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Marketing Review St.Gallen

The Role of Marketing in the Green Economy

Schwerpunkt

Drei Perspektiven auf Nachhaltigkeit

4xA² für ein grünes Marketing – Eine Weiterentwicklung des Marketing-Mix zur Förderung der grünen Transformation

Authentic Green Marketing – How Sustainability Influencers Advocate for Change

Brands for Future – A Framework for Sustainable Impact

50 Shades of Green – Assessing Sustainability Labeling

Nachhaltigkeit als Premium-strategie – geht das?

Driving Sustainability with Price Management – Innovative Approaches to Business Model Transformation

Spektrum

Aufbau touristischer Daten-ökosysteme – Erfolgreiche Koordination von heterogenen Anspruchsgruppen

Toward a Digital Empathy Framework – Evaluating User Experience Research Methods

Universität St.Gallen

Authentic Green Marketing

How Sustainability Influencers Advocate for Change

Prejudices about sustainability are widespread. This article shows how sustainability influencers seek to overcome these while remaining authentic, as they also collaborate with brands, thereby promoting consumption. The findings from 18 interviews and a netnography show that they apply four strategies: *Educating, exemplifying, endorsing imperfection,* and *embracing compassion* to address this.

Julia Gisler

Introduction

Understanding of sustainability in society is often unclear and influenced by misconceptions. Sustainable products, for example, are considered less strong and efficient (Mai et al., 2019), not masculine (Brough et al., 2016), less tasty (Berke & Larson, 2023), and overprized (Aschemann-Witzel & Zielke, 2017). Research also shows that consumers are generally skeptical regarding sustainability (*consumer sustainability skepticism*; Cho et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2023), especially regarding brand's sustainable marketing claims (Kim et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2012). These rather negatively tinted perceptions about sustainable products and services often result in consumers sticking with their established consumption habits rather than switching to more sustainable alternatives. However, in order to achieve a green transformation of the economy, it is not enough if only eco-conscious consumers consume sustainably; the broader mainstream must embrace sustainability too. To achieve this, social media marketing is a particularly effective way to reach consumers and foster behavioral change, as consumers have great trust in what influencers say (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ye et al., 2021). Furthermore, influencers can serve as role models that consumers tend to mimic (Ruvio et al., 2013). Moreover, due to the 'megaphone-effect' of social media, messages can be spread widely and rapidly (McQuarrie et al., 2012).

Because of their intrinsic motivation to achieve a greener society, some influencers even dedicate their whole profile to sustainability. These so-called 'sustainability influencers' are content creators who let their followers partake in their daily lives as sustainability-conscious consumers and advocate for change towards more sustainable consumption behaviors. In the process, they often incorporate brand collaborations into their content to promote more sustainable alternatives. However, in doing so, they also promote consumption, which contradicts the core principles of a sustainable future: to reduce overall consumption. Therefore, the following question arises: *How do sustainability influencers address consumer sustainability skepticism while remaining authentic?*

This study answers this research question through in-depth interviews with sustainability influencers, as well as a netnographic data collection.

Julia Gisler
Research Associate and Doctoral Candidate,
Institute for Marketing and Customer Insight,
University of St. Gallen (IMC-HSG)
julia.gisler@unisg.ch
https://imc.unisg.ch/team/julia-gisler/

Theoretical Background

Sustainability Influencers

Research distinguishes between many different types of influencers, which differ in the content they post and in the number of followers they have (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020). Regarding the number of followers, the differentiation between nano-, micro-, macro-, and mega- or celebrity-influencers has been established (Santora, 2021). Influencers who focus on a niche topic usually attract a relatively small following. Even though the number of followers can have a great influence on the impact of an influencer, influencers who focus on a specific topic are often perceived to be more trustworthy (Pittman & Abell, 2021). Furthermore, smaller influencers often maintain close personal relationships with their followers (Meiselwitz, 2015). Sustainability influencers (also known as *Greenfluencers* or *Ethical Influencers*) use their social media profiles to show their sustainable lifestyle to followers (Aboelenien et al., 2023; Kapoor et al., 2023). While prior research has addressed which strategies they use to connect with their audience (Aboelenien et al., 2020, 2023), we lack knowledge about how sustainability influencers calibrate their content to overcome skepticism towards sustainability among their followers.

When looking into more general research on influencer marketing, several key factors for content effectiveness have been identified (e.g., Belanche et al., 2022; DeVeirman et al., 2017). Among others, especially expertise (Lou & Yuan, 2019), inspiration (Ki & Kim, 2019), as well as aesthetics and similarity (Ki et al., 2020) have been explored. However, most research on influencer marketing has been done in the domains of fashion, beauty, and travel (Ye et al., 2021). Since the sustainability context is highly specific and particularly complex and prejudice-prone, as mentioned above, it is unclear whether the same factors are applicable to influencers in these domains. Furthermore, these success factors do not address how influencers overcome prejudices and therefore don't acknowledge the challenges sustainability influencers face.

Authenticity

A threat to influencers' authenticity due to the commercialization of their profiles through branded posts has already been acknowledged by researchers (Hu et al., 2020; Kozinets et al., 2010). The construct of authenticity often encompasses multi-faceted and complex meanings (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2020; Grayson

& Martinec, 2004). Authenticity in social media and branding contexts is often related to concepts such as perceived sincerity, trustworthiness, and credibility (e.g., Napoli et al., 2014). For influencers to achieve this, recent research has suggested primarily two strategies: *Passion* and *transparency* (Audrezet et al., 2020). These studies, however, focus on the contradiction between the independent opinions that followers demand from influencers and the paid brand collaborations in which influencers often engage. Sustainability influencers, however, face the contradiction between sustainability as a core value for themselves and promoting consumption by posting branded content and product ads (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). This is particularly challenging since the chief goal of sustainability is not about profit but rather about limiting consumption and making the best choices for the environment (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017). Therefore, sustainability influencers are expected to apply specific and unique strategies to remain authentic.

Methodology

The aim of this article is to shed light on how sustainability influencers seek to overcome prejudices about sustainability while remaining authentic. As the goal is to better understand how exactly they do this, an interpretative qualitative approach has been chosen. To answer the research question, the author therefore conducted and transcribed 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews with 14 sustainability influencers between June 2023 and March 2024.

Informants were asked to describe how they calibrate their content, especially regarding how they address sustainability. The interviews lasted 01:06:35 hours on average, with a total duration of 20:05:32 hours. The sample consists of only women aged between 27 and 44.

In addition to the interviews, data was also collected through a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2015). Here, the Instagram profiles of all informants were analyzed regarding what they included in their posts as well as saved stories. Posts up to three months before the interview were included in the netnographic data collection.

The data was coded into initial categories and analyzed for themes relevant to the investigation, especially content calibration strategies and how sustainability was incorporated and framed. To analyze the themes and strategies, a hermeneutic iterative approach was chosen (Spiggle, 1994).

Findings

The data suggests that sustainability influencers calibrate their content extremely consciously. To overcome skepticism and advocate for a more sustainable lifestyle among their followers, they apply two different strategies to their social media profiles: *Educating* and *exemplifying*. To remain authentic, they use the strategies of *endorsing imperfection* and *embracing compassion*.

How to overcome prejudices when advocating for sustainability? As outlined above, prejudices regarding sustainability are widespread (e.g., Aschemann-Witzel & Zielke, 2017; Mai et al., 2019). To overcome misconceptions (e.g., sustainable products being less effective; Mai et al., 2019), sustainability influencers rely on the strategies of *educating* and *exemplifying*.

Management Summary

1. Sustainability influencers face the challenge of overcoming prejudices about sustainability and remaining authentic while still collaborating with brands and thereby promoting consumption.
2. They address these challenges by applying the following strategies on their social media profiles: Educating, exemplifying, endorsing imperfection, and embracing compassion.
3. This is especially interesting for sustainable brands and those working to become more sustainable, as they aim to promote their products through influencer marketing.

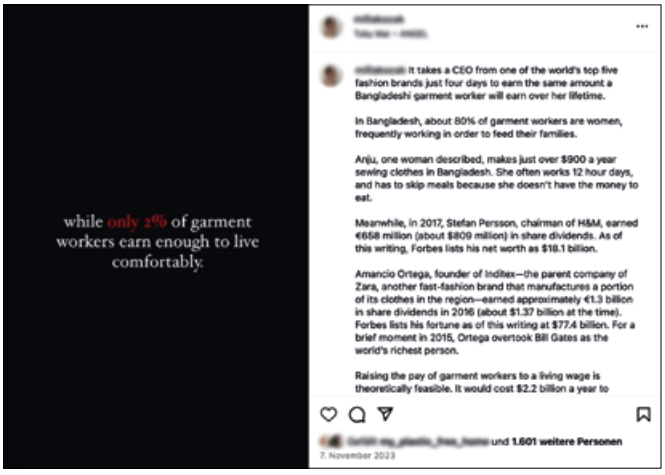

Figure 1: Screenshot of the video post from Maya that she posted on her Instagram profile on the 7th of November 2023 where she explains the labor pay practices of fast fashion brands.

Figure 2: Screenshot of the post from Andrea that she posted on her Instagram profile on the 9th of January 2024 where she shares a "Veganuary-Guide" to help her followers find vegan alternatives to everyday products.

Educating

Just as many scientific studies show, consumers' perception of sustainability is quite diffuse (e.g., Sokolova et al., 2023; Xu & Bolton, 2024). Even consumers who would like to engage in a more sustainable lifestyle often don't know the most sustainable option. This is something Maya noticed when she started as a sustainability influencer:

"What I realized with my first couple of reels that went viral is that a lot of people don't know the basic things that I thought everybody knows. What is plastic? What is fast fashion? What is this? What is that? Things that were very obvious to me."
(Interview, Maya)

This realization has led Maya to start from scratch with the sustainability content she posts online and incorporate a lot of informational content to educate her followers on sustainability in everyday life. Her posts often contain scientific statistics, such as the amount of production waste or labor pay of fast fashion brands (figure 1). Furthermore, when introducing sustainable alternatives to her followers, she underlines the sustainable benefits of the promoted product with facts and reasoning to inform her followers about sustainable alternatives.

This educational approach resonates with Jenna as her description of her content shows:

"I try to do a lot of educational posts. For example, explaining composting and how composting works. And how if a product says it's compostable you actually have to ask more of the company. Compostable doesn't mean you can throw it in your backyard bin, and it breaks down and makes soil. It means that it could be sent to an industrial facility. […] I'm trying to explain how to really read labels […] so that they [her followers] truly know what they're purchasing."
(Interview, Jenna)

Jenna's motivation is to inform her followers. With her background as a science teacher, she has the required skills to understand the scientific aspects of sustainability, which she then transforms into digestible pieces of knowledge for her followers who lack in-depth scientific knowledge.

With this educational approach to sustainability, sustainability influencers aim to talk about sustainability as it truly is rather than keeping misconceptions and prejudices alive. Most sustainability influencers hope to change consumers' minds through an objective and rational tactic. Contrary to just being experts like many influencers in other domains (e.g., fashion or travel, Lou & Yuan, 2019), sustainability influencers transfer complex knowledge about sustainability into easy-to-understand pieces.

Exemplifying

Even though many consumers know about sustainability, many struggle to transfer their knowledge into practice. Therefore, sustainability influencers not only rely on informational content but also take their followers along in their everyday lives and serve as an inspirational source. Lauren explains:

"I just try to be inspirational or try to inspire someone to maybe make a different alternative choice, for example, without it being like pointing fingers or forcing people to do things but just more like lead by example."
(Interview, Lauren)

Lauren wants to show more sustainable alternatives without proselytizing. In concrete terms, for example, this means collaborating with the national train line and pointing out when she takes the train rather than a plane to get from A to B. In doing so, she exemplifies how sustainability can look on a daily basis.

To make the implementation even easier, Andrea, for example, created a "Veganuary-Guide" for her followers, where she showed the existing vegan alternatives, how to cook them in a tasty way, and how easy it is to follow a plant-based diet (figure 2).

To conquer prejudices about sustainability being expensive and less convenient, Sally uses inspiration and gives concrete examples as a strategy as well. She explains:

"I just ride my bike down to the grocery store to pick up what I need. And it's actually faster than me going in my car because I don't have to wait at the traffic lights and all that sort of things. So, I just try to show daily habits that I'm doing, that are different from what most folks around here are doing but cost $0 and don't take any extra time."
(Interview, Sally)

By taking her followers along on her daily habits, Sally tries to inspire them to do the same and directly provides them with concrete actions. By pointing out the benefits of her sustainable alternative to mobility, she furthermore includes an educational aspect, as her choice of going by bike is cheaper and equally, if not more, convenient regarding the time it takes than taking the car.

With their exemplifying strategy, sustainability influencers further the conventional strategy of inspiring, identified by previous research (Ki & Kim, 2019), by giving concrete examples of how to tackle sustainability and thereby aim to overcome prejudices by leading by example.

How to remain authentic as sustainability influencers?
Advocating for sustainability on social media while still incorporating branded posts may seem contradictory. This is something sustainability influencers are confronted with daily. Jenna explains:

"It's such a juxtaposition, right? Because I'm talking about sustainability and then brands say we'd love to pay you to promote our products, but I don't really want people to buy more products. I want people to use what they have."
(Interview, Jenna)

Her explanation describes how contradicting she thinks it is to advocate for a more sustainable lifestyle while simultaneously promoting consumption by incorporating branded posts into her feed. Apart from simply being fully transparent (*transparency*; Audrezet et al., 2020) by clearly disclosing any branded post and showing their intrinsic motivation (*passion*; Audrezet et al., 2020) in the topic by declining many lucrative collaboration requests if not helpful for their mission, sustainability influencers apply the specific strategies of *endorsing imperfection* and *embracing compassion* to remain authentic.

Figure 3: Screenshot of the post from Maya that she posted on her Instagram profile on the 9th of January 2024 where she introduces herself as an advocate for imperfect environmentalism to new followers.

Endorsing Imperfection

Sustainability influencers often show themselves unmasked and as real as possible. Especially regarding their sustainable consumption habits, they often showcase their own struggles, embracing their own imperfection as the depiction of Maya shows (figure 3):

"I'm advocating for imperfect environmentalism. I try my best when I have sustainable options to consume sustainably. If not, I have no problem grabbing plastic bags if I've forgotten my bags, without feeling guilty. And that's what I'm promoting to people. Just try your best. Because it's impossible to live a perfectly sustainable lifestyle."
(Interview, Maya)

This shows that Maya tries her best to be as sustainable as possible in her daily life. However, she also doesn't fear showing her followers when she's not able to accomplish that. Instead, she aims to be as realistic as possible to remain authentic. The same goes for Yalle. She explains:

"I'm not perfect. I don't expect anyone I'm talking to, to be perfect. I'm not one of those 'collect my waste in a jar type of zero-waster'. I call myself minimal waste. I call myself vegan-ish."
(Interview, Yalle)

Yalle signals to her followers that even small changes in the direction of more sustainable habits are worth it and can make an impact. This shows that she encourages an achievable approach to sustainability rather than an all-or-nothing mentality. Because these sustainability influencers don't fashion themselves as perfect eco-advocates on their profiles, they remain humane and trustworthy, which they are convinced resonates with their followers.

Embracing Compassion

Sustainability influencers not only accept their own imperfection but make allowances for their followers. They acknowledge the uniqueness and individuality of everyone else and respect that not everyone has the same opportunities to live a sustainable life. Alina explains:

"I know it's difficult and I know you [her followers] have other things on your mind because you might be a single parent and have no money, but I'm here to show that it can be easy, and you can implement it step by step. Don't overwhelm yourself, you can't do everything right overnight."
(Interview, Alina)

Main Propositions

1. Prejudices about sustainability are widespread (e.g., expensive, ineffective).
2. Consumers are generally skeptical of sustainability, especially regarding sustainable marketing claims.
3. Brands can also integrate the strategies of educating, exemplifying, endorsing imperfection, and embracing compassion applied by sustainability influencers.
4. These strategies allow brands to overcome potential misconceptions about their sustainable products and foster consumer engagement regarding sustainability.
5. Brands can further improve their credibility regarding their sustainability efforts by collaborating with sustainability influencers.

When talking to her followers, Alina acknowledges their different life situations. She bears in mind that not everyone is as privileged as her to be able to afford considering sustainability aspects in their consumption. Therefore, she follows a soft approach regarding the transformation of consumers towards a more sustainable lifestyle and treats each individual follower and their approach with compassion.

Discussion and Implications

This study shows that sustainability influencers apply four strategies to address consumer sustainability skepticism while remaining authentic. Through *educating* they provide their audience with information and insights about various sustainability issues, strive to debunk myths, clarify misconceptions, and offer evidence-based knowledge to foster understanding and awareness. They further approach their followers through *exemplifying*. By showcasing positive examples, success stories, and simple solutions, they encourage their audience to adopt more sustainable behaviors and lifestyles. To remain authentic, sustainability influencers *endorse imperfection*. They acknowledge that the journey towards sustainability is not always smooth or perfect, and they openly share their struggles and failures. In doing so, they create a relatable and inclusive space for their audience to engage with sustainability. Additionally, *embracing compassion* is a key element of the approach taken by sustainability influencers. They demonstrate empathy towards their audience and understand that everyone is at a different stage in their sustainability journey. Overall, these strategies aim to encourage their followers to engage with sustainability in a non-judgmental and supportive environment.

For brands, it could be helpful to collaborate with sustainability influencers to improve their credibility regarding their sustainability efforts. Through their educational and exemplifying approach, sustainability influencers can target potential misconceptions about a certain product or brand. Brands can support these efforts by providing factual, transparent, and accessible information about their sustainable practices and products. Partnering with influencers who exemplify sustainable behaviors in everyday life can help demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of sustainable choices, thereby reducing perceived barriers to adoption. In the process, practitioners should encourage influencers to showcase their imperfections and struggles in their sustainability journey. This approach humanizes the influencers, making them more relatable and trustworthy, which can enhance the effectiveness of branded content. Thus, marketers should avoid pushing for perfection in messaging and instead embrace a more realistic portrayal of sustainability.

While research shows that influencers are generally perceived to be more trustworthy than brands regarding sustainability claims (Lou & Yuan, 2019), brands could still apply these strategies themselves, as they primarily target prejudices about sustainability to foster sustainable behavior, regardless of whom they are applied by. By incorporating educational and exemplifying aspects directly into the marketing strategy of their sustainable offerings, brands can counter consumers' struggles in translating their knowledge of sustainability into action. Thus, marketing campaigns should emphasize practical and relatable examples of sustainable behavior. More specifically, this could mean featuring real customers who have made small, manageable changes in their daily lives to be more sustainable, facilitated by products or offerings of the brand. To overcome prejudices, a campaign could also highlight practical use cases for sustainable products. For example, a campaign for a sustainable cleaning product could demonstrate how it effectively cleans various surfaces in the home, emphasizing that it's just as convenient and effective as traditional cleaners but with fewer environmental impacts.

Furthermore, by displaying their own imperfection and being compassionate with their consumers in their sustainability journey, they can show that they struggle just as much as their consumers, resulting in getting perceived as humane and on an equal footing as their consumers and thus potentially enhancing their authenticity as a player towards a greener economy. For

instance, brands could offer products and services that cater to different levels of commitment to sustainability, providing a range of options from fully sustainable products to those that incorporate some eco-friendly features. This allows consumers to choose based on their comfort level and budget. Another approach is to ensure that marketing language is supportive rather than preachy. Instead of making consumers feel guilty for not being perfectly sustainable, they should emphasize that every small step counts and encourage gradual improvement. For example, marketers could use phrases like "start where you are" or "every action helps" to create a positive, encouraging tone. When communicating their sustainable efforts, brands could highlight that they are "on the way" rather than emphasize what they have already achieved.

In conclusion, by partnering with sustainability influencers and integrating the four strategies themselves, marketing practitioners can authentically communicate the brand's sustainability efforts and effectively foster consumer engagement toward a more sustainable economy.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides insights into how sustainability influencers seek to overcome sustainability prejudices while remaining authentic, it falls short of a quantified answer to what exactly makes this approach so authentic and how successful these strategies effectively are. Furthermore, the study answers the research question from the perspective of sustainability influencers. It would be insightful to additionally incorporate a consumer perspective. This would shed light on the question of what makes sustainability influencers credible or authentic from the view of their followers. Additionally, future research could look deeper into the navigation process of sustainability influencers facing the challenge between their values for sustainability and the commercial nature of being an influencer on social media.

Lessons Learned

1. When aiming to promote the sustainability efforts of a brand, consider collaborating with sustainability influencers as they are authentic sustainability advocates on social media.
2. Sustainability influencers follow very individualistic approaches to calibrating their content. Therefore, they should be unrestricted in their content creation to remain their authentic selves.
3. In marketing campaigns, marketers should incorporate educational elements and applicable examples. They should also ensure a supportive language to emphasize compassion and avoid being perceived as patronizing.

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