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Social Media Influencers Educating Consumers on Sustainable Fashion

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The paper examines how social media influencers (SMIs) within sustainable fashion educate their followers. By drawing on literature on sustainability education and netnographic data, we identify several knowledge domains to which the SMIs contribute. The findings extend understanding of how sustainable consumption can be facilitated through social media.

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers and practitioners in various fields are increasingly looking for ways to encourage sustainable consumption, which is characterized by a focus on environmental, social and ethical aspects as well as an "improvement in the quality of life" and "avoiding modern hyperconsumption" (Lim 2017, 71). Changes are needed both in the mindsets and everyday consumption practices of consumer-citizens (Sahakian and Wilhite 2014; Price et al. 2018). However, interventions usually target individual behaviors rather than social practices (Kemper and Ballantine 2019; Gonzales-Arcos et al. 2021). Social influence is a significant factor in facilitating behavior change toward sustainability (Sahakian and Wilhite 2014; White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019). The role of bottom-up initiatives, such as using social media, may hence be very relevant in facilitating sustainable consumption.

This paper examines how social media influencers (SMIs) educate consumers on sustainability in the context of fashion. Building on De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) and Coco and Eckert (2020), we define an SMI as an opinion leader or tastemaker in one or more areas of consumption with a large social media following based on sharing text, audio, image, and video posts on a range of topics. Fashion industry and the current patterns of (fast) fashion consumption are major contributors to the global environmental crisis (Lehmann et al. 2019). Fast fashion refers to the business model of retailers who produce inexpensive clothing in a rapidly changing cycle, creating pressure for constant purchasing, and textile waste in the form of unsold clothes. Fashion is also one of the major areas of content produced by SMIs online. Hence, it provides a fruitful empirical context.

Recently, sustainability issues have gained more foothold in social media (Pearson et al. 2016). For example, consumers have started to take a stand on sustainability issues in their personal blogs (Joosse and Brydges 2018), but also SMIs have adopted sustainability as their central focus (Närvänen et al. 2018; Leban et al. 2021; Orminski, Tandoc, and Detenber 2021). However, more research is required on what is the role of these influencers in encouraging and facilitating the collective adoption of sustainable consumption.

In this paper, we draw from sustainability education literature (Frisk and Larson 2011; Redman and Redman 2014) and focus specifically on the domains of knowledge that the SMIs contribute to. By sharing knowledge, they also transfer meanings to their followers (McCracken 1989). The paper contributes to consumer research by extending literatures on SMIs and sustainable consumption by shedding light on the different domains of knowledge which are relevant by SMIs to accomplish change in consumption.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

SMIs as agents of change for sustainability

Previous research on consumers' social media activities has indicated the potential that social media have on creating change in issues related to sustainable consumption (Kozinets, Belz, and McDonagh 2012). Producing social media content on sustainability issues can take many forms, such as using sustainability related campaign hashtags or commenting on existing content, posting images, or participating in discussions (Pearson et al. 2016; Närvänen et al. 2018; Paschen, Wilson, and Robson 2020). In their study of environmental blogs, Joosse and Brydges (2018) identified several levels of how sustainability becomes represented, ranging from making small adjustments or giving practical hands-on advice to more substantial lifestyle changes that redefine consumption. Social media have several advantages for building awareness and motivation for social issues. They create a space for existing social norms to become visible (Pearson et al. 2016). Furthermore, they enable to distill and curate complex information into easy-to-use heuristics, promote the establishing of social relationships and communities, provide customized information, and democratize participation (Kozinets et al. 2012). Social media "offer a powerful way for consumers to educate each other about sustainable options, assert their power to choose those options as democratic citizens in a capitalist global economy, and organize as concerned citizens and consumers" (ibid., 217).

SMIs have been studied in marketing and consumer research from various other perspectives than sustainability. CCT research has highlighted that social media has become a megaphone for individuals who are able to exhibit their taste and expertise in different fields of consumption, including fashion (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; Dolbec and Fischer 2015), food (Kozinets, Patterson, Ashman 2017) and interior design (Arsel and Bean 2013). The power of SMIs as authentic, unique, and credible opinion leaders, and the various associated benefits to brands collaborating with them has also been studied (De Veirman et al. 2017; Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020). However, SMIs role in sustainability change still requires more research.

Domains of knowledge in sustainability

Within sustainability education literature, a framework outlining four domains of knowledge has been proposed for sustainable behavior change (Frisk and Larson 2011; Kaiser and Fuhrer 2003). The first domain in the framework is *declarative knowledge* which is the factual knowledge about environmental problems and systems. The second domain of knowledge, *procedural knowledge*, is action-oriented, entailing know-how information and concrete advice on how to do something. The third domain, *effectiveness knowledge* refers to knowledge about the (sustainability) impacts of specific behaviors and the responsibility for their outcomes. This can be also subjective in nature and concern people's own beliefs about the effectiveness of their actions. Finally, *social knowledge* refers to information regarding other people's motives and intentions, such as information on social norms or the legitimacy of certain values or goals in society. Previous research has demonstrated that for sustainable behavior change, integration of these various forms of knowledge is critical, especially beyond declarative knowledge (Kaiser and Fuhrer 2003; Redman and Redman 2014).

METHOD

The research was conducted through netnographic methodology, and the data were generated in two ways between October 2020 and April 2021. First, by exploring Instagram profiles related to sustainable fashion in Finland, we familiarized ourselves with the sustainable fashion social media arena. In previous research, Insta-

gram has been identified as one of the main social media channels for fashion influencers (Casaló et al. 2020) and for sustainable fashion (McKeown and Shearer 2019). Next, we conducted nine in-depth thematic interviews with sustainable fashion SMIs. Most of them can be considered as micro-influencers with less than 5.000 followers (Yalcin, Nistor, and Pehlivan 2021). We observed the SMIs for several months before contacting them to make sure that a substantial part of their social media content was related to sustainable fashion. The interviewees were in different stages of their SMI career, including the amount of followers, the length of their history as an SMI, and the degree of their professionalism (i.e. whether they considered influencing as a hobby vs. as a livelihood).

The interviews were conducted in Teams or Zoom, each lasting about 90 minutes. In addition, the social media postings of the interviewees were observed and analyzed from the preceding year. This data includes photos, videos and texts published on their social media channels, and these postings were also jointly discussed in the interviews by viewing them on a shared screen. All interviewees were active on Instagram, some of them also on YouTube or on their personal blogs.

Topics that were discussed during the interviews included, for example, the SMIs' own experiences and knowledge on secondhand fashion; their thoughts and future goals on their SMI careers, as well as their aims to educate and change the consumption behavior of their followers.

Data analysis and interpretation for both types of data followed the process outlined in Spiggle (1994). Two of the authors firstly categorized the data according to the framework of four knowledge domains (Kaiser and Fuhrer 2003). Consequently, through a joint discussion between all authors, we compared and integrated differences and similarities between different types of data and the four categories. We also utilized iteration to go back and forth between the framework and various types of data to assess the fit between the theoretical framework, the data and our interpretation.

FINDINGS

Declarative knowledge contains both technical or mechanical information and systems knowledge. The first kind includes facts on sustainable fashion consumption: materials, care, acquisition, and disposal practices. For instance, SMIs share technical information through material guides, where the features of different textile materials are compared. On Instagram, these guides are usually short lists of pros and cons, from where the followers can easily receive information without devoting a lot of time and effort into it. In blogs, the material guides are longer texts. Often the information is gathered from external sources: books, articles or from other SMIs. This emphasizes the role that SMIs have as declarative knowledge providers: they summarize and curate information from various sources to offer their followers information in a suitable form. The systems knowledge concerns the way the fashion system works, including the fashion companies' power in society. For instance, on Black Friday, one SMI wrote on Instagram: "Did you know that today is Buy Nothing Day? [...] also a cheap garment has an expensive price. Today is a good day to buy nothing!". Thus, declarative knowledge helps SMIs to subvert the dominant marketing and consumption practices in the fashion industry.

Procedural knowledge covers all stages of consumption from acquisition to use and disposition. Regarding acquisition, procedural knowledge is shared on how to recognize a piece of clothing that is of good quality, where are the best secondhand shops and the best tips for shopping there (e.g. "always try on clothes before purchasing" and "feel the materials of the clothes" in order to recognize poor

quality). Also tips for avoiding shopping are shared, such as how to make one's own clothing or how to refrain from shopping impulses. Related to the use phase, the SMIs share knowledge on how to style thrifted garments and how to maintain clothes in good condition, for instance, by using DIY laundry vinegar, avoiding washing clothes too often, or by using a special wool comb. In the disposition stage, the knowledge shared by the SMIs includes, for instance, advice on where to take the disposed clothes to recycle them in the most sustainable way or how to set prices when selling clothes in secondhand shops. Here, the SMIs highlight not only clothing-related knowledge but also knowledge about digital marketing and algorithms, such as how to either bypass or take advantage of the algorithms which target consumers based on their browsing history. Hence, the SMIs want to offer concrete advice for resisting particularly big fast fashion brands.

Effectiveness knowledge includes providing facts and reflections on the outcomes of specific actions and choices that consumers make in fashion consumption. The SMIs share knowledge on aspects of fashion consumption that the fashion industry controls (such as the environmental impact of different types of fabrics or CSR issues). They also share knowledge on the impacts of daily fashion consumption choices made by consumers. Some influencers highlight the need for a holistic perspective in terms of impacts and to have a prioritization system when evaluating the sustainability impacts of one's own actions. For instance, one SMI suggests "making a list of the sustainability values that are personally most important and then prioritizing your actions accordingly". The most sustainable choice is to use the garments you have - to "shop your closet" as one of the SMIs said. The SMIs also highlight social sustainability, such as the working conditions of fashion production. The SMIs thus help consumers who feel disempowered or overwhelmed by the amount of information. Furthermore, effectiveness knowledge includes the dimension of social media. The influencers highlight the consequences of, for instance, liking or commenting (even in critical tone) the posts of fast fashion companies as this will help the "bad guys of fashion" as named by one of the interviewees, gain more impressions and influence.

Social knowledge can be considered to include anything SMIs share about their personal experiences related to fashion consumption. This provides their followers social understanding of what other consumers (or SMIs) do and think. SMIs also share their own failures regarding fashion consumption, such as accidentally ruining a garment in the wash. In addition, they often share their growth stories as sustainable consumers: "This is how and why I broke free from fast fashion". These stories portray the SMIs as ordinary consumers and as vulnerable to mistakes and temptations, such as impulse purchases. Another form of social knowledge are the social norms: SMIs determine what is legitimate and acceptable and what is not. For instance, one SMI argues that "I hope that they [people with low income] will not feel insufficient or ashamed about their income. Sustainable choices should be made if and when one's income level rises". In addition to enforcing social norms, SMIs are tastemakers. Good taste is important to many SMIs, who are often enthusiastic about fashion and clothing. One SMI argues that buying secondhand does not mean giving up on being on top of fashion trends: "We all know that fashion rotates". SMIs often frame secondhand shopping as a style choice - in addition to being a sustainability choice.

DISCUSSION

Firstly, our findings extend the literature on the roles of SMIs in consumer research. Dolbec and Fischer (2015) suggested that consumer influencers are doing work earlier done by other actors, such

as photographers or fashion editors. From a sustainability perspective, however, it can be argued that the work done by SMIs can be also considered to be complementary or substitutive to sustainability campaigners, such as consumer activists, or public or private educational actors such as schools and non-profit organizations. Compared to these more traditional educators, fashion SMIs are considered as taste leaders. Especially because top-down interventions for sustainability, such as governmental bodies' information campaigns have been found inefficient (Gonzales-Arcos et al. 2021), SMIs provide more potential for social influence and credibility.

Secondly, our findings contribute to research on encouraging sustainable consumption through social media (Kozinets et al. 2012; Pearson et al. 2016; Närvänen et al. 2018) by revealing how the SMIs share different types of knowledge: declarative, procedural, effectiveness and social. Social media appears as a very suitable forum for going beyond declarative knowledge, which is important in influencing sustainability behaviors (Redman and Redman 2014). Furthermore, within fashion, knowledge on sustainability issues can create confusion and complexity, for example due to many trade-offs that must be made (Bly, Gwozdz, and Reisch 2015). Hence the role of SMIs becomes crucial in curating knowledge to their followers.

Thirdly, in addition to sharing knowledge on sustainable fashion consumption, the SMIs also engage in criticizing unsustainable aspects of the mainstream fashion system, such as fast fashion. The role of algorithms is significant and the SMIs share tips for resisting their power. Thus, the SMIs build awareness not only on sustainability of fashion but also on coping with the persuasive power of digital marketing.

Finally, the limitations of the study include that by focusing on SMIs only, the findings do not cover the impact of knowledge sharing on sustainable behavior of their followers. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare the micro-influencers to big celebrity influencers using social media to discuss sustainability issues. Our study opens up avenues for investigating the relations between SMIs and followers further in the context of sustainability change.

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Table 1. Summary of the empirical findings

Domains of knowledge	Declarative knowledge	Procedural knowledge	Effectiveness knowledge	Social knowledge
Description	Mechanical and technical information of sustainable fashion consumption Systems knowledge on how the fashion system works	How-to skills related to sustainable consumption, covering all stages of consumption How to cope with digital marketing and algorithms	Aspects of fashion consumption that the fashion industry controls Knowledge on the impacts of daily fashion consumption choices	Enforcing social norms in fashion consumption Sharing experiences of success and failure
Aim	To summarize information from various sources to offer followers information in a suitable and accessible form	To provide concrete advice on how to perform a particular task	To provide facts and reflections on the outcomes of specific actions and choices of consumers or companies make	To provide the followers social understanding of what other consumers (or SMIs) do and think
Example(s)	Material guides: Instagram posting and blogs text Revealing how power manifests in the fashion system	Tips on the best secondhand shopping outlets How-to -videos (e.g. DIY laundry vinegar or lint remover)	Advice on ordering one's sustainability values to prioritize actions accordingly	"Outfit of the day" -photos Sharing own growth stories about breaking free from fast fashion

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