

# **The representation of sustainability on social media**

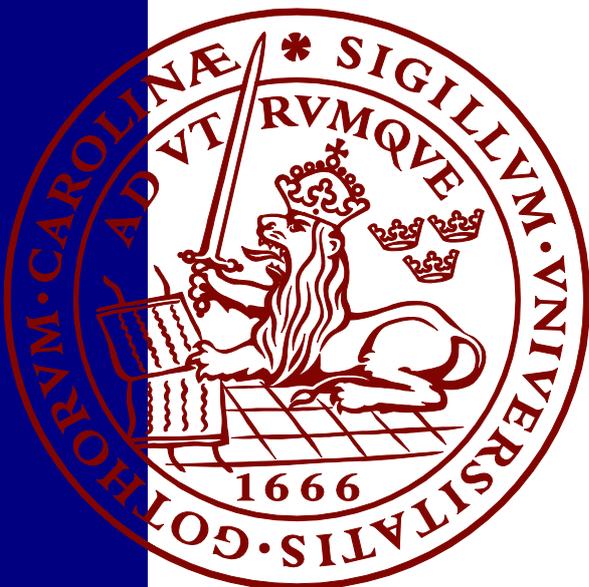
## an Ecofeminist reading of Instagram

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## **Abstract**

Social media is a part and parcel of the daily lives of most people today. From targeted advertisements to affecting the election results around the globe, social media holds tremendous power in the way it shapes narratives and the world we live in. As sustainability has become a hot topic on online platforms, it is imperative to question how it is represented. This thesis explores the representation and the power of social media in setting the discourse on sustainable living. Instagram is chosen as the platform to study since it is both a textual and a visual medium. Using hashtags, a particular community of influencers is discovered, who share their everyday sustainable practices. Using tools from digital ethnography, along with interviewing members of this online community, their representation of sustainability is examined. The analysis reveals that there is a clear gender divide in this community, as most of these influencers and their followers are female. Ecofeminist theory is used to analyze this eco-gender gap which makes itself visible on Instagram. The ethics of care which is central to ecofeminist theory is used as a lens to look at the gendered sustainable content and community on Instagram. Critical Discourse Analysis of Instagram posts reveals that most online influencers represent sustainable living as a natural way of living, away from toxins and chemicals. This is deemed good both for the women and for their children's wellbeing. This is in line with ecofeminism which challenges the prioritization of capitalistic values of efficiency and profit maximization. Overall, it seems that the community of sustainable bloggers on Instagram sees Instagram as a platform where they, as women, are the producers of knowledge, and their knowledge holds merit in an almost exclusively female community that values their experience of being caregivers for their household.

**Keywords: Instagram, Social Media, Sustainable Living, Ecofeminism, Lifestyle bloggers, Digital Ethnography**

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## 1. Introduction

Social media has been around for about twenty years (Hendricks, 2013) and within this short period it has become the most consumed media, forming seventy-three percent of all media consumption (Felix, 2020). There are about three and a half billion active social media users and the number grows by nine percent annually, and this does not account for users below 13 years of age (Kemp, 2019). For a phenomenon of this magnitude, it is interesting to question if we are aware of the impact it has on our world. A glimpse of the power of social media can be seen in the way it affects political elections (Garett, 2019), helps organize social movements (Shirky, 2011), or helps brands to publicize themselves (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011). A 2016 report by Deloitte states that social media has the power to influence consumer choices, that is, it can affect the buying behavior of people (Deloitte Development LLC, 2015). Given the power of social media, it then becomes imperative for the field of sustainability science to analyze the role social media can play in promoting different sustainable lifestyles, especially among the younger generation.

Even though social media has such a vast impact on our daily lives and influences the way we behave and the actions we take, it would be hard to judge how the effect of social media specifically translates into off-screen sustainable behavior. Therefore, this research is designed to study the *representation* of sustainability on social media instead. The main aim of this research is to judge the discursive power of social media in the field of sustainability. Discursive power here is defined as the power to shape public discourses by amplifying, introducing, framing, and maintaining topics (Jungherr, Posegga, and An, 2019). For this purpose, I analyze the posts by top Instagram influencers and lifestyle bloggers – those that can be seen as role models for today's online generation - in the field of sustainability. Influencer here refers to those people who have the power to affect people's everyday actions (such as buying habits) by posting content on social media platforms (Martineau, 2009). To study this particular group of people on Instagram, who form a community of practice, ethnographic methods are applied to digital spaces, which includes asynchronous interviews with the influencers.

Critical Media studies contends that there is more to a message than meets the eye; that is, a message is not just made up of the content it delivers (the facts or information), but also of 'form', which is the cognitive component of the message. This means there are hidden implications behind any content, based on who created it, for what purpose it was created, which socio-economic backdrop it is created in, and so on (Ott and Mack, 2014). Therefore, Critical Discourse Analysis is used as the main method to examine the Instagram posts created by sustainability influencers.

Eco-gender gap and the theoretical reasons behind it are used to analyze the data. Eco-gender gap refers to the fact that women are more likely to be environmentally friendly than men (Hill, 2018). An example of this eco gender gap is seen in university courses related to the environment, where women form the majority of the student population (Hunt, 2020). Currently, sustainability movements are also led predominantly by women, such as Alexandria-Ocasio Cortez and Greta Thunberg. The reasons for this eco-gender gap can be found in societal conditioning and gender roles, rather than biological differences; that is, it is more 'nurture' than 'nature' (Hunt,2020). For example, women are still disproportionately responsible for household chores, because of which most environment advertisement is marketed to women and also why women are more likely to purchase environment-friendly products. Being environment friendly is often seen as feminine; caring is seen as a feminine trait in general, therefore so is caring for the planet (Spretnak, 1987). Surveys report that some men refuse to carry a reusable bag to the grocery store for fear of their masculinity being questioned (Hunt, 2006). Women also have less faith in institutions and question governments and businesses more as compared to men (Hunt, 2006). This is probably because men have historically been more privileged and therefore they do not wish for their lifestyles to change (Hunt, 2006). As this eco-gender gap is found in the sustainability discourse represented online as well, I have used Ecofeminist theory to analyze and report the findings.

Therefore, through this research, I have attempted to answer the following research questions:

- What does the representation of sustainability on social media look like?
- How do sustainability influencers on social media affect ideological formation?
- How can sustainability influencers on Instagram be analyzed from an Ecofeminist perspective?

### **1.1 Layout of the Thesis**

This thesis is organized into a *Background* section which talks about the chosen social media in this research – Instagram. The way Instagram operates and its reach is briefly explained, along with why it is an important medium to study. Critical Media Theory is touched upon in this section to give more meaning to how Instagram acts as a medium of cultural and social influence. There is a short literature review on previous studies done on the nexus of social media and sustainability.

The next section lays out the methods used for the collection and analysis of data, along with the methodology, that is the justification for using said methods.

This is followed by the *Theory* section, which explores how Ecofeminist theory has evolved over the years, and how it lays the foundation for this thesis. Critical Media Studies is used to discuss the

framing and representation of narratives. Finally, Critical Discourse Analysis theory is briefly touched upon, as it is the primary method of analysis here.

The *Findings* section presents the discourse analysis of the data along with an examination of interview answers. This section is where the research questions asked in the *Introduction* are finally answered.

The next section lists the *Limitations* of this study and the *Future Scope*, followed by a succinct *Conclusion* of the research.

## **2. Background**

Disregarding instant messaging applications, the top three social media platforms by the number of users, as of 2019, are Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram (Clement, 2020). With 700 million active users, Instagram is the most popular image-sharing media today (Musonera, 2018). and the second most widely used social media, after Facebook. However, while Facebook is used mostly for keeping in touch with family and friends, Instagram, on the other hand, is a platform where brands, celebrities, lifestyle bloggers, and online role models have a way better reach and interaction with their audience. Instagram was also the first social media application to be exclusively made for cell phones, or as the e-commerce expert Jason Miles puts it, it was “born mobile” (Success Magazine, 2014).

The field of Critical Media Studies suggests that the way a message is packed and delivered matters more than the message itself (Ott and Mack, 2014). This is stressed upon to such an extent that a common saying in the field of Critical Media theory is, “the medium is the message” (Ott and Mack, 2014). This is why the choice of the medium, and understanding the medium chosen, is of paramount importance. What makes Instagram an interesting medium to study is that the importance of tagging content using keywords called “hashtags”. This practice of using hashtags, is much more common on Instagram than on Facebook, as the Instagram algorithm gives a lot of weightage to hashtags. These tags are used as symbols for emotions, ideas, different subjects, and so on. Hashtags are interesting because they are not just the tools for studying social media but also the subject of the study itself. One of the uses of hashtags is to classify and organize information, to make it easier to find later, for oneself and also for others (Ibba, Orrù, Pani, and Porru, 2015). This is known as Folksonomy (Ibba et al., 2015). This organization of information to make it easier to find is fundamental in determining how much reach a post on Instagram has. Another use of hashtags is to use them to self-proclaim oneself as something or someone, that is to use it to construct an online identity. Hashtags also provide legitimacy to content; that is, if a post is tagged with ‘#sustainability’

it is not only a way of proclaiming oneself as sustainable, thus building your online identity, but it also leads users to assume that you are somehow linked with sustainability, regardless of whether it is objectively true or not. This makes hashtags interesting to study from a Critical Media Theory perspective.

Social media has been the subject of numerous studies across various disciplines. However, most of these studies are quantitative. They employ Big Data tools to analyze and report different metrics related to the number of users, demographic distribution, activity per day, etc. While the quantitative studies are useful, it is also true that Big Data often makes us see patterns where there are none, just because of the sheer magnitude of the data. Qualitative studies are few and usually focus on the negative effects social media has on individual psychology, such as leading to alienation, depression, and attention deficit disorder in teenagers. There is a dearth of studies on the power of social media to affect cultural phenomenon and shape discourses. Therefore, taking a Critical Media studies perspective to study social media is an essential but not well-researched enough field. One reason for this is that social media is a fairly new phenomenon, being termed as “new media” in the field of Critical Media Studies. What little research there has been in this field has been dominated by studies of textual content on social media, leaving room for more research on a visual-based medium like Instagram. Critical Media theory contends that images and text are consumed in very different ways (Ott and Mack, 2014), which will be elaborated more in the *Theory* section. Ott and Mack suggest that because of the difference in how we consume the two mediums, and image-based mediums being more prolific today, the current generation’s brains work differently to the previous generations’.

This summarizes how social media is usually studied and what makes Instagram an interesting medium to study, especially from a critical theory standpoint. As far as research on social media in terms of its impact on the sustainability discourse is concerned, there is, again, a lot of room for further exploration.

## **2.1 Social media and sustainability**

Already existing research on the nexus of sustainability and social media shows that social media can be more effective than government or advertisement campaigns in encouraging people to be more environment friendly (Goldsmith and Goldsmith, 2011). This clearly shows that social media does have an impact on people when it comes to sustainability, thereby strengthening the motivation for this study.

Isacsson and Gretzel in their 2011 study show that social media can be beneficial in educating young pupils on matters of sustainability. There is also research that shows that social media can be used to

re-politicize environment and sustainability education (Andersson & Öhman, 2016). However, all of this research is conducted in online environments that are specifically created for the sole purpose of education.

Research by Laurell, Sanström, and Suseno (2019) shows that crowdfunding for sustainability on social media can be another way to impact sustainability through online platforms. However, it is not very successful as these crowdfunding campaigns are mostly led by a few prominent actors and do not gain enough traction (Laurell, Sandström, and Suseno, 2019).

The power of online social movements is explored by a study done on Twitter hashtags for protests leading up to the United Nations Conference of Parties on Climate Change 15 (COP15), in 2009 (Segeberg and Bennett, 2011). This study shows how hashtags can be re-Tweeted to shape mechanisms that are used for organizing social movements. Therefore, social media can not only accurately reflect real-life sustainability movements, it can, at the same time, also affect their structure (Segeberg and Bennett, 2011).

A study done on ideological struggles on online platforms shows that in the era of post-truth, online debates are not usually rooted in science (Jaques, Islar, and Lord, 2019). It concludes that disagreements only serve the purpose of keeping current power structures alive and that anti-hegemonic movements need to manifest themselves materially; online platforms are not a good field for this (Jaques, Islar, and Lord, 2019). Schlosberg and Coles (2016) on the other hand, argue that social media promotes alternative material flows by encouraging community organization. Their study argues that social media can be an effective tool for sustainability when it promotes individual behavior change, because this behavior change challenges material flows between the state and industries (Schlosberg and Coles, 2016).

This short literature review on the nexus of sustainability and social media reveals that social media clearly has an impact on how people perceive sustainability, how they discuss it online, and their political and daily behavior in terms of sustainability. However, there is much room left for research on how sustainability is being currently *represented* on online mediums. According to Robbins (2012), things are rarely what they appear at first sight, as all representations ultimately serve a political purpose, and through analysis one can uncover the hidden implications in them.

### **3.Materials and Methods**

This section describes how the data was collected and analyzed, how the research was designed, how the research questions were chosen, and the ontological and epistemological assumptions made in this research.

#### **3.1 Data Selection**

Since there is a plethora of online content, it was important to limit the scope of the study for feasibility. After choosing Instagram as the social media network to study, due to the reasons explained in the previous section, hashtags were used to find posts that are relevant to sustainability. Digital Ethnographic research makes use of hashtags to observe social formations, shared identities, and cultures on online platforms. In other words, hashtags follow the flow of the medium (Caliandro, 2014).

To narrow down on which hashtags would be used for data collection, free online analytical tools were used in conjunction with each other – Top-Hashtags and Keyword Tool. After inserting ‘#sustainability’ as a hashtag, the tools showed a list of other related hashtags, along with the number of posts on Instagram for each, which can be seen in Figure 1. Based on that, the following seven hashtags were selected:

1. Sustainable - seven million posts
2. Sustainability - five million posts
3. Environment - six million posts
4. Eco - five million posts
5. Ecofriendly - eight million posts
6. Climatechange - three million posts
7. Sustainableliving - three million posts

## Hashtags for #sustainability in 2020 to be popular and trending in Instagram, TikTok

Best Popular Hashtag to use with #sustainability are #sustainabilitymatters #greenliving #reducewaste #sustainablelife #sustainablefuture #sustainablelifestyle #environmentallyfriendly #sustainable #circulareconomy #sustainableliving . You should try these good hashtags in your *Instagram* or *TikTok* post to get popular and boost your view.

### Best Popular Hashtag to use with #sustainability

Prev Next

Show Links Refresh

#sustainabilitymatters #greenliving #reducewaste #sustainablelife #sustainablefuture #sustainablelifestyle #environmentallyfriendly #sustainable #circulareconomy #sustainableliving Copy

### Related Hashtags

1	#sustainabilitymatters
2	#greenliving
3	#reducewaste
4	#sustainablelife
5	#sustainablefuture
6	#sustainablelifestyle
7	#environmentallyfriendly
8	#sustainable
9	#circulareconomy
10	#sustainableliving

**Keyword Tool** Keyword Tool Pro For Instagram API Access - Contact Login

Google YouTube Bing Amazon eBay Play Store Instagram Twitter

eco English

Filter Results Hashtags People Sort by Keywords - ascending

Negative Keywords

Search for "eco" found 328 unique hashtags

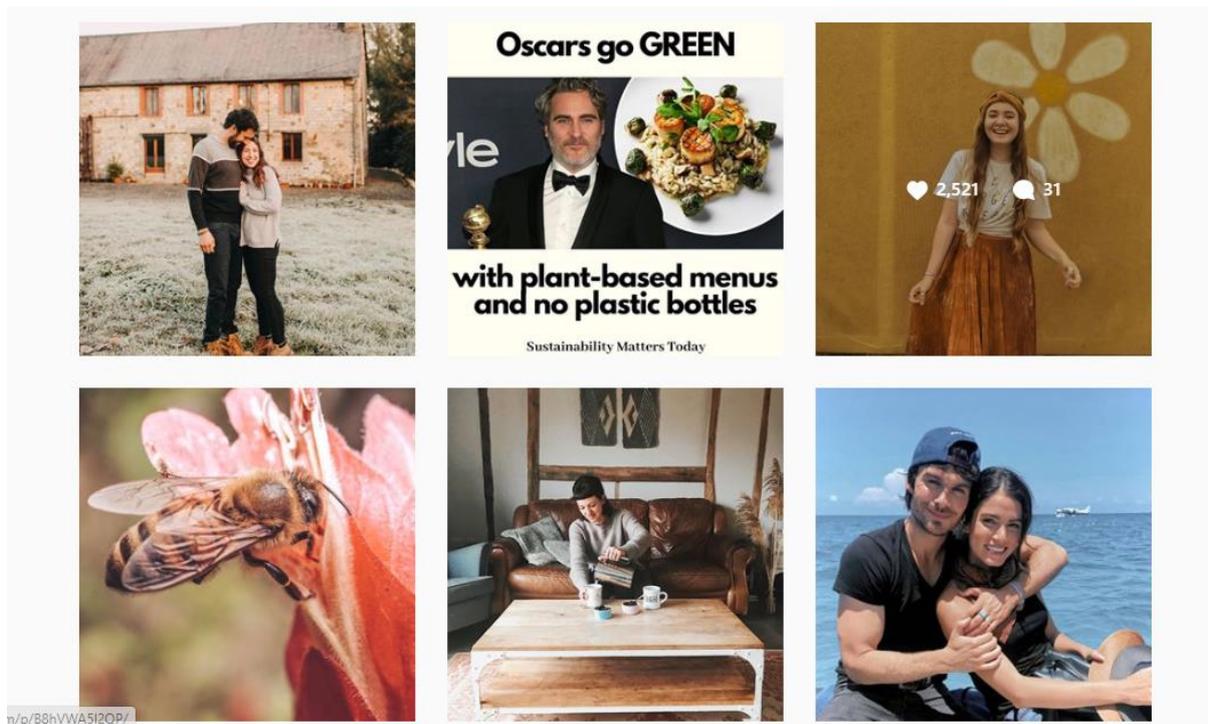
Want to get up to 10x more hashtags instead? [Subscribe to Keyword Tool Pro now!](#)

Hashtags	Posts
#ecofriendly	8,622,410
#ecofashion	2,209,122
#ecopoxy	69,066
#ecoamigable	69,147

**Figure 1.** The panel on top shows the most popular hashtags related to “sustainability”, as taken from the tool Top-Hashtags on 5 February, 2020. The panel at the bottom shows the most popular hashtags related to the keyword “eco” along with the number of posts for each of these hashtags, as taken from Keyword Tool on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2020. (Screenshots taken from top-hashtags.com and keywordtool.io on 2 Feb 2020.)

Instagram shows the top posts for a hashtag in chronological order. So the top posts for a hashtag can show us the most recent posts that are getting the most attention on Instagram. The top posts are based on Instagram’s algorithm, and while it isn’t entirely clear how that algorithm works, it is known that it mostly considers the engagement a post generates (Chacon, 2017). This means, the more the number of likes and comments a post gets, the more popular it is, and therefore the more likely for it to show up in the ‘top posts’ on Instagram. An example of these top posts collected through Instagram can be seen in Figure 2.

By analyzing the top posts for the above-mentioned hashtags on different days across the span of one month, I could broadly categorize the posts into different categories, one of which was that of influencers and lifestyle bloggers. This categorization is listed in the *Findings* section.



**Figure 2.** This picture depicts six posts that made it to Instagram’s “top post” category on 14 February 2020, for the hashtag “sustainability”. (Screenshot taken from Instagram on 14 February 2020.)

To look further into this finding, I employed methods used in Netnography and Digital Ethnographic research. Ethnography, in general, refers to the act of learning about people by immersing yourself in the native population you are trying to learn about (Dewan, 2018). This is done through observing a group by keeping their historical and cultural context in mind. The point of this research is to explore social phenomena and report those findings (Dewan, 2018). These practices can take place on online mediums as well, taking the form of Netnography or Digital Ethnography. Many use these two terms interchangeably, however, in the context of this thesis, I will use the definitions given by Caliandro (2014). He defines Netnography as an ethnographic research conducted on the internet, with a focus on either brand communities or communities of practice. The Instagram influencers that promote a sustainable lifestyle choice can be called a community of practice here, since they are passionate about a particular way of living. Netnographies take offline ethnographic tools like conducting interviews and surveys, and uses them on online mediums (Caliandro, 2014). Digital Ethnography, on the other hand, is broader and does not have a specific definition or methodology related to it. However, a key point of difference between digital ethnography and Netnography is that Digital Ethnography does not employ offline mediums on the internet, rather it uses exclusive tools that are made for the internet. An example is using hashtags for studying an online community. For this research, I have employed a hybrid methodology that borrows from both Netnographic research as well as Digital ethnographic research, as will become clearer through this section.

After identifying the online community of practice that is the subject of this research, the next step in ethnographic research is to immerse oneself in this community. In Netnographic terms, this part of the virtual participation is termed “lurking”. Lurking, in this context meant looking at the hashtags used by these influencers (influencers whose posts made it into the “top posts” category on Instagram).

Another method of data collection was to use what is termed as “chain sampling” in ethnographic research (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, and Kamsteeg, 2010). This refers to the practice of asking people from the community you are studying to identify more people in their community (Ybema et al., 2010). This method is also termed as ‘snowballing’, and helped find other influencers from this online public.

Therefore, my data is a list of Instagram influencers that consider themselves to be sustainable lifestyle proponents in some way or another. A list of the influencers can be found in the appendix of this thesis. This data is not made up of people whose posts generate the most interaction, necessarily. Rather it is made of up sustainability influencers that use similar hashtags and have identified others in their community. In this way, the data is a ‘digital public’; that is, it is a collectively imagined social place that has emerged by the intersection of people, technology, and practice (Boyd, 2010).

In Netnographic research, after Virtual Participation through lurking, the researcher moves on to interact with the community using synchronous and asynchronous methods (Caliandro, 2014). Synchronous methods refer to interviews conducted through online mediums where both parties must be online at the same time (Caliandro, 2014). For the sake of convenience, Asynchronous Virtual Methods were used in this research, where both parties do not need to be online at the same time. These asynchronous interviews were conducted by emailing a questionnaire to the participants via email. The questionnaire along with the answers can be found in the appendix.

### **3.2 Conceptual Frameworks**

Digital Ethnographic research has the following methodologies it employs for studying a chosen digital public: Network Analysis, Co-word Analysis, Semantic Analysis, and Discourse Analysis. All of these methodologies are based on the argument that social media is a cultural text, that is, it is a language made up of images, signs, and symbols. This language on social media is the site where social and cultural practices take place and where identities, relations, beliefs, and knowledge systems are made (Fairclough, 2003).

For my analysis, I have employed the methodology of Discourse Analysis. Here, discourse refers to the definition given by Fairclough, Muldering, and Wodak (1997); it is a set of resources that is used for meaning-making, such as symbols, pictures, words, designs, colors, and so on. The word 'critical' used here can have various meanings as well, but generally refers to a method for explaining and changing social phenomenon (Fairclough et al., 1997). In Critical Discourse Analysis, which is explained below, the word 'critical' is influenced by Kant, the Frankfurt School, and Habermas, amongst others (Fairclough, 2003). According to these theorists, 'critical' can mean questioning the limitations of human knowledge, analyzing cultural forms that reproduce capitalistic social relations, and reflecting on the historical context in which linguistic and social interactions occur, respectively (Fairclough et al., 1997). The definition of these two words – critical and discourse- gives context to the broad area of research methodologies called Critical Discourse Analysis, which studies the semiotic dimension of cultural exchange, society, and power.

This thesis applies Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis as a tool to analyze social media discourses of sustainability in the data collected. This method of discourse analysis states that language can be used as a medium for studying social practices. It states three dimensions that need to be analyzed for this:

1. the object of analysis -> In this case the objects of analysis are texts and images
2. the process through which the object is produced-> Instagram is the medium, or the process, in this study.
3. socio-historical conditions that govern this process-> In the context of this thesis, this refers to the eco-gender gap that persists in our patriarchal society.

For each of these dimensions, a different analytic method needs to be used, stated as follows (Janks, n.d.):

1. text analysis
2. process analysis or interpretation
3. social analysis or explanation.

This means that a descriptive analysis of the texts is required, along with an interpretation of who created or curated it, and finally an explanation of the social constraints and conditions under which it was birthed (Janks, n.d.).

Besides Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this thesis also makes use of Critical Media Studies and the tools it provides to question how we know the things we know. This field is based on the argument that besides *somatically* knowing things, that is, knowing about something through direct sensory

perception, we also learn about things *symbolically*, that is, through a medium – a friend, the TV, the internet, and so on (Ott and Mack, 2014). Critical Media Studies questions not just what we learn, but how we learn it (Ott and Mack, 2014). What we learn is the content of the message, the facts, information, details. How we learn about it is the medium itself, that is, the way the message is delivered- images, texts, symbols. There are four key characteristics of Critical Media Studies (CMS) , stated by Ott and Macl, which are used as perspectives to guide the discourse analysis in this thesis; these are stated below:

1. Attitude- Skeptical: CMS takes a critical perspective on the meaning of a message, just like CDA. It asks not just what the message is conveying, but in what context the message was written, by whom, and for what purpose. For example, not just taking the news as an objective truth but questioning if it was created to fill in a 1-hour TV gap, how it is affected by the profit-making motive of capitalism (Marxist perspective), how governmental laws and regulations affect it (Pragmatic perspective), and so on. The perspectives taken in this thesis are a feminist and an ecological perspective, as will be elaborated more in the *Theory* section
2. Approach- Humanistic: CMS, unlike reductionist sciences, has a self-reflecting approach which argues that science is subjective, rather than objective. This means that CMS considers knowledge to always be not fixed, complete, or finished.
3. Assessment- Political: CMS is used for analyzing networks of power relations that historically benefit some groups over others. CMS asks us to question whose interests are served, how these interests contribute to exploitation and domination, do they maintain social structures, do they challenge gender roles, and so on.
4. Ambition- Social Justice: CMS aims to bring forward the asymmetric power relations. Unlike most other research disciplines, CMS asks the researcher to take a non-neutral, even interventionist stand and challenge power relations. The goal here is to highlight political injustice in an attempt to have a more egalitarian society.

CDA and CMS are broad fields that will be talked about more in the *Theory* section. Here, the tools and perspectives these two fields provide have been listed in the way that they will be utilized for analyzing the data.

### **3.3 Research Design**

To start designing a research, the researcher usually starts with a question that needs to be answered. Research questions are broadly of three types- what, why, and how (Blaikie, 2009).

Most questions in research design are ‘what’ questions; these are for exploration, description, evaluation, prediction, and impact assessment. ‘Why’ questions are for understanding and explanation; and “how” questions are for intervention (change) (Blaike, 2009).

In line with the tools of CDC and CMS mentioned above, this thesis started by asking a “what” question to understand the dominant narrative of sustainability on social media platforms- “what does the representation of sustainability on social media platforms look like?”. Then two questions for intervention are asked- ‘how do sustainability influencers on social media affect ideological formation?’, ‘how can sustainability influencers on Instagram be analyzed from an eco-feminist perspective?’ Both of these take a critical perspective and want to question if certain socio-cultural structures are reinforced through social media.

The research questions can be answered through the following processes- induction, deduction, retroduction, abduction.

This thesis research has followed a hybrid strategy of inductive and abductive research, in accordance with Norman Blaikie (2009):

- Induction is the research strategy that attempts to answer “what” questions by generalizing patterns of association in the data collected. The aim is to give descriptions of social phenomena, or individuals. It is usually done with quantitative data, but in the case of this thesis, the data is qualitative. Here, induction is used initially to answer what role social media plays in the representation of sustainability. For this, a generalization is made based on the type of top Instagram posts seen.  
After this stage, to find out the role of social media influencers in ideological formation with relation to sustainability and analyze it from an ecofeminist perspective, an abductive research strategy is used.
- Abductive research strategy is used to find out why people do what they do. It is based on observing the language, symbols, and intentions of social actors. This strategy has various stages. The first stage is to get an understanding of the social actors’ world based on their accounts of themselves and other people. In this research, this is done by interviewing the influencers. This is done to understand how they *think* they represent themselves and their motivation for it. The next stage is to determine their true motive and their understanding of their world. These findings are then reported in a language as close as possible to the social media influencers’ language.

Abductive research can end here, but there is also the possibility to continue research by using technical concepts to define the lay concepts explained by the social actors. This thesis enters the third stage of abductive reasoning by using ecofeminist theory to explain the everyday content posted by the Influencers on Instagram. The researcher takes an inside view here, rather than an outside one, so the reporting of the researcher should have integrity. That is, the social actors, who are the social media influencers, in this case, must be able to recognize themselves in the researcher's reporting. So while interpretations have been made about the language and symbols used by the influencers on Instagram and a discourse analysis is conducted, caution has been taken to not 'contaminate' the social actors' world too much with the researcher's analysis. Rich answers can be obtained to the research questions if this understanding of the social world is further refined and presented from both the social actors' perspective, as well as from the researcher' perspective. The goal of this research strategy is, thus, to give detailed descriptions of social phenomena.

To design the research by following the methods of digital ethnography, the following questions were used as a guide, based on a reading of Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design (Cresswell, 2007):

1. Is digital ethnography an appropriate research design here?

Since this thesis is about studying a particular online community, a digital public that creates and circulates a social imaginary, digital ethnography seems an appropriate research design here.

2. Identifying the group you are going to study

This would be the self-proclaimed sustainability influencers and lifestyle bloggers on Instagram. The selection criteria are based on hashtags and other people they follow.

3. Select cultural theme, theories or issues to study about the group

Ecofeminist theory is chosen here, since the findings show that most of these sustainable influencers on Instagram are women.

4. Which type of ethnography to use?

A hybrid ethnography – tools from digital ethnography and netnography are used in this study.

5. Collecting data, fieldwork.

This is done through hashtags, chain sampling, and asynchronous interviews, as explained previously.

#### 6. Analyze data

The data is analyzed using critical discourse analysis and critical media studies.

#### 7. Views of participants and researcher combined and presented as a final product.

The findings and analysis are presented in the coming sections.

### **3.4 Ontology and epistemology**

Ontology and epistemology are important considerations for any research. Ontological assumptions are about the nature of reality (Ybema et al, 2010). The research makes assumptions about what kind of social phenomenon can exist, what are the conditions under which they can exist, and so on (Cresswell, 2007).

This thesis takes an idealist approach to reality, which is in line with the inductive and abductive reasoning strategies. An idealist approach contends that reality is perceived differently by different people, and therefore, multiple realities exist based on multiple interpretations (Cresswell, 2007). There may be a real reality out there, or there might not be, but even if there is, it is not possible to know of it because we are always bound by our cultural contexts (Cresswell, 2007). What can be said with certainty is that social reality is constructed by the shared interpretations of various social actors as they go about their daily lives (Cresswell, 2007).

Epistemology, on the other hand, is concerned with knowledge. Epistemological assumptions assume what kind of knowledge is possible and how we know if it is legitimate or not (Ybema et al. 2010).

When applied to digital ethnographies, there are two ways to go about your research from an epistemological perspective – one is to take a realist perspective. This means you observe the behavior of the online community and make conclusions about them. A constructivist approach, on the other hand, when applied to online communities, means the researcher and the subject together construct a social understanding (Ybema et al., 2010). The researcher believes that everyday knowledge is what people come up with to make sense of the physical world around them. This can be done by each individual for themselves, known as the Personal Constructivist theory, or it can be done by creating meaning through interactions with other people in the community (Cresswell, 2007). Researchers study this everyday knowledge and reiterate it in technical terms. However, since humans are not free from bias, errors, and past experiences, no knowledge can be perfect. This means it is impossible to make true discoveries about the world, whether they exist or

not is not relevant here. Creswell (2007) says that all social research and inquiry are done from the perspective of the researcher and all the observations, therefore, are laden with theory.

Research about online communities has been shown to benefit from both realist and constructivist approaches (Blaikie, 2009). However, this thesis takes a constructivist approach since the analysis goes beyond just observing the online behavior of the Instagram influencers; through interviews, an attempt has been made here to interact with the influencers and creates a shared understanding of their community. Interviews fit into this epistemological perspective since qualitative methods are more suitable to deal with multiple constructed realities (Blaikie, 2009).

### **3.5. Ethical Considerations**

Any interviews undertaken for this thesis have been done with ethical considerations for the privacy of the interviewees. All participants have been given their right to anonymity and confidentiality. The interviewees were asked for their consent in reporting their answers in this thesis. They have been informed about the collection and storage of data as well as the purpose of this research. For the sake of privacy, the names of the interviewees are kept anonymous here.

The critical discourse analysis of Instagram posts has been done for posts that are public and open to viewing by anyone. Therefore, it does not violate the privacy of those that have posted this content.

For the sake of keeping the participants in the loop with the findings of this research, the final analysis will be shared with them and their feedback recorded. This feedback might be valuable for future research.

## **4.Theory**

The theoretical underpinnings of this research lie in Ecofeminism, Critical Media Studies and Narrative Analysis, which are discussed in this section.

### **4.1 Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminist theory argues that the domination of nature and the domination of women are linked (Banerjee, 2004). It rejects the Marxist idea that power dynamics and domination only stem from class and money and points to the patriarchal domination of women and nature (Spretnak, 1987). Another area of ecofeminism believes there is a spiritual and/or religious connection between nature and women, comparing the phases of the moon to different stages in the menstrual cycle, or representing Earth as “mother” earth (Spretnak, 1987). However, this strand of ecofeminism has been criticized as being essentialist (Banerjee and Bell, 2007); it sees women as beings that are closer to nature by virtue of their existence. Seeing women as being inherently more ecologically

aware does nothing to break the dichotomy of women-nature and culture-man that more recent strands of ecofeminism try to challenge. In this dichotomy women are regarded as more “natural” or emotional beings and men are seen as more “cultural” or scientific (Anstey, 2006). Anstey argues that most ecofeminists now like challenge this dualism as the ecofeminist movement has evolved past essentialism.

Ecofeminism in its non-essentialist form contends that knowledge production in a male-dominant society has led to neoliberal environmental policies, which lead to the destruction of the environment for the sake of profit maximization (Phillips, 2016). However, this does not mean that men are biologically less ecologically aware, but neoliberal institutions of power and privilege benefit men more than women and allow them an undue advantage over environmental resources, which is why men are less likely to question neoliberal institutions (Banerjee and Bell, 2007). Feminist standpoint theory tackles the issue of male-dominated knowledge production by advocating for knowledge that women have and giving it more value than other scientific knowledge (Anstey, 2006); this is because feminist standpoint theory states that since females are marginalized in a world dominated by men, they have a better vantage point, seeing things from the outside. However, as this is also essentialist and has been criticized, as no knowledge can be absolute (Anstey, 2006). This does not mean that valuable insights cannot be gained from the experiences of women living in a male-dominated society; it merely means that feminist standpoint theorists should be cautious to not be essentialists and idealize women just for being women.

In a neoliberal world, caring services are left up to the market, to be provided through commodification; however, the market does not place much value in care (Phillips, 2016). Similarly, caring for nature is left up to the market as well, through privatization and green technologies (Phillips, 2016). Ultimately, we end up living in a society that does not place much importance in care.

What lies at the core of ecofeminism is the ethics of care- challenging the neoliberal idea of viewing the individual as a rational actor with the main goal of maximizing their self-interest (Spretnak, 1987). Rather, ecofeminism places more importance is changing the value system of society to focus more on care and empathy, to be intertwined with other people and beings and the world around us (Spretnak, 1987).

An example of neoliberal policies based on the value system of profit-maximization rather than caregiving is agricultural efficiency; this is achieved using chemical fertilizers, not paying heed to the toxins that this decimates into our food chain, and ultimately our bodies (Anstey, 2006). Anstey uses this example to relate ecofeminism to the Precautionary Principle- the principle of avoiding

something because of its potential health risks, though the risks might not be proven yet. Neoliberal values do not place importance in the Precautionary Principle because it is not based on hard scientific evidence rather it is based on avoiding a *potential* health risk. Anstey argues that women are more likely to adhere to the precautionary principle; that is, they will avoid products and processes if they are informed of its potential risks to their and their kids' health. However, it is important to reiterate that women adhering more to the 'precautionary principle' is not necessarily a direct result of biological differences between genders. According to ecofeminist theory, it is often the result of traditional gender roles that are formed using reproductive biology as an excuse. These gender roles are based on women being homemakers and caregivers, thus associating gentle traits with femininity (Phillips, 2016). This gives us a theoretical understanding of the eco-gender gap and why some men have an aversion to the idea of being eco-friendly and also why ecofeminists like warn against idealizing women as being more "natural" beings (Phillips, 2016). Phillips also speaks about the importance of generalizing care and not seeing it as just a maternal trait but rather a wider compassion that we should feel for each other and all other beings.

#### **4.2 Critical Media Studies and Narrative Analysis Theory**

Tools from Critical Media Studies are used for analyzing the data in this research, as mentioned in the *Methods* section. However, critical media theory is a broad field that theoretically links to narrative analysis and ecofeminism. Therefore, it is elaborated more in this section.

The presentation of self, the online identity one creates, is known as a social imaginary in digital ethnographic research (Caliandro, 2014). It is not a role that is played, but rather something that emerges naturally from the process of users constructing set manners for themselves (Caliandro, 2014). This understanding of the social imaginary is used to analyze how sustainability influencers present themselves on Instagram, what values and ethics they choose to highlight, how they see themselves, and how they like others to see them.

Visual narratives theory talks about how there is more to a narrative than meets the eye (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012). A narrative is an intentional organization of information (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012). First there is the content itself. You can take it at face value, which is the internal examination. But then there is another level – the representation of the content – who created the content, where is the knowledge coming from, the social context in which it is produced. This is the external examination. All forms of visual, oral, and written texts are considered narratives (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012).

This narrative analysis is central to critical media theory, which also differentiates between textual and visual narratives. Textual narratives are formed using language, and language is sequential.

When we read a sentence, we read one word after the other (Ott and Mack, 2014). This is a linear way of learning. However, visual narratives are composed of images and symbols. When we look at an image we take in different aspects of it at the same time. That is, images are spatial, which means they support associative way of learning rather than sequential (Ott and Mack, 2014). Critical media scholars, Ott and Mack, contend that the form of the message, that is, the cognitive component which deals with how a message is delivered (textually, visually, etc.), is a more important socializing force than the content of the message. Socializing here refers to the process by which people (both individually and collectively) learn, adapt, and internalize cultural beliefs, values, and norms prevailing in a society (Ott and Mack, 2014).

Narrative analysis uses different analytical frames to interpret stories. This is done by focusing on how the story is structured, what the substance of the narrative is, who is telling the story, and how the story is performed. This is important to the analysis of the message because whenever a message passes through a medium (such as Instagram), it gets converted from somatic (direct perception) to symbolic. In this way, ironically, Instagram itself acts as a “filter”, because symbols are selective by nature. Stories are inevitably (and sometimes unintentionally) filtered through the perspective of the storyteller. This can be done in the following three ways, according to Ott and Mack, 2012:

1. By leaving out certain information and only presenting some of the facts – socializing us to care about some issues and not others
2. By covering only one viewpoint- makes us neglect other perspectives on the topic
3. By using symbols for communication, which are inherently biased – makes us adopt particular attitudes.

Therefore, in these ways, both the content and the form of the message matter. One affecting *what* we learn and the other affecting *how* we learn.

Media studies is closely linked with ecological and feminist theories. This is because media technologies dominate our everyday lives, including our socio-environments, shaping human consciousness, and how we think about our surroundings. From a feminist perspective, media influences our cultural performance of gender in complex ways (Zlatar, 2003). Therefore, both media studies and ecofeminist theory are used in this research to analyze the findings, which will be elaborated on in the next section.

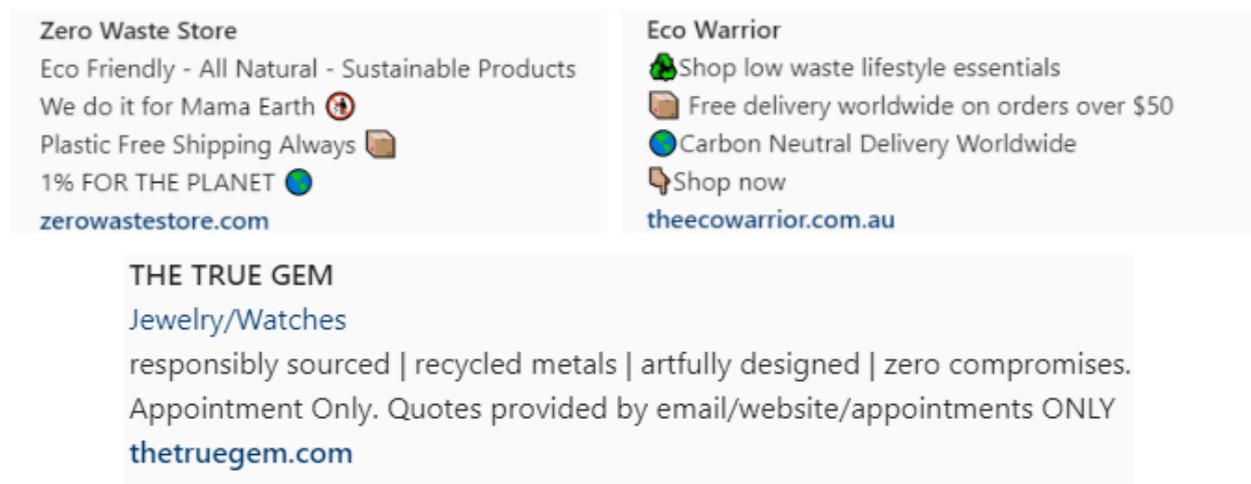
## 5. Findings

The aim of this research was to answer the following questions-

1. What does the representation of sustainability on social media look like?
2. How do sustainability influencers on social media affect ideological formation?
3. How can sustainability influencers on Instagram be analyzed from an ecofeminist perspective?

To answer the first question, the top posts for hashtags related to sustainability were collected over a period of a month. These are the posts with the maximum interaction on Instagram. These posts can be roughly categorized into the following different categories;

1. Category A: Online shops and retailers selling sustainable goods and services
2. Category B: Influencers or lifestyle bloggers promoting sustainable living
3. Category C: Tips and tricks to be more environmentally friendly, and news about the environment – these accounts are different from Category B as they are not represented by individuals; there is no face or branding behind them.



**Figure 3.** A screenshot of the profile descriptions of three different Instagram accounts. These are the accounts that have posts features in the “top posts” category of Instagram. Picture taken from Instagram on 9 May 2020.

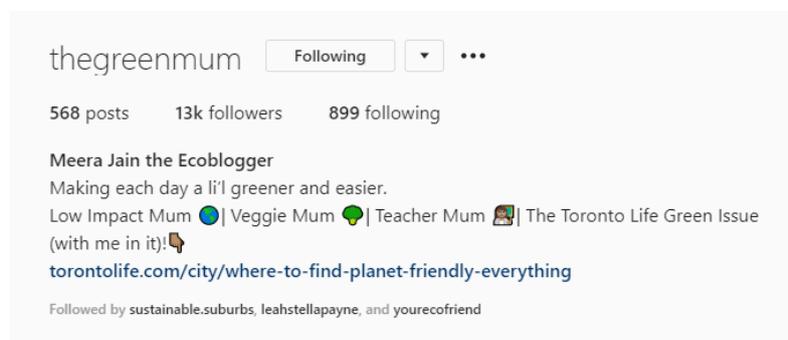
Figure 3 shows three different accounts on Instagram that fall into Category A, along with their profile descriptions as an example of the different categorizations.

This is a broad categorization based on top posts analyzed on different occasions during the span of one month. This generalization provides a rough idea of what the representation of sustainability on Instagram looks like.

To answer my second research question, I analyzed the category of influencers (category B) by lurking and chainsampling- tools used in digital ethnography which have been elaborated in the *methods* section. This resulted in the following observation- the majority of sustainable influencers on Instagram are women.

The method of looking at top posts for certain chosen hashtags and chainsampling resulted in finding influencers who were all women. This does not mean that there aren't sustainability influencers on Instagram who are men, however, the methods followed for data collection in this research did not find any male accounts associated with top posts (for the given period of data collection).

Lurking around these influencers on Instagram resulted in the discovery of a particular category of sustainable influencers that emphasize their motherhood, an example of which can be seen in Figure 4. These influencers use hashtags such as #EcoParenting, #EcoMom, #GreenMom, and so on. The self-description on their Instagram profile highlights the fact that they have children. Some of the profile descriptions were: “zero waste mindset/ low waste living **mama**”, “writer, environmentalist, **mom**”, “low waste with **kids**”, “plant-based **mom**”, “**mamalina**, the slow and sustainable **parenting site**”.



**Figure 4.** A screenshot of the profile descriptions of one of Instagram accounts featured in the “top posts” for hashtags related to sustainability and eco-parenting. As can be seen in the profile description, the word “mum” is repeated many times to emphasize that it is an integral part of the online identity of the blogger. Picture taken from Instagram on 10 February 2020.

This finding was not pursued further; however it is an interesting discovery that shows there is a network of influencers exclusively talking about a green parenting lifestyle. This can be linked to certain ecofeminist understandings of the ethics of care where caregiving is linked to maternal traits (Phillips, 2016).

## 6. Analysis

This section analyses the findings presented above using Critical Discourse Analysis and ecofeminism for both the Instagram posts, as well as the interview answers.

### 6.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

To enrich *finding number two*, which shows that most sustainable bloggers on Instagram are women, I used Fairclough's method for Critical Discourse Analysis. Using this, I analyzed the Instagram posts by 30 influencers, narrowed down through my data collection. The CDC gave rise to the following matrix:

<b>What is to be analyzed</b>	Texts and Images on Instagram	(Textual and Visual Analysis)
<b>Who has created this object that is being analyzed</b>	Women and/or mothers with an online presence	(Interpretation)
<b>Under which social conditions has this content been produced</b>	A patriarchal society that places neoliberal values above those of environmental protection	(Explanation)

**Textual and Visual Analysis:** There is a clear pattern that can be seen across all accounts that were analyzed, which is that of natural and healthy living. Words such as “natural”, “simple”, “slow”, “wellbeing”, “health”, “low toxin” are seen across all the Instagram posts of the influencers that were analyzed. In most of these accounts images of local food produce, cleaning supplies, plastic-free household items, are neatly organized. The Instagram feeds have a subdued color palette of whites and browns. This is significant because color theory suggests that color is a form of language, evoking different feelings in the viewer (Jasper, 2014). White is associated with purity in most Anglo-Saxon contexts (Aslam, 2006) and brown is seen as a natural color or an “earthy” tone (Aslam, 2006). Overall, the two colors give the Instagram feeds a very clean and natural feel. There is usually no pop of color which might be associated with artificiality. This neat arrangement of items, emphasis on health, and a natural color palette, all stresses on a “clean” living message, focusing on life without toxins and chemicals. Health and cleanliness are the primary focus in most of the posts, DIY cleaning supplies, herbal steam, and organic teas being some of the examples. Broadly, the posts from all the accounts fall into one of these categories – healthy and chemical-free living, zero waste, fashion and beauty, kids and motherhood, and food.

**Interpretation:** All of the top posts by Instagram bloggers found and analyzed in this study were created by women. Some of these women have gone through health problems such as pregnancy complications or fertility problems, and therefore think it is important to talk about toxins in relation to both the environment and women's health. Some of them highlight the fact that they are mothers, because living a sustainable and natural life, free from excessive chemicals is important for their children's health. In this way, most of the posts appeal to the precautionary nature of women; some of the accounts are very explicit in linking environmental degradation and women's health. For example, some talk about how women's health – fertility, skin, fatigue, hormones- are affected by air quality, water quality, and cleaning products used in the household, how cadmium which is present in women's accessories is bad for their health and the environment, and how clothing often has toxic petroleum present in it. Some of the accounts specifically mention chemicals like Glyphosate, which are not only harmful to the environment but also cause birth defects in humans. Besides talking about how toxic chemicals affect both women and the environment, most of the influencers talk about sustainability issues that are gendered- reusable menstrual and makeup products and sustainable fashion for women.

Here, it is clear that women are the producers of knowledge. Instagram is a medium that provides an audience to their knowledge without questioning their expertise. Instead of being scrutinized and peer-reviewed as they would if they were to approach a scientific journal, their knowledge is valued based on their experience of being a woman and/or a mother. From a feminist standpoint theory, one can see that the Instagram community gives merit to their everyday knowledge that comes from work in the domestic sphere, being responsible for food, recycling, children, and so on. This can also be seen in the way the influencers talk about online community building and how it is so important to them.

**Explanation:**

Overall, health and wellbeing are used by Instagram influencers as the main motivators to tell their followers, who are mainly women, to be more sustainable, or to keep track of their own sustainability journey. This health and wellbeing of the individual women also means health and wellbeing for the environment, and vice versa; the products that are harmful to one are also deemed harmful to the other. "Our homes make us sick" is a recurring theme. It can be seen across most of the accounts that modern-day life is deemed as unhealthy because of the chemicals used in most products. These products are the ones used in everyday life around the house – for cleaning, cooking, toys for children, and so on. While independent studies showing the harmful effects of toxins in the home do exist, it is not a topic that we as a society give much attention to, as our

current modern-day lifestyle keeps going on unchallenged. However, on Instagram women take it upon themselves to challenge this way of living and also spreading the word. This is a platform where their womanhood gives them legitimacy to form a community of other women who share the same life experiences and will be affected by these toxins in similar ways. However, this legitimacy that their followers give them because of their womanhood is also used to market certain products. Gendered sustainability is used to advertise certain brands that act as a source of income for most of the women who run these Instagram accounts. This does not necessarily discredit their sustainability journey or motivation, however, as they self-represent themselves as environmentalists. The capitalistic way of life where there is perennial growth is challenged on this online platform as most of the sustainability influencers in this study talk about “slowing down” and “natural living”; one of the phrases used by an influencer – “do it like your grandma” points to this wish to go back to the way things were before our modern lifestyles. This denouncement of neoliberal values and an emphasis on empathy and connection with nature can be seen as an expression of ecofeminism.

## 6.2. Interview Answers and their Interpretation

Out of 29 influencers that were contacted, seventeen responded, however only six replied to an interview questionnaire. These influencers were all first contacted on Instagram. If they agreed to answer the questionnaire, then it was sent to them via email. Six influencers replied to the interview questionnaires, who are referred to as Interviewee 1, 2, 3, and so on, for privacy purposes.

The answers are summarized in Table 1, which is also explained below.

**Table 1. Interview Answers by Influencers.** The first column of the table lists certain patterns that were noticed in the interview answers, such as the reasons behind their motivation to post sustainability content, their reasons for choosing Instagram, etc. The following columns have a tick mark if the answers of that influencer fit into the category mentioned in column one and it is left blank if it does not fit.

Influencer	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Motivation-</b> teaching others, helping the community	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<b>Motivation-</b> self-learning and accountability	✓			✓		✓
<b>Why Insta?</b> – reach		✓	✓	✓	✓	
<b>Why Insta?</b> - community, learning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Content source</b> – research	✓			✓	✓	
<b>Content source</b> – social media, life, other	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Being a woman/mom as part of online identity	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Being a woman helps to gain followers	✓	✓		Not Sure	✓	
Being a woman is a hindrance online				Not Sure	✓	

Women identity doesn't matter online			✓			Not Sure
Followers mostly women	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Income	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Hobby	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

**The motivation behind being sustainable bloggers and influencers:** Most influencers say they post sustainability content because they want to teach others by sharing what they know, with the exception of Influencer 6. Influencer 6, along with Influencer 1 and influencer 4 are motivated to post online sustainability content because they want to learn from the online community and be held accountable for their sustainability journey. Everyone sees it as a hobby but most also generate some form of income from it, except for Influencer 5.

**Why Instagram is used as a medium:** Instagram is used by all influencers, except for Influencer 1 and Influencer 6, because of its reach. Influencer 1, 4, and 5 mention aesthetics/images as a motivation for using the platform. However, the most important factor for all the women contacted seemed to be the fact that this medium provides a community of like-minded people. This sets it apart from other platforms for these women.

**Source for content posted:** The content posted online is a mixture of personal experiences and social media content. Interviewees 1,4, and 5 said they also use content from research articles and journals.

**Gendered identity:** Almost all the interviewees said that being a woman is a big part of their identity. Influencer 4 and Influencer 6 mentioned not just being women, but being mothers, as important aspects of their online identities and sustainability journeys. Influencer 4 said her kids' health and future is a big motivator for her to try to be more sustainable. Influencer 6 said it is important to talk about sustainable parenting because many people think being sustainable is tricky as a parent and she wants to prove otherwise. Except for one person, all others said their womanhood must somehow show in the content they create even if they are unaware of it, some going as far as to say being feminine and "soft" was a big part of their content.

**Gendered community:** Most of the interviewees said it helps to be a woman online because they know other women will relate to their journey. Some said they were not sure if it was a hindrance in reaching more people since men might instinctively not pay attention to their work.

All the interviewees said that most of their followers are women, usually forming 90-94% of their followers. Most are aware of the eco-gender gap and recognize that sustainability, both online, and

offline, is usually seen as women's work because it is care-work, work of solidarity, and men are averse to these things.

**Interpretation of the interviews:** Similar to the discourse analysis of the posts, it can be seen here that Instagram is seen as a medium to share knowledge by women that care about sustainability. There seems to be an exclusively female online community that acknowledges each other's experiences. Many women believe they have knowledge related to sustainability, due to their role as a mother or as a woman, which can be beneficial to others. Therefore, they wish to share this knowledge with others and see social media as a tool for doing this. The community aspect of Instagram was mentioned by most of the influencers, one even mentioning that there is a kind of cynicism on Facebook that doesn't exist on Instagram. Therefore, it seems Instagram is seen as a place where female knowledge about the environment is valued more than other online or offline mediums.

None of the interviewees spoke about toxic-free living being the motivation for their sustainability journey on Instagram, nor was it mentioned in any of the other answers. This is quite different from what the posts themselves represent. This can either be because the precautionary principle is not something that is seen as being favored by one gender or because the precautionary nature of their posts is not intentional. However, it might also be possible that the toxin-free and natural way of life does not present itself in any of the answers because of the way the questionnaire was designed.

Almost all of the interviewees acknowledged the fact that even if their Instagram account is not their primary source of income, it does help them financially, in one way or another. Therefore, it can also be said that this exclusive female-only community which is curated by these influencers is done for branding purposes to sell certain products. However, this does not mean that there is no authenticity to the self-identity that these influencers have created or represent.

## **7. Discussions**

The fact that the sustainability bloggers found using the methods of this research are women and up to 94% of the followers of these accounts are also women shows that the eco-gender gap exists on online platforms as well. It is also interesting to note that many of these women were contacted through chain sampling, that is, they were asked about other sustainability influencers on Instagram. The fact that all the influencers who were contacted are female also shows male influencers, while they do exist on Instagram, were not mentioned by any of the female influencers. Therefore, whether for branding purposes or to share their sustainability knowledge with others, the discourse of sustainable lifestyle perpetrator on Instagram is rooted in values that are seen as feminine.

Most women talk about how important the community aspect of Instagram is and the fact that most of their followers are women shows that women use Instagram to share their sustainability knowledge with other women, who legitimize this knowledge. This knowledge is not based on scientific fact but anecdotal and personal experience, which is related to being a woman or a mother, and thus the primary caregiver of kids and the primary person responsible for housework. Feminist standpoint theory explains this as the knowledge women have due to their experience of being marginalized in a male-dominated world is considered of importance. The community of women supporting each other is a strong message that is given by these accounts; most of these accounts comment and like the posts by the other accounts and also mention the community on Instagram as their primary motivation for using the platform. Therefore, women burdened with housework and the emotional anxiety that comes with it use Instagram as a medium to share this burden with like-minded women. This is because, as ecofeminism points out, caring for nature is seen as a predominantly female value and therefore these influencers feel it is their responsibility to make their households more eco-friendly, while their partners just “hop on board” or “tag-along”, as stated by some of the influencers on Instagram.

The influencers do not mention the precautionary principle as their motivation for talking about sustainability online, however, most of their posts do point to the precautionary principle, thus showing that there is merit to the ecofeminist point that women adhere more to the precautionary principle – whether this is intentional and whether it is “nature” or “nurture” cannot be elaborated on in this research, nor is it the intention of this research. However, health, toxic-free living, and natural living are themes that reoccur in most of the Instagram accounts. The motivation to talk about sustainability online is to brand themselves, at least to some extent, even if it was not explicitly mentioned as a motivation in the interviewees. Another motivation to talk about sustainable living online is to build a community of likeminded people. Some of the influencers talk about the emotional burden of running a household coupled with eco-anxiety that their male partners do not share. The followers of these women, who are also women, share similar experiences in the comment section. Therefore, finding a platform where they can unload this emotional burden and find a community that shares their eco-anxiety can also be a motivation behind running these Instagram accounts. This mention of an ‘emotional burden’ is in line with an ecofeminist reading of sustainability as care-work and other unpaid household labor is central to ecofeminism.

Most sustainability influencers present themselves as promoters of “slow” living. They represent what is “natural” and healthy. The ethics highlighted are those of caring for the environment, for

their kids, and themselves. Without being explicitly stated, there is a denouncement of neoliberal values, such as efficiency for the sake of profit maximization only. The Instagram feeds also paint a very orderly and neat image. Even though the content is not always gendered in itself (unless it specifically talks about menstrual products and women's fashion), caregiving, household chores, feeding the family, kids and their toys and parties are common themes in the accounts analyzed. This appeals mostly to women, since women are the ones mainly responsible for care work and the domestic sphere. The existence of this online eco-gender gap is proven by the fact that most of the followers of these accounts are women. In one way, because the eco-gender gap exists due to traditional gender roles, these accounts have an almost all-woman following. However, on the other hand, it could also be said that since these accounts mostly present sustainability as care work related to the domestic sphere, it might widen the eco-gender gap by only appealing to those who are mostly responsible for the household. The discourse of sustainability online by individual influencers, therefore, is a discourse in line with ecofeminism however it does not try to broaden the definition of care and mostly adheres to posts that reinforce the idea that care is a feminine or maternal trait.

## **8.Limitations and Future Scope**

As this thesis is done using a constructivist paradigm, it is important to acknowledge that the research process and the researcher's bias affect the study greatly, since the results are constructed by the researchers and the subjects together. In this research, more emphasis has been placed on ecofeminism and feminist standpoint theory and the data has been analyzed from those perspectives. However, another way of analyzing the data could have been to look more critically into using ecofeminism as a tool for branding, but this thesis lacks critique on that front.

Acknowledging subjectivity also means that it can be present in the qualitative data gathering process as well, not just from the researcher's side but also from the biases of the subjects while answering questions. To reduce researcher bias, 'member checking' is an important aspect of an abductive research design. In 'member checking', the participants of the study (the Instagram influencers in this case) are invited to respond to the researcher's findings. However, that was not done here, which means the account given here might not be a well-balanced account equally representing the researcher and the social actors. Extending this research in the future could include asking the influencers for their thoughts on the interpretations and findings in this thesis, leading to a richer understanding of the research questions.

The method of data collection is not robust as there isn't a strict criteria for determining who is an influencer and who isn't. There is no minimum follower count which has been taken into consideration, which means the reach of the influencers is not known. However, this should not be of great consequence as the aim of the research is not to see the effect of the influencer, but rather understand how sustainability is represented. For this purpose, self-labeling has been used as the selection criteria for subjects. Even so, a bigger sample size of influencers collected over a longer period could enhance the research; for example, it might lead to the discovery of male influencers that talk about sustainability. This is another potential area of further research. It would also be interesting to see the gender division of the followers of male influencers, especially if they do not focus on household and kids as topics of sustainability. A comparison between the eco-gender gap between different generations to see if the gap has been closing down recently, and the reasons behind it, could also be an intriguing area of study.

There is another way of collecting data, which can be by seeing how an object is *interpreted* or how it is *imagined* by those that consume this content (Ybema et al, 2010). This can help you gauge the influence of the digital public. This has not been pursued in this research and can be used for future research where the followers of these accounts are interviewed.

Instagram algorithm shows posts with the most likes and comments for a particular hashtag as the top post for that tag. However, these don't necessarily have to be tags used by the influencers themselves; any tag used by anyone in the comments is counted in this algorithm as well. This might distort the results.

This study has revealed that there is a niche online community of sustainable bloggers who are parents. There is a lot of scope to further explore green parenting, both in online communities and offline.

The research also revealed that most of the influencers talking about sustainability did so from a western standpoint, being mostly white women. However, this is not reported as a finding as it was not looked into further due to the limited scope of this study

Finally, researching other platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, would better our understanding of how sustainability is represented online.

## **9. Conclusion**

This research aimed to explore the nexus between sustainability and Instagram, to see the discursive power of social media in setting the sustainability narrative. The data revealed that there is a gender

imbalance in the sustainability bloggers on Instagram, most being women, and a specific community highlighting their motherhood in close connection with their environmental values. Using visual narrative theory, the external narrative of these posts revealed that the posts are in line with the precautionary principle and ecofeminism. Ecofeminist theory links the precautionary principle to women and how they are more likely to adhere to the precautionary principle if the information related to health risk is shared with them. Doing a discourse and visual narrative analysis of the posts supports this. Interviews with the influencers and a CDA reveal that their main motivation behind posting online is to either stay accountable for their own behavior or to learn and share knowledge and eco-anxiety with others in the community. Though it is not stated explicitly by the interviewees, creating a self-identity for branding purposes can also be a motivation as most of the influencers earn some sort of income from Instagram. Being female is seen as a big part of their identity by these influencers, whether the content is exclusively female or not. It also shows there is a clear gender divide in the audience of most sustainability bloggers, as most followers are female. Most sustainability influencers see Instagram as a community that welcomes and values women's knowledge about the environment. The existence of the eco-gender gap due to traditional gender roles is the reason for these accounts having mostly women followers as they talk about sustainability from a care-giving perspective. There is scope for more research in this field by analyzing influencers who are male, understanding the perspective of the followers instead of the influencers, and researching platforms other than Instagram.

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## **Appendices**

### **List of Appendices**

Appendix 1. List of Instagram Influencers

Appendix 2. Interview Questionnaire and Answer

### **Appendix 1. List of Instagram Influencers**

The following are the Instagram usernames of the accounts that were used in the CDC and that were contacted for interview questions:

1. Phenomenal\_com
2. Yourecofriend
3. Whatmwore
4. Amyskitchengrden
5. Tulips\_and\_a\_toolbox
6. Plasticfreeto
7. Thesimplegourmetmamma
8. Simply.living.well
9. Sustainabilityiscool
10. Zerowastedoc
11. Essentiallywastefree
12. Zerowastechef
13. Going.zero.waste
14. Essentially\_crystal
15. Plantedinthewoods
16. Nonlocal.joy
17. Wandering\_wild\_home
18. Impactforgood
19. Simpleishliving
20. Polly.barks
21. Judithvanvliet
22. Crueltyfreewithme
23. Dreamywalkhome
24. Leahstellapayne
25. Thegreenmum
26. Zeroquestpeople
27. Sustainable.suburbs
28. Mamalinauk
29. Zerowaste.japan

### **Appendix 2. Interview Questionnaire and Answers**

The names of the interviewees have not been stated to maintain their anonymity.

#### **Interviewee 1**

**Question 1: What is your motivation for producing and posting content related to sustainability? Why did you aim for sustainability-related content?**

**Answer:** Our main motivation for producing content related to sustainability is to ultimately transform society; the way we relate to each other, and the way we relate to the natural world. Obviously, that is a very broad goal, and not something that can be achieved by two people on one social media platform. However, we believe that by providing educational content, building social cohesion, and inspiring activism we can change minds and behaviours.

Why sustainability-related content? Because everything about our current existence is unsustainable, and that has been demonstrated multiple times throughout the few decades we've been on this planet. From 9/11, to the trillion dollar campaigns against "weapons of mass destruction", to the hole in the ozone layer, to panic about Y2K, to the 2008 financial crisis, to SARS, to COVID-19, to our impending great depression, to the destruction of the Amazon, the burning of Australia, the bleaching of the entire Great Barrier Reef, and on, and on. This level of planetary, human, plant, and animal suffering is untenable. And, we believe that as human beings on this planet, we have a responsibility to aim for better, and to build the world we want to live in.

**Question 2: Why did you choose Instagram as a platform to share your lifestyle? How does it differ from other platforms/offline mediums?**

**Answer:** Our sustainable journey started with a pact to go "plastic free" for 30 days; to avoid purchasing/acquiring any new single use plastic during March, 2018. We thought that sharing the journey would not only help us find like-minded people, but hopefully inspire others to try. Instagram seemed like an ideal platform to document the journey – heavily image based, predominantly used by millennials, with the ability to post substantial descriptions if we felt that was necessary (we often do). Twitter's character limit doesn't lend itself well to the educational posts we enjoy creating. Frankly, it is hard enough to keep up with one social media platform. Given that we both have other day jobs (Lin is a model/actor, Toni is a family doc), there are only so many hours in the day to devote to social media.

How do you generate your content? Do you get your information from research journals and popular science, social media, or some other source?

All of the above. I (Toni) compulsively read the news, as well as scroll through social media, which is often where the ideas for posts come from, and then it's often a process of jumping down a rabbit hole to learn more about the issue. That exploration often includes research journals, and other news articles.

**Question 3: Is being a woman a big part of your Instagram identity? (If yes, why?)**

**Answer:** Insofar as we are female-identifying and thus speak from that perspective, womanhood does inform what we talk about and how we choose to talk about it. However, our content is not gender-specific.

**Question 4: Is your Instagram account your income source or a hobby?**

**Answer:** Hobby

**Question 5: Do you see any gender-related patters with your audience on Instagram?**

**Answer:** The vast majority of our audience is women. This is not something that is unique to our account. Most sustainability influencers have a predominantly female following, the reasons for which many of us have explored on our feeds and in our private reflections. It is worth noting that outside of the social media space, sustainability movements are also largely women-led: Greta Thunberg, Jamie Margolin, Jane Goodall, Naomi Klein, Wangari Maathai, are just a few that come to mind immediately. In some ways, I think sustainability work is caring work; work based out of empathy, compassion, solidarity, and a deep understanding of ourselves as interconnected and interdependent. And caring work has long been assigned to the domain of women, so perhaps it is no surprise that our world-rebuilding project is women-led.

Does being a woman help in building an audience on Instagram, is it a hindrance, or does it play no role?

I think it is both a help and a hindrance. In so much as many people interested in sustainability on Instagram are women, it has helped us in building a following. However, because the Instagram-sustainability world is so women oriented, I often wonder if men feel excluded or fearful about joining in.

That said, a lot of what we focus on in our posts is the way in which capitalism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchal society models intersect to generate the quagmire of inequalities and injustices we find ourselves entrenched in now. To achieve the world we want, or more correctly, to achieve the world we need to have if we want humanity to live past the end of the century, men will necessarily have to be relieved of some aspects of male privilege. Our endless consumptive models for the sake of economic prosperity, our preference for ownership over stewardship, our belief in individualism as opposed to collectivism, our orientation towards the natural world as masters rather than participants all need to go. And this is a message that is threatening, especially for men who have historically benefited, and continue to benefit the most from these systems and ways of being. So, in summary, I am not surprised, nor am I perturbed by the fact that our following is largely female. Men, and I would argue, largely white men, built the current system for the benefit of other white men. It is time to try something new. Women empowering women to build strong, just, and sustainable societies is the answer for our times.

## **Interviewee 2**

**What is your motivation for producing and posting content related to sustainability? Why did you aim for sustainability-related content?**

My goal was to keep myself accountable, learn from others and keep a journal of my progress. I aimed for this because I wanted to reduce the waste I was producing which seemed like a tangible to be more sustainable.

**Why did you choose Instagram as a platform to share your lifestyle? How does it differ from other platforms/offline mediums?**

I chose IG because it's an easy platform and a good community of people that I could learn from. It seems there's more of a community vibe compared to some of the other platforms I've used.

**How do you generate your content? Do you get your information from research journals and popular science or social media (or some other source)?**

I try to share what I have questioned myself. I try to keep it as practical as possible. Most of what I share is from my experience or things I've learned from other social media accounts. I don't talk much about scientific facts because there are far better people to talk about that.

**Is being a woman (and/or mother) a big part of your Instagram identity? (If yes, why?)**

They are a part of my identity certainly but I wouldn't say I focus on it. I try to show all sides. I think it is important to talk about the mother side seeing as many people have expressed that low waste living is too challenging as a parent.

**Is your Instagram account your income source?**

No. While I have done a handful of sponsored posts over the last few years I am not interested in having my feed be filled with ads. When I decide to work with a company it has to be a product I already use or a brand I truly believe in.

**Do you see any gender-related patterns with your audience on Instagram?**

YES. 91% identify as women

**Does being a woman (and/or mother) help in building an audience on Instagram, is it a hindrance, or does it play no role?**

Hmm I'm not sure either way. I share my life and hope that it helps someone else in whatever way possible.

**Interviewee 3:**

**What is your motivation for producing and posting content related to sustainability? Why did you aim for sustainability-related content?**

I had always been a writer and editor, but I shifted to sustainability content on my Instagram page in 2019, after learning more about climate change and plastic waste.

I started sharing some of my Zero Waste swaps for my friends and family. After a little while, I decided to make that my focus, so I connected with likeminded people on Instagram and started writing with a wider audience in mind. It soon became the focus of my entire freelance writing and editing business. I feel like it's a bit like "Alice in Wonderland" going down, down, down the rabbit hole. Once you learn a little, you keep learning, and it's impossible to go back!

**Why did you choose Instagram as a platform to share your lifestyle? How does it differ from other platforms/offline mediums?**

As a writer and editor, I love breaking down content into bite-sized reader-friendly chunks, so that's what appeals to me about social media. I can take a concept, research it, write about it in a way that makes sense to others (or so I hope!) and share it with others. I love the conversational aspect of Instagram—it really fosters some wonderful conversations, and it allows for networking. I've connected with some truly incredible and inspiring people. I also like Instagram because it allows for a lot of personality—people have their own "brands" and aesthetics—no two content creator's pages look exactly alike. I feel that you really get to know someone.

**How do you generate your content? Do you get your information from research journals and popular science, social media, or some other source?**

It's where my education comes in handy. My Bachelor's degree is in Communication and my Master's degree is in Library and Information Studies. That means I have a huge focus on research. I sign up for updates from science press release websites, and I'm always reading news articles as well. Of course, I also learn from other content creators. Basically, I always keep my eyes and ears open! Then, when I'm writing in-depth content, I always fact-check everything and provide my sources.

**Is being a woman (and/or mother) a big part of your Instagram identity? (If yes, why?)**

Absolutely. Being a woman, and a mother, are two of my most central identities. They influence how I see the world, so these identities are the lenses through which I write. In terms of environmentalism, being a mother is incredibly important to me. I always think, "what kind of world will my son inherit?" I don't believe that being a mother means that you are always an environmentalist, of course, and I certainly don't believe that you need to be a mother to be an environmentalist, but for me, the two are intricately linked.

**Is your Instagram account your income source or a hobby?**

I am a content creator, so my income comes from the content I create, in its various forms. The majority of my income is not tied to Instagram directly—it's from the publications and organizations I write for, or for my workshops and speaking engagements. I do a few ads on Instagram; however, I only work with companies that I believe in and support. I also offer the opportunity for readers to support my work monetarily if they choose to. Overall, however, the vast majority of the content I create for Instagram is unpaid. It's a labour of love.

**Do you see any gender-related patterns with your audience on Instagram?**

According to my stats, 93% of my readers are women, so yes, there are huge gender-related patterns with my audience. I write about my experience as a mother, and so a large percentage of my readers are also mothers (although I don't have stats on that).

More generally, I've read that the Zero Waste world appeals mainly to women. This is because women still tend to make the majority of decisions related to the home—purchasing decisions, and homemaking decisions. Thus, the “burden” of environmental work falls to women. [A good article: <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/5/9/18535943/zero-waste-movement-gender-sustainability-women-instagram>.]

I've also read news reports and studies that say men actually avoid environmental actions such as recycling because they associate these actions with being gay (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/08/man-straight-recycle-men-environmental-gay-homophobia>).

Finally, I very often hear from my readers that their male partners don't want to make lifestyle changes to be more eco-friendly. Therefore, I do feel that women take on the biggest responsibility of the environmental movement and Zero Waste movement. It's incredibly unfortunate.

**Does being a woman (and/or mother) help in building an audience on Instagram, is it a hindrance, or does it play no role?**

Gender always plays a role, but I can't say for sure what role. There are hundreds of women posting eco-friendly content online. As far as I can tell, there are far fewer men. Would it be easier to stand out and create a niche as a man? Possibly. Or, is it easier to be relatable to a wider audience as a woman? Possibly. I'll never know what could have been

**Interviewee 4:**

1 - I always wanted to help people make sustainability easy. It's already difficult choosing between products that are non-sustainable so I wanted to be a guide for the best and most on-trend products and services for sustainability.

2 - I started with a blog, that I still write on but not as frequently anymore. People spend most of their time scrolling Instagram so in terms of finding a new audience, it is the best platform for now for my niche.

3 - I go after the simple motto of "what would I want to see" so things that interest me like fashion, food, lifestyle etc. I don't follow a strict uploading schedule either, it just comes as it does.

4 - Not really, I try to keep most of my advice gender-neutral unless it's a specific fashion item. But I have even reviewed mens fashion with the help of friends testing and trying the garments.

5 - It is half of my income source, the other half is from consulting

6 - Women want to read more on the products being sustainable and details behind it whereas men just want to know if it's good or not. Also I have some followers who started following me purely because of the way I look and then have messaged me to tell me that they started paying attention to sustainability.

7 - In this field no not really. It's always an advantage if you are aesthetically pleasing to look at, but that also works as a guy in this field. I think if there was a male version of me he would be as successful if he looked after himself and fit in with what is generically pleasing in terms of looks.

### **Interviewee 5:**

**What is your motivation for producing and posting content related to sustainability? Why did you aim for sustainability-related content?**

I am a fashion designer and during the start of my career I realised how big the impact of the fashion industry is to the planet & people.

**Why did you choose Instagram as a platform to share your lifestyle? How does it differ from other platforms/offline mediums?**

I use Instagram for my label to promote my label, but also to create awareness. Instagram is used by mostly younger people and has a lot of users, all over the world. Facebook is also a big platform, but young people use it less and less. Also, at Instagram people can find you more easily, because the use of hashtags, tagging etc. My work also has been published in printed magazines, national and international, but there rarely comes something out, their reach is lower and it's not easy to get published. While an Instagram account is for free and you can post as much as you want to, when you want to.

**How do you generate your content? Do you get your information from research journals and popular science, social media, or some other source?**

My content pictures are mostly my 'own' pictures, pictures of my work. My text and my stories, the message, comes from different recourses, I gather it all together. Recourses like social media, but also documentaries, or websites.

**Is being a woman a big part of your Instagram identity? (If yes, why?)**

My work is feminine. I only design women's fashion. It has a kind of softness and I am followed more by women than men. I also see that the sustainable fashion community I am connecting to, are almost only women.

**Is your Instagram account your income source or a hobby?**

It's to share my label, marketing, but I also use it to create awareness and to be connected to people, so I guess it's both.

**Do you see any gender-related patters with your audience on Instagram?**

I see that I am mostly followed by women, and I also follow more women than men. I like women's account more often but also see that there are more women than men using Instagram, and also more women are in to sustainability than men online.

**Does being a woman help in building an audience on Instagram, is it a hindrance, or does it play no role?**

I think being a women can play a part, girls like to see role models more, so you can have an impact on that, probably more than a man.

### **Interviewee 6:**

**What is your motivation for producing and posting content related to sustainability? Why did you aim for sustainability-related content?**

I started my account on whim in 2017 when I decided to try going zero-waste. I'd always had an interest in environmental issues and sustainability, particularly because of my academic background in environmental education and conservation science and policy, but I'd seen a video of Bea Johnson (author of Zero Waste Home) shopping without using any packaging and I was inspired to try it myself. The day I decided to try going zero waste myself, I started an IG account, and it sort of blew up along with the entire movement. I've continued posting because I enjoy the creative process – developing recipes, making things with my hands, and practicing photography – but I also enjoy the community that I've built up there. I think it has also helped me grow and stay accountable.

**Why did you choose Instagram as a platform to share your lifestyle? How does it differ from other platforms/offline mediums?**

I've always loved Instagram because of the focus on visual aesthetics.. Until stories, there was very little room for sharing news media, which kept the platform more hopeful, personal, and artistic, I think. There's a cynicism on Facebook that just doesn't feel welcome on Instagram, and I like that.

**How do you generate your content? Do you get your information from research journals and popular science, social media, or some other source?**

I try to live my life and share it as authentically as possible. I've learned a lot of the things I share from print books, mostly, but I also use Pinterest a little for inspiration.

**Is being a woman (and/or mother) a big part of your Instagram identity? (If yes, why?)**

I think my experience as a mother definitely finds its way onto the platform, and I think that's because it's pretty hard to separate myself from that role. I try to be myself and being a mother is a big part of who I am.

**Is your Instagram account your income source or a hobby?**

Right now, it's a hobby. I've only done a few paid advertisements. That said, I have a book coming out next week, and I definitely go that book deal because of Instagram, so it has been a source of income indirectly.

**Do you see any gender-related patterns with your audience on Instagram?**

Yes, 94% of my following is female. I think that's pretty common among accounts that focus on sustainability and motherhood.

**Does being a woman (and/or mother) help in building an audience on Instagram, is it a hindrance, or does it play no role?**

I think it helps. I think women are more active on IG than men, particularly within my niche

