

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Master's degree in Management from the Nova School of Business and Economics.

How can influencers change consumer behavior in sustainable consumption?

Jalla Hertoghe

Work project carried out under the supervision of:

Professor João Marques Gomes

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to investigate the strategies influencers should adopt to drive actual change towards sustainable consumption habits. The research was done through qualitative research methods through eighteen interviews from three different samples: social media influencers, customers, and marketing directors. The key findings are that authenticity, transparency, proximity, and credibility are crucial. The value of time, price, facts, and numbers are also key in convincing followers to purchase sustainable offerings. Content formats and the way of presenting brands are also playing a role in the ability to influence change. Influencers should consider this when addressing their audience.

Keywords: Social media influencers, followers, marketing directors, sustainable consumption

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1. Introduction

Background and Relevance of the Topic

Sustainable consumption. The founding of the “sustainable consumption” term arose during the Earth Summit of 1992 (Cohen, 2010). Ever since, this term has occupied an increasingly important role in how people think and consume. Indeed, sustainable consumption and production patterns are one of the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda of 2030 (United Nations, Agenda 2030). Sustainable development includes different strategies to obtain social, economic, and environmental goals. Thus, sustainable consumption contributes to one or multiple conditions (World Bank, 2003). Studies have shown that a gap is still identified due to a lack of awareness among consumers. There is an apparent lack of accessible and trustworthy information about sustainable consumption, accessibility of sustainable goods, trust, and appropriate governmental rules (Groening *et al.*, 2018). Tomkins *et al.* (2018) have provided ways to bridge this gap by educating customers and providing sustainable suggestions and alternatives along with sustainable advertisement.

Importance of social media for Companies. Digital transformation has weakened traditional media, and there has been a change in behavior following the growing presence of social media networks. This has given birth to the power of digital marketing (de Brito Silva *et al.*, 2020). Social media have strategic branding importance to inform, entertain, and remind consumers about a specific brand or product. Researchers have demonstrated that 54% of consumers' decision habits are influenced by social media interactions (Lovett and Staelin, 2016). Indeed, social media drives sales, push impulse purchases, and contribute to marketing intelligence sources about customers' interests and attitudes (Lindsey-Mullikin and Borin, 2017). Furthermore, social media platforms have pivoted the way consumers act toward marketing

information as it has become omnidirectional, enabling everyone to act as a personal brand (Nistor *et al.*, 2018). On social media, consumers are very much linked to each other creating electronic word of mouth about products and services (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). Thus, allocating essential resources to social media and its online communications is fundamental for marketers to keep up with marketing strategy trends. In other words, online presence on social media is indispensable to staying competitive, and this has been proven by the growing number of companies having a social media presence nowadays.

Influencers marketing. The growth of social media has given birth to social media influencers (SMI) who produce content and interact with their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Sponsored content is when a social media influencer receives a financial reward to endorse a brand to their community. SMIs then have the responsibility of sharing content about the advantage of the product or service, and their functionality to increase the popularity and desirability of the product. The success of influencer marketing strategies will usually be analyzed in conversion rates and numbers of purchases. The return on investment is generally examined through attributed promotion codes given to each influencer to analyze the conversion rates of each influencer the company works with. Indeed, as SMIs share their personal experiences with brands or products, they have become crucial voices for brands. Indeed, they influence their followers by promoting a product's attributes and convincing them why it is worth purchasing it. They became essential agents for brand exposure and gave remarkable results by converting into engagement and sales.

Aim of the Study

As discussed previously, there is common knowledge among researchers that social media influencers are generally positively related to consumers' attitudes toward a brand or a product (Nafees *et al.*, 2021). Marketers have also realized in the past years that social media

influencers have a key role to play in marketing strategies, which has been proven by the increase of influencers that companies solicit to promote their brands. Therefore, the research question that has driven this research is: *How can influencers change consumer behavior in sustainable consumption?* The purpose of this research is to investigate what strategies to adopt to drive actual change in consumer behavior toward sustainable consumption. The present research will tackle a gap in the literature that will be discussed in the next section.

2. Literature review

a. Consumer Engagement

Consumer engagement has also changed in previous years, and influencers and social media have had a crucial role in this. Consumers do not solely interact with brands anymore; they are also interacting with a wider environment, such as media, influencers, or other customers. Therefore, marketing directors should focus on strategies to adapt to this change to deliver coherence in communication and influence the audience most interestingly. However, this is greatly challenged as brands only partially control the spread of communications (Maslowska *et al.*, 2016). The growing digitalization and social media have rumbled the straight communication path that was previously still possible, and brands sometimes have no control over what is spread. Indeed, interactivity and digitalization are now impacting communication channels. Both consumers and influencers became more active, acting like activists towards brands or causes they support. Indeed, Gensler *et al.* (2013) have argued that brands and consumers are co-authors nowadays, as consumers can also add different values to the original brand communication. In that sense, brands benefit from a competitive advantage as social media influencers give light to customers' insights. Thus, companies can benefit from those insights to co-create and offer better consumption offerings, adapt according to consumers' needs, and address the feedback to drive brand loyalty. Co-creation ensures the involvement of

consumers in conceiving the products' core offerings (He *et al.*, 2013). Findings have also shown that brand engagement raises perceived brand value, predicting consumer behaviors and intentions to purchase an endorsed brand, product, or service (e.g., Youssef *et al.*, 2018; Marbach *et al.*, 2016; France *et al.*, 2016).

Evidence has demonstrated that social media influencers can influence each consumption stage, from awareness to purchase. Indeed, engagement and influence start with cognitive processing, where the audience is exposed to a certain brand or product and will start considering, thinking, or sharing about it. Affection then arises, and the audience will have a particular emotion or feeling associated with the brand. Finally, the activation process also arises when the consumer takes action, and consumer behavior can then be observed (Hollebeek, 2014). When an influencer endorses a product or brand, followers can also share its reviews creating engagement and extensive word of mouth (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). Chen *et al.* (2019) reveal that influencer-promoted ads experience higher customer engagement rates (liking, commenting, and sharing) than brand-promoted ads on Instagram.

b. Social Media Influencers

As previously discussed, the world of digitalization has opened new ways of communication. People have started using social networks, which has opened a new opportunity for the bloom of new marketing strategies. Influencer marketing is the science of engaging people with a certain type of influence on the internet to spread information in a sponsored way to a specific audience (Sammis, *et al.*, 2015). Content creators have started advocating a way of living and consuming that influenced followers to live a similar lifestyle to theirs, which has given birth to influencer marketing strategies. Influencer marketing strategies have proven to be key in attracting new consumers, raising awareness, engaging a targeted audience, strengthening the brand image, influencing actions, and establishing a form of loyalty toward the brand (Vareško,

2017). The trust between influencers and their audience makes this strategy one of the most competitive ways of promotion nowadays. Influencers can be seen as mediators between brands and their target audience, and the relationship is driven by trust. It opens a two-way conversation meant to increase brand loyalty (Glucksman, 2017). Influencers can promote products in a more engaging and non-intrusive way than traditional online communications. The authenticity of social media influencers seems to be the main reason for an audience to follow influencers regardless of whether it is sponsored content (Dziuban, 2016). Therefore, such strategies are usually used to build an authentic relationship between a brand and its consumers through a mediator. Furthermore, influencer marketing strategies are efficient when a brand wants to engage with a certain type of consumer segment that normally avoids or skips advertisements (Conick, 2018). Influencers have also proven these days to be more trustworthy than other marketing strategies (Lim *et al.*, 2017). There are multiple ranges of influencers; mega influencers who have over one million followers, macro (100,000 to 1 million followers), and micro influencers (between 1000 to 100 000 followers). Micro-influencers have more than 60% more conversion rates than macro-influencers due to trust and proximity with their followers (Forbes, 2021). Indeed, brands usually work with micro influencers as it allows to connect with consumers more efficiently and interaction rates are more intertwined (Isyanto *et al.*, 2020).

The most popular platforms for influencer marketing are now Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Snapchat (Leparoux, *et al.*, 2019). Influencer marketing is usually distinct in different types of fields. Indeed, influencers usually specify themselves in special industries such as food, beauty, lifestyle, traveling, sports, photography, and others (Forsey, 2019). Along with the rise of sustainable considerations, some influencers have also niched into industries such as sustainable influencers, upcycling influencers, DIY, and zero waste contents, amongst other eco-influencers (Jordans, 2019). Indeed, sharing vast content about a single interest could be seen as redundant, thus, leading to diminishing consumer engagement levels.

c. Content Generated by Social Media Influencers

Findings have depicted that the type of content generated by social media influencers is crucial as it will determine whether viewers will want to look further into the content generated. Social media influencers usually create content without professional production, also called user-generated content (Cocker and Cronon, 2017). This makes the type of content more natural and enhances authenticity. Researchers have justified that the authenticity of posts had the power to create a snowball effect, unlike traditional communications. Influencers enhance the message's reach to a large community on social media, keeping the ball rolling (Childers, *et al.*, 2019). Communities usually like the content made by SMIs as it is easier and more entertaining to watch than professionally produced content. The authenticity of social media personalities has proven to be the main reason the audience follows the content created, whether sponsored or not (Linqia, 2019).

Purpose and importance of content type. As influencers usually have creative freedom, meaning they create the message and content they want to share, it is very distinct from traditional advertising. Lieb (2012) has suggested that social media personalities create content for various purposes. Most of the time, content creation may have promotional, educational, and/or informational objectives. Content marketing will increase brand awareness, credibility, and loyalty if it is created for promotional purposes. Other types of content may also be created to inspire and entertain the audience. Successful social media marketing strategies should be promotional but, most importantly, entertaining and engaging. It has proven more successful to feature a product entertainingly rather than pushing to sell a product. This is also why it is effective to work with influencers, as they can bring up a subject or product in an authentic way. Findings have highlighted the benefit of prioritizing quality content over quantity, which is why organic content strategy, including originality and creativity, is valued (Wondwesen *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, it has also been shown that the relationship between SMIs and their

audience is influenced by the content creator's personality and the type of content published. Therefore, if companies seek brand affection, video reviews and tutorials provoke more positive emotions than other types of content. Therefore, marketers should define which type of brand engagement they will benefit from the most and select the content type accordingly (Delbaere *et al.*, 2020).

Along with the authenticity factor, influencers use speech marking power and a certain type of language skill to persuade their followers, increasing engagement and brand perception. These language skills include stickers, emojis, and emoticons (Gautam, 2021). Furthermore, consumers generally trust audio-visual modality more as they tend to trust more things we can see than those we read. Therefore, consumers usually trust videos and pictures rather than texts (Sundar, 2008).

d. Parasocial Interaction Theory

The interaction through user-generated content develops a close relationship between social media influencers and their community. Indeed, Lee & Watkins (2016) have demonstrated that followers develop perceptions of attitude homophily which is when people will have a sense of friendship based on shared interests and values with social media influencers. The closeness SMIs can have with their followers creates trust and, in turn, enables them to influence the opinion and habits of their followers. As followers want to enhance their connection with the content creator, they usually want to acquire and adopt the products that influencers use and promote. Therefore, the term “influencers” makes all its sense. The Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI) defines the relationship, closeness, and trust from followers toward media personalities (Wegner, 2017). Although social media personalities feel a sense of commitment towards their community, the relationship is more often one-sided by the follower. The audience has the impression of knowing the SMI as good as a friend, while the SMI barely

knows its community which can be defined as “an illusory experience” as the relationship is not reciprocal. The parasocial interaction theory can also describe the relationship between brands and their customers; customers have PSI sentiment when exposed to content created by marketers (Labrecque, 2014).

e. Influencers and Consumer Behavior

Social Explanations. Influencers' impact on consumption behaviors can be justified by social explanations (Makgosa, 2010). The typical learning process is generally made through observation, imitation, and modeling, which can explain why and in which way influencers can have a role in followers' decision-making processes and attitudes. According to Bandura & Walters (1977), assimilation is made in three different ways: cognitive factors (including knowledge, expectations, and attitudes), behavioral factors (including skills, practice, and self-efficiency), and environmental factors (the ability to change its environment, social norms, and the access in community). Those three ways of assimilation represent buying systems that may be influenced. Firstly, the cognitive factors create expectations for the consumer about new products or features. Secondly, behavioral factors will confirm that products are essential and worth buying, and consumers will be confident in this assimilation process. Environmental factors in turn, will influence consumers through other people's advice; they will be encouraged to question or change their way of doing. As it is all about evolving along with their environment, influencers are essential in this assimilation process.

One of the main reasons why an audience follows an influencer is consumerism. Indeed, Facebook has reported that 70% of shopaholics rely on Instagram for brand identification and information (Facebook, 2019). Influencers are seen as shopping curators as they select and endorse quality brands. In that sense, it makes brand exploration more convenient and less risky for consumers. Consumers benefit from discovering new brands, getting special deals or

promotions, finding new items to purchase, and looking at unboxing, which creates the desire to engage and purchase the products (Huh *et al.*, 2020).

Influencing Sustainable Consumption. Some researchers have analyzed the effectiveness of sustainable communications. Fu *et al.* (2020) and Shen *et al.* (2020) have demonstrated that environmental concerns significantly affect consumer behavior and purchase intentions. Other researchers have shown that by increasing the awareness and interest of an audience, it is possible to influence consumer behaviors toward more sustainable consumption methods and lifestyles (Kautish *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, influencers may impact decision-making through trust, reliability, and assurance (Todisco, 2017). Lieb (2012) suggested that content creators balance their content between entertaining, informing, educating, and promoting.

In most cases, sustainable influencers provide information and inspiration about sustainability choices. They play a crucial role in popularizing sustainable lifestyles by raising awareness of how effortless certain sustainability practices can be (Yesiloglu *et al.*, 2021). According to Pereira *et al.* (2021), consumers sometimes face difficulties in searching for and selecting the best sustainable brand. Therefore, consumers prefer social media influencers' recommendations as it is easier for them to purchase a brand that has been recommended to them. Vringer *et al.* (2015) have investigated the probability of consuming sustainably increases significantly when consumers believe that others do it. Influencers cover many sustainability practices related to people's everyday life, including sustainable purchasing, sustainable alternatives, slow fashion, sustainable investing, climate change issues, carbon footprint, and sustainable traveling, amongst many others.

f. Sustainable intention-behavior gap

Elhaffar (2020) argues that there is a rise in positive attitudes and intentions toward more sustainable, ethical, and green consumption behaviors. However, there still appears to have a

gap as sustainable consumption has not yet become mainstream (White *et al.* 2019). Researchers have investigated that some of the reasons for this gap are the lack of accessibility of information, lack of awareness, lack of credible information, and shortage of effective green offerings, amongst also personal factors such as money, and commitment. Other factors affecting the sustainable intention-behavior gap are individual values, financial situations, and the common atmosphere, as they greatly influence consumer consumption. Regarding external factors, influencers play a crucial role in this gap as they increased awareness, give sustainable recommendations, and give light to sustainable alternatives (Tomkins *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, Hosta & Zabkar (2021) have shown that the complexity and lack of information about good sustainable alternatives and the environment drive challenges in consuming responsibly. White *et al.* (2019), have also argued that consumers have sometimes negative associations for sustainable products and do not always trust the product's quality.

Another factor having a role in sustainable decision-making is perceived consumer effectiveness. Consumers tend to follow their values as they believe that other consumers do not behave sustainably either. Moser & Kleinhüchelkotten (2018) showed that when people want to behave sustainably, they believe their efforts have minimal benefits. Indeed, those who realize the potential of their sustainable decisions tend to act more responsibly in the long run. Therefore, building communities around responsible behaviors is crucial to initiate and disseminating sustainable consumption.

g. Research Gap

Bedard and Tolmie (2018) suggested that the role of influencers is a worthwhile topic for further in-depth research, as it has been widely accepted that influencers impact consumer behavior (Zak & Hasprova, 2019). Furthermore, as the social media presence is increasing drastically, it is key to deepen the research (Thakur *et al.*, 2016). Tan (2018) believes it is even

more important to research environmental issues and sustainable consumption further. Although the literature review depicted previously, there still appears to have a research gap in the role of social media influencers in impacting sustainable consuming habits, not just in terms of awareness or attitude but in terms of intentions and actual purchasing behavior (Casalo *et al.*, 2018). As the correlation between influencers and sustainable consumption have not been researched enough, this research aims to further investigate it. Furthermore, Vrontis *et al.* (2021) also suggest that there needs to have more qualitative research when researching SMIs.

3. Methodology

a. Selection of methods

We recall the purpose of the research, which is to understand how social media influencers can change consumer behavior in sustainable consumption. The main objective is to investigate the strategies to adopt to drive actual change in behavior. To find out concrete and interesting strategies to use, the research was done through qualitative research methods. Indeed, as Vrontis *et al.* (2021) also suggested the need of more qualitative research in the context in this field, this was the strategy adopted. The interviewee would capture changing attitudes within the target group and be more flexible to adapt to interviewees to capture deeper and greater value from each interview.

The interview sample was divided into three samples: customers, social media influencers, and marketing directors. Interviewing those three samples would give a global representation and help answer the research question through a broader perspective which was crucial to increase the quality of the research. The research accounted for 18 interviews in total. All interviewees are considered experts in their fields and have enough knowledge to bring light to interesting concepts.

b. Research Sample

Customers. Indeed, interviewing customers was fundamental to understanding the buying system and the different stages a customer is confronted with when purchasing a product or service. This is crucial to answering the research question as it is needed to recreate how customers project themselves into a purchase. Having the customer perspective enable to understand the ideal moment to advertise a product to increase the likelihood of purchasing decisions. This also shed light on what would be the ideal influencer and the ideal customer to recognize what leads to buying behaviors.

The customer sample accounted for eight customers who value sustainability in their purchasing decision and in their lifestyle. They have been carefully selected to create a well-diversified and representative sample. The segment ranged from customers between 22 and 55 years old as it appeared to represent people buying online and following social media influencers. The interviewees were both men and women. They come from Belgium, France, and Netherlands. Amongst them were three post graduate students, a lawyer, a physiotherapist, business developer, a veterinary, and a communications director.

Influencers. Interviewing influencers was also crucial to understand the relationship, proximity, and trust they usually have with the brands they endorse and their followers. Thus, it highlights their role in marketing strategies and what influencers use best to increase engagement rates. It also reveals what seems to convince customers to purchase a product or service according to them.

The carefully selected sample of influencers accounted for six social media influencers ranging from 12K to 50K followers on Instagram. The main reason why the research has been focusing on micro-influencers is because as previously mentioned, they seem to be more effective in terms of interaction and conversion rates. All interviewees were sustainable influencers

meaning that the content shared on their social media is related to sustainable lifestyle and practices. They appeared to be the most relevant to answer the research question. All of them were present mainly on Instagram but some of them also were present on YouTube and TikTok.

Marketing directors. Marketing directors were the third sample interviewed for this research. Indeed, marketing directors were interesting to interview to complete the multiple angles to answer this research. Marketing directors have expertise in marketing strategies and know what works best for companies in terms of key performance indicators. They would be the ones having the most knowledge in terms of conversion rates due to their expertise in the field.

The sample accounted for four marketing experts. Two of them were marketing directors in two different companies, one was the CEO of an influencer marketing & social media agency, and another was an influencer manager in a company. Once again, the sample was also well-diversified, with people working in different industries, working in different countries, and having different job responsibilities, although they all worked closely with influencer marketing strategies.

c. Research Design

The interviews were semi-structured with an interview guide (please refer to appendix I, II, III). Due to convenience, the interviews have been held in French and English, depending on the participant's preference. All interviews were approximately 30 to 50 minutes long and were held online through video conference. The interviews have been recorded upon the participant's agreement. The data collection was made during October and November 2022.

4. Results

After analyzing the interview transcripts of our study sample, a few recurrent concepts were identified such as undefined market, influencer's role, authenticity, trust, customer needs, and paradoxical injunction (please refer to appendix IV).

a. Undefined market

All three samples were asked their definition of sustainable products and brands. However, they have mostly given different definitions of it. This highlights the fact that the market still needs to be defined. The definitions provided in the interviews were broad, showing that sustainability still needs a consensus on how to define it. Interviewees seemed to be hesitant and needed some time to think about how to define sustainability.

b. Influencers role

The interviews have pointed out that influencers typically do not have a good image in the public eye. This can be represented by the following statement made by a customer:

"(...) I follow only a few influencers because they only want to sell the products and make their money. (...)"

For others, influencers seem to have a crucial role in sustainable awareness and bringing adequate alternatives to their community:

"Influencers have an informant role in exposing and highlighting problems and opportunities. (...) A sustainable influencer should collaborate with companies that provide sustainable alternatives. They should also inform themselves frequently to be coherent in what they say."

It also shows that customers need coherence which will further be discussed later. Furthermore, an influencer argued that followers usually follow influencers for their personality:

"People follow me for who I am, my personality, my character, and how I present things. I know my community well, so I know how to appeal to them and the most appropriate ways to convince my followers in the best possible way."

A marketing director has also argued that to increase sustainable consumption habits, it is also essential to work with non-sustainable influencers to raise awareness:

"It's also interesting to work with non-sustainable influencers because they usually have a community that lacks awareness. It gives a new dynamic to educate a community that is not yet affected and not aware of the issues."

Influencers can also co-create with brands to improve the offerings:

"I like to co-create with brands and exchanging together to find the best strategies to promote the offering and improve the product or service. I receive a lot of feedback which can be very beneficial to them too."

c. Authenticity and Content Formats

Authenticity was evoked within the three interview samples. Customers need authenticity to be sensitive to content; it is crucial to building trust:

"We need their honest opinions; they should also tell us when the product is not good, and it immediately seems more authentic. We will then tend to believe them in their future recommendations."

On the other hand, influencers appear to have understood that, as illustrated below:

"I like to say that it is not perfect, but it's still better. It's important to avoid trying to appear perfect; you can't overdo it. People can feel the sincerity behind it."

Indeed, even marketing directors have pointed out the authenticity and sincerity:

"It's also important to show that the brand isn't perfect and important to admit it and explain what the reasons are."

Looking deeper to which content types seem to work best, most interviewees also pointed out the importance of authentic content as identified here:

"Authentic content always works best for me. Overworked videos for a brand always tend to have lower engagement compared to the spontaneous content I usually do. For example, stories.¹ on Instagram always have a good engagement rate because it's very spontaneous."

¹ Stories is a feature allowing to share different moments of your day, that stay for 24 hours. Stories appear together in a slideshow format called "your story". (Instagram, 2016).

Indeed, this has been confirmed by the audience. This is a representation of a type of homophily as previously discussed. This content format creates proximity between both parties:

"I also like when influencers talk about their experiences so I can relate to them. They often do it on their stories, and it is like they are talking directly to me; it's like a bonding moment."

Although stories appear to be successful in creating proximity between both parties, other content types are also important not to neglect:

"Different types of content target different people; it's not the same people watching different types of content."

Followers tend to prefer videos and pictures rather than text:

"I also always prefer videos or pictures rather than text."

Indeed, this shows that it is essential to create different content formats to please a broader spectrum of followers.

d. Trust

Both for sustainability and influencers, the audience still seem to have trust issues as there appears to be a lot of dishonesty and manipulation, as pointed out below:

"There's a lot of greenwashing, which is scary. You're not always sure who you can trust, and it takes a lot of research, time, and energy which I don't always have or want to allocate to."

Furthermore, influencers argue that recurrence is also key in building trust:

"I don't gain the trust of my followers through my paid posts with my business partners. I earn it daily by showing myself, my daily life, my flaws, and the products I consume. Trust is strongly based on repetition in my opinion. Followers get convinced because they see that I continue to use these brands over time, proving that it suits me."

Marketing directors also usually aim for long-term strategies and partnerships as it allows them to be more credible:

"We're much more credible with a long-term strategy because it shows that the brand convinces the influencer, and the consumer is also led to see our product more often."

The audience seems also to value coherence highly:

"To trust an influencer, I need to see that what they say makes sense, that they are well informed, and that the discourse is coherent. They need to have arguments based on true facts and numbers that will make me want to reverse the trend."

Together with coherence, transparency and awareness seem to be other values that an influencer should have to influence consumption habits:

"The arguments presented must be transparent for me to believe them. We need to focus on awareness rather than focusing on the product's features. We need to be educated rather than advertised; this is how we will change our consumption habits in my opinion."

e. Customer Needs

Looking deeper, it has been pointed out that the type of products endorsed is essential; it should respond to a need rather than creating a need:

"For a partnership to work well, the product has to respond to a market need. It must correspond to a daily need, not a superfluous one. (...) It's not about creating but responding to a need. There's a huge difference between both concepts here."

According to influencers, customers also seem to be very price-sensitive:

"The price argument is obviously a strong point in our arguments. People are very sensitive to that."

It is also important to recall for companies that comfort is primordial for customers:

"I'm not always willing to sacrifice my comfort and that's the problem with sustainability. I'm also not willing to pay much more for that."

Therefore, influencers need to offer valuable alternatives that respond to customer needs without sacrificing their comfort and affordability:

"I like when influencers give solutions to our problems or offer alternatives that will be better for us or more sustainable without it being a sacrifice. This is where influencers are truly helpful; they give light to great alternatives."

Customers seemed also to have a hard time identifying suitable sustainable products on the market:

“Making sustainable products requires a lot of time and research. Indeed, there are so many products, but it is sometimes complicated to find the most sustainable alternative to the original products. Also, I never really know which brand I should trust or not.”

Another follower also argued that simplicity and easiness to adopt is important:

“I like to be proposed things that I can adopt or change on a small scale, things that will help me in my daily life and that won't cost me too much money or effort. Something that is simple to introduce into my daily life, it's easier for me later on to take action.”

There also appear to be a psychological reward when customers buy a sustainable product or service, which shows that there is a willingness to change their consumption habits if offered sustainable alternatives:

“There is a psychological feeling of not having remorse; you feel good about your purchase. We don't have to think about the environmental or social impact behind our purchase.”

f. Paradoxical injunction

Although there is usually a psychological reward when buying sustainable products, paradoxical injunctions remain in the market. This also influences the trust between parties:

“It's hard to trust someone that is paid to promote a product because even though they like the product, they will still be biased. In a way, they must decide whether they want to accept the remuneration. It inevitably influences their opinion, I guess.”

Furthermore, customers also gave light to paradoxical injunction, which shows the dilemma of companies that need to respond to market needs while being sustainable:

“To me, it doesn't make sense to pay online for sustainable brands. Most often, the transportation is not sustainable, so you can't call it a sustainable purchase anymore.”

The interviews' results highlight that many psychological factors are involved in changing consumption habits, and it is not only about marketing strategies.

5. Discussion

a. Undefined market and Paradoxical Injunction

As previously discussed, the sustainable market needs to be better defined and regulated. However, findings have shown that sustainable customers are usually educated, informed, and tend to research information about brands. There is a thinking process behind consumer purchasing behaviors and a willingness to know more about the product they intend to buy. However, the market sometimes lacks knowledge and information. Even brands sometimes do not have the necessary information to be transparent with their customers. On the other hand, results show that there is an actual need for transparency towards customers. Nevertheless, none of the actors have the information required, making the buying system complicated. It is a complex market as customers need to feel safe in their choices and aware about what they are purchasing. There is also an ecological emergency catching each actor. The market juggles between a notion of security and risks, which is not controllable.

We are coming from a production and consumption society (capitalism, revenue orientated, growth, etc.) to a knowledge society, realizing the damage caused. We are now focusing on solutions to repair it through technology and other means that grow rapidly, which is not always controllable, driving insecurity. This creates a paradoxical injunction as we are asked to adopt sustainable consumption habits and consuming "well" however, it is complicated as we often miss information to do so. Indeed, we want to master information and science, but it is constantly evolving being a dynamic phenomenon including paradoxes. We must realize that we will never be at the cutting edge, and flexibility and adaptation are consequently primordial. However, influencers have a role to play in those paradoxes by building trust and offering as much information as possible to reassure future consumers.

b. The role of different actors

Customers. Inevitably, there is a synergy between different actors in the market. However, the market is mainly driven by consumer's needs. Based on the findings of this research, consumers need transparency and guidance from companies and influencers to help them make the right choices. Indeed, the research showed that sustainable consumption habits require a lot of information behind the purchases, and it is therefore important to have the information to be presented to them in an attractive, interesting and organic way.

Influencers. Influencers are increasingly willing to help by facilitating the transition towards sustainable consumption habits. Being followed by numerous people, they can influence and guide their community in their purchasing decision. Thus, by having an informant and inspirational role, they have a role to play in sustainable consumption by raising awareness and offering sustainable alternatives. Their voices can be very powerful as an influencers audience has proven to be a natural place to transmit word-of-mouth. As previously mentioned, the world of sustainability is evolving rapidly. Therefore, influencers should **be informed** daily to bring the most relevant and accurate information to their audience reinforcing credibility. Indeed, the given information is inevitably key in the degree of impact an influencer will have on the consumption habits of its followers.

Results have also shown that it is important to both involve sustainable influencers and **regular influencers** to change consumption habits. Indeed, regular influencers usually have a community that needs more awareness. Therefore, there is a significant opportunity to educate a community yet to be affected and unaware of the importance of sustainability. This would attract a wider range of consumers agreeing with Conick (2018). However, it is fundamental to offer an adequate product that would be at least as valuable for them than non-sustainable

products otherwise it would not be interesting enough to them. Price, utility, characteristics, durability, and others are key to convince them.

Companies. Although influencers have a key role in influencing consumer behavior in sustainable consumption, companies are the starting point. It is fundamental that companies invest in **research and development** to bring up sustainable alternatives to the market. Companies should constantly evolve with the market, researching future trends, new innovations, and new strategies to be competitive in the market. It is also essential to be in a shared information system where **co-creation** is welcomed. Based on the results, companies can highly benefit from customers' and influencers' feedback to improve their offering according to market needs. Indeed, without that, influencers would not be able to help customers in their journey towards sustainable consumption.

Results have also highlighted another paradox as products endorsed by influencers are mostly sold online. However, this implies environmental costs related to transportation which is not coherent with sustainable companies' values. A solution for this would be **carbon-neutral shipping**. It is crucial for sustainable companies to implement this in their model to be coherent with what the values they promote.

Despite the context, we can see a common trend and desire amongst the three actors; they all need transparency and rely on the availability of information. They are all looking for security in information and knowledge. One tries to create reassurance systems in this insecure climate, but it constantly mutates and evolves.

c. Strategies to influence consumer behavior in sustainable consumption

The main intention of this research was to investigate the strategies to adopt to drive actual change in behavior toward sustainable consumption. As previously discussed, the interviews with the three sample sets have highlighted a few strategies that seem to work best.

Responding to Customer Needs. First and foremost, for influencers to be able to convince their audience to take sustainable actions, the product endorsed should **respond to a market need**. It should not be about creating a need, but it should be about responding to a need, otherwise it would not be truly sustainable. Therefore, **market research** beforehand is one of the most important steps to consider. Furthermore, most customers are not willing to sacrifice their comfort. Therefore, the influencers should carefully select the brands they want to promote to give sustainable and valuable alternatives that would not impact comfort. Inevitably, the argument of **price** and the **economic savings** of a product or service is a powerful argument to convince customers to take action. Therefore, influencers can promote affordable offerings to guide toward sustainable consumption. However, the fact that customers mentioned this in the interviews could also highlight that influencers sometimes promote products that people do not need. Thus, price is decisive so making it affordable is fundamental in the convincing process.

Another persuasive method is the argument of **time saving** by convincing customers about the **convenience** of the purchase. Results show that influencers have the power to popularize sustainable practices by showing the **ease of purchase** agreeing with (Yesiloglu *et al.*, 2021).

Another strong strategy is about presenting powerful arguments through **facts and numbers**; indeed, it greatly impacts customers' actions. It provokes a psychological effect where the audience wants to reverse the trend by changing their consumption habits. However, it has proven to be crucial that those arguments truly **reflect reality** as the audience sometimes have difficulty believing influencers due to massive greenwashing and misleading information.

Trust & Recurrence. It is important to build trust through **authenticity** and **proximity** to build **credibility** beforehand. Being authentic is about showing the reality. The research highlights that researching a brand is very time-consuming for customers agreeing with what had been demonstrated by Pereira *et al.* (2021). It is often a reason that discourages customers from taking sustainable actions. They sometimes face a difficulty to identify sustainable products on the market. Influencers should therefore act as **information facilitators** you can trust through their **transparency** and **accuracy**. Therefore, as the market is constantly evolving, influencers should stay **well-informed** about the trends and innovations of the market. It helps to keep a **coherent discourse** and results show that it is fundamental when aiming to convince a potential customer agreeing with Todisco (2017). Indeed, results show that followers seem to seek awareness and **education** rather than advertisement. Therefore, when influencers endorse a brand, they should take more energy and time to create **awareness**, the promotion part should be less evident than it usually is. Influencers are also faced with paradoxes as they are paid to promote a product which scares the audience as they are suspicious about the recommendation. Therefore, accuracy and coherent discourse are key. Along with that, another effective strategy is for influencers to share their own **experience** so potential customers can relate to them and project themselves in the purchase. Results have shown that **long-term partnerships, and repetition** is key to convincing the audience. Therefore, influencers should **organically show products** over time. This will not only build trust but also allow potential customers to project themselves on the product or service's utility. Indeed, results show that customers will only trust influencers if they see recurrence, and after following an influencer in its daily life for a consequent period of time as **trust will be built over time**. Sustainable consumption requires a lot more trust and information compared to regular purchases as customers are usually looking to be more aware of the product or issue tackled.

Authenticity and Content Formats. **Honesty** and **authenticity** are important pillars for influencers to impact consumption habits. As results demonstrate, followers usually follow influencers for their personality and authenticity, agreeing with Linqia (2019) and Dziuban (2016). Indeed, customers like when influencers also share their honest **feedback** on brands. **Admitting** that a brand or influencer is not perfect makes it more human, creating proximity and allowing for identification. Results have shown that authentic content is what works best so influencers should create more **spontaneous and authentic content** when promoting a product. This also implies making engaging, and friendly content. Brands usually communicate in a formal way to appear professional while influencers create content in a more **creative** way, making it sometimes more convincing to customers. Therefore, Instagram **stories** are usually a great way to advertise a product. However, results have also shown that different types of content target different audiences confirming what has already been said by Delbaere *et al.* (2020). Therefore, influencers must **vary their content formats** to attract a wider range of people. Results show that consumers also tend to trust **audio-visual modality**, they trust videos and pictures more rather than texts, also confirming what Sundar (2008) has demonstrated. Furthermore, the influencer also has a role in offering **sustainable alternatives** that can be **easily adopted** for customers, products or services that are easy to trade with.

d. Limitations and Future Research

While six social media influencers and eight customers were interviewed, the sample had only four marketing directors, which might have been limiting so future research should use a larger sample. Furthermore, future research could also benefit from quantitative research, offering different dimensions. It would also be valuable to include influencers with larger communities. Due to accessibility and convenience, the research relied on micro-influencers, but macro-influencers could also bring additional insights. This research has only considered sustainable

influencers but considering regular influencers with other interests could be interesting. Only marketing directors working with influencers were interviewed whilst regular marketing directors could also bring value. Those different variables might bring other conclusions to this research question as the research conclusion depends on the sample selected.

6. Conclusion

Social media influencers are generally seen as powerful communicators who can influence purchasing decisions. Therefore, they have a crucial role in influencing and promoting sustainable consumption. The research concludes that creativity, authenticity, transparency, proximity, and credibility are fundamental to raising awareness and having an impactful role in influencing consumer behavior. Social media influencers must reflect those values in the long run together with long term partnerships with brands to introduce products in an organic way, enabling trust between all parties. The presentation of products or services in an organic way and recurrently appears to be fundamental in convincing an audience to make a purchase. Social media influencers tend to share their daily life creating a parasocial interaction, which is about the trust arising from followers towards the influencer. The trust in turn turns into influence and guidance to undertake an action. Other important arguments inevitably tend to influence customer preferences such as the price, value of time, convenience, facts, and numbers. The research also concludes that customers are looking for accurate and coherent discourse with reliable information. Furthermore, customers can also be influenced by content formats. Instagram stories or any other audio-visual modality that reflects authenticity and spontaneity is the most powerful format to impact customers directly. It creates proximity, which is vital in building trust and increasing the degree of influence on behaviors. The results show that tradeoffs will also be decisive for customers to switch to sustainable alternatives so influencers should carefully choose their partnerships with coherent and convenient substitutes.

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Appendix

Appendix I: Interview Guide to Customers

1. What is your definition of sustainable products or services?
2. What do you think about the products presented by influencers?
3. What is the ideal sustainable product for you and what are the key features?
4. What is the ideal brand for you and what kind of brand makes you dream? What do you like about this one?
5. What are your sources of information when you have to make choices to buy a product?
How do you usually know about these products?
6. What was your best sustainable purchase? Why and how did it happen?
7. How often do you buy sustainable products?
8. How sensitive are you to sustainable communication?
9. What are you most sensitive to? What kind of content, arguments, environment, personality?
10. Do you face difficulties to consume in a sustainable way ?
11. How can influencers help you make choices that fit you?

Appendix II: Interview Guide to Influencers

1. How did you start your career as an influencer?
2. How did your first contracts with sustainable brands go?
3. What is the relationship you have with sustainable brands?
4. What is your relationship with your community?
5. How do you build trust with your community?
6. What strategies do you adopt to make your followers become customers and loyal to these sustainable brands?

7. What is your ideal sustainable brand? Why would you like to represent it?
8. How much freedom do you have with your influence strategy?
9. What type of content are your followers most responsive to?
10. What is your best tip for converting a follower into a customer?

Appendix III: Interview Guide Marketing to Directors

1. What is the ideal sustainable product for you? What are the key features?
2. How can influencers affect consumer behaviour around sustainable consumption?
3. What communication is most appropriate to convert a follower into a consumer (Content, personality, environment, level of influence)?
4. What would be your ideal influencer in terms of sustainability?
5. Can you describe the relationship you have with your influencers? (Problems and opportunities)
6. How do you brief your influencers?
7. How do you implement influencers in your marketing strategy?
8. How do you see your relationship with your influencers evolving?
9. How do you see your social networks evolving?
10. How will sustainability evolve in your marketing strategy?

Appendix IV: Most recurrent concepts and words in interviews.

Undefined Market and Paradoxical Injunction	Greenwashing, Distrust, Price, Fairtrade, Target, Returns, Guilt
Influencers role	Building trust, Inspiration, Engagement rates, Implication, Commitment, Awareness, Visibility, Recurrence, Creativity, Strategy, Community, Content, Education
Authenticity	Proximity, Freedom, Identification, Daily life, Spontaneity, Personality, Experience
Trust	Transparency, Honesty, Clean, Coherence, Credibility, Repetition, Values, Clarity
Customer needs	Expectations, Needs, Informative, Data, Proven Facts, Convenience, Time saving, Freedom, Awareness