field of sustainability, social marketing is used to promote recycling, energy saving, and environmentally friendly consumption (Rodriguez-Sanchez, 2023). Secondly, cause-related marketing is focused on creating connections between brands and sustainability causes, which links the corporate communication to a specific environmental or social issue (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988; Bhatti et al., 2021). Third, eco-branding, as stated in the study by Hartman, Ibanez, and Sainz (2005), emphasizes how organizations build brand identity around environmental values using functional or emotional positioning of green attributes. Emerging practices like digital storytelling further extend this by allowing organizations to create stories on environmental topics – such as waste as a resource or the circular economy – through social media and digital platforms.

In this context the role of digital and social media is significant. On the one hand, they provide a mechanism for changing behavior by using visual and emotional appeals

for specific sustainable practices such as reuse, repair, and recycling (Yang et al., 2025). On the other hand, digital platforms allow users, activists, and organizations to connect, share experiences, and co-create sustainability narratives (Johnstone & Lindh, 2017).

Taken together, these concepts provide a framework for understanding how digital tools are shaping sustainable marketing. This framework also provides a basis for exploring both the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing circular economy principles in marketing practice in certain regions. In this regard the article compares Brazil and the European Union (EU), with a specific case study of Bulgaria within the context of the EU.

In this context, the research question underlying this study is:

How do digital marketing campaigns for sustainable development differ in Brazil and the European Union, and what are the specifics in the Bulgarian context?

Based on an analysis of secondary data the conducted study examines how digital communication campaigns influence consumer awareness and adoption of circular economy initiatives in different contexts.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research conducted in the article is based on secondary data sources, using a comparative qualitative methodology. The goal is to examine how social media and digital platforms are used in sustainable development marketing in Brazil and the EU with a special focus on Bulgaria as a case study. The effectiveness of secondary research in examining sustainability communication strategies is well known, especially in cases where institutional reports and digital campaigns are accessible to the general public (Wickham, 2019).

There are several types of sources used, summarized in Table 1 and Table 2, namely:

- Policy documents were selected because they represent the official frameworks guiding sustainability and communication strategies. They establish the regulatory and institutional context within which marketing operates.
- NGO and startup reports were included as they capture grassroots initiatives, innovation, and civil society efforts often underrepresented in academic literature.

Survey data and reports provide comparable quantitative data into consumer awareness and attitudes toward sustainability, which are critical for understanding the effectiveness of marketing campaigns.

- Academic articles provide conceptual grounding and connect empirical evidence with sustainable marketing theory.

The nature of the research approach used is exploratory and revision, based on secondary data analysis, which allows for a comparative study of identified key documents, communication tools, narratives and outcomes across regions. The main method, which is adopted is an integrative review complemented by a thematic qualitative analysis of selected studies and a quality evaluation of the included articles. In this way, official documents, academic research and good practice examples are integrated in different regional contexts, as shown in Table 1. For the implementation of the adopted method the INTEGRA method (Valencia-Contrera et al., 2024) for integrative reviews, with an emphasis on the quality of the outcome is used, the stages of which adapted implementation is shown on Table 1. Those stages are applied for each of the three regions, object of research, the summarized results of which are shown on Table 2. The INTEGRA method is also used in other studies on the evolution of social media marketing and its impact on the circular economy like the one conducted by Alanya et al. in 2025.

Table 1

Stages of the adapted methodological approach (based on INTEGRA)

Stage	Description	Type of Source	Action in the research
1.Idea	Define the research idea	Policy Documents	To define the legal framework guiding sustainability and communication strategies
		Reports	To track sustainability progress and communication
		Academic literature	To define the theoretical grounding in digital marketing and sustainability
2.Question	Define the research question	Policy Documents	What is the policy framework for CE communication?
		Reports	What are the digital marketing campaigns for sustainable development?
		Academic literature	What is the theoretical grounding in digital marketing and sustainability?
3.Tactic	Design of database search strategies	Policy Documents	Define keywords
		Reports	
		Academic literature	

4.Search Execution	Database search	Policy Documents	Application of the strategy in several sources - global, international, regional, national government
		Reports	Application of the strategy in several sources – NGOs, startups, agencies
		Academic literature	Application of the strategy in several scientific databases – Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar
5.Quality	Define and apply basic quality criteria	Policy Documents	Identify based to region, date and relevance to the theme
		Reports	Filter the reports based on several basic quality criteria – relevance, year, innovation
		Academic literature	Filter the studies based on several basic quality criteria – relevance, citation, indexed
6.Final Selection	Evaluation process	Policy Documents	Application of additional criteria – contribution, theme, period
		Reports	
		Academic literature	
7.Analysis	Thematic categorization	Policy Documents	Thematic qualitative analysis
		Reports	
		Academic literature	

Table 2

Secondary Data Sources for Comparative Analysis of Digital Marketing and Sustainability

Region	Type of Source	Basic Data identified	Purpose in Study
Brazil	Policy documents	National Plan for Circular Economy Brazil Investment Platform Brazilian Ministry of Environment campaigns	National-level sustainability strategies
	Reports	Greenpeace Brazil Instituto Akatu	Civil society perspectives & campaigns
	Academic literature	Shim (2024) Salles et al. (2024) Santini et al. (2025) Celestino & Valente (2022) Deslandes and Ferreira (2025) Rossini et al. (2021)	Digital climate activism & consumer behavior
European Union (EU)	Policy Documents	EU Green Deal (2019) EU Circular Economy Action Plan (2020)	Policy framework for CE communication
	Reports	Eurobarometer (2021) on sustainability and digital awareness European Environment Agency (EEA, 2021) The foundation for european progressive studies (FEPS)	Measure public awareness and attitudes Track sustainability progress and communication Policy study

	Academic literature	Chen Y, Kwilinski A, Chygryn O, Lyulyov O, Pimonenko T. (2021) Rocca et al. (2024) Ewa Latoszek (2021)	Theoretical grounding in digital marketing & sustainability
Bulgaria	Policy Documents	National Waste Management Plan 2021–2028	National CE communication framework
	Reports	TexCycle Eco Academy FoodObox CleanTech Bulgaria	Practical examples of CE marketing
	Academic literature	Dicheva & Simeonov (2025) Pozzetto, E., Leoni, L. (2025)	Local study

For Brazil, data was used from government initiatives led by the Ministry of Finance, such as the Brazilian Investment Platform (Plataforma de Investimentos do Brasil/BIP), which provides an investment ecosystem to address climate change, accelerate economic decarbonization, and promote green reindustrialization. Another part of the sources includes non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace Brazil and Instituto Akatu, which develops actions to raise awareness and engage society in conscious consumption. Academic research on digital activism and climate communication (Monteiro & Capelari, 2025; Celestino & Valente, 2022) further highlights the country's reliance on grassroots movements, influencers, and civil society organizations to raise awareness about sustainability.

For EU The European Commission's Communication Strategy for the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019), the Circular Economy Action Plan (European Commission, 2020), Eurobarometer surveys on digital and environmental awareness (Eurobarometer, 2021), and the European Environment Agency reports (EEA, 2021). are some of the main sources. They offer details on methodical, policy-based strategies for communicating about sustainability.

For Bulgaria, the focus is on emerging circular economy initiatives and their digital communication strategies. Key materials include the National Waste Management Plan 2021–2028 (MoEW, 2021), supporting documentation from NGOs and startups such as TexCycle and FoodObox, as well as academic reports (Dicheva and Simeonov, 2025; Pozzetto, E., Leoni, L., 2025) that highlight the need for innovation to address the challenges of the transition to a circular economy. Sector reports (CleanTech Bulgaria, 2022) provide additional context on the challenges of innovation and marketing in the circular economy.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Brazil

Brazil's environmental communication differs from the more formal, policy-driven approach often seen in Europe. It relies on grassroots movements, social media influencers, and informal online networks. Young people play a central role in this space (cebds). The Fridays for Future (FFF) youth-led movement, for example, has an active branch in Brazil that uses social media—especially Instagram—to organize protests and actions across the country. Shim (2024) describes it as a 'new narrator' and "one of the most significant communicators of climate change".

Environmental NGOs have also adapted to this digital style. Greenpeace Brasil describes its communication as a "different mode of campaigning," which is focused on storytelling and emotional connection (Greenpeace, 2020). Its 2024 annual report shows that the organization uses platforms like TikTok and works with influencers to spread sustainability messages and reach younger audiences (Greenpeace Brasil, 2024). These strategies reflect a clear move toward more engaging, story-driven communication.

At the same time, informal channels like WhatsApp and Telegram play a complex role. They are effective tools for organizations for spreading environmental messages, but they are also used to share misinformation and fuel political polarization. Research shows that discussions in these apps often mix environmental issues with broader "culture war" topics, including conspiracy theories and attacks on environmental groups (Santini et al., 2025). Similarly, analysis on Twitter activity during the 2020 Amazon fires also found evidence of automated accounts and propaganda distorting public debate (Salles et al., 2024).

3.2 European Union (EU)

The analysis of the major events concerned with the environmental issues organized in the EU and promoted through the digital media show that in the EU, sustainable development marketing is characterized by highly structured and policy-driven digital campaigns. Examples for this statement include the *EU Green Deal*

promotional videos, part of which include collaboration with UEFA campaigns to raise the awareness about Europe's climate and energy priorities. Another major event is the *#EUGreenWeek* campaign, which is part of the European Commission's communication strategy on sustainability and climate action (European Commission, 2021). Those events are disseminated through channels such as Twitter/X, LinkedIn, YouTube, and institutional websites, reflecting the EU's reliance on formal communication spaces (EEA, 2022). A defining feature of the EU communication in the last years is its reliance on science-based, fact-heavy messaging, which strengthens legitimacy and credibility but often results in weaker emotional appeal. This is highly supported by the way the European Commission is communicating its policy as "Supporting policy with scientific evidence. We mobilise people and resources to create, curate, make sense of and use knowledge to inform policymaking across Europe." (European Commission). But the findings of Rocca et al. (2024) on the evolution of the EU's Commission communication on Twitter show that the focus of EC communication has shifted substantially from economy-, finance- and governance-related topics, towards social policy, digital and environmental policy, and identity and that EC communication in the last few years has become less neutral (in favor of more positive sentiment), simpler, and more readable, all features which are associated with more accessible and engaging messaging (Rocca et al., 2024)

3.3 Bulgaria

In the last years public trust in Bulgarian institutions remains low, as confirmed by Alpha Research (2025). This lack of trust to the institutions is transmitted to all their communication efforts in the different sectors, like law, healthcare and in the circular economy and sustainable development issues as well. This emphasizes the need to search for good examples in practice.

In Bulgaria, digital marketing for sustainability is still emerging and fragmented. For example, the *FoodObox* mobile application uses gamification and influencer marketing to promote food waste reduction (FoodObox). *TexCycle's Eco Academy* provides online educational resources and an ecological calculator for consumers, combining awareness with interactive engagement (TexCycle). NGOs and startups, such

as *Biomyc*, have also adopted Facebook and YouTube storytelling campaigns to connect with audiences (*Biomyc*). Despite these promising practices, the overall landscape is limited by small marketing budgets, fragmented campaigns, and low reach beyond eco-conscious niches (*CleanTech Bulgaria*). As a result, circular economy initiatives often struggle to scale or enter mainstream consumer behavior.

The model used by Brazil emphasizes the strong influence of „bottom-up“ activism and online influencers on social media (Deslandes and Ferreira, 2025; Rossini et al., 2021). In contrast, the EU policy on the communication of the Sustainable Development Goals is characterized by structured, policy-oriented communication campaigns in favor of the European Green Deal and the Circular Economy Action Plan (European Commission, 2020). They are often led by public authorities and supported by EU funding programs, which place emphasis on communication and citizen engagement in the green transition (EEA, 2021). Bulgaria, as a small EU member state, illustrates both the opportunities and limitations of sustainable marketing. In the last few years, startups and non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria have begun to adopt the concept of a circular economy in their strategies like *CleanTech Bulgaria*, but regardless of this the consumer adoption and public awareness of the Bulgarian citizens are relatively low. This can be confirmed by Eurobarometer surveys conducted in 2021, which found that only 39% of the Bulgarians are familiar with the concept of a circular economy, in comparison to an EU average of 57%.

The findings highlight distinct regional approaches to digital sustainability marketing. To better understand their implications, the following analysis examines what works, what doesn't, and what lessons can be exchanged across contexts.

4 ANALYSIS

4.1 What works

In Brazil, success derives from grassroots mobilization and emotionally charged storytelling. Campaigns led by NGOs and influencers, particularly on Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, have successfully mobilized youth and built communities of practice

around environmental causes. This model demonstrates the power of narrative-driven activism in shaping collective behavior.

In the European Union (EU), the strength of sustainability communication lies in its structured, science-based, and credible messaging. By relying on institutional platforms and policy-backed narratives, the EU builds legitimacy and trust, which is a critical factor in countering skepticism and greenwashing

In Bulgaria, although consumer awareness remains relatively low, startups and niche digital platforms such as *FoodObox* and *TexCycle* provide innovative prototypes for scaling circular practices. Their integration of gamification, eco-education, and influencer outreach illustrates how resource-constrained actors can still create meaningful impact when strategies are targeted

4.2 What doesn't work

In Brazil, emotional messages have a positive effect, especially among younger people. However, the spread of misinformation creates an obstacle to long-term trust in sustainability campaigns.

Despite their respective strengths, all three contexts face challenges. In the EU, the heavy reliance on technical language and fact-based messaging often limits emotional engagement with citizens. This reduces the effect of campaigns compared to grassroots approaches.

In Bulgaria, the major barriers are low public awareness, resource limitations among SMEs, and cultural stigma associated with reuse or second-hand consumption. As a result, many circular marketing initiatives remain limited to eco-niches rather than spreading to the mass market.

Despite these challenges, valuable opportunities for cross-regional learning emerge, as strengths from one context can help address weaknesses in another.

4.3 Cross-learning opportunities

The comparative analysis also highlights mutual learning opportunities. For Bulgaria, adopting Brazil's grassroots storytelling and influencer-driven communication

could help mobilize younger audiences and normalize practices such as reuse and upcycling. At the same time, the EU could learn from Brazil's emotionally compelling narratives to strengthen the resonance of its otherwise fact-heavy communication strategies. Conversely, Brazil could benefit from EU-style institutional frameworks and verification mechanisms, which would help counter misinformation and provide stronger legitimacy to digital campaigns.

Taken together, these insights provide the foundation for broader conclusions about the role of digital and social media in shaping sustainable marketing and circular economy practices.

5 CONCLUSION

Digital and social media marketing is a strategic tool for advancing sustainability and promoting circular economy transitions. The comparative findings reveal different types of approaches: the European Union follows a top-down, institutionally driven approach, Brazil demonstrates bottom-up activism shaped by influencers and grassroots mobilization, while Bulgaria represents an emerging hybrid model, where SMEs and NGOs experiment with innovative but small-scale campaigns. Ultimately, these findings suggest that future global sustainability communication will depend on hybrid strategies that combine the institutional credibility of top-down campaigns with the power of grassroots storytelling and the adaptive creativity of local innovation.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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