

RESEARCH DISSERTATION

HOW CAN SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS SHAPE ETHICAL CONSUMPTION?

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1. Declaration of Originality

I declare that this dissertation has been prepared based on my own work and has not been previously submitted, in whole or in part, for any degree or other purposes.

Further, I have acknowledged all sources used in the text and have appropriately cited these in the reference section.

2. Acknowledgements

I wish to show my appreciation to my supervisor, Dr Mario Campana, who regrettably has decided to leave Goldsmiths behind on his continuing journey in the world of marketing. He left a most positive impact on his tutees, just like on the university as a whole.

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4. Abstract

This study aims to explore how ethical influencers can build authenticity with their followers, and how influencers can contribute to the wider adoption of ethical consumption and combating of unethical business practices. With both, ethical consumption and influencer marketing growing rapidly, this research is at the intersection of 2, rapidly evolving research fields. For this project, a qualitative approach was used, wherein influencers were interviewed in-depth on 4 key areas: Their background, their relationship with brands, their relationship with followers and their thoughts on ethical consumption. The interviews were then coded and analysed using grounded theory.

It was found that major factors contributing to authenticity in ethical influencers include staying true to their values, being on an eye-level with their followers and being sufficiently informed and competent on ethical and sustainability matters. Furthermore, a link between brand involvement and influencer authenticity was found. Original findings include a messaging strategy for ethical matters, and a generalised framework for relationships between ethical influencers, consumers and brands. Further research in this field is required, with a more consumer-centric attitude and with the help of multiple researchers to come up with more verifiable findings. With the areas of ethical consumption and influencer marketing evolving at a rapid pace, there is bound to be more to be discovered through further research.

5. Introduction

Influencer marketing is considered to be a relatively new form of marketing in the industry, which exhibits less marketing message resistance, higher audience penetration and a higher level of credibility and trust when compared to traditional forms of marketing (Kadekova and Holienčinová, 2018).

Ethical consumption is defined as consumption with concerns, such as fair-trade and production circumstances in mind – whereas the traditional model of consumption emphasises the “hedonic, self-interested outcomes, in contrast with the more societal centred viewpoint of ethical consumers” (Shaw and Shiu, 2002).

In a way, ethical consumption is primarily concerned with “saving capitalism from itself” by tackling the resource depletion which comes about as an inherent effect of the endless wants fuelled by the hedonic, capitalist consumer (Carrington et al., 2016; Shaw and Shiu, 2002).

This research dissertation sets out to address the questions: “How can ethical influencers build likability and credibility” and “what strategies may influencers exactly use to effectively promote ethical consumption in their fanbase?”

Ethical consumption can be considered a lifestyle, and research by Glucksman found that “social media influencers who promote a lifestyle brand are most successful interacting with consumers when they are authentic, confident, and interactive in their content”. Thus, the 1st research question relating to authenticity is stipulated to affect the tactics that influencers can use to promote ethical consumption in their fanbase (Glucksman, 2017).

Of course, this dissertation aims to see ethical consumption for what it is – taking a holistic approach on this topic and addressing the barriers to ethical consumption and the shift from a purely consumerist mindset to one that is more focused on sustainability. This research is thus set out to analyse the current barriers to sustainability that consumers are facing, and then relating these barriers to methods that influencers could use to essentially help overcome them.

To gain a rich insight into the world of sustainability and to help address the research questions, a qualitative approach will be used involving the thematic analysis of 6 interviews with Instagram influencers in the sustainability niche across different sub-niches, such as sustainable fashion and sustainable finance.

Additionally, the opinions stated by the influencers will be compared and contrasted with existing publications in magazines and blogs, as well as grounded in existing, academic literature.

6. Literature Review

6.1. Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is a relatively novel form of marketing, breaking away from the usual approach taken by brands. Rather than brands advertising to consumers directly, they enlist the help of *influencers* – individuals who can spread the message of an organisation to people that are in their target niche.

Traditional marketing is seeing less and less efficacy with today's consumers because there are “too many marketing messages bombarding prospects” that all “sound the same” (Brown and Heyes, 2008, p. 10). This is even more relevant with Gen Z, as expressed by one of the influencers taking part in this research dissertation:

“Being a digital native, I think in this world, more and more people can just see through companies so fast because we're just so used to seeing digital products and just everything being thrown at us all at once. It's a filter. We have a filter!”

– (MN, 2021)

Compared to search engine marketing (SEM), interest in influencers and influencer marketing has only been growing over the last 5 years, according to Google Trends data. Compare the worldwide change in search interest for “search engine marketing” (red) with “influencer marketing” (blue):

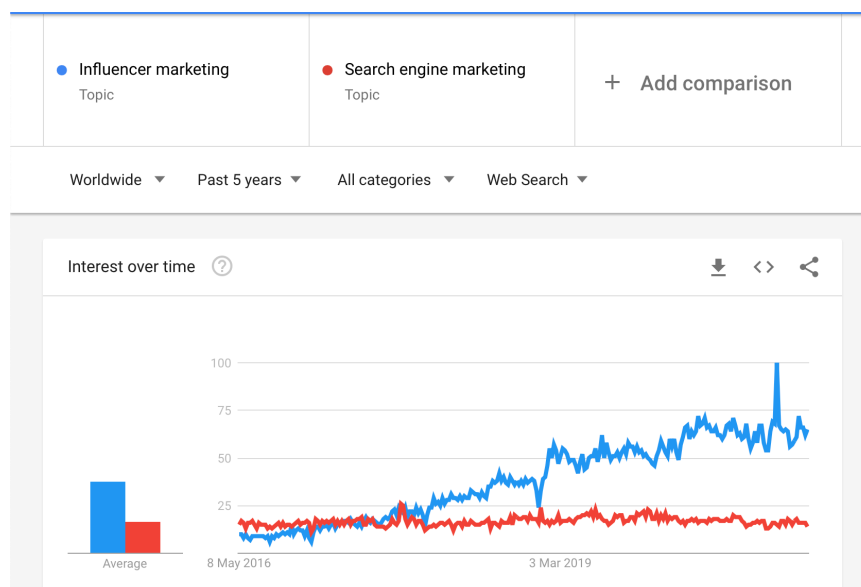


Fig. 1: Influencer marketing vs SEM interest, May 2016 – May 2021 (Google, 2021)

In the summer of 2017, the interest in influencer marketing surpassed that of search engine marketing, and ever since, this new form of marketing only continued to grow. From a brand's perspective, "working with influencers can be a tricky process, [yet] the returns on investment are unparalleled if well executed" (Woods, 2016).

Traditional advertising is faced with ever-growing consumer resistance to the message – and with an increasing number of consumers "blocking digital advertising, organizations will use digital influencers in their online promotional activities more widely", implying that "digital influencer activities will develop soon at the expense of digital advertising" (Wielki, 2020).

To understand why influencers are more effective in meaning transfer than traditional forms of marketing, in 2020, Trivedi and Sama (2020) have found that one important factor relating to the efficacy of influencers is to "help their followers with authentic and updated product information" (Trivedi and Sama, 2020). This validates the need for influencers to be authentic, which is why authenticity is a key variable in the research design of this dissertation.

Social media influencers are effective at both, persuasion/sponsorship of products that align with their values and dissuasion/discouragement of products that go against their values. This power that influencers online have is known as electronic Word-Of-Mouth (or eWOM for short). "Positive eWOM involves sharing positive experiences and feelings. In contrast, negative eWOM avoids others from making mistakes or purchasing the bad-quality product" (Wang et al., 2020).

Despite existing insights into the domain of influencer authenticity (Lou and Yuan, 2019), this research attempts to establish the ways that influencers can increase their credibility specifically within the niche of ethical consumption.

What made this research possible is the fact that it is now easier than ever to get in touch with influencers, as "companies increasingly abandon traditional celebrity endorsers in favour of social media influencers, such as vloggers and instafamous personalities" (Žák and Hasprová, 2020). In line with this, the scope of this research is limited to "instafamous" influencers on Instagram.

6.2. Authenticity and influencers

In the world of influencer marketing, one could define authenticity as influencers being transparent and true to themselves. Furthermore, there seems to be a positive link between the similarity of influencers to their followers and the purchase intention exhibited by their fanbase (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

The topic of authenticity in influencer marketing is a field in its own right. Prior research identified that influencers who are both, passionate about the brands they partner up with and also motivated by intrinsic factors (e.g. their values, desire to help) rather than extrinsic factors (e.g. fame and profits) are perceived to be more authentic (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Further to this, Audrezet et al. found an interesting concept known as “fairy-tale authenticity” (Audrezet et al., 2020), wherein influencers would naïvely perceive themselves to be authentic due to a passion for the brand they represent, whilst being primarily motivated by extrinsic factors such as profit.

Despite the obligation to inform their followers of good product choices, influencers also need to be careful not to get into any brand scandals due to negative eWOM. Ots and Abidin (2016) exemplified this through a brand scandal in the Singaporean telecoms industry, where influencers hired by a telecom provides were found to badmouth rival providers on their social media, and how this led to reduced perceived authenticity of both, the brands and influencers alike (Ots and Abidin, 2016).

One of the influencers interviewed for this dissertation mentions how one must be prudential when critiquing anyone as an influencer:

“...everyone's situation is very different and I think that you know, you've got to be careful of shaming anyone for what they do because you never know what their background is and stuff.”

– (JR, 2021)

6.3. Ethical consumption

The concept of *ethical consumption* is a paradigm shift from traditional consumerism, in that it “aims at preventing the injustices of global trade, such as child and low-paid labour, pollution of the environment, infringement of human rights and the inequalities in development caused by globalization” (Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004).

This consumption ideology aims to allow for the economy to thrive in the future, as non-ethical consumption – in the long run – might run the risk of biting the very hand that feeds by leading the economy to a collapse, due to spiralling environmental and societal issues. Thus, it can be said that ethical consumption is a form of consumption that is *sustainable*.

Even though the general gist of what ethical consumption is might be well-known, research by Urzua (2014) shows that understanding does not necessarily equal action, as there is a disparity between “green thinkers” and “green practitioners”, mainly for “financial reasons” (Urzua, 2014), that is, ethically produced goods being more expensive than those which are not ethically produced.

This price barrier is validated by a 2014 Ipsos survey on deterrents of ethical consumption in consumers:

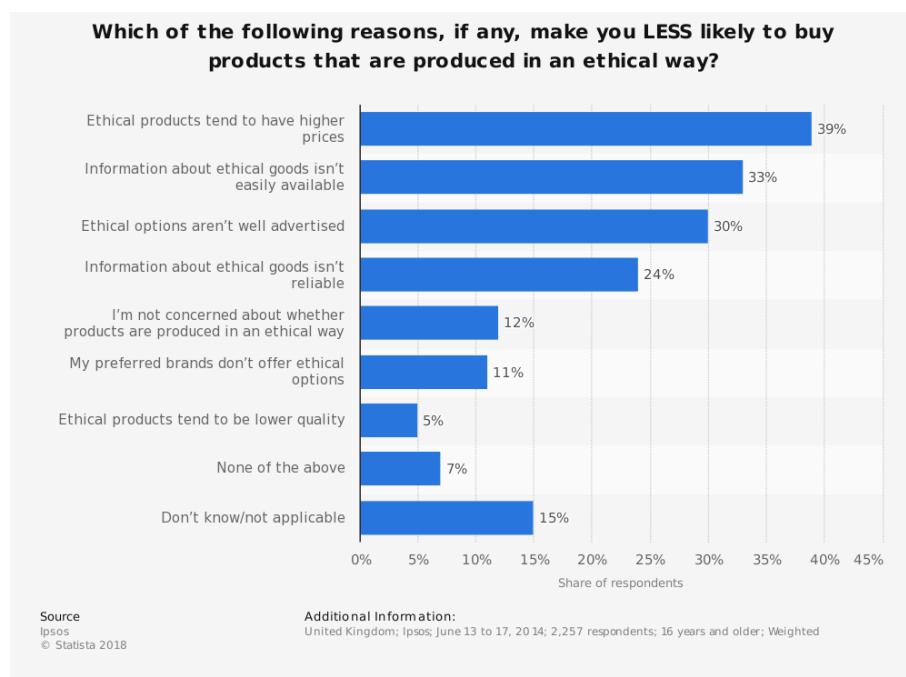


Fig. 2: Ipsos survey on deterrents of ethical products (Ipsos, 2014)

Despite multiple, apparent barriers to ethical consumption, the prospect of ethical consumption successfully embedding into society is realistic (Hussain, 2012), and not just a form of empty, social vigilantism.

Another, more covert factor playing into ethical consumption is that of the personal judgment of what the term “ethical” even means – research by Lu and Sinha in 2019 shows that consumers tend to reconstruct the boundaries of what ethical means to them when an ethical purchase is not vested with their self-interest (Lu and Sinha, 2019).

The same paper also finds that messaging which evokes the 3rd person perspective (e.g. “they/them”) is more likely to shift the consumer into an observational state than the 1st person perspective (e.g. “me/myself/I”), which helps consumers to see and judge ethical decision making more effectively (Lu and Sinha, 2019).

Influencers provide this 3rd person perspective to their audience: Rather than trying a product themselves, fans can vicariously do so through the influencer, thereby seeing things from a more external/objective perspective rather than a subjective perspective. This role of how values impact consumers and their connection with ethical influencers is also explored in this dissertation.

6.4. Ethical consumption and the consumer decision-making process

Before building an understanding of influencers in ethical consumption, it’s important to understand why consumers act the way they do. Every purchase is shaped by the consumer decision-making process (CDMP), which consists of 5 key stages:

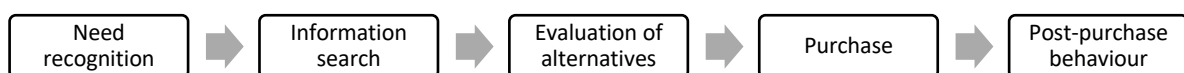


Fig. 3: Consumer decision-making process (Stankevich et al., 2017)

As discussed earlier, ethical consumerism is relatively new, and thus, people are only beginning to understand the implication of their choices and the availability of ethical alternatives. Solomon et al. describe the CDMP as being influenced by the degree of problem-solving a consumer has to go through before committing a purchase.

With ethical products – as mentioned earlier – being more expensive, they thus also require higher consumer involvement, exhibit less frequent purchasing and need more extensive thought than non-ethical products (Bray et al., 2011; Solomon et al., 2016). The issue of sustainability is a problem in itself that is hard to solve, and this resonates with the problem-solving model of consumer behaviour.

Implications of this are that consumers need a way to process the information related to ethical consumption actively, and influencers – engaging actively with their followers – could provide a potential way to engage consumers and help them move to more ethical alternatives.

Furthermore, existing research by Shaw et al. shows that the ethical consumer is very much driven by certain values specific to the domain of ethical consumerism, showing that the usual CDMP might not be enough to fully understand ethical consumerism. Some values identified as driving forces behind ethical consumption in their research are those of universalism related to prosocial concerns, consumer power and self-direction (Shaw et al., 2005).

It would be interesting to see whether these values emerge within the interviews with the influencers, as one could say that influencers could be considered “model consumers” for their specific niche. Thus, it would only be logical if they also exhibited the values found in the research by Shiu et al.

6.5. Greenwashing

As opposed to genuine, ethical consumption, the issue of greenwashing is rampant and poses a major barrier to ethical consumption, with consumers expressing a certain degree of cynicism towards green campaigns of major retailers thinking that it’s “just another marketing ploy” that’s “purely for profit” (Bray et al., 2011). As one influencer stated:

“Brands take advantage of consumers who don't have the time or the knowledge about sustainability and they just see, like, organic cotton, like, ‘oh well, it's organic – so it must be sustainable’, and I think, yeah, like, fast-fashion brands are taking advantage of this, hopping on the trend, but they're not doing anything to change their overall business model which is unsustainable.”

– (JR, 2021)

That's the key to understanding greenwashing, the fact that ethical consumption and sustainability are becoming big trends/buzzwords that major companies are jumping on, hoping to make quick money without recognising that ethical consumption isn't just a trend, but rather an entire paradigm shift in terms of consumer buying behaviours and also the way things are produced by brands.

Oftentimes, large companies use claims to help them sound environmentally friendly, without actually substantiating them in any way. Take Nestle, for instance: They've advertised one of their bottles as using "30% less plastic" (Aggarwal and Kadyan, 2011), but it isn't necessarily clear 30% less plastic than what originally.

Aggarwal and Kadyan (2011) also mention that elusive statements such as the above are only one form of greenwashing, and that ethical messaging without any, real underlying sustainability initiatives (i.e. greenwashing) could risk the reputation of brands, and is therefore not worth it in the long-run. The authors also suggest that consumers lack knowledge on greenwashing (Aggarwal and Kadyan, 2011).

Earlier on, it was mentioned that influencers help consumers find information about products (Trivedi and Sama, 2020), and that cynicism due to greenwashing was a major barrier to ethical consumption (Bray et al., 2011). It would thus be interesting to see how influencers approach this issue and how they help to mitigate the negative effects of greenwashing on buying behaviour regarding ethical consumption.

6.6. Impulse buying

Impulse buying is a major driving factor when it comes to consumer decisions. Even ancient, renowned philosophers of the likes of Plato and Aristotle already knew about the power of impulse – *akrasia* (Kalla and Arora, 2011). Today, this concept is known as System 1 thinking, as coined by acclaimed marketer Daniel Kahneman:

"Although System 2 believes itself to be where the action is, the automatic System 1 is the hero of the book."

– (Kahneman, 2012, p. 21)

Here, Kahneman states how most of our decisions are driven by System 1 thinking (impulsive) rather than System 2 thinking (thought-out and coordinated), and how this is where the big money is (with System 1 thinking being “the hero of the book”, in Kahneman’s words).

This is interesting, as Revlon-Chion et al. found – just last year in May of 2020 – that social media influencers significantly increased the likelihood of consumers impulse buying fast-fashion, as compared to when no influencers were involved (Revlon-Chion et al., 2020). Influencers are so powerful in triggering impulse buying that – in the author’s words – they even “could be dangerous”.

The same research also finds that social media influencers “can be used as role models of sustainable consumption” (Revlon-Chion et al., 2020), through impulse buying. Despite intuitive thought that the ethical consumer might be more thoughtful of their purchases and is thus more likely to invoke System 2 over System 1 thinking, research by Bae (2011) shows that impulse buying is not attenuated in ethical consumers (Bae, 2011).

7. Methodology

7.1. Data protection measures

All interview participants have been briefed that their information will only be accessible to individuals directly involved in the research (i.e. researcher and supervisor) and that the interviews might be processed through 3rd party services, such as transcription and qualitative analysis services.

The identities of the participants have been pseudo-anonymised to the highest extent possible. As such, any names or identifying information have been redacted, and participants are instead identified through their initials (Saunders et al., 2015). All raw data is due to be removed from the researcher’s devices and accounts by June 2021.

7.2. Interview guide

An interview guide was set up with 4 overarching categories (see Appendix A):

1. Background of the influencer
2. Relationship with brands
3. Relationship with fans
4. Thoughts on ethical consumption

All of the questions were open-ended, as the design of this research dissertation aims to establish common themes in the way influencers act towards their followers and brands to unearth the exact mechanisms through which influencers can build authenticity in the field of ethical consumption and also help the wider adoption of the ethical agenda.

The way the interview guide was designed allows not only for understanding the relationships between the influencer and brands and followers but also gives an insight into the understanding of the topic of ethical consumption by the influencers, as well as information on their backgrounds in sustainability.

For this research, a semi-structured approach was used, which allows for in-depth exploration of the topic (DeCarlo, 2018).

7.3. Influencer outreach

According to a survey by the leading authority on Millennial and Gen Z marketing YPulse, Instagram is the most popular platform for Gen Z (YPulse, 2020). Influencer marketing is also – for the first time – gaining unforeseen traction with Gen Z (Wielki, 2020). Thus, Instagram seemed like a good platform to reach out to influencers within the sustainability/ethical consumption niche.

Instagram offers search by hashtags, and this came in helpful during the outreach process. Examples of sustainability-related hashtags are:

- #ethicalconsumer
- #zerowaste
- #savetheplanet
- #sustainablefashion

Through seeing which hashtags were used for the posts, the actual list is much larger, as this helped expand the reach of potential influencers to be interviewed.

The exact, step-by-step outreach process went by as follows:

1. Enter the ethical hashtag (e.g. #ethicalconsumer) into Instagram search.
2. Go through the “Top Posts” section, vet profiles for suitability – if posts seem to have high engagement and follower count is >1000, the account can be considered as a nano-influencer (1k – 10k followers) (Wielki, 2020).
3. Send outreach message via DM to the influencer, if the profile indicates outreach by email only, send a message to indicated email address.
4. After having obtained the email of the influencer, send them an email with the Interview Information Pack consisting of the Participant Information Sheet, an Interview Consent Form to be read, signed and returned by the influencer and a link to a Doodle calendar to book an interview slot, which automatically creates a Zoom invitation upon booking (due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online through Zoom).
5. Once the influencer has returned the signed Interview Consent Form and booked an interview slot, the actual Zoom interview can take place, which is then recorded and saved.

Furthermore, each influencer was given 3 days to respond to the outreach message, with 2 follow-up messages each separated by 3 days. A minimum of 10 influencers per day were contacted over 2 weeks.

7.4. Transcribing the interviews

Manually listening to the interviews and transcribing them verbatim is a time-consuming task, so the help of artificial intelligence was used to speed up the process.

The interviews were each uploaded to YouTube as private videos, that is, interview audio with a black screen (NB: private videos are *not* accessible externally and are only visible to the account holder, so data privacy was still respected). YouTube then generated closed captions for the interviews, which were used as a starting point for transcribing the interviews. Mistakes and punctuation were corrected manually (see *Fig. 4*):

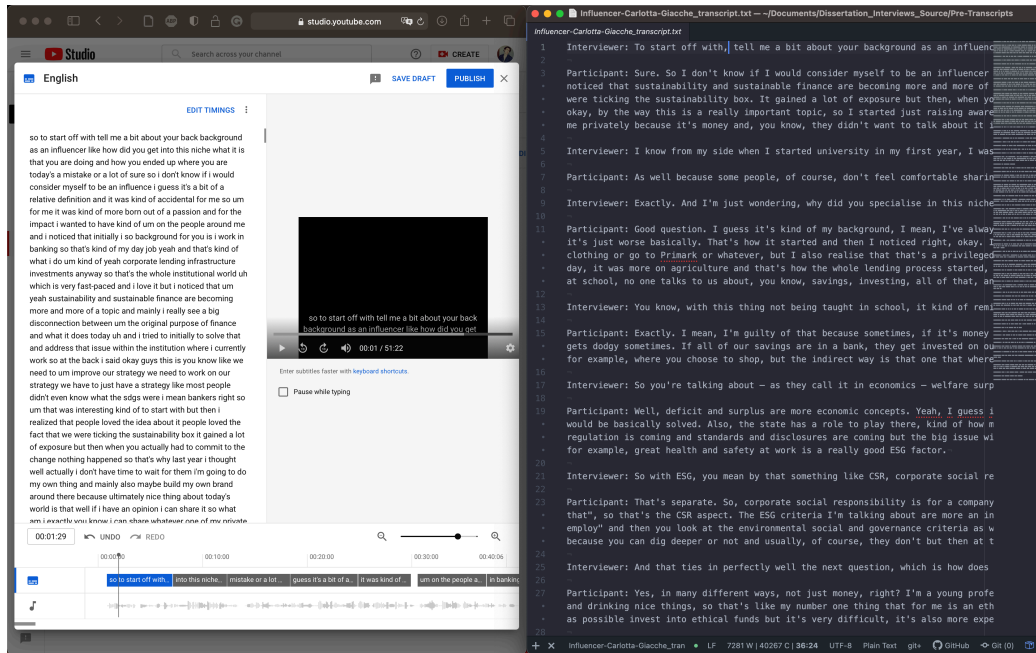


Fig. 4: Computer-aided interview transcription

7.5. Coding of the interviews

In qualitative research, a *code* is defined as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2009). When coding, one can do so either manually, or with the help of computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS).

The university provides access to NVivo 12, so this was used as the CAQDAS of choice for coding the interviews once all of them have been transcribed verbatim. Coding was done in 4 stages:

1. **Pre-coding:** Arranging the interviews, highlighting relevant concepts
2. **Open coding:** Line-by-line, finding themes and core concepts
3. **Axial coding:** Grouping the concepts into categories
4. **Selective coding:** Amalgamating categories into themes

(Vollstedt and Rezat, 2019)

7.6. Reality checks

To ensure that the data in the interviews is accurate, the claims made by the influencers have – where possible – been cross-referenced with opinions garnered through secondary research from blogs and the press.

Those points that are sufficiently substantiated are then grounded in academic literature to draw empirical conclusions. The entirety of the qualitative research approach used for this dissertation is known as grounded theory (Pandit, 1996).

One thing to note is that although all precautions have been put in place to ensure that the data is reliable and credible (e.g. use of CAQDAS, coding according to a thematic framework, sticking to the interview guide as closely as possible), the saturation of the data couldn't be guaranteed since the COVID-19 pandemic only allowed limited access to influencers, purely through online means. This – consequently – resulted in a smaller sample size of 6 interviews than the conventionally desirable 12 (Braun and Clarke, 2016).

For purely qualitative research such as this, triangulation with colleague researchers and participant validation would have led to increased validity of the data presented. Time and assignment-specific constraints – however – made these techniques infeasible for this dissertation (Torrance, 2012).

8. Findings

First, a quick reminder on what the research questions are:

1. How can ethical influencers build authenticity?
2. What strategies may influencers exactly use to effectively promote ethical consumption in their fanbase?

8.1. Influencer authenticity

8.1.1. Enablers of influencer authenticity

Relating to the 1st research question, we find that influencers have multiple ways of building authenticity with their followers. The most prominent way of building authenticity here is an attempt to truly stick to their values and be themselves:

“You have to be honest with yourself and with the people that you showcase [brands] to and you have to stay true to yourself and your values.”
 – (CG, 2021)

Furthermore, the influencers seem to be careful to not only stick to their values but to portray themselves veraciously to their followers by being transparent themselves:

“The only way to be authentic and likeable is to have content that is just you as a person outside of, like, what you do.”

– (MN, 2021)

Next, we see influencers having a duty to educate themselves on all things related to sustainability, thereby making them a more well-informed (and credible) source:

“[Influencers] need to do due-diligence before they are promoting a product, for example, what does Fairtrade actually mean and what can brands get away with without Fairtrade?”

– (HB, 2021)

Some of the participants, as exemplified, are even criticising other influencers regarding their lack of research and self-education on sustainability. This self-education seems to occur through various methods, ranging from following online sources talking about ethical consumption, to researching brands and certifications related to ethical practices and sustainability.

In terms of ensuring that brands fit the values of the influencers and thereby support the influencer’s authenticity, a few key areas have been identified which the influencers are looking out for in brands. Some criteria are brand transparency, specifically brands disclosing their full supply chain, the small steps and processes they take to achieve sustainable goals, and fully disclosing their ethical certifications and sustainability initiatives.

Furthermore, influencers attempt to make themselves authentic and likeable by maintaining eye level with their followers:

“I want there to be friendships rather than a power dynamic, I feel like it's to some degree inevitable.”

– (NN, 2021)

Then again, this power dynamic is – as quoted above – inevitable, and influencers seem to be well-aware of their power as opinion leaders to spread a message:

“I think anyone with a platform – whether they've got 500 followers or... because, if you think, if you fill a room with 500 people then that's a lot of people. Especially influencers with, like, 5 million people.”

– (JR, 2021)

Half of the influencers mentioned that making time for their followers is a key strategy to not only keep them up-to-date but also to ensure that they can build that solid connection with their followers. Note the use of more time-consuming ways of engagement – such as Instagram Lives and DMs – over standard posts:

“Instagram Lives are very useful because you have, a free webinar, people pop in and out when they want so that's helpful and of course private messages are the ones that are helpful because ultimately, you spark the questions and the interest through your posts and your stories and then privately in your messages people say ‘oh okay, so I saw you wrote about that so I have this and this and this so how can I work with that’, that's kind of how engagement works for me.”

– (CG, 2021)

Especially Instagram Live seems to be a great way to not only show their real selves for the influencer but to also educate themselves on certain subjects through conversations with their followers:

“Instagram Lives are so much fun because it's live and people can comment and interact, and so when we have these conversations, the guests are always talking about an interesting topic that they're an expert in and you get people who have all sorts of questions, they're excited to be there.”

– (DH, 2021)

What's also worth noting is that influencers were found to prefer working with smaller brands where they can get information from the owners directly over larger brands. This also adds to the authenticity of the influencers, as they're more likely to be credible in the products that they're sponsoring if they know who is behind these products.

What emerges from this research is a “chain of authenticity”, so to speak, where it all starts with the brand being transparent, which then allows the influencer to also be transparent with their followers.

Thus, brand transparency (which is part of the influencer being knowledgeable and well-informed) is an antecedent to influencer authenticity, as long as that influencer is working for the brand (more on this in the next section, when brand inauthenticity is a barrier to influencer authenticity will be discussed).

To summarise the key contributors to authenticity in ethical influencers:

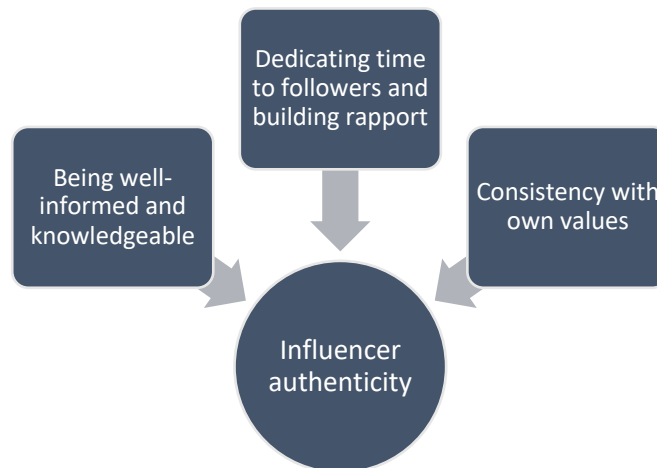


Fig. 5: Identified factors of influencer authenticity

8.1.2. Barriers to influencer authenticity

Of course, the understanding of influencer authenticity would be incomplete without looking at the barriers which could prevent this authenticity from being established. Although the original interview guide did not touch upon barriers and merely asked the influencers for their definitions of authenticity, codes have emerged implying some of these barriers.

“I think that influencers can be complicit in greenwashing because if someone that you think is knowledgeable is, like, ‘hey, it’s sustainable, it’s sustainable and you just trust them then yeah, obviously people are going to buy it and that sort of thing.’”

– (JR, 2021)

Practically speaking, the “chain of authenticity” gets broken here, and there was unanimous consensus on how and why influencers might become complicit in greenwashing and/or the promotion of unethical brands. One of the participants summed it up in the best way possible: “whenever profit enters the equation, the possibility of exploitation becomes present” (NN, 2021).

When ethical influencers give in to the temptation of deals and sponsorships with unethical brands, their reputation can quickly dissipate, as exemplified:

“There’s a bunch of people that started in sustainability that now do warehouse PR, for example, or there are a few other brands that they’re doing now and, just like, well, I don’t trust you anymore, and so I unfollow those people. They might get followers from other types of people but it won’t be the sustainable community anymore because they’ve lost that kind of credibility.”

Another issue that is deep-rooted in the platform of Instagram itself is that the platform is becoming more and more commercialised. “On Instagram, they always have a shop option and it has become a marketplace” (CG, 2021), so essentially, Instagram is “not a social media app anymore, it’s an advert, the whole thing is an advert” (HB, 2021).

This makes it hard for followers to tell apart genuine and sponsored content, so ethical influencers must be ever-more careful to stay authentic even when brands might be “paying [them] big dollars” (JR, 2021).

8.2. Strategies for promoting ethical consumption

The key strategy of being authentic has been defined by the previous findings, but ethical influencers can use strategies specific to the niche of ethical consumption and sustainability to advance the agenda. The 2 distinctive categories of influencer strategies identified are brand-facing and consumer-facing.

8.2.1. Consumer-facing strategies

Multiple participants have condemned the fact that so many ethical influencers tend to only speak of the problems, without actually animating the consumer to take action. People are “tired of hearing about how everything is wrong” and want to find ways to start “fixing things” (MN, 2021). So, it’s not just about the ethical issues themselves, it’s about “showing actionable tips as well” (JR, 2021).

Expanding on getting to solutions, participants have also expressed concern about the fearmongering present in such a large portion of ethical influencers’ messaging. One influencer stated that “when people are scared they stop thinking clearly and oftentimes, they just freeze and they don’t ng about the problem” (DH, 2021).

Consequently, the findings show that a fear/panic mindset seems to be contradictory to a solution-oriented mindset.

Last but not least, influencers need to give “not massive steps but just little steps” to their followers in terms of becoming more ethical. Example: “You can’t just say ‘oh, don’t buy anything’ because people are always going to buy stuff. This is supported by most of the influencers mentioning the role of consumer habits, and it is common knowledge that changing habits requires small steps (Nawaz, 2020). Some of the identified consumer habits in the interviews are overconsumption, impulse-buying and social shopping.

8.2.2. *Brand-facing strategies*

Ethical influencers can use their power to not only affect their fanbase but to also keep brands accountable for their ethical practices. Even when just being approached by brands, ethical influencers can “ask for a sustainability report” (HB, 2021) and certain “baseline questions” (NN, 2021) to help them stay true to their values, and say “no” when brands seem to be secretive or unethical.

Another brand-facing strategy influencers can use is “using their voice and their platform to speak out against [...] injustices” (NN, 2021). They could actively be “bringing to light problems that are happening with garment workers” (HB, 2021) or how “how people are treated in factories” (MN, 2021), for instance.

8.3. Consumer barriers to ethical consumption

Before going into a discussion of the findings, it is important to understand the main barriers to ethical consumption as narrated by the influencers:

- **Knowledge barrier:** “People still need a lot of education in terms of what are more sustainable options” (DH, 2021).
- **Greenwashing:** “It’s not fair that consumers can’t just find something that is ethical and they’re being lied to” (JR, 2021).
- **Price barrier:** “The ethical side of things is a lot more expensive than cheaply made stuff, so that is a problem” (HB, 2021).
- **Over-consumption:** “We have too much stuff. We consume way too much, so much, so much unnecessary things and as an actual consumer” (MN, 2021).

- **Economic myopia:** “In the Western world, often we think that we’re protected because we assume that certain things only happen to the developing world. Well, actually no, it’s hitting very close to home and so it doesn’t matter how wealthy you are, where you’re from” (CG, 2021).
- **Time and convenience:** “The fact that whatever we have around is convenient is a big reason why people shop the way they do” (NN, 2021).

9. Conclusion

9.1. Theoretical implications

The findings of this research present a plethora of theoretical implications, both complementing and adding to the existing theory around ethical influencers.

For any strategies to work, influencers too – first and foremost – be authentic, since a lack of authenticity (i.e. credibility and likability) would result in a heightened message. Existing literature indeed confirms this research’s findings that “SMIs’ authenticity can be threatened by brands’ encroachment into their content” (Audrezet et al., 2020).

That is, an influencer might perceive the content of a brand to be authentic, and would thus reproduce the fake/greenwashed message of the brand in an authentic light (what Audrezet et al. call “fairy-tale authenticity”). If the ethical influencer is wilfully complicit in greenwashing in exchange for profit, one could say that the influencer exhibits “fake authenticity” (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Fig. 5 shows the 3 factors contributing to influencer authenticity which have emerged from the interviews. These are in line with Zenger & Folkman’s 3 elements of trust:

- Being well-informed and knowledgeable = Good Judgement/Expertise
 - Dedicating time to followers and building rapport = Positive Relationships
 - Consistency with own values = Consistency
- (Zenger and Folkman, 2019)

Furthermore, being well-informed helps influencers stay out of potential brand scandals, which also helps them maintain authenticity in the eyes of their followers (Ots and Abidin, 2016).

In terms of helping consumers to overcome the barriers of ethical consumption, influencers are a great tool to help trump the knowledge barrier by giving consumers digestible, small steps on how to be more ethical. Existing literature confirms that overcoming habits (in this case those contributing to unethical consumption) is easier when small steps are taken (Nawaz, 2020).

Negative eWOM (Wang et al., 2020) is a powerful tool that influencers can use to call out brands that are committing unethical practices. This is reliant upon influencers themselves being well-informed, committed to ethical consumption and with healthy relationships to their followers (in other words, the influencer being credible).

That being said, the findings confirm that authenticity and trust are the building blocks for the other strategies (since an influencer relies on having good relationships with their followers, and inauthenticity/distrust implies negative relationships, thus rendering any communication with consumers ineffective).

Through showcasing ethical brands and giving solutions to ethical issues, influencers can trigger more impulse buying in consumers of ethically-produced goods, which last longer and thereby require less replacing. This helps to tackle the issue of overconsumption, ironically by increasing consumption of things that last thereby shifting consumer choices from conventional to more ethical choices.

This research has managed to expand existing literature on authenticity within the context of ethical consumption, as well as provide an exploratory, qualitative angle to the intersection of the 2, relatively new fields of ethical consumption and influencer marketing. It has also managed to establish authenticity as a prerequisite for ethical influencers to effectively communicate with their followers, and how this authenticity can be gained or lost depending on brand involvement.

9.2. Practical implications

Overcoming the price barrier is all about exposing unethical practices and showcasing ethical brands. As demand for ethical brands will increase, one can only hope that the market mechanism will reduce prices of ethical products, but what is clear is that social media influencers could be catalysts in this process.

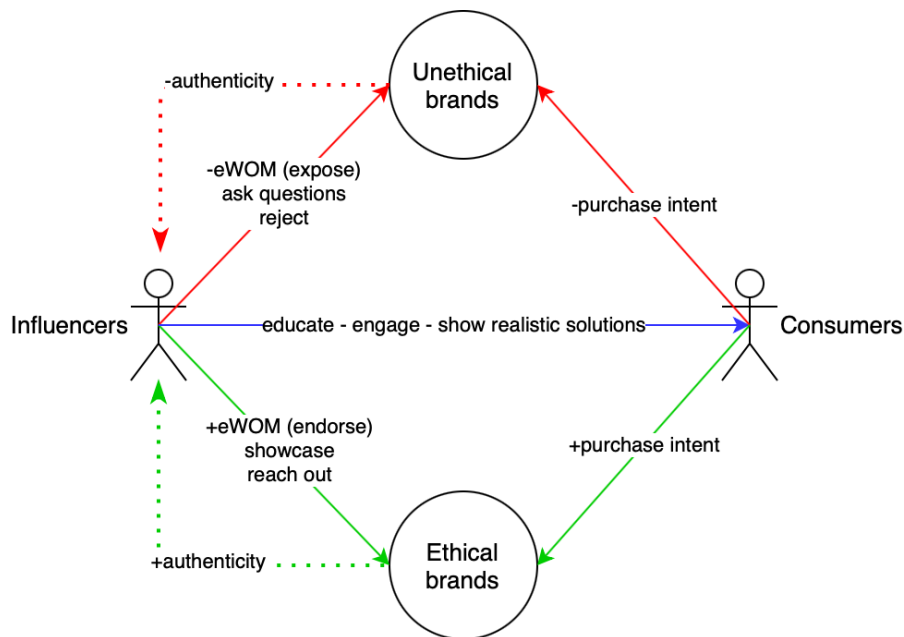


Fig. 6: Conceptual diagram of relationships between influencers, consumers and brands

To translate the concepts into praxis, ethical influencers can draw upon their various techniques to educate and engage consumers by showing them realistic, step-by-step solutions to overcoming ethical issues.

Furthermore, an ethical influencer's authenticity would only increase if they partnered with ethical brands which aren't greenwashing, as that would build the reputation of the influencer. Conversely, working with unethical brands could quickly destroy the authenticity of influencers.

If ethical influencers choose to turn away opportunities for quick profits from unethical brands and instead endorse and showcase ethical ones, then that's already a good 1st step. Even better would be to ask the unethical brands questions – why couldn't they do things more ethically? brands outright violate ethics, such as by providing garment workers with harsh conditions, expose these acts accordingly.

An "economic myopia" was one of the identified barriers to ethical consumption. This is defined as a parochial worldview, wherein issues in the Orient are blatantly disregarded by the occidental consumer mentality. Through exposing such injustices to followers, influencers could provide an eye-opening insight for many who would otherwise be unaware of the global nature of production.

Practically speaking, consumers are so deeply entrenched in their habits that it is only normal that there is some form of resistance to ethical consumption, as we keep finding comfort in the likes of fast fashion and fast food. Thus, ethical influencers underlie an obligation to ask the relevant questions during this time when consumers are undergoing a massive paradigm shift in their consumption patterns. Understandably, the consumers are confused and need some sort of guidance.

Being well-informed also means reaching out by themselves and doing the necessary research to find ethical brands, and offering to showcase them. In fact, with Gen Z and onwards becoming increasingly reliant on influencer marketing, ethical brands have a great opportunity to become more known in the market through them.

Another practical implication is that influencers must be close to both, the brand they represent and their followers. Building closeness with the brand comes in the form of ensuring that the influencer's values match with those of the brand, and being close to the followers comes down to being both, authentic and packaging the message in a way that can be easily digested – using positive words rather than fearmongering.

10. Closing remarks

This research dissertation, despite providing rich insights into the discussed subject matter, failed to address the consumer side of the story is not including any interviews/questionnaires from consumers. Further research is needed to understand this topic in more detail from a consumer-centric perspective, rather than from an influencer-centric one.

A qualitative investigation with a larger sample size and coding by multiple researchers to ensure better validity of the data and a higher data saturation would carry this research even further.

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12. Interview Guide – Influencers (Appendix A)

1. Background of the influencer (10 mins)
 - a. Tell me a little bit about your background as an influencer.
 - b. Why did you decide to specialise in the niche of ethical consumption?
 - c. How does ethical consumption manifest in your daily life?
2. Relationship with brands (20 mins)
 - a. What does an “authentic brand” mean to you?
 - b. How would you define “ethical consumption”?
 - c. Explain to me your process behind choosing which brands to partner-up with.
 - d. Why do you think should brands be mindful of ethical production?
 - e. In what ways do you attempt to shape ethical production in the ____ industry?
 - f. Tell me about your favourite ethical brands and why you like them.
3. Relationship with fans (20 mins)
 - a. Tell me a bit about the interactions between yourself and your fanbase.
 - b. As an influencer, how do you build credibility and likability?
 - c. How do you create awareness of ethical consumption in your fanbase?
 - d. In what ways do you interact with your fans?
 - e. Tell me a bit about the conversations you’ve had with your fans.
 - f. How do your fans interact with your content?
4. Thoughts on ethical consumption (20 mins)
 - a. What are your thoughts on the consumption patterns in our society?
 - b. How do you think can influencers increase ethical consumption in consumers?
 - c. What exactly can influencers do to stop unethical business practice?
 - d. What would deter you from choosing an ethically produced alternative?
 - e. Who do you feel is responsible for ensuring ethical consumption?
 - f. Why do you feel is ethical consumption important in the long-run?