Inspiring in a Realistic Way: Role of Authenticity in Gen Z's Perceptions of Green Influencers on TikTok

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Abstract

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In an era where social media shapes public opinion and lifestyle choices, and issues such as global climate change are at the forefront of the public's minds, green influencers emerged as promoters of sustainability and educators on environmental topics, especially among Gen Z. Despite the growing popularity and influence of green influencers, there is a lack of knowledge related to how Gen Z perceive them and their authenticity, a crucial characteristic of social media influencers for this generation. This study employs a qualitative approach, conducting in-depth interviews with Gen Z TikTok users to explore their perceptions of green influencers' authenticity, supported by the Scale of Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers developed by Lee and Eastin (2021). Drawing on the PASMI scale, this study proposes a new, seven-factor model of perceived green influencer authenticity consisting of sincerity, visibility, originality, expertise, credibility, truthful endorsements, and consistency. These findings contribute to the strategic communication field by providing a detailed understanding of how green influencer authenticity is evaluated and perceived on TikTok, offering practical guidance for green influencers aiming to engage Gen Z audiences.

Keywords: green influencers, authenticity, Gen Z, TikTok, perceived authenticity, social media influencers

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1. Introduction

In today's digital world, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for facilitating interpersonal communication, content creation, and the dissemination of information in real-time across borders (Topsümer et al., 2023; van Dijck, 2013). Subsequently, the planet Earth has been going through undeniable changes connected to global climate change, pollution, and environmental degradation, prompting an urgent need for collective action toward sustainability. In this climate, social media has become a space to promote sustainability, spread information about environmental issues, and advocate for change (Hu et al., 2023).

Through the intersection of social media and environmental activism, a new type of social media influencer emerged: the green influencer. Green influencers are regular social media users who gained popularity by interweaving environmental topics with content about their everyday lifestyles (Dekoninck et al., 2023). They act as educators, activists, opinion leaders, and sustainability role models (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023).

Enter Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019)), often labeled as a generation of digital natives (Confetto et al., 2023), whose lives are highly influenced by social media. The usage of social media influences this generation's purchasing decisions (Nugroho et. al, 2022), the way they dress (Van den Bergh & Pallini, 2018), their eating habits (Kaylor et al., 2021), and their political opinions and involvement (Andersen et al., 2020). Members of Generation Z use social media for entertainment, shopping (Mude & Undale, 2023), consuming news content (Ahmed, 2020), as well as connecting and interacting with brands, organizations, and each other (Bourke, 2019). In addition, this

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generation is said to be generally environmentally conscious (Singh, 2014) and concerned about issues such as sustainability (Narayanan, 2022) and global warming (Chen et al., 2023). A large portion of Gen Z is aware of global climate issues and would like to take action to save the planet (Tewari et al., 2022; Hess, 2021). This generation makes up a large part of green influencer following. Younger people tend to display lower levels of trust toward political establishments and thus, they turn to the internet, specifically green influencers to learn about environmental topics (Dekoninck et al., 2023).

TikTok, originally a lip-syncing app quickly rose to popularity amongst Gen Z, transforming from exclusively a "feel good place" (Meza et al., 2023) to a platform that allows Gen Z to learn about climate change, discuss related concerns with each other, and spread different environmental initiatives (Hautea et al., 2021). TikTok is also one of the most common platforms to be utilized by green influencers (Huber et al., 2022), offering them a unique place to connect with their audiences thanks to the app's algorithm-driven content discovery and short-form video format.

Furthermore, Gen Z is a generation that values authenticity. Authenticity has been cited as one of the most important deciding factors of following a social media influencer for Gen Z (Meza et al., 2023). To perceive social media influencers as trustworthy and credible, they must view them as authentic (Singer et al., 2023). Authenticity has also been a popular buzzword for the past few years, studied by several disciplines, strategic communication included. Authenticity is generally agreed to be something that is construed (Ebben & Bull, 2013), therefore, subjects, in this paper social media influencers particularly, must engage in strategic communication to appear authentic in the eyes of their followers.

1.1. Problem Formation and Research Question

However, despite the growing importance of authenticity in influencer communication and the strong potential that green influencers have in mobilizing Generation Z towards environmental activism and education (Dekoninck et al., 2023), there is a notable lack of research on how it is perceived in the case of green influencers. Although studies have explored the general concept of perceived authenticity of social media influencers (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Audrezet et al., 2020; Pöyry et al., 2019), very few have explored how authenticity is perceived by Gen Z, especially when it comes to influencers advocating for environmental issues due to their unique role in the social media landscape. Unlike regular influencers who focus on fashion, makeup, gaming, or entertainment, green influencers have the role of educating their followers on critical environmental issues and advocating for sustainable practices.

Additionally, TikTok is a platform that differs from other social media due to its algorithm-driven nature in which authenticity might be perceived differently than on other platforms. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how authenticity is constructed and perceived on this platform.

To achieve the goal of exploring Gen Z's perceptions of green influencers on TikTok and their authenticity, the study is guided by the following research question:

What is the role of authenticity in how Gen Z TikTok users perceive content by green influencers?

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Environmental Communication

As environmental issues, such as global warming, become increasingly urgent, they are heavily featured in the media. In the midst of the global climate crisis, there is a growing recognition of the environment as a social and political issue. Hansen (2018) traces the emergence of discourse about environmental concerns related to politics and society to the 1960s. Lowe & Morrison (1984), note the 1980s as the time period in which researchers noted a significant rise in media coverage relating to environmental issues. Highly publicized environmental movements and events such as the "Silent Spring Incident" and "The Love Canal Incident" established the environment as an issue that the public started paying attention to and discussing (Wu et al., 2021). Over the next decades, environmental communication has become notably more prevalent in the public debate, developing its own distinctive vocabulary, subject matters, viewpoints, and visual representation (Hansen, 2018). As a response to the increase of coverage, theorists sought a way to study the relationship between media and the environment, and eventually, the field of environmental communication emerged.

Luhmann is often cited as one of the first theorists to write about environmental communication as a research field, as he published the title "Ecological Communication" in 1989 (Wu et al., 2021). The field intersects with other communication disciplines, such as science communication, risk communication, or the field of strategic communication. In addition, due to the issues it deals with, environmental communication is also related to the fields of public health and sociology (Comfort & Park, 2018). Due to the variety of

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different fields and disciplines that environmental communication intersects with, one can find a plethora of definitions of the field in academic literature. In a very basic form, environmental communication can be understood as any communication "about the environment or its social and political definition in public debate" (Hansen, 2018, para 1). Klöckner (2015) draws on the definition of communication by Pearson (2011, as cited in Klöckner, 2015), creating a definition of environmental communication as "a process by which meaning about the environment and environmental problems is exchanged between individuals through a system of common symbols, signs, and behaviour," noting that this process includes both verbal and non-verbal communication (p. 18). Pezzullo and Cox (2018) argue that confusion can arise by simply defining environmental communication as any talk about environmental topics. Drawing on the theory of symbolic action by Burke (1966, as cited in Pezzullo & Cox, 2018), they provide a more comprehensive definition of environmental communication as "the pragmatic and constitutive modes of expression - the naming, shaping, orienting, and negotiating of our ecological relationships in the world, including those with nonhuman systems, elements, and species" (p. 13). Using this definition, the authors (Pezzullo & Cox, 2018) provide two functions of environmental communication: pragmatic and constitutive. The pragmatic function establishes that environmental communication conveys an instrumental purpose. It is used to (among many) inform, make demands, educate, persuade, and alert. The constitutive function asserts that environmental communication includes "modes of interaction that shape, orient, and negotiate meaning, values, and relationships" (p. 13).

In line with the definition of the field by Pezzullo and Cox (2018) discussed in the previous paragraph, Anderson (2015) notes that research in environmental communication does not focus exclusively on the relationship that humans have to the environment, but also on how to challenge existing practices and use communication to promote societal

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change. This statement has been applicable to the field since its emergence, as is evident in the article by Burgess et al. (1998), in which the authors explore how environmental communication is striving to promote public participation in sustainability issues, address public alienation and resistance, and support institutional actions to progress environmental goals. However, research notes that since the 2010s, there has been a shift of focus in the environmental communication field, and that is from general environmental risks to global climate change (Comfort & Park, 2018). Among climate change communication, other widely researched topics in the field are corporate social responsibility, sustainability and sustainable habits, environmental health, environmental education, conservation and biodiversity, environmental rhetorics, and environmental management (Akerlof et al., 2022).

2.1.1. *Environmental Communication and Activism on Social Media*

Through a quick search on social media, one can learn about the evolution of public opinion on various topics (Kompatsiaris et al., 2013). Therefore, it is only natural that one of the main platforms of environmental communication nowadays is social media. Social media made information about the environment widely accessible to everyone, inciting a "democratization of environmental information-making" (Joose & Brydges, 2018, p. 686). Social media serves, among other functions, as a tool for environmental activism, as a platform for public debate and discourse related to environmental issues (Pearce et al., 2018), and as a chance for regular citizens to publish first-hand documents on environmental issues (Pezzullo & Cox, 2018).

Social media has been widely used to promote collaboration and to encourage people to take action. Since it is a quick way to reach the masses and spread information, its power can be used to support environmental causes (Hamid et al., 2017). In addition,

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social media assists in spreading awareness and staying informed about environmental issues. Mallick and Bajpai (2019) highlight the ability of users to support environmental causes and campaigns. For instance, the social media platform X has been recognized as a crucial actor in the success of online environmental petitions. The reason is that X facilitates easy information dissemination and promotes engagement (Proskurnia et al., 2021).

Social media also provides a platform for environmental educators and activist groups, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Over the past few decades, non-governmental organizations have played a crucial role in bridging the gap in the communication on environmental issues, such as global climate change, between scientists and other important stakeholders, like the media, policymakers, and the public (Vu et al., 2021). Through social media, NGOs can have access to diverse communication tools that allow them to reach a variety of audiences while keeping communication costs relatively low. As an example of a successful campaign by an NGO that was conducted on social media, Ozdemir and Alkabbanie (2017) provide the "Earth Hour" event organized by World Wildlife Fund every year, where people are encouraged to turn off the lights in their homes for an hour to spread awareness of climate change. This effort is often labeled as one of the largest grassroots movements for the environment and its success can be largely credited to the traction that the event has gained on social media (Ozdemir & Alkabbanie, 2017).

2.1.2. Environmental Communication on Social Media and Gen Z

It has been established that social media plays a crucial role in the lives of Generation Z. Research has shown that social media is often where Gen Z gains knowledge about sustainability, green behaviors, and environmental issues (Vladimirova et al., 2023; Chen

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& Madni, 2023; Umboh et al., 2023). For instance, social media is where Gen Z research products to find if they are sustainable (Tan & Trang, 2023), or where they turn to find out how to live a greener lifestyle (Chen & Madni, 2023).

Social media also gives Generation Z a space to discuss topics related to the environment. Through different platforms, Gen Z shares information, talks about sustainability, and supports environmental causes. This helps to raise awareness and shift consumption habits toward more ecologically friendly options (Umboh et al., 2023; Boulianne & Ohme, 2022).

Furthermore, social media provides young activists with the opportunity to connect with audiences from their generation, raise awareness and educate them on issues, and even further, mobilize them and create activist networks. Boulianne and Ohme (2022) surveyed youth and young adults (aged between 18 and 33) across four Western countries and found a strong link between following environmental groups on social media and attending environmental marches, participating in boycotts, and signing petitions for environmental causes. An example of a young activist who uses social media to benefit their cause is Greta Thunberg. Greta Thunberg is a young Swedish activist who has amassed great attention worldwide for her school strike for the climate. Eventually, this initiative led to the Global Fridays for Future movement, as a part of which young people across the globe attended organized events focused on climate change awareness, forgoing traditional school attendance on those days. Thunberg has also protested in front of the Swedish Parliament and documented her actions on Twitter (now X), gaining a significant social media following, out of which many are young people. This movement also gave birth to the Extinction Rebellion activist network (Boulianne & Ohme, 2022). Fridays for Future relies heavily on social media in terms of information sharing and mobilization. The movement makes use of many different social media platforms such as X, TikTok,

and Instagram to connect with the audience, spread awareness, and gain support. Their communication style is often humorous and employs memes (Johann et al., 2023).

2.1.3. Environmental Communication on TikTok

When it comes to the specific platforms that young people use to engage with environmental content, existing literature reflects a shift in the popularity of various platforms over the past few years. A 2015 study by Scherman et al. (as cited in Boulianne & Ohme, 2022), found that young people who took part in environmental student movements in Chile were often very active on Facebook. Hamid et al. (2017) investigated the use of social media to raise awareness of environmental issues and sustainability among university students. The authors highlighted Facebook and Twitter as useful tools to inform young people about the aforementioned topics. Kaul et al. (2020) label YouTube as one of the social media platforms that have been relevant in spreading the topic of sustainability in the past few years.

In newly published research (e.g. Hautea et al., 2021), TikTok is the social media platform that is often studied as a tool for young people (or Gen Z) to learn about climate change, discuss related concerns with each other, and spread different environmental initiatives. TikTok is a social media platform that was launched in 2016 in China to facilitate users a way to share brief video clips. As of 2021, the platform has amassed a billion active monthly users worldwide (TikTok, 2021) and its continuous growth is anticipated to persist in the coming years (Statista, 2023). Initially, shared clips could last up to 15 seconds and mostly consisted of comedy and lip-syncing.

The app was purchased by a different company in 2018, and integrated with Musical.ly, maintaining the TikTok brand. After that, the app was made available globally while preserving the profiles of its prior users (Geyser, 2021). The app has also been

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increasing the possible length of clips shared by users, until finally settling on videos up to ten minutes in 2022 (Birney, 2024).

The platform utilizes an entertainment-based content logic that demands a lot of creativity, dynamism, and visual stimulation (Bautista et al., 2021). A large portion of the content is based on users engaging in trending dances and challenges as "people use and repurpose sounds in combination with dance and other performative 'challenges' that invite imitation and transformation in novel and creative ways" (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023).

One of its main differences from other social media platforms is its feed design – the "For You Page," the app's primary feed, is a never-ending selection of videos. The usage of popular hashtags and sounds, as well as the number of interactions - likes, comments, and shares - achieved by the video in a given period of time within a smaller audience, are what determine how visible and viral content becomes (Negreira-Rey et al., 2022). TikTok also holds a unique algorithm that drives the user experience on the app (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). One could argue that TikTok's primary purpose, rather than fostering human connections, is to provide consumers with personalized content using its highly precise algorithm (Lovelace, 2022). This is also one of the reasons why user-generated content thrives on the platform: "Where most social media platforms are bustling hubs for meticulously curated content, TikTok diverges dramatically. Unlike Instagram, where the pressure to post picture-perfect visuals can be immense, TikTok encourages originality and whimsicality" (Rizvi, 2023). The nature of TikTok has been noted to make it a relevant platform for environmental communication, amongst many reasons due to the variety of visual elements that allow the promotion of collective action. Huber et al. (2022) cite the green screen function, duet, or stitch as examples of the visual elements provided by the application that aid environmental communication.

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Due to the nature of the feed and the algorithm, users are exposed to various types of content covering a wide variety of topics. This makes dissemination of information relatively easy, which can then serve as a way for users to keep up with pop culture and internet culture news (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022) but also as a way to get educated on different topics (Fiallos et al., 2021) or get exposed to news about current world affairs (Basch et al., 2021). Alonso-López et al. (2021) note that while disinformation and misinformation are abundant on TikTok, the platform also serves as a tool for debunking hoaxes and correcting misleading information in a way that is more effective than traditional media.

Moreover, TikTok is a platform where young people can express themselves, share their opinions on topics, and make efforts to engage in social media activism (Hautea et al., 2021). The platform's creators are aware of this fact and have used it to launch environmental awareness campaigns on a number of occasions. In the #ForClimate campaign, the platform collaborated with non-governmental organizations to encourage users to record the impact of extreme weather events and allow them to add climate-themed visual effects to their recordings (Hautea et al., 2021).

There has been a limited number of studies about environmental communication on TikTok. A few studies can be found, mostly focusing on the nature of environmental communication between Gen Z users. Hautea et al. (2021) illustrates two instances of environmental TikTok videos created by young individuals for their peers:

"A young woman lectures about how rising water temperature threatens sea turtles, intercut with images and video. A young man appears with the words 'Unmotivational Monday' and cheerfully riffs on the hopelessness of climate action, closing with 'Go ahead, use that plastic straw. We're all as good as dead anyway.'" (p. 1).

The authors reason that these videos show the differences in the tone of the communication surrounding environmental issues on the platform. Hautea et al. (2021) analyzed viral videos that were posted on TikTok under the hashtags #GlobalWarming, #ClimateChange, and #ForClimate. The authors explain that many videos were mocking and earnest at the same time and switched between "care and indifference". While the creators are far from experts, TikTok gives them a platform to voice their concerns about the climate and influence other's opinions (Hautea et al., 2021).

2.2. Environmental Communication and Social Media Influencers

2.2.1. Social Media Influencers

Through social media, a new type of celebrity emerged: the influencer. Influencers are social media users who gained popularity by posting user-generated content (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023). Abidin (2015, para 3) defines social media influencers as "everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating "advertorials" into their blog or social media posts". The concept of SMI is intrinsically linked to self-branding. While macro-influencers can amass popularity comparable to traditional celebrities, the difference is that the popularity of a celebrity is tied to a certain profession and their success is enforced by traditional media. On the contrary, SMI are popular because of their successful self-presentation on social media (Schmuck et al., 2022). Because one does not need to be highly skilled in technology to create material that advances their brand, social media makes it relatively simple for

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average individuals to construct personal brands. The gap between a producer and a consumer is no longer as great due to Web 2.0, since many users now concurrently consume and make content (van Dijck, 2013).

Marwick (2013, as cited in Arthurs et al., 2018) refers to social media influencers as micro-celebrities - individuals whose celebrity status is upheld by their recognition and popularity amongst a niche group of internet users. Nowadays, "influencer" can be seen as a career because many SMIs rely solely or mostly on social media as their source of income. Some SMIs gain a cult following and their fame is comparable to that of well-known actors or singers, not limited to a certain niche group anymore. They have millions of followers, frequently appear in the mainstream media, and attend entertainment events.

Furthermore, SMIs also serve as opinion leaders. As suggested by the term 'influencer,' they have the ability to influence their followers' behavior, views on certain topics, and purchasing decisions, which is why many brands employ collaborations with influencers as a part of their marketing strategy (Yang & Wang, 2023). Followers develop relationships with SMIs and view them as members of the community, promoting trust and credibility (Freberg, 2022).

The status of a SMI is also related to the size of one's following. According to academic literature, a social media user must have over a thousand followers to be considered a SMI (Dekoninck et al., 2023 & Chen et al., 2024). SMIs with smaller followings are labeled as micro-influencers, having over 10,000 followers makes one a meso-influencer, and users who reach more than a million followers are referred to as macro-influencers (Dekoninck et al., 2023).

2.2.2. Green Influencers

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In light of the prevalence of environmental issues in both public discourses online and offline, as well as significant events such as the environmental protests by Friday for Future movement, many influencers shifted from the role of an entertainer to commenting on and promoting topics related to the environment (Dekoninck et al., 2023). While some social media influencers only comment on those topics occasionally, green influencers make it their niche by connecting environmental topics to content about their lifestyle (Dekoninck et al., 2023) as a form of digital activism (San Cornelio et al., 2021). Some ways in which green influencers combine sustainability and lifestyle are by promoting sustainable brands, documenting their journey with veganism, educating about sustainability and other green issues, or promoting political action (Dekoninck et al., 2023).

It can be stated that the current form of green influencers was preceded by green bloggers. Joosse and Brydges (2017) describe personal blogs through which regular people document how they are incorporating sustainability into their everyday lives. Personal green blogs served an essential intermediary function by promoting green standards, tastes, and identities. As the internet and social media developed, social media replaced blogs, and the green influencer as we know them today emerged.

As was mentioned in the introduction, SMIs act as role models of sustainable lifestyle and provide their followers with tips and advice. Therefore, they can influence their audience's environmental behavior and habits, serving as opinion leaders (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023).

Huber et al. (2022) analyzed green influencer accounts on TikTok and found out that they communicate a wide variety of green topics. The most common included climate change, zero waste, solutions to global crisis, sustainable food, sustainable gardening, trash cleanup and recycling, and sustainable cosmetics. Other topics, among others,

mentioned included animal agriculture and animal protection, eco-anxiety, environmental

activism, greenwashing, and ocean protection.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Influencer Authenticity

Over the past decade, authenticity has been studied in various different disciplines, from psychology to sociology and marketing. As every discipline has its own angle and approach to investigating this concept, it has been noted to be notoriously hard to define. Most researchers agree that authenticity involves an object or a person that is "real, true, and genuine" (Wood et al., 2008).

The word "authenticity" originated from the Greek words 'autos' (meaning self) and 'hentes' (meaning being or doer). A related term is 'authentikos,' which can be interpreted as "one who acts in their own right" (Södergren, 2020). The concept of authenticity has been present in Western thought since the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau. However, the term 'authenticity' as it is understood today, meaning 'genuine,' has been in use in the English language only since the 18th century (Trilling, 1972, as cited in Södergren, 2020).

As was mentioned before, scholars cannot agree on one singular definition of authenticity. This uncertainty hinders the development of theories related to this concept (Nunes et al., 2021). According to a study by Kovács (2019), the wide variety of definitions of one concept can be partially explained by the heterogeneity of words that audiences across domains associate with the term, therefore, researchers create new frameworks and definitions in a quest to reflect this diversity. Additionally, the author notes that "authenticity" has been connected to a plethora of concepts that are unrelated to each other, for instance alcoholic drinks, musical performances, restaurants, leadership

figures, and individual self-expression Kovács (2019). To complicate matters further, authenticity in the eyes of consumers is a 'formative' rather than 'reflective' construct, meaning that it is a result of multiple judgements that consumers make to assess whether a product or a brand is authentic. In addition, to understand what one means when they use the term 'authentic', it is necessary to know which dimensions are being included in the definition. Some of these dimensions can be originality, accuracy, or integrity (Nunes et al., 2021).

Molleda (2009) asserts that the industry of strategic communication is built on authenticity. He argues that it is authenticity that makes strategic communication effective as it allows organizations to build trust and establish relationships with their audiences, thus helping to fulfill the communication's goals. Similarly, social media influencers must strategically communicate authenticity to their followers in order to build relationships and gain trust (Ebben & Bull, 2023). Research regards the authenticity of SMIs as "the performance of persona" (Ebben & Bull, 2023, p. 2). Therefore, it is something that is carefully constructed by using digital media tools and social media performances to create an "authentic" persona. It does not necessarily have to reflect reality, and it falls under certain standards and expectations that SMIs adhere to, such as relatability, trustworthiness, accuracy, originality, spontaneity, and visibility (Ebben & Bull, 2023).

This research views authenticity as a concept that is constructed by consumers by assessing multiple factors, that come together to create an authentic feeling. As was established above, these factors are not incidental but evoked using strategic communication. Since there are multiple scales of authenticity, the Scale of Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers (PASMI) by Lee and Eastin (2021) was chosen due to the fact that it specifies how SMI followers evaluate their authenticity, rather than how SMIs view their own authenticity. Additionally, this scale was one of the most

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extensive ones, covering not only influencer characteristics but also how they relate to brand endorsements. The PASMI scale is outlined in the section below.

3.1.2. Scale of Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers

Lee and Eastin (2021), developed five factors of perceived influencer authenticity: sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. The following sections explain the factors and how they relate to perceived SMI authenticity:

a. Sincerity: the first factor of the scale, sincerity, serves as a reflection of honesty and truthfulness. In order to determine if a social media influencer is authentic, fans closely examine their social media accounts, looking for signs of sincerity and candidness. If users get the feeling that a SMI is down-to-earth and approachable, they are more likely to view their persona as authentic. Being "down-to-earth" is closely connected to relatability, as users prefer watching content by a SMI that they perceive to be living a similar lifestyle and holding similar values as them.

b. Truthful endorsements: the 'truthful endorsements' factor defines what makes a SMI collaboration seem authentic to their audience. When endorsing a product, the social media influencer should be transparent about their partnership, which they can do so by clearly communicating that the content was incentivized. When evaluating products or services, the SMI should appear truthful. Similarly, to appear authentic to their followers, a SMI should not collaborate with brands that do not match their personality and the values that they promote in their content.

c. Visibility: visibility is connected to being open and transparent. To appear authentic, social media influencers should engage in self-disclosure, which sometimes can involve revealing information that is considered personal. Research (Marwick, 2013, as cited in Nunes et al., 2021) notes that high levels of self-disclosure result in the

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blurring of the "frontstage and backstage distinction," leaving the audience with the impression that the online persona of an influencer is identical to their personality in real life. By publishing content that features personal imperfections and negative emotions, a SMI gives their fans the impression that they are not strategically curating a fake persona, rather sharing their true experiences.

d. Expertise: if a social media influencer displays a natural ability in their field, the audience then believes that their content is sincere and not motivated by external factors, such as fame or financial rewards. Possessing knowledge about a particular topic is associated with passion, credibility, and dedication. Consequently, public figures (and SMIs) who do not display a specific talent are deemed as less authentic by the audience. Moulard et al. (2015, as cited in Nunes et al., 2021) cites Paris Hilton and her public image as a socialite as an example of a public figure who is generally not perceived as possessing specific talents by the public and is thus viewed as inauthentic.

e. Uniqueness: according to Lee and Austin (2021), a SMI is unique when they are not an imitation or a copy of another content creator. A SMI who produces content that is distinct from the posts of other SMI is viewed by their audience as real, as they create content stemming from their own original ideas. If a SMI posts content that is very similar to other creators and lacks originality, the audience evaluates the creator as inauthentic as they believe that these posts are posted purely for the sake of updating social media profiles.

4. Methodology

4. 1. Research Paradigm

Given the plethora of existing techniques and methods within qualitative research, it is essential for the scholar to select a paradigm within which their research will be conducted. A paradigm typically refers to a set of ontological and epistemological assumptions that unite a community of scholars and outline specific guidelines for conducting research (Prasad, 2017). This work is guided by the interpretive research paradigm, specifically by the theory of symbolic interactionism. The interpretive paradigm is one of the most common types of qualitative research. It assumes that there is no single objective reality that can be observed, rather it is constructed by human experiences and interpretations. Thus, there are multiple realities of a single event that coexist, none of them being more 'true' than the other (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Symbolic interactionism is one of the approaches informing interpretive research. It is a sociological theory coined by Herber Blumer, mainly based on the works of sociologist George Herbert Mead (Dennis & Smith, 2015). The paradigm focuses on meanings and interpretations, working with the assumption that (1) humans interact with objects, people, and concepts based on the basis of meanings that they hold for them, (2) these meanings are derived from social interactions with other people, and (3) everyone undergoes an interpretative process in which they handle and modify those meaning (Blumer, 1986). Therefore, according to symbolic interactionism, things do not possess fixed, universal meanings. What something means can change based on context and many other factors. In addition, meanings are not individual but are created in conversations and interactions. By

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the use of symbols, people are able to gain an understanding of others' point of view. Therefore, meaning is elicited "by working out why someone is doing what they are doing, what it means to them, and responding on the basis of these attributions" (Dennis & Smith, 2015, p. 352). In this context, symbols can be anything that represents certain meanings to people (Chen et al., 2020).

In qualitative research, symbolic interactionism can be used to interpret behaviors, attitudes, and motives and to explain how people make sense of their experiences and different situations that they encounter. In addition, symbolic interactionism can also help explain how people construct reality by creating and using shared definitions and meanings (Carter & Montes Alvarado, 2019). It is often used in the fields of organizations studies, marketing, and information systems (Prasad, 2017). However, there is also a variety of studies using this paradigm within communication and its subfields (Chen et al., 2020; Szabla & Blommaert, 2020; Brake, 2012, Passman & Shubert, 2021).

The foundations and characteristics of symbolic interactionism make it a suitable theory for this study. By focusing on the meanings and interpretations derived from social interactions, symbolic interactionism allows for an in-depth exploration of the role of perceived authenticity in how Gen Z TikTok users perceive content by green influencers. It allows the researcher to explore how the participants construct green influencers' authenticity, helping to uncover the underlying factors that contribute to it and the symbols that Gen Z attaches to a green influencer's authenticity in the highly interactive and symbol-rich digital environment that is TikTok.

4.2. Research Design

Research design involves the process of planning a study, which entails the defining of a research problem, construction of research questions, and the selection of suitable

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approaches to data collection and analysis (Thornberg, 2022). As was mentioned before, this study is conducted using qualitative research methods. Through qualitative research, scholars seek to understand one's experiences and how they interpret them, the construction of their reality, and the meanings that the individuals attribute to those experiences. Therefore, in contrast to quantitative research, the researchers collect subjective experiences rather than objective data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The data used in this study are collected through in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews and then coded using a thematic analysis approach.

4.3. Collection of the Empirical Material

4.3.1. Semi-structured Interviews

In qualitative research, interviews are the most often used technique for gathering data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). They are especially popular in social sciences (Kvale, 2007). Interviewing allows researchers to understand people's feelings, behavior, and how they interpret different situations and realities. In addition, it makes it possible to explore situations that happened in the past and cannot be replicated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Through qualitative interviews, the participant has the space to reflect and explain their point of view in a way that feels natural. This allows for mutual exploration and discovery during which the researcher and participant create meaning. "Interviews are not neutral exchanges of questions and answers, but active processes in which we come to know others and ourselves" (Fontana & Frey, 2005 as cited in Tracy, 2013, p. 132).

The data in this study were collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are usually conducted using an interview guide that includes a mixture of flexible questions and topics that the interviewer asks the participant about. As

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this thesis aims to uncover the perceptions of Gen Z TikTok users towards green influencers and how they construct their authenticity, semi-structured interviews allow for a naturally flowing conversation where participants can explain their experiences with green influencers on TikTok and their reflections on their authenticity. Because semi-structured interviews allow the research to focus on topics that are important and relevant to the research as they arise and make it possible to ask follow-up questions, this format allowed me to ask deeper questions and uncover the symbols that TikTok users associate with authenticity in the case of green influencers (Tracy, 2013; Kvale, 2007).

4.3.2. Sampling and Participants

The source of data for this study was participants in the aforementioned semi-structured interviews. The participants were obtained through convenience and snowball sampling methods with additional criteria, which were (1) being a member of Gen Z, (2) being an active user of the TikTok app, and (3) following and consuming the content of at least one green influencer on TikTok. While Generation Z starts with people aged 12 (as of 2024) (Dimock, 2019), I decided to set the minimum age to 18 in order to avoid possible ethical and legal risks. Thus, the participants had to fall within the age range of 18 and 27 to qualify for the study.

Convenience sampling is one of the most widely used sampling methods in qualitative research (Tracy, 2013). For this study, it was chosen due to its simplicity and cost-effectiveness. Moreover, as a member of Generation Z and an avid TikTok user, I could easily identify potential participants from my university cohort and previous classmates. Furthermore, social media sites, namely Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit were used to publish calls for participants on the researcher's personal profiles, as well as relevant groups that were largely composed of Gen Z social media users. The posts included a

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brief summary of the research topic and aims, an easy to comprehend definition of a green influencer, and the criteria that potential participants should meet. The last line provided my contact information and invited anyone interested in participation to contact me or react to the post.

Snowball sampling is another popular sampling method that is cost-effective and relatively easy to employ (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Every participant that was interviewed was asked if they know other people that fit the criteria of the study and would be willing to participate. Through this method, I was able to obtain participants beyond my personal network and who were not part of the groups where calls for participants were posted.

Before conducting an interview, potential participants had to fill out a pre-screening questionnaire to ensure that they met the criteria (Tracy, 2013). The questionnaire asked potential participants to provide their country of origin, age, and links to the accounts of the green influencers that they followed on TikTok.

Using these methods, the researcher successfully recruited 11 participants who were interested in sharing their experiences and views in an interview. Out of the 11 participants, four identified as male and seven as female, which corresponds with the composition of green influencers' audiences (Dekoninck et al., 2023). The participants typically followed two to four green influencers that were discussed during the interviews. Since the participants all came from different countries, all interviews were conducted in English. The length of the interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 55 minutes.

4.3.3. Data Collection Procedure

As was discussed in the sections before, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with participants who were Gen Z members and followers of green influencers

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on TikTok. Most of the interviews were conducted online, through Zoom. Precisely, out of 11 interviews, three were conducted in person and eight online. Online interviews allow the researcher to interview people without the restraint of geography. They also permit flexible scheduling and since the interviews can be recorded, the researcher can watch them repeatedly and review nonverbal cues (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Before the interviews were conducted, I created an interview guide using my theoretical framework and selected topics from the literature review and consulting academic literature on effective qualitative interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Tracy, 2013; Kvale, 2007). In order to develop effective questions, I was guided by the six types of questions as described by Patton (2015 as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The author advises researchers to include (1) experience and behavior questions, (2) opinion and values questions, (3) feeling questions, (4) knowledge questions, (5) sensory questions, and (6) background/demographic questions. In addition, the guide was checked by my thesis supervisor to ensure all questions were formed well and were relevant to the study. The interview guide can be seen in Appendix 1. However, it is important to note that due to the only partially structured nature of the interviews, the questions were not formulated as they are in the guide, the order was often changed, some questions were left out in some interviews, and additional questions were asked to explore topics deeper. This approach allowed me to be flexible and adjust the interviews according to the needs of both the participants and me.

Candidates who passed the pre-screening process were subsequently invited for an interview. Based on convenience and availability, participants were free to choose whether they preferred to be interviewed online, via Zoom, or in person. Each interview began with a brief explanation of the research aims and topic, an overview of the privacy protection procedure, and a summary of the consent form content. The participants were

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then presented with the consent form that they were asked to read and sign. This form can be found in Appendix 2. Lastly, permission to record the interviews for coding and transcribing purposes was requested from the participants.

After the initial part of the interview, the researcher began asking questions related to the research topic. In order to ease into the interview and create a comfortable atmosphere for the participants, the first few questions were related to their general use of the app and the content that they consume. Next followed more general questions about green content on TikTok and authenticity. The interview then focused on questions that were directly related to the Scale of Perceived Influencer Authenticity by Lee and Eastin (2021), as outlined in the Theoretical Framework chapter. Finally, the interview concluded with questions that prompted the participants to reflect on the topics mentioned and to provide concluding remarks.

During the interview, I took notes on the most important points. The recordings were saved on my computer and later transcribed using the transcription feature in Microsoft 365 online. Finally, the transcripts were proofread and compared to the recordings to prevent potential mistakes and misinterpretations during the analysis.

4.4. Data Analysis

4.4.1. Coding

After transcribing the interviews, the data was coded using an abductive approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While coding abductively, both inductive and deductive reasoning were used. Before analysis, a set of codes based on the theoretical framework was formed, which was then combined with additional codes that arose as I was reading the transcripts. During this process, a list of

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descriptive and in vivo codes was developed. These codes were then compared with each other and the text to assure maximum accuracy and to avoid repetition. The coding process took place in the computer software NVivo which allowed the researcher to organize transcripts and keep track of the codes.

4.4.2. Ethical Consideration and Reflexivity

As mentioned previously, it can be said that qualitative research works with 'subjective experiences' rather than 'objective data' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of the researcher in the interpretation process and address issues that might arise during the research process to ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015). Interviewing specifically is a complex process due to the fact that it details and analyzes people's individual experiences and opinions that are often private and delicate (Kvale, 2007). In addition, regardless of the nature of the interview, the researcher holds an inherent advantage over the interviewee, thus ethics is a crucial component of the research process (Tracy, 2013).

In order to conduct the research ethically, I was guided by the procedural ethics actions described by Tracy (2013). These are (1) do no harm, (2) avoid deception, (3) get informed consent, and (5) ensure privacy and confidentiality (p. 243). The study was designed to protect participants from harm and to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

At the beginning of the interviews, each participant was informed about the aims of the study and about their rights to privacy and data protection. I emphasized that participation in the interview was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Subsequently, I explained that I was recording the interview for transcription and coding purposes and that quotes from the interview might be included in the final work. However, their identities will remain confidential as all participants will be referred to by

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nicknames. Additionally, all recordings will be deleted after the coding process is finished.

Lastly, it is crucial for a researcher to recognize their own personal biases and background which may influence the interpretive process of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In my case, these biases include the fact that I am a part of Generation Z and an active TikTok user who consumes content produced by green influencers. Additionally, authenticity is a significant factor to me when evaluating influencers, and like the participants of this study, I have my own personal understanding of what it means for a green influencer to be authentic.

To reflect on sampling methods, the most useful part was the prescreening questionnaire, which saved me time by avoiding interviewing candidates who did not fit the criteria. For instance, a potential participant was disqualified from the study after providing links to regular celebrities' TikTok profiles instead of green influencers. This method was also extremely helpful in identifying dishonest participants. After posting a call for participants on Reddit, my email inbox was flooded with responses, some of which appeared suspicious. Participant dishonesty in research is not a new phenomenon, but since the rise of online interviewing after Covid-19, scams have become more prevalent. Some of the responses to my call for participants showed multiple telltale signs of fraud, as described by Pullen Sansfaçon et al. (2024). Firstly, I received a lot of replies within a very short time frame, all originating from email addresses following an identical format ("namesurnamenumber" before the domain). The contents of the emails were also very similar to each other and closely matched the description of fraud replies in the article by Pullen Sansfaçon et al. (2024). When I followed up with the suspicious candidates and asked them the pre-screening questions, the majority did not respond.

Therefore, the pre-screening process prevented me from conducting interviews that are fraudulent and could have skewed my research.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1. Overall Perceptions About Green Influencers

At the beginning of the interviews, each participant was asked to share their honest thoughts about the phenomenon of green influencers in general. Most participants viewed green influencers positively, describing them as passionate individuals who post inspiring content for their generation that they enjoy watching. This is consistent with the information presented in the literature review section and also in line with the discussed findings of Dekoninck and Schmuck (2023). These ideas are reflected in the following quote by the participant going by the nickname Paul:

"Hmmm… I think they're really passionate and knowledgeable about what they do. Most of them give me a genuine feeling and I believe that they really care about the environment and, like, sustainability and like trying to be better for the planet. Yeah, I really like watching their videos." (Paul)

In this quote, Paul describes his positive view of green influencers, specifically citing passion, knowledgeability, and genuine interest for environmental issues as the characteristics that drive him to consume content produced by green influencers. This aligns with the factor of sincerity in the Perceived Authenticity scale by Lee and Eastin (2021). A more detailed analysis of this factor will be provided later in this chapter.

A similar sentiment is demonstrated in the quote of participant Finch:

"Well, I think the work that they do is very important and also I would say more effective than like paid ads because it's… with paid ads, they're incentivized with money but green influencers are genuinely interested in green issues." (Finch)

Finch acknowledges the function of green influencers in spreading awareness of environmental issues. She also says that she believes that green influencers post content out of a genuine passion for environmentalism. Consequently, she expresses that in her opinion, this characteristic makes messages by green influencers more effective than paid advertisements as they are not completely motivated by financial gain. This reflects the theory of cognitive dissonance, where authenticity in green influencers reduces the dissonance viewers might feel when comparing genuine passion to financially motivated content.

Participant Karin also expresses her positive view of green influencers, including examples of the content that she often sees green influencers post on TikTok:

"I think they're great. I like them and I don't think I've seen any that would be annoying or like… bad. I usually just see people with inspirational videos about "Ohh, you know, this could be you helping turtles in this cool place at the ocean." Or "Did you know that if you do this instead of this, it's much easier and sustainable?" and stuff like that. So, I usually just get positive and aesthetic and inspirational ones. So, I like them." (Karin)

Karin is referring to green influencers that post content about biodiversity and sustainability tips, voicing that these videos are usually positive and inspiring to her.

A theme that was repeated a few times without it being mentioned by the interviewer at this point of the interview was the comparison of green influencers and content produced by environmental organizations, such as nonprofit organizations or governmental bodies.

"I also follow some companies, but in my free time when I'm just laying in my bed and watching TikTok, I do enjoy following, looking at influencers because they're much more entertaining and it's much nicer to see." (Karin)

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In this quote, Karin expresses that to her, content created by green influencers is easier to digest during casual scrolling due to the entertainment factor included in the videos.

"I'm young, so influencers are easy to understand for me. So, what I'm saying is, you see, NGOs give out information in a very hard way. Sometimes it's just not that easy to understand... They use complex language, like, you are learning why, like, Iceland is melting, the ice is melting, but they say it in such a way that it feels, kind of like, almost like an article. "(Francis)

In this quote, Francis expresses a similar sentiment to Karin. Furthermore, he finds that environmental nongovernmental organizations use a language that is less casual compared to that of green influencers, resulting in difficulties grasping the concepts being explained in their videos. As outlined earlier, according to the theory of symbolic interactionism, the way that Gen Z perceives green influencers is shaped by how they engage with their content and how it resonates with their personal experiences. Symbols such as relatable language help convey complex environmental messages in a manner that is easier to comprehend and digest for younger audiences.

To summarize this section, the participants believed that green influencers are passionate, genuine individuals who use social media to advocate for the climate and influence and inspire their audience to live a more sustainable lifestyle. These results match with the findings by Lee and Eastin (2021) and Dekoninck and Schmuck (2023). Moreover, a few participants mentioned that they prefer green influencers over content made by environmental organizations due to the informal format and less complex language. This finding can be explained using the symbolic interactionism tradition.

5.2. Engagement with Green Influencers and Green Content

This section presents and analyzes the participants' responses to questions about how they first got exposed to green content on TikTok, their green content preferences, and the reasons why they consume green content on TikTok.

5.2.1. For You Page

As discussed in the literature section, the TikTok algorithm functions differently to that of other social media platforms as it is highly precise and selects videos for users to view through their "For You Page" which acts as the main feed. Due to this fact, users are exposed to a variety of topics during scrolling and often, they cannot control which themes or topics will be shown in the videos they are seeing, which can result in discovery and learning (see Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Fiallos et al., 2021), amongst many about environmental topics (see Hautea et al., 2021). Moreover, the algorithm supplies videos to users based on their engagement with content, resulting in a curated, personalized feed (Lovelace, 2022). This is demonstrated in the responses by participants Primrose and Vita:

"I mean, to be fair, I think before TikTok, I was on another social media, always very following activist page pages, right. So, before that Instagram was more the norm. So, I would always have a lot of political activist content, a lot of feminist content, but also environmental stuff. Yeah, I think, like, it was a natural thing. But I think for TikTok, it's like at first, the algorithm learns you and then you get it on your 'For You Page'. I was never really seeking it out but I think it kind of automatically appeared, like I was engaging with that kind of content. That means, yes, I think it's a lot of the algorithm, but at the same time, I think, like, I was following that a lot beforehand in other platforms and interested in those topics." (Primrose)

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"I think it kind of randomly, like popped up in my algorithm at one point and then the algorithm knows if you like it, the more or you watch and then it returns with a similar type of videos so I think. I don't exactly know, like, when I became aware, but at one point I was like 'ohh, now I have a lot of this type of videos, OK'. Like, it's not like I initially actively searched for things. I think it started with shark videos, actually." (Vita)

In these quotes, the participants describe how they were first exposed to green content on TikTok through their For You Page. While both showed previous interest in environmental topics, they did not purposefully search for green videos but engaged with them once they started seeing them on the app.

5.2.2. Green Content Preferences

In order to get an in-depth view of how Gen Z perceives the content by green influencers, participants were asked what type of environmental content they enjoy consuming on the platform. Based on the study conducted by Huber et al. (2022) investigating what topics green influencers cover in combination with the participants' responses, the following categories of green content popular with the participants were created: sustainable lifestyle tips, sustainable fashion, climate change information, conservation and biodiversity, carbon footprint, green energy, ocean protection, trash cleanup, veganism, sustainable cosmetics, and zero waste.

For instance, participant Karin expressed her interest in multiple green topics, namely ocean protection, conservation and biodiversity, trash cleanup, veganism, and sustainable lifestyle tips:

"I like sea animals, so I enjoy videos with turtles and whales, so I get kind of introduced to creators who are studying marine biology. Or maybe are traveling somewhere to help with conservation or cleaning beaches or something like that. But also,

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I like videos where people give tips and stuff. Either it's how to make stuff yourself, to reduce having to buy stuff or how to reuse things. I also like vegan recipes." (Karin)

Similarly, Vita explains that she is interested in ocean protection, sustainable lifestyle tips, but also climate change information and sustainable fashion:

"I like the shark videos and then I also really like learning about climate change but like, through the more fun accounts that kind of use a meme to address, like environmental issues. Then I also like, more, like, tips, for example, with fast fashion, how to avoid it or, like, how to avoid harming the environment and be more sustainable." (Vita)

5.2.3. Green Influencer Consumption Motivation

Participants cited following green influencers to get educated and informed on environmental issues and sustainability, to get inspired and learn about sustainability tips that they can apply to their own lifestyles, and lastly, because they found their content entertaining.

"I am trying to be a bit more sustainable in my lifestyle and I like when I can get easy tips on how to do that without having to be extreme. Because when you search, I don't know, elsewhere on the Internet or try books or stuff, it's sometimes way too extreme, but TikTok being for younger generations, the tips are much more doable and easier." (Karin)

In this quote, Karin describes her motivation for watching content by green influencers on TikTok. She explains that she turns to them to learn about sustainability tips because they are applicable and relatable to her lifestyle as a Gen Z.

For Yves, information seeking was the strongest motivation to follow green influencers:

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"I think the first of all is the environmental crisis. For example, environmental news. I watch videos about environmental news a lot and I like when influencers help me keep up with what's happening right now. I also like learning about new topics, like green energy and things like that." (Yves)

In this quote, Yves expresses his desire to be informed about environmental affairs and topics.

Lastly, Vita describes her motivations that are related to both entertainment and information seeking:

"Because for example, some influencers I think are really funny and that's why I like them, they post memes and stuff about climate change. And I think it's a clever way to bring attention to certain issues." (Vita)

Additionally, Primrose stated that one of the reasons why she watches green influencers is to learn how to argue better in favor of environmentalism and sustainability. Karin also explained that she likes green influencers' videos because they are 'aesthetic'. By watching aesthetic content, users seek a sense of joy, relaxation, and escapism (Mastandrea et al., 2019).

5.3. Perceived Authenticity of Green Influencers

The following section explores factors that contribute to the perceived authenticity of green influencers by Gen Z participants, firstly by using the Perceived Authenticity scale by Lee and Eastin (2021) (as outlined in the Theoretical Framework section) and secondly by presenting and analyzing findings that include characteristics not discussed in the Scale.

5.3.1. Sincerity

As was evident in the first section of this chapter, the participants valued if green influencers gave them a feeling of *being genuine*. This is in line with the sincerity factor in the scale by Lee and Eastin (2021), where one of the definitions of sincerity is that the SMI "comes off as very genuine" (Lee & Eastin, 2021, p. 830). The concept of genuineness is inherently tied to the concept of authenticity (see Wood et al., 2008) and is used interchangeably by some (Södergren, 2020), however, as was established in the theoretical framework section, most academics see authenticity as a multifaceted concept consisting of multiple factors.

In an additional quote, Karin explains what being genuine as an influencer means to her and how it relates to authenticity:

"I think authentic content by influencers, green and normal ones, is when you can kind of feel that they like and believe in what they're posting, whatever it is. So if someone's saying like 'do this, it's so great,' whatever it is, even if it's oatmeal for breakfast, like a new recipe. I feel like it's... I find it authentic, if you can actually see them kind of fitting it into their persona, and you can kind of feel that they're genuine." (Karin)

Lee and Eastin (2021) also mention that in the eyes of followers, a sincere SMI is "domestic, honest, wholesome and cheerful" (p. 825). The idea of cheerfulness and positivity was reflected in the opinions of three participants. In the case of green influencers, the concept of *positivity* was not limited to the personality of the SMI but also to how they talked about environmental issues. Karin mentioned that she liked when influencers "seemed happy" and were "just like... nice", while Anna emphasized that she enjoys when green influencers were positive in their approach to environmental issues:

"I think it depends on how they talk about it. In a way, some are very negative. And it can feel more like I'm doing everything wrong. [...] And then I feel like there's the other

side which I feel like, is for me, more positive in the sense of what it gives you and supports you and the vibe of the influencers is just better, more positive overall" (Anna)

Lastly, another factor that belongs to sincerity in the scale (Lee & Eastin, 2021) is *relatability*, which refers to the degree of which the audience believes to be living a similar lifestyle and holding similar values as the SMI. Participant Vita mentioned that she tends to follow green influencers whose personality and way of communicating are similar to hers. Finch mentioned that she can relate to the SMIs that she follows through their shared interests. Moreover, Paul explained that he likes following influencers that are of a similar age as him, as he feels more connected to them and understands what challenges they are facing at this point of life and vice versa.

However, in the case of green influencers, relatability was often connected to *realism*. As many green influencers share sustainable lifestyle tips and act as sustainability role models for their audience (Dekoninck et al., 2023), it is crucial that their followers can relate to the lifestyle the SMI are modeling and feel that the tips they are sharing are applicable. Karin described seeing green influencers whose lifestyle was so different to hers that she used the word 'extreme' to describe it:

"There's some influencers who showed on my front page, and they live somewhere in the forest and they only eat fruit and do yoga. And you can kind of tell that it's weird and sketchy. It doesn't have the right vibes, it's so extreme." (Karin)

Primrose uses humor to express that she enjoys following SMI who share tips on how to be more sustainable that are applicable for people who are studying or working, "without, like, having to live in the middle of the words and chiseling fire". Similarly, Anna describes that she enjoys following SMIs "who are just living a normal life and are doing things to be more sustainable and are sharing that with others," emphasizing that

she can relate to the green influencers that she follows to the point that they become just ordinary users in her eyes.

Moreover, for Karin, being unrealistic was directly tied to both sincerity and relatability:

"If they post videos and especially if it's like tips for sustainable living or stuff like that and those tips aren't doable [they aren't as sincere]. Because I feel like people who aren't as sincere, they promote kind of [sic] things that, you know, a regular person wouldn't really do and it's kind of, like, a bit of a reach. They're like, 'yeah, everyone can do this' and then it's stuff that no one can really do."

To summarize, the characteristics of SMI that sincerity was composed of, according to Lee and Eastin (2021), that were validated as applicable for green influencers were genuineness, positive and happy attitude, and relatability. In the case of green influencers, relatability seemed to be intertwined with the concept of realism, meaning that participants saw green influencers as relatable when they shared sustainability tips that are achievable to them and modeled a lifestyle that was not too different to their own lifestyles.

5.3.2. Visibility

In the text by Lee and Eastin (2021), the factor of visibility refers to being *open and transparent*. For a SMI to appear as such, they ought to engage in self-disclosure and reveal not only facts about their personal life but also negative emotions and flaws.

Participants of this study have established that when green influencers share information about their personal lives and backgrounds, and their sustainability journey, it makes them more authentic in their eyes.

"You see, we have this notion and analogy whereby we think that people we see online, or we maybe follow online have this kind of quote - unquote perfect life. And that really gets us to have the wrong idea about these people because they are humans like we are. [...] But we kind of forget that they do have a life outside social media. So, I think when someone is brave enough to be honest about, maybe, their shortcomings, I think I appreciate that, I think that's authentic." (Benjamin)

In this quote, Benjamin expresses that self-disclosure makes SMIs seem honest and relates self-disclosure to the concept of relatability (see Sincerity), describing influencers using the sentiment *humans like us*, reflecting one of the definitions of social media influencers that labels them as regular users who gained popularity through self-branding (Abidin, 2015; Schmuck et al., 2022) rather than micro-celebrities that are worthy of admiration (Marwick, 2013, as cited in Arthurs et al., 2018). When SMIs reveal imperfection, he is inclined to see them as more human and thus more authentic.

Comparably, Karin prefers green influencers who can admit that "not everything they do is green" as it "makes them a bit more human," also emphasizing the importance of self-disclosure and how it results in the perceived relatability and authenticity of the green influencer. Lastly, Vita admits that she is less likely to follow a green influencer on TikTok if they never talk about the hardships that come with living a vegan lifestyle:

"I think I would think that a green influencer that's like,' oh, I'm so vegan and blah, blah blah, it's so fine. It's great'. I think maybe then, I think of them as less authentic than someone who's like, 'I'm vegan, but yes, of course, I have struggled sometimes as well'. Because, yeah, they're more honest and it makes them more human." (Vita)

For SMI followers, revealing deeply personal information has become a common practice that is often expected (Marwick, 2013, as cited in Lee & Eastin, 2021).

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Contrastingly, some followers of green influencers do not expect them to share personal information:

"I think personal space should always remain to be personal space. You see, I love your green content, I don't think I really have to know a lot about you sexually." (Francis)

Here, Francis describes his lack of interest in the personal lives of the green influencers that he follows. He is referring to a situation where a green influencer decided to come forward and publish a video discussing their sexual orientation. It is evident that his main interest is the environmental information that is being shared by the influencer and personality comes second.

In a similar tone, Yves argued that SMIs are not obligated to "post the entirety of their life [sic] on the internet". Therefore, self-disclosure does not necessarily correlate with authenticity in his view as he does not expect high levels of self-disclosure.

5.3.3. Expertise

By being perceived as *having knowledge and skills* related to their niche, SMIs are able to evoke a feeling of authenticity. In the interviews, participants evaluated the expertise of green influencers based on their demonstrated knowledge, experience, and education.

"If it's the like nature and ocean ones, then I do follow people who do have degrees in it, so I do trust them to be knowledgeable and to give me actual good information because I follow ones that also are like 'OK, there is this research being done about this thing about the ocean' or 'there is a cruise going to investigate this and this in the ocean'. And because it's their field and they actually have degrees in it and are, like, working on experiments, I want to believe that they're really knowledgeable and would actually give me some good information." (Karin)

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In this quote, Karin discusses the factors that make her believe in the expertise of the green influencer that she follows. She is talking about SMIs in the ocean protection and wildlife niche, reasoning that she trusts their informative content because they are studying marine science related degrees. Furthermore, they are able to prove their expertise by educating the viewers on the newest research in marine science or even engaging in academic projects themselves. In a similar line of thought, participants mentioned trusting green influencers' expertise because they had open water diving certifications and due to their profession as a wildlife scientist.

Some participants valued demonstrated experience with a certain lifestyle over traditional diplomas and certificates. Anna mentioned a green influencer who spent "a long time" practicing a vegan and no waste lifestyle, therefore, she believed that "she knows what she's talking about".

Moreover, two participants expressed that they would not follow green influencers who do not seem knowledgeable to them, because they would suspect that they either create green content solely for profit, or that they are dishonest about practicing a sustainable lifestyle. Both of these possibilities would negatively affect the perceived authenticity of the SMI.

To summarize, expertise is an important factor in a green influencer's authenticity. The participants evaluated expertise based on demonstrated knowledge and skills, experience with the promoted lifestyle, and the possession of degrees and certificates or professional experience in the field.

5.3.4. Uniqueness

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Uniqueness refers to the degree of which a SMI stands out from the rest. It is directly connected to posting content that is deemed as original by the audience (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

"I think for me, it's someone who is, like, original and in terms of their creativity, someone who does not like… you see, if you have took [sic] maybe someone's work and not give them the credits, I think you don't deserve to be labeled as authentic. I think for me, no matter how simple the video can, maybe… it can still be authentic." (Benjamin)

Benjamin's quote includes a concept that was frequently mentioned by participants when describing a green influencer's uniqueness: not copying other creators. Participants valued originality and creativity in green influencers' content. Another participant holding a similar opinion is Vita:

"[…] when they are trying to be themselves and not, like, copying things just because it's trending. Or I mean, you can copy something, but then make it your own, like if it's a trend, but not just, you know, sometimes, I see people, like, literally making the same video because one video got a lot of likes." (Vita)

The above comment showcases that on TikTok, originality might be defined in a different way than when it comes to other social media platforms. TikTok is a platform based on trending sounds, dancing, and memes that users then adapt and remix (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023). Therefore, users do not expect creators to publish content that is entirely new, but they should put a twist on trends to be considered unique and original, as is evident in Vita's quote.

However, uniqueness was a divisive topic, and some participants experienced internal tension when trying to determine the importance of authenticity in green influencers. While Vita expressed that she values originality in the quote above, consequently, she had doubts about whether being unique on social media nowadays is even attainable.

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Moreover, Finch expressed that she did not see uniqueness as a deciding factor in following a green influencer, explaining that the green SMI that she follows, she "stumbled upon them randomly" and due to the abundance of green influencers on the app, she is unsure about how they compare to others in terms of originality.

Consequently, according to three participants, striving for uniqueness can negatively affect a SMI's perceived authenticity if it is to an exaggerated degree.

"I mean, obviously, if somebody copies someone, then it's not as authentic. But at the same time, you could argue that it's also not authentic to try to always stand out." (Primrose)

"[…] it could be, kind of, like, you try to be unique and then you don't… You're not really authentic because you try so much to be unique and different." (Anna)

In these quotes, Anna and Primrose argue that if a SMI gives off the feeling of trying to be unique at all costs, they are not as authentic as their efforts are ingenuine. Therefore, participants mostly value originality and uniqueness but only when it feels natural and not forced.

5.3.5. Truthful Endorsements

"[...] that you feel like they're making, genuinely, content about something that they want to make content off for the reason. They can make a profit off it, but that's not the sole reason for doing it. So, it feels that it's true to them, no matter if they make money or not. So basically, even if they promote a product, then it's not just because the product pays them to promote them, but they actually believe the product is good." (Primrose)

The status of SMIs as opinion leaders is not unknown to marketing and communication professionals and consequently, a portion of SMIs have social media as their main source of income. Therefore, many of them engage in brand collaborations and

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product endorsements (Yang & Wang, 2023). 'Truthful endorsements' is the final factor of the scale by Lee and Eastin (2021) explored in this work. The approach to conducting endorsements and collaborations is directly linked to a SMI's authenticity as there is a tension between the desire to make profit via promotions and the need to be still perceived as authentic. In order to achieve this balance, SMI ought to be *truthful and transparent*. This sentiment is evident in the quote by Primrose, who states that she does not mind if green influencers engage in influencer marketing, as long as they reveal the motivations behind the video and showcase genuine affinity for the product. This is consistent with the findings by Lee and Eastin (2021).

Moreover, the products that SMIs promote must be aligned with their values and fit into their lifestyles. The majority of the participants said that collaborations and endorsements do not negatively impact a green influencer's authenticity, as long as the products promoted fit with their image, and it is believable that the influencer uses the products. For instance, Vita mentioned that "it would be kind of weird" if the endorsement "wasn't related to the content they post". Other participants echoed this sentiment, expressing that a misalignment of values and interests of the brand versus the influencer creates a feeling of inauthenticity and creates the impression that the SMI is only concerned with financial gain.

In the case of green influencers who are role models for sustainability and engage in environmental activism, there was an additional factor that participants mentioned: collaborations with 'nongreen' brands. Brands that have a history of greenwashing or do not include sustainability in their strategy were labeled as nongreen by participants. An example that was discussed by four participants was fast fashion brands, for instance, H&M and Zara. Participants who discussed these collaborations took a hard stance against

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those brands, expressing that an endorsement of fast fashion would cause them to seriously question the SMI's authenticity. This is evident in the following quote by Anna:

"I mean, if you're trying to, like, promote sustainability and be good for the environment and then you turn around and promote brands like H&M, isn't that super weird? I think… to me that's inauthentic because it's just… so, like, evident that you're only doing this for money. Like, what else could be the reason?" (Anna)

On the other hand, there were opposing views:

"I feel like it would depend on, kind of, what they were trying to do by that review. Because I feel like if a green influencer collaborated with H&M and they would be like, 'OK, in their sustainability line, they're doing this and that. And I know that's still H&M but if you do want to shop fast fashion this is a little bit of a better way to do it then,' I feel like that's honest. I wouldn't mind that. But if they just try it on their newest collection, I would find that kind of weird." (Karin)

In this comment, Karin expresses that she does not mind when a green influencer collaborates with a fast fashion brand, as long as the collaboration still has the purpose to promote eco-friendly behaviors and ideas. Therefore, she believes that the green influencer is still authentic despite promoting fast fashion, because they are uplifting a sustainable line, and the collaboration is connected to the causes that they are promoting in their usual content.

Additionally, promotional content should be sincere. A few participants mentioned that they evaluate the honesty and sincerity of endorsements based on if the SMI only blindly praises the brand and products or if they can be *critical* in their reviews. Karin described a situation in which a green influencer was sent ice cream by a vegan brand. The interview felt genuine and authentic to her because while the SMI praised some flavors, she was open with disliking others. This sentiment is echoed in this quote by Paul:

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"I feel like if someone's collaborating with a brand but then aren't saying that that is the only thing they use and everything that they make is perfect, then it seems more genuine" (Paul)

Last factor that was discussed as having an influence on the authenticity of green influencer sponsored content was related to the expertise factor on the scale by Lee and Eastin (2021):

"[...] she got a PR package sent from the brand Merit, which is a beauty brand. And I think that was a very honest review and she talked about how brand partnerships work and monetary incentives behind brand partnerships. It was fair, she said they were good but that the company itself wasn't. She talks about greenwashing and stuff while reviewing the actual product. [...] I feel like I believed that the review was fair because she has a chemical engineering degree. So, she was also talking about, like, the ingredients in the lipsticks and their sustainability." (Finch)

In this quote, Finch is describing a collaboration of a green influencer and a cosmetics brand. She evaluated this interview as authentic and honest due to the SMI's transparency but also knowledge and expertise.

In summary, brand and product endorsements by green influencers on TikTok are viewed as authentic when they are honest, transparent, and aligned with their values. The participants preferred when the SMIs disclosed the motivations behind the sponsored content and provided balanced reviews. Misalignment between the influencer's values and the endorsed brand, particularly with non-green companies such as fast fashion brands, is viewed negatively and as inauthentic. However, transparency about the sustainability aspects of such brands can possibly help mitigate these concerns. Expertise of the green influencers in their niche positively affected the perceived authenticity of sponsored content.

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5.3.6. Consistency

A factor of authenticity that is not included in the PASMI scale by Lee and Eastin (2021), neither as a factor nor as a characteristic of a factor, is consistency. Yet, it was a frequently used term by the interviewees when discussing the authenticity of green influencers on TikTok. Participants mentioned that they value consistency in the content posted by green influencers, as well as in showcased values and personality. This can be seen in the following quote:

(talking about what she considers authentic) "Being themselves or also being kind of consistent. And also what they post and I don't mean that they always have to post the same type of video, but that they are portraying the same kind of image of themselves, which then makes it more authentic." (Vita)

A phrase used by number of interviewees that was used to describe consistency of the values showcased by green influencers in their TikTok videos was 'walk the talk':

"If a vegan influencer posts a vlog to meet a friend and then they're eating vegan food, that feels like, 'okay, so they are really like walking their talk'. So I think that is authentic, to prove, 'okay, they are doing it'." (Yves)

In this quote, Yves describes consistency that is created by the alignment of the green influencer's claims and documented actions. By consistently promoting veganism and then documenting themselves committing to the lifestyle in a more casual setting, the participant gets the impression that the green influencer is genuine and authentic.

Benjamin mentioned that he would unfollow a green influencer "if there was inconsistency whereby there's a mismatch between the influencer's lifestyle and their green messages," highlighting the effect that consistency has on perceived authenticity.

While this topic is not discussed in Lee and Eastin (2021), these findings correspond with other literature; consistency has been mentioned as one of the main contributors to

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authenticity in self-branding (Whitmer, 2018; Khamis et al., 2017). Whitmer (2018) describes the ideal personal brand as "framed as consistent, produced through an individual process of self-discovery, comprised of a continuous stream of personal information that constitutes a distinct, recognizable whole" (no page). Research (e.g. Zniva et al., 2023) holds that consistency increases a SMI's perceived authenticity.

5.3.7. Credibility

The second topic often discussed by participants that is not in the PASMI scale (Lee & Eastin, 2021) is credibility. Participants often related credibility to the authenticity of green influencers:

"I think it's authentic if whatever you're saying is real. That if I go and search, look it up on the Internet or wherever, I'm going to find that specific piece of information. And if it turns out to be correct it makes me think that the influencer is genuine." (Francis)

In the above quote, Francis emphasizes credibility as one of the factors of authenticity. He describes how fact-checking the information shared by green influencers helps him figure out if they are genuine. Similarly, Yves views credibility as more important than other factors of authenticity related to a green influencer's personality:

"As long as it's not misinformation and it's like correct, then I think it's authentic. So, would you say for you it's more about the credibility of the information than just the overall feeling of the influencer? Yeah, exactly." (Yves)

Additionally, Vita makes the connection of genuineness of green SMIs and credibility, reasoning about ingenuine motivations behind posting green content:

"But why would you promote things you're not educated on? Maybe you don't really care, but you're kind of using it to get the followers, to make money out of it" (Vita)

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According to Vita, as can be seen in the above quote, a possible explanation of the reason why some SMIs might publish videos containing incorrect information is that they lack knowledge and experience related to environmental issues and are only motivated to create videos for financial gain. Therefore, that gives her the impression that the SMIs are inauthentic.

According to Lee and Eastin (2021), authenticity as a concept is very different from credibility. The authors state that authenticity involves being true to oneself and credibility is concerned with trustworthiness. While authenticity encompasses a broader range of attributes, also including emotional connection, and perceived genuineness, credibility specifically focuses on trustworthiness and expertise. Therefore, the two concepts both involve trust but are otherwise unrelated.

The findings of this study indicate that the case of credibility might be different when it comes to green influencers. Since, unlike regular SMIs, a crucial function of their content is to inform, credibility is evaluated as more important. Additionally, the green influencer followers interviewed emphasized that accurate and reliable information is a key aspect of what makes green influencers appear trustworthy and authentic. This suggests that in the case of green influencers, authenticity and credibility are intertwined as the ability to share correct information directly influences the degree of perceived sincerity and genuineness. Thus, in this context, the unique role of green influencers as educators and role models calls for a higher standard of credibility, making it a crucial factor in their perceived authenticity.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter brings together and concludes the findings of this study. It discusses their significance and contribution to strategic communication as a research field and practice. Lastly, the chapter examines the limitations of this study and offers suggestions for further research.

The purpose of this study was to explore how Gen Z TikTok users perceive green influencers, with a particular focus on authenticity. The study was guided by the following research question:

What is the role of authenticity in how Gen Z TikTok users perceive content by green influencers?

Given that authenticity is a broad concept that is multifaceted and consisting of different factors that come together to create an 'authentic' feeling (Kovács, 2019), the study utilized the Scale of Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers developed by Lee and Eastin (2021). This scale identified five concrete factors that contribute to the perceived authenticity of SMI: sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. To explore how these factors apply to Gen Z TikTok users and their perceptions of green influencers, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews consisted of questions aiming to investigate general perceptions, as well as specific questions directly related to the five factors of the PASMI scale.

The findings of this study revealed that while this scale is applicable to green influencers, the individual factors were often defined and viewed differently. Sincerity in the case of green influencers was defined by Gen Z as when they were genuine, their

content and attitude had a positive tone, and the audience could relate to them. However, relatability was viewed differently in green influencers than in other types of influencers. Lee and Austin (2021) put emphasis on the degree to which the audience perceived the SMI's lifestyle as similar. While this was true for green influencers, there was an added factor - realism. Since green influencers serve as role models and guide their audience towards a more sustainable lifestyle (Dekoninck et al., 2023), it is crucial that the tips that they provide in their videos are viewed as applicable and realistic for their Gen Z audience. Participants favored green influencers who lived similar lifestyles to them. Furthermore, this concept was directly related to the authenticity of the influencer as green influencers who were living 'unrealistic' and 'extreme' lifestyles were viewed as ingenuine. Out of the reviewed literature, this finding aligns most closely with Pittman and Abell (2021), who observed that green influencers with fewer followers tend to be seen as more relatable because they promote sustainability in a more approachable and realistic way.

The second factor of the PASMI scale was visibility, which involved SMIs being open and transparent and engaging in self-disclosure. The findings of this study validated this factor, as participants cited preferring green influencers who openly discuss their sustainability journey and potential struggles with living an eco-friendly lifestyle. However, self-disclosure was a dividing factor. While some participants enjoyed learning about the green influencers that they followed, some showed no interest in their personal life, labeling this content as distracting from green causes and unnecessary. This shows that while some followers view green influencers as a source of inspiration and seek to develop relationships with them (as seen in Dekoninck et al., 2023), others prefer to use their content as purely informational, and they do not have the desire to connect with the

SMI personally. This finding highlights the dynamic of green influencers as both role models and information sources, with personal preferences of users having influence.

Expertise was another factor of the PASMI scale that was validated as applicable to green influencers. Expertise is defined as having knowledge and skills related to the SMI's niche (Lee & Eastin, 2021). The findings of this study assert that green influencers are evaluated as skilled in their niche by their Gen Z audience based on demonstrated knowledge, experience, and education. Green influencers are viewed as knowledgeable when they possess degrees related to natural sciences, work in the field, or have experience living a sustainable lifestyle for some time.

Uniqueness was a partially validated factor of green influencer authenticity. According to the findings of this study, Gen Z participants mostly favor SMIs who are original and do not copy content from others. However, a desire to stand out and be unique at all costs is viewed as ingenuine and thus inauthentic. A possible explanation of this finding is that on TikTok, originality is viewed differently than on other social media platforms, for instance Instagram, as content often incorporates trending sounds and dances remixed by users (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023).

Lee and Eastin (2021) assert that in order to be authentic, a SMI must be open and transparent when engaging in brand collaborations and product endorsements. This sentiment was true in the case of green influencers, as well. Additionally, participants preferred if green influencers chose to collaborate with brands that match their sustainability message and avoided collaborating with 'nongreen' brands, such as fast fashion ones.

This study identified two factors that contribute to the perceived authenticity of green influencers: consistency and credibility. Consistency is a concept that is sometimes mentioned in literature regarding SMI authenticity and self-branding (e.g. Whitmer, 2018;

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Khamis et al., 2017), however, it was not included in the PASMI scale by Lee and Eastin (2021). Using the findings of this study, it can be stated that Gen Z values when green influencers are consistent. This applies to both their content and the values and personality showcased in videos. Gen Z viewed green influencers as more authentic if they 'walked the talk,' meaning if their actions and lifestyle matched the ideology and values that they were promoting in their TikTok videos. Similarly, if SMIs were consistent in promoting a topic, they were viewed as genuinely interested and passionate, which positively influenced their perceived authenticity.

Contrastingly to Lee and Eastin (2021), credibility was found to be a crucial content of perceived green influencer authenticity. While the authors of the PASMI scale argued that credibility and authenticity are separate concepts, this study's findings show that it directly influences how authentic green influencers are viewed to be. As green influencers provide information about green topics, it is important that the information in their videos is truthful and factual. By spreading incorrect information, the SMI is deemed untrustworthy by their audience and suspicions about the motivations behind their content arise. Thus, the green influencer is deemed not only as lacking credibility and expertise but also generally inauthentic.

6.1. Contribution

The findings of this study contribute to strategic communication both as a research field and as a practice. Since the 2020s, there has been a growing research interest in green influencers - how they communicate sustainability, promote sustainable products, and connect with audiences online (Huber et al., 2022; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023; Dekoninck et al., 2023; Boerman et al., 2022; Knupfer et al., 2022; Pittman & Abell, 2021; Kapoor, 2013). This study intersects this emerging area of research on green

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influencers with the well-established subject of authenticity, offering a fresh addition to the body of strategic communication research on authenticity and how it is strategically communicated on social media.

Drawing on the Scale of Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers by Lee and Eastin (2021), this study identified two new factors that contribute to the perceived authenticity of green influencers: credibility and consistency. Additionally, the study validated four factors of the PASMI scale as applicable to green influencers, with the fifth one, uniqueness, being partially validated. To better align with the findings, the concept of uniqueness is replaced with the related concept of originality. Drawing on the aforementioned findings, a seven-factor model of perceived authenticity of green influencers is proposed, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Factors of perceived authenticity of green influencers
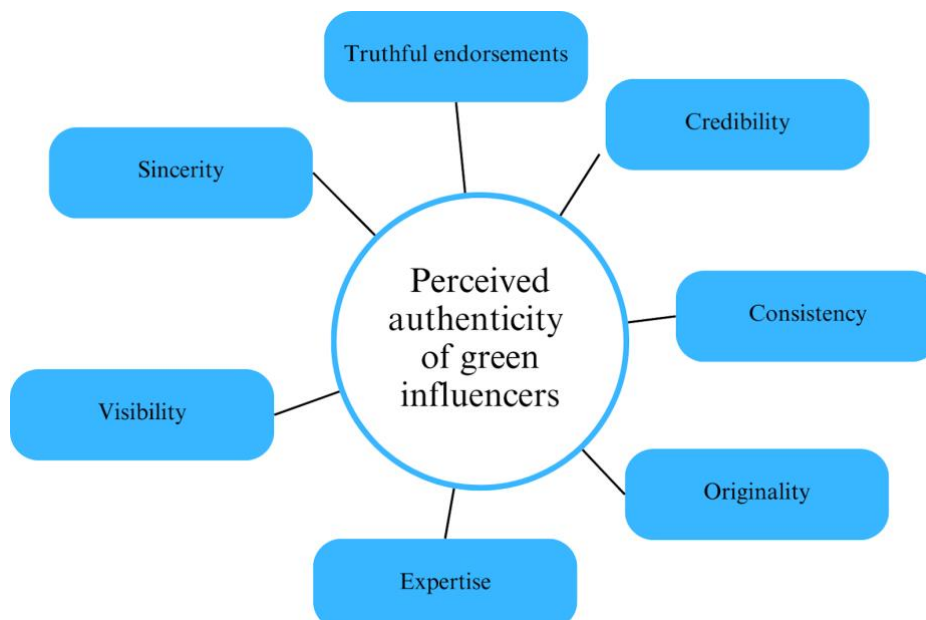
The findings of this study also hold a value to the practice of strategic communication, particularly for green influencers aiming to engage Gen Z audiences on TikTok while maintaining an authentic persona. Several recommendations can be drawn from this study to aid green influencers in capturing attention and promoting green topics effectively:

Firstly, Gen Z TikTok users are interested in sustainable lifestyle tips, sustainable fashion, climate change information, conservation and biodiversity, carbon footprint, green energy, ocean protection, trash cleanup, veganism, sustainable cosmetics, and zero waste. Therefore, to capture their attention, green influencers should focus on content covering one or a few of those topics.

Secondly, Gen Z TikTok users discover green influencers through the platform's algorithm, which selects content to appear on their For You page. Thus, it is advisable that green influencers seeking to grow their following learn about the algorithm. By understanding the mechanics of the platform's algorithm, SMIs are able to create content that is "algorithm-friendly," increasing the possibility that it will be shown to a wider audience.

Finally, green influencers can directly apply the proposed seven factor scale to assess their content across key dimensions of authenticity and identify which areas have room to improve to appear more authentic in the eyes of their Gen Z followers. Table 2 includes a list of the seven factors with, along with concrete advice on how green influencers can implement each one to enhance their perceived authenticity.

Table 2

Authenticity factors and their application for green influencers

Authenticity	Application

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factor	
Sincerity	• being genuine • having a positive attitude and delivering information in a positive way • sharing realistic tips that are applicable for Gen Z audiences
Visibility	• sharing personal journey to sustainability with the audience • sharing imperfections and talking about personal experiences with sustainability openly and honestly
Expertise	• demonstrating knowledge about green topics • showcasing experience with sustainability and green lifestyle
Originality	• avoiding copying other creators • putting a personal twist on popular trends
Truthful endorsements	• revealing the motivations behind the content • selecting brands and products that align with values promoted in videos • avoiding 'nongreen' brands • providing critical, honest reviews of products

Consistency	• 'walking the talk'
	• aligning promoted values with showcased lifestyle
	• portraying a consistent personal image
Credibility	• sharing truthful information
	• fact checking

Environmental organizations and NGOs seeking to target younger audiences can use the findings of the study and the seven factor model to tailor their messages and content. By getting inspired by green influencers who are popular with this type of audience, organizations can learn to create content that is more attractive and engaging, avoiding employing communication that is complicated and too formal. Additionally, these organizations can benefit from understanding how to select green influencers who are seen and authentic for collaboration, thus enhancing their outreach initiatives.

6.2. Limitations

While the study's findings are informative, they are not without limitations. Firstly, out of 11 participants, only four identified as male. Although that research indicates a higher proportion of female followers among green influencers (Dekoninck et al., 2023), a more diverse sample could result in more comprehensive results.

Secondly, although the researcher tried to create a comfortable atmosphere and emphasized the participants' anonymity, there remains a possibility of social desirability bias. Participants might have manipulated their answers to align with the social norms surrounding sustainability, which could have influenced the truthfulness and authenticity of their statements.

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Lastly, utilizing semi-structured interviews in research always carries the risk of researcher bias. Despite efforts to follow a consistent interview protocol and to interpret answers based on the theoretical framework, the subjective nature of interviewing may have influenced how questions were asked and their later interpretation.

6.3. Suggestions for Further Research

There are still many areas to be explored within the topic of perceived authenticity of green influencers. Future research could benefit from applying different theoretical frameworks to examine specific aspects of these perceptions. For instance, employing the Uses and Gratifications theory could help investigate why Gen Z turns to TikTok to consume green content over other platforms. Additionally, there is an opportunity to compare possible perceptions of the authenticity of green influencers on TikTok and Instagram.

A quantitative study would allow the researcher to measure the relationship between the individual factors and perceived authenticity, and to assess how these factors influence audience perceptions. Furthermore, there has been research into how SMIs perceive their own authenticity (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022) but no existing study focused on green influencers. Addressing this gap a potential study could delve into the self-perceived authenticity of green influencers, comparing the findings to audience perceived authenticity.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

PART 1: Green influencers and authenticity

TikTok use

1) Can you tell me a bit about your use of TikTok and the types of content you usually engage with? How often do you use TikTok, how much time in a day, how long have you had it?

Green content on TikTok

1) What is "green content" in your opinion?

2) How did you first become aware of green content on TikTok?

3) What green content do you usually engage with?

E.g. sustainability lifestyle tips, environmental activism, environmental news, eco-friendly products, biodiversity and conversation topics

4) What motivates you to engage with green content on TikTok?

(Additional question: "Are there specific green content topics that you find more engaging or credible than others? Why?")

Green Influencers on TikTok

1) How would you describe your overall perception of green influencers on TikTok?

2) How did you first come across green influencers on TikTok and what drew you to follow them and consume their content?

3) Why do you follow these particular green influencers?

Green influencer authenticity

1)What do you understand as authentic content made by influencers?

2) Do you seek authenticity in influencer content?

3) Is it important to you if the green influencer you follow is authentic? Why or why not?

PART 2: Scale questions

Sincerity

1) How do you determine if a green influencer on TikTok is sincere in their content?

2) Would you unfollow or stop consuming the content of an influencer if you felt like they were dishonest? Why or why not?

3) Can you describe a time when you felt a green influencer was particularly honest or candid? What made you feel that way?

Visibility

1) Can you recall a situation where a green influencer's actions did not match the message they are promoting? How did that make you feel?

2) Would you say that the green influencers that you follow are open and transparent?

3) Can you recall an instance where a green influencer shared something personal or imperfect? Did that impact your perception of them and their authenticity? How?

4) Do you feel like the green influencers you follow are relatable? Why or why not?

Truthful endorsements

1) Have you seen the green influencers you know/follow post sponsored content or collaborate with brands? If so, how do you feel about it?

2) Have you seen any collaborations or sponsored content posted by a green influencer that you liked? Why did you like it?

3) What about some that you didn't like? Did it change your overall view of the influencer in any way?

Expertise

1) Would you say that the green influencers that you follow are knowledgeable in their field? Why?

(Additional: How do you evaluate the expertise of a green influencer? What kind of information or content demonstrates their knowledge?)

Uniqueness

1) What makes the green influencers that you follow stand out to you? Does this affect your perception of their authenticity in any way?

Reflections and closing

1) In what way do you think authenticity influences how effective the green communication on TikTok is?

2) Are there any other factors that you think contribute to the authenticity of green influencers that we haven't discussed?

3) Is there anything else you'd like to add about your perceptions of green influencers and their authenticity on TikTok?

Appendix 2: Consent Form

Informed Consent to participate in a Master Thesis Study

I agree to participate in the Thesis: Perception of Gen Z TikTok users towards Green Influencers.

The thesis project will not entail the disclosure of any personal data, except for information voluntarily provided by the interviewees at their discretion.

Information on the processing of personal data

The following personal data will be processed:
 Participant's gender and age

The following sensitive personal data will be processed:
None

Personal data will be processed in the following ways:
The interview will be recorded and stored on the researcher's personal laptop. Subsequently, it will be transcribed for analysis purposes. Once the thesis has been submitted, the interview recording will be deleted.

Lund University, Box 117, 221 00 Lund, Sweden, with organisation number 202100-

3211 is the controller. You can find Lund University's privacy policy at

www.lu.se/integritet.

You have the right to receive information about the personal data we process about

you. You also have the right to have inaccurate personal data about you corrected. If you

have a complaint about our processing of your personal data, you can contact our Data

Protection Officer at dataskyddsombud@lu.se. You also have the right to lodge a

complaint with the supervisory authority (the Data Protection Authority, IMY) if you

believe that we are processing your personal data incorrectly.

I agree to participate in Perception of Gen Z TikTok users towards Green Influencers

Location	Signature
Date	Name clarification