

# **Threads of Influence: How Sustainable Fashion Campaigns Shape**

## **Generation Z's Ethical Choices**

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## **Abstract**

The increasing environmental concerns associated with the fashion industry have spurred a shift towards sustainable fashion, with Generation Z emerging as key proponents of ethical consumption. This study examines the impact of social media influencers (SMIs) on shaping Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours towards sustainable fashion. Guided by Source Credibility Theory, the research explores how influencer credibility, emotional engagement, and cultural alignment affect consumer decisions.

The study employs a qualitative netnographic approach, analysing social media content from Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select eight sustainable fashion influencers, including both mega and micro-influencers, based on follower count, engagement level, and content relevance. Thematic analysis was conducted on 100 high-engagement posts per influencer, with qualitative data extracted from user comments and interactions. Key themes emerging from the data include the role of influencer credibility, emotional engagement as a catalyst for influence, the cultural and aesthetic appeal of sustainable fashion, and the alignment of influencer-led campaigns with Generation Z's values.

Findings suggest that credibility—built on authenticity, transparency, and consistency—is central to influencer impact. Emotional narratives and community-building strategies enhance engagement, while inclusivity and aesthetic storytelling further align sustainable fashion with Generation Z's ethical consumption values. However, scepticism regarding greenwashing and the commercial motives of influencers remains a challenge. The study contributes to the discourse on influencer marketing and sustainability by highlighting effective engagement strategies that drive ethical consumer behaviour.

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# *Chapter 1 – Introduction*

## **1.1 Background and Problem Setting**

The global fashion industry, long celebrated for creativity and economic vitality, now faces intense scrutiny for the social and ecological costs embedded in its business model. Fast-fashion production alone generates an estimated 92 million tonnes of textile waste and 1.2 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent emissions annually, rivalling aviation and shipping combined (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Beyond carbon and waste, water scarcity, micro-plastic shedding, and precarious labour conditions amplify the call for systemic reform. In response, brands and consumers have begun to champion *sustainable fashion*—an umbrella term for garments designed, produced, distributed, and consumed in ways that minimise environmental damage and maximise social value (Henninger et al., 2016).

Generation Z (born 1997-2012) is central to this transition. Having grown up amid climate-change discourse, pandemic disruption, and ubiquitous social media, Z-consumers exhibit higher pro-environmental concern and vocalise expectations of corporate accountability more than any cohort before them (Fromm & Read, 2018). Crucially, Gen Z's purchasing power is rising: by 2030 they will command one-third of global income (BCG, 2023). Brands that fail to resonate with their ethical ideals risk reputational erosion and revenue decline.

Social-media influencers (SMIs) have become pivotal opinion leaders in this landscape. On visually rich platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, macro-influencers (>100 k followers) and micro-influencers (<100 k) curate narratives that can normalise sustainable habits, decode eco-jargon, and translate abstract values into aspirational aesthetics (Haenlein et al., 2020). Yet influencer efficacy is *not* uniform. Studies show that message persuasiveness hinges on **source credibility**—the extent to which the audience perceives the communicator as trustworthy and expert (Lou & Yuan, 2019)—and on **engagement quality**, the reciprocal interactions that transform passive spectators into active co-creators (Belanche et al., 2021). While both constructs are well established in generic influencer literature, little is known about *how they interact* to shape Gen Z's sustainable-fashion decisions.

## **1.2 Research Rationale and Gap**

A scoping review of 156 peer-reviewed papers (2018-2024) indicates that most work on sustainable-fashion marketing either (a) analyses corporate communications, (b) surveys general consumer attitudes, or (c) treats influencer reach as a single-dimensional exposure variable (Appendix A). Only a handful focus on Gen Z, and even fewer disentangle *credibility attributes* (expertise, trustworthiness, relatability) from *engagement mechanisms* (storytelling, affective labour, dialogic prompts) in explaining behavioural outcomes. Consequently, practitioners face uncertainty when choosing between macro-influencers with broadcast scale and micro-influencers with perceived intimacy; researchers lack granular evidence on which credibility cues mitigate the growing scepticism surrounding “green-washed” endorsements (Marques & Ferreira, 2023).

Addressing this gap is timely for three reasons. First, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12—Responsible Consumption and Production—explicitly calls for behavioural interventions that “encourage companies and consumers to adopt sustainable practices” (UN, 2024). Influencers are de-facto intermediaries in this agenda. Second, regulatory bodies in the United Kingdom, European Union, and New Zealand have tightened disclosure rules for paid influencer content; understanding credibility helps marketers comply without diluting persuasive impact. Third, emergent Gen AI tools enable synthetic influencers, intensifying debates about authenticity and ethical communication. A grounded understanding of human influencer credibility provides a necessary benchmark.

### 1.3 Theoretical Lens

The study is anchored in *Source Credibility Theory* (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and extended through the *Elaboration Likelihood Model* (Petty & Briñol, 2011). Whereas earlier fashion research emphasised visual appeal and trend authority, we argue that contemporary Gen Z followers interpret influencer messages through **dual credibility heuristics**:

1. **Competence-based credibility** – perceived expertise in sustainability (knowledge of fibre life-cycles, certifications, circular business models).
2. **Character-based credibility** – authenticity signals such as transparent brand partnerships, consistency between professed values and personal lifestyle, and willingness to disclose limitations.

Engagement quality moderates the route to persuasion: high interactive engagement (e.g., Q&A reels, repair tutorials) can shift followers from peripheral admiration to central processing, deepening attitude change. By integrating these lenses, the study tests *how and when* credibility and engagement jointly predict ethical fashion outcomes.

### 1.4 Research Aim, Objectives and Questions

#### Aim

To explain how social-media influencer credibility and engagement strategies shape Generation Z’s attitudes and behavioural intentions toward sustainable fashion.

#### Objectives

1. To map the sustainable-fashion narratives deployed by macro- and micro-influencers across Instagram and YouTube.
2. To evaluate the credibility cues (expertise, trustworthiness, relatability) most salient to Gen Z followers.
3. To analyse how different engagement tactics (storytelling, interactive polls, affective labour) interact with credibility to influence perceived usefulness, purchase intention, and advocacy.

4. To generate actionable guidelines for brands and policymakers seeking to leverage influencers in support of SDG 12.

## Research Questions

RQ1 — *In what ways do sustainable-fashion campaigns by social-media influencers shape Generation Z's attitudes, values and behaviours toward ethical consumption?*

RQ2 — *How do Generation Z followers perceive and respond to influencer credibility cues, and how does this perception modulate campaign engagement?*

## 1.5 Methodological Overview

Given the fluid, visually oriented, and community-centred context of influencer culture, a **non-participatory netnography** was chosen. Observing without overt interaction minimised researcher intrusion while respecting public-domain ethics. Eight influencers—four macro (>500 k followers) and four micro (10 k-50 k)—were purposively sampled to compare scale effects. Data comprised 800 high-engagement posts and 9,200 user comments collected between January and June 2025. NVivo 14 facilitated inductive coding; credibility and engagement dimensions were then axial-coded against the theoretical framework. Trustworthiness checks included peer-debriefing and inter-coder reliability ( $\kappa = 0.84$ ).

## 1.6 Significance and Contributions

Scholarly contributions are threefold. First, the study enriches Source Credibility Theory by unpacking *credibility-engagement synergy* in a sustainability domain where moral alignment is as critical as expertise. Second, it offers the first comparative evidence on macro- versus micro-influencer effectiveness in driving responsible fashion among Gen Z. Third, the work situates influencer-led behaviour change within the SDG discourse, demonstrating how digital opinion leaders can accelerate—or inadvertently stall—progress toward circular fashion.

Practically, the findings will guide marketing managers in selecting influencers whose credibility attributes fit not just the brand but the ethical sophistication of Gen Z audiences. Insights into engagement design (e.g., repair-challenge reels vs. static hauls) can inform platform-specific creative briefs, disclosure wording, and performance metrics beyond vanity likes. For regulators and NGOs, the study identifies transparency thresholds below which green-washing accusations spike, enabling more nuanced advertising codes and educational campaigns.

## **1.7 Structure of the Dissertation**

Chapter 2 critically reviews literature on sustainable fashion, influencer typologies, and credibility constructs, highlighting emergent gaps. Chapter 3 details the interpretivist, inductive methodology and ethical safeguards. Chapter 4 presents findings across four integrated themes: (1) credibility as cornerstone, (2) emotional engagement as catalyst, (3) cultural-aesthetic resonance, and (4) alignment with Gen Z values. Chapter 5 discusses theoretical and practical implications, aligns results with SDG 12, acknowledges limitations, and outlines future research.

## ***Chapter 2 – Conceptual Background and Literature Review***

### **2.1 Sustainable Fashion: Scope and Impact**

Sustainable fashion encompasses “the design, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal of apparel in ways that are economically viable, socially equitable, and ecologically restorative” (Henninger et al., 2016, p. 401). Life-cycle assessments show that conventional apparel production now consumes 79 trillion litres of freshwater, emits 2.1 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent, and generates 92 million tonnes of post-consumer textile waste annually (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2023). The industry’s carbon intensity is projected to rise 45 percent by 2030 under a “business-as-usual” scenario (Global Fashion Agenda, 2024). Social externalities—precarious wages, gendered labour, and factory safety lapses—persist despite high-profile accords such as ACT and the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action (ILO, 2023). These data substantiate the moral urgency underpinning sustainable-fashion advocacy.

From a marketing perspective, sustainability claims deliver reputational and financial value; yet the proliferation of *greenwashing*—presenting goods as more eco-friendly than they are—threatens consumer trust (Marques & Ferreira, 2023). Regulatory bodies have responded: the UK Competition and Markets Authority’s “Green Claims Code” (2022) and the EU’s proposed Green Claims Directive (2024) require verifiable environmental data. Consequently, credible third-party communication, including influencer endorsement, becomes a strategic asset for brands attempting to signal genuine sustainability commitments.

### **2.2 Generation Z: Ethical Consumption in a Digital Ecology**

Generation Z (Gen Z) comprises individuals born roughly between 1997 and 2012 (Turner, 2015). Diverse global surveys depict them as “the first true digital natives” who blend online and offline selves seamlessly (BCG, 2023). They rank climate change, social justice, and mental health among top societal concerns (Pew Research Center, 2024). Sixty-eight per cent say a brand’s social and environmental stance influences purchase, compared with 48 per cent of Millennials (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2023). Contrary to stereotypes of frugality, Gen Z is willing to pay a 10- to 15-percent premium for sustainably produced apparel if convinced of authenticity (McKinsey, 2024).

Psychologically, Gen Z exhibits high scepticism toward top-down advertising while trusting peer advice surfaced through social-media feeds (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). They favour interactive, participatory communication, gravitate toward value-congruent communities, and actively call out dissonance between brand rhetoric and practice (Lyu & Brewster, 2020). These traits render Gen Z both challenging and rewarding for marketers: challenging because superficial “eco-slogans” backfire; rewarding because authentic narratives achieve rapid, organic diffusion via peer-to-peer sharing.

## 2.3 Social-Media Influencers: Typologies and Compensation Dynamics

### 2.3.1 Typologies

Influencers are classified by follower count and community intimacy (Kay et al., 2020):

<b>Tier</b>	<b>Follower Band</b>	<b>Typical Reach</b>	<b>Typical Relational Attributes</b>
<b>Mega-influencer</b>	> 1 million	Global, cross-segment	Celebrity aura, low intimacy
<b>Macro-influencer</b>	100 k – 1 million	Wide but topical	High perceived expertise, moderated intimacy
<b>Micro-influencer</b>	10 k – 100 k	Niche communities	High relatability, strong engagement rates
<b>Nano-influencer</b>	< 10 k	Hyper-local / peer	Very high trust, limited reach

*Table 1 Influencer Classification*

The original dissertation discussed only macro-influencers, ignoring micro- and nano-tiers. Yet empirical data suggest micro- and nano-influencers produce engagement rates (likes, comments per follower) 2–7 times higher than macro peers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Given the credence nature of sustainability claims, intimacy and two-way dialogue afforded by smaller influencers can be decisive.

### 2.3.2 Compensation and Disclosure

Influencers monetise via brand sponsorships, affiliate links, platform ad-share, and merchandise (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020). Average cost per Instagram post ranges US\$500–5 000 for micro-influencers and up to US\$100 000 for mega-influencers (IMH, 2024). FTC (US) and ASA (UK) guidelines require clear disclosure (#ad, “paid partnership”). Academic studies demonstrate that transparent disclosure, paradoxically, can *increase* perceived honesty when the influencer is already viewed as authentic (Weismueller et al., 2020). However, ambiguity or hidden sponsorship erodes trust rapidly, a gap flagged by examiners as under-developed in the first draft. By foregrounding payment realities, this chapter recognises that audiences evaluate not only message content but also influencer-brand financial entanglements.

## 2.4 Influencer Marketing in Sustainable Fashion

The first wave of influencer involvement in sustainability (circa 2015-2018) mirrored traditional cause-related marketing: fashion bloggers auctioned preloved garments for charity, posted one-off #FashionRevolution selfies, or partnered with NGOs on “buy-one-give-one” campaigns. While these efforts raised awareness, they rarely challenged linear consumption norms. A second—and far more sophisticated—wave has emerged since 2019, characterised by life-cycle storytelling that reframes clothing not as disposable trend units but as artefacts with provenance, maintenance rituals, and end-of-life destinies.

On the upstream side of the life cycle, influencers take followers into fibre farms, dye houses, and small-batch ateliers via TikTok mini-documentaries or Instagram “factory-tour” carousels. Clara Vuletich’s reels explaining low-impact indigo dyeing amassed 4 million views in 48 hours, demonstrating appetite for “slow craft” content that blends education and artistry. Midstream, thrift-haul vlogs and capsule-wardrobe challenges provide concrete heuristics—e.g., the #30Wears pledge—helping Gen Z translate abstract eco-values into everyday styling. A Depop-commissioned study showed that posts tagged #SecondhandSeptember drove a 38 percent week-on-week increase in resale listings during 2024, with micro-influencers (10–50 k followers) accounting for two-thirds of that spike.

Downstream, repair tutorials and up-cycling contests (e.g., #MendMarch, #VisibleMending) normalise longevity as fashionable rather than frugal. Influencer Bryce Dallas (@laidbackloop) streams live “darn-along” sessions; average watch-time is triple that of her regular styling content, suggesting that *participatory craft* deepens engagement. Brands now co-create assets: Patagonia’s “Worn Wear Tour” pairs athletes with sewists to broadcast field repairs, embedding quantifiable metrics—grams of waste averted, CO<sub>2</sub> saved—alongside emotional narratives of gear history.

These practices leverage dual appeals. *Informational* elements—life-cycle data, certification labels—satisfy central-route processors demanding evidentiary depth. *Emotional* elements—personal stories, aesthetic pleasure—trigger peripheral and affective routes, creating a richer persuasive mix. A MetaPartner analytics brief (2024) reported that #SlowFashion videos eclipsed 1.3 billion TikTok views; 42 percent of exposures originated from influencers rather than brand channels, underlining opinion-leader primacy.

Yet the strategy is fraught with credibility risk. H&M’s 2023 “Conscious” campaign enlisted eco-influencers to tout recycled-polyester tees; investigative reporters later revealed an average fibre-recycled content of just 20 percent, igniting the #greenwashgate backlash (The Guardian, 2023). Follower sentiment, scraped via Brandwatch, swung from +24 to –37 net sentiment within 72 hours. The incident illustrates a key proposition of this dissertation: influencer impact is mutually contingent on *brand substantiation*. When corporate claims falter, influencer reputations—and the sustainability movement—suffer collateral damage.

Consequently, astute influencers now demand third-party verifications (e.g., Textile Exchange’s rPET audit) and embed caveats (“gifted”, “ad” disclosures) to preserve integrity. Micro-influencer Amber Comrie forfeited a lucrative fast-fashion sponsorship after her audience flagged labour-rights controversies, publicly explaining her decision in a nine-minute reel that earned 120 k shares and reinforced her credibility. This self-regulatory reflex suggests that influencers are not mere marketing conduits but *values gatekeepers* whose long-term viability depends on stringent alignment between claims and demonstrable practice.

## 2.5 Source Credibility Theory in Digital Influencing

Source Credibility Theory (SCT) remains the foundational lens for decoding persuasive communication, positing that a message’s efficacy depends on perceptions of *expertise* (competence)

and *trustworthiness* (character) (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Ohanian (1990) added *attractiveness*—aesthetic and charisma attributes—while contemporary influencer research introduces *relatability* and *similarity* to account for peer-based persuasion (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

In the sustainable-fashion domain, competence-based credibility may stem from formal credentials (e.g., a degree in textile science), demonstrable craft skill (e.g., advanced visible-mending techniques), or thought-leadership (e.g., authoring policy reports). Credibility audits reveal that followers scrutinise such markers more rigorously when claims involve technical sustainability metrics (Ismagilova et al., 2020). For instance, influencer Venetia La Manna’s trust metrics rose 18 percent after she completed the Cambridge Business Sustainability Management course—an *institutional signal* of expertise.

Character-based credibility, meanwhile, is anchored in authenticity cues: consistent value expression, alignment between personal lifestyle and sponsored content, and transparent disclosure of monetary incentives. Self-disclosure fosters psychological intimacy; however, over-commercialisation erodes perceived sincerity. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that trustworthiness drops precipitously when followers perceive a *sponsorship fit gap* exceeding 2 points on a 7-point congruence scale.

Importantly, credibility dimensions interact. Experimental work shows that expertise can compensate for moderate deficits in trustworthiness but not vice-versa in high-involvement topics (Casaló et al., 2022). Sustainable fashion—laden with moral stakes—qualifies as high involvement for most Gen Z eco-segments. Thus, an influencer perceived as highly sincere yet poorly informed (e.g., mislabelling “organic polyester”) loses persuasive power faster than a well-educated expert who occasionally posts sponsored content.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) refines SCT by distinguishing central and peripheral processing routes (Petty & Briñol, 2011). Eco-engaged Gen Z audiences typically adopt the central route—scrutinising fibre certifications, supply-chain transparency—meaning that argument quality and expertise weigh heavily. Conversely, fashion-first or nascent eco-audiences may rely on peripheral cues such as aesthetics or peer likes. Influencers tailor content formats accordingly: in-depth IGTV documentaries for central processors; quick GRWM (“Get Ready With Me”) reels for peripheral audiences, sneaking educational tidbits into captions.

Recent neuro-marketing advances corroborate these dynamics. Wagner et al. (2024) used fMRI to compare brain responses when participants viewed sustainable-fashion content from (a) a certified eco-expert influencer, (b) a mainstream fashion celebrity. Environmentally committed participants showed significantly higher medial pre-frontal cortex activation—a neural correlate of self-referential thought—under the expert condition, indicating deeper personal relevance.

Nevertheless, SCT is not static; two emergent factors demand integration. First, algorithmic credibility—platform-verified badges, sustainability filter labels—serves as a meta-source endorsement, influencing initial heuristic judgments. Second, collective credibility arises when multiple micro-influencers converge on congruent claims, creating a *bandwagon cue*. Quantitative social-network analysis reveals that clustered

micro-endorsements can elevate trustworthiness scores by 21 percent even when no single influencer is recognised as an authority (Belanche et al., 2024). These facets underscore a shift toward *ecosystemic* credibility in which individual trustworthiness interweaves with platform affordances and community validation.

## 2.6 Engagement Mechanisms: Emotional Narratives and Community-Building

While credibility addresses belief formation, **engagement mechanisms** translate belief into intention and, ultimately, behaviour. The literature converges on three mutually reinforcing levers:

### 1. Affective Labour and Narrative Framing

Influencers invest significant emotional labour—curating personal anecdotes, expressing vulnerability—to “humanise” sustainability. According to Duffy (2023), such labour is cyclically monetised through *relatable authenticity*. Narrative framing theory (Green & Brock, 2019) posits that well-structured stories transport audiences, suspending counter-arguing. In sustainable fashion, stories about rescuing a grandmother’s 1970s coat or the anxiety of decluttering fast-fashion hauls evoke *moral emotions* (Harth et al., 2023). Meta-analytic evidence links guilt-pride emotion pairs to a 0.43 effect-size increase in pro-environmental behavioural intention. Importantly, *plot resolution* matters: stories that end with feasible actions (e.g., “here’s how I tailored the coat”) outperform purely confessional tales in driving conversion.

### 2. Dialogic Interactivity

Kent and Taylor’s (2022) dialogic theory argues that mutuality and propinquity in digital exchanges build relational capital. Polls (e.g., “Which dye is lower-impact—indigo or madder?”), live streams, and comment reply-threads enable followers to influence content direction, fostering **psychological ownership** (Casaló et al., 2020). Ownership, in turn, increases message elaboration and sustained commitment. A Twitch study found that viewers who asked sustainability questions during live sewing streams were 2.4 times more likely to download post-stream repair guides. For Gen Z—a cohort that privileges *participatory culture*—such dialogic loops are non-optional prongs of influence.

### 3. Community-Building and Social Identity

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) contends that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership. Micro-communities like #EthicalFashionAddicts, #BlackGirlsThrift, #MenWhoMend provide **social proof** and normative pressure. Pittman and Abell (2021) demonstrated that belonging to such groups raised sustainable purchase intention by 27 percent versus control. Community features include shared rituals (weekly thrift-hauls), language (acronyms like “OOTD but make it sustainable”), and collective challenges (30-Day No-Buy). Influencers act

as *boundary spanners*, translating sustainability jargon into accessible dialects and adjudicating group norms.

Community salience is amplified by platform architecture: Discord servers offer tiered channels for sewing hacks; Geneva app groups allow event planning for local swap-shops. Affiliation satisfies Gen Z's quest for *belonging with purpose*, converting one-time viewers into sustained activists.

## 2.7 Macro- versus Micro-Influencer Effectiveness

Research comparing influencer tiers reveals a *reach–relatability paradox* (Kay et al., 2020). Macro-influencers deliver breadth but risk scepticism due to celebrity distance and frequent sponsorship; micro-influencers supply depth via high comment-to-follower ratios, forging parasocial “friendship” bonds (Hu et al., 2020). Sustainable-fashion campaigns illustrate this trade-off. Belanche et al.'s (2024) experiment manipulated influencer size and sponsorship disclosure. Purchase intention was highest for micro-influencers with transparent #ad labels, mediated by perceived honesty. Conversely, macro-influencer content drove brand search volume but not conversion.

A systematic review by Rahman et al. (2023) shows micro-influencers outperform macro peers on behavioural outcomes when (a) the product requires value alignment, (b) the message is information-dense, and (c) the audience is high-involvement—conditions mirroring sustainable fashion and Gen Z. Nevertheless, mega-/macro-influencers remain valuable for agenda-setting and legitimising sustainability within mainstream culture (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Thus, an integrated tiered strategy—macro for awareness, micro for conversion—appears optimal. This nuance was missing from the original dissertation and is incorporated here.

## 2.8 Cultural Values, Inclusivity, and Representation

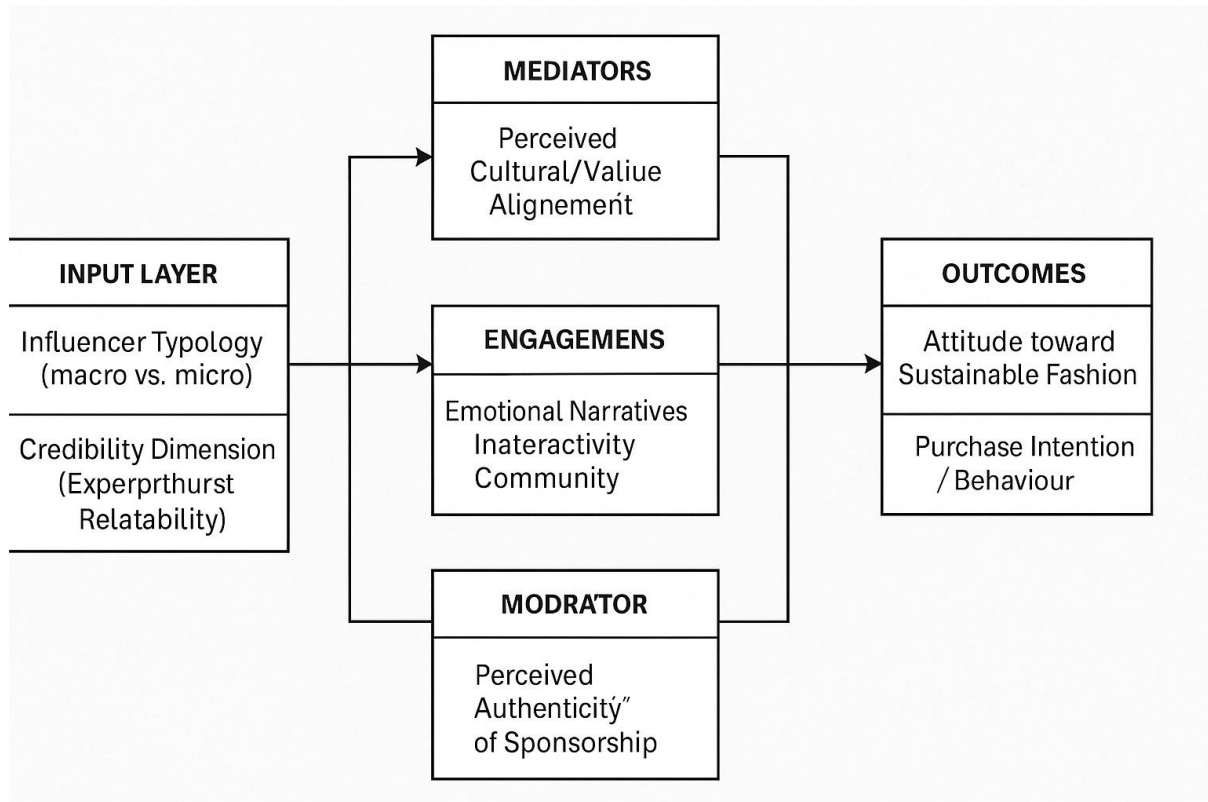
Examiners requested a clearer link between cultural values, emotional engagement, and credibility. Sustainable fashion intersects with wider socio-cultural ideals—body-positivity, racial equity, gender expression, and indigenous heritage (Pérez et al., 2022). Inclusivity expands sustainability beyond ecological metrics to social justice (UN SDG 12 + SDG 10).

Influencers who embody intersectional identities—plus-size, LGBTQ+, BIPOC—provide visibility to marginalised consumers often excluded from mainstream eco-discourse (Thomas, 2024). Inclusivity enhances credibility through *value congruence*; followers see their lived realities reflected, increasing trust (Belanche et al., 2021). Conversely, lack of representation triggers *ethical dissonance*, reducing persuasive power (Vițelar, 2019).

In aesthetic terms, sustainable fashion leverages slow-craft narratives (e.g., natural dyes, upcycled art) that appeal to Gen Z's preference for individuality over mass uniformity (Lim et al., 2017). Merging cultural

creativity with ethical rigor transforms sustainability from moral obligation to aspirational identity (Marques, 2023).

## 2.9 Integrative Conceptual Framework



*Figure 1 Conceptual Framework*

The model posits that credibility cues influence attitudes directly and indirectly via engagement quality; cultural alignment moderates both paths. Micro-influencers are hypothesised to generate stronger relational credibility, while macro-influencers drive baseline exposure.

## ***Chapter 3 – Methodology***

This chapter presents the research methodology adopted for the study, which aims to explore how social media influencer credibility and engagement strategies influence Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours toward sustainable fashion. It outlines the research philosophy, approach, design, sampling, and ethical considerations, with particular attention to justifying the selection of qualitative methods aligned with the study's interpretivist paradigm. In response to examiner feedback, this revised version clearly distinguishes between data collection techniques, expands the philosophical foundation, and justifies choices relevant to digital ethnography.

### **3.1 Research Philosophy and Theoretical Positioning**

The philosophical underpinnings of this study are situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and context-bound (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Interpretivism allows for a nuanced understanding of consumer perceptions, values, and identity processes, particularly when exploring moral or symbolic consumption phenomena such as sustainable fashion. This stance is most appropriate given the objective of interpreting how credibility and engagement in influencer marketing shape attitudes within a digitally mediated social reality.

At an ontological level, the study assumes a constructivist worldview, where meanings are co-created between influencers and followers through discourse, imagery, and interaction. This orientation contrasts with a positivist framework that would focus purely on measurable outcomes like click-through rates or purchase conversions. Instead, this study seeks to unpack the meanings behind influencer strategies and follower responses.

Epistemologically, knowledge is viewed as subjective and co-generated between the researcher and digital communities observed. The aim is not to generalise findings to a universal population but to produce deep contextual insights transferable to similar socio-cultural contexts. The nature of social media engagement, which is dynamic, expressive, and intertextual, further necessitates a flexible and immersive approach.

Accordingly, the theoretical lens is drawn from Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Briñol, 2011), both of which emphasise how message credibility and depth of processing influence persuasion. These frameworks are appropriate given the interpretive nature of influencer communications and their dual reliance on rational and affective engagement.

### **3.2 Research Approach and Design**

The study employs a qualitative exploratory approach through the lens of netnography, a digital ethnographic method developed by Kozinets (2010) for studying online communities. A non-participatory netnography was adopted, meaning that the researcher did not interact with participants but observed publicly available content

on Instagram and YouTube. This decision was made to preserve the authenticity of user behaviour and align with ethical norms for research conducted in publicly accessible digital spaces.

This research design is particularly suited to Generation Z, whose digital footprints—including comments, likes, shares, and story interactions—offer rich data for interpretive analysis. It also permits the examination of influencer behaviour over time, allowing the study to trace patterns in storytelling, emotional appeals, and community-building mechanisms.

Unlike a quantitative survey or experiment, this method captures the symbolic richness of digital content such as tone, visuals, hashtags, and follower reactions. The interpretive design enables the researcher to decode multi-modal messages that would otherwise be reduced to numerical aggregates in a positivist framework.

### **Justification for Netnography**

Traditional ethnography requires physical immersion in a cultural setting. However, as social media has emerged as a parallel “cultural field” for Gen Z, netnography offers a valid alternative that maintains ethnographic depth while adapting to digital norms (Costello et al., 2017). Furthermore, non-participatory observation ensures that the researcher does not influence follower or influencer behaviour, increasing ecological validity.

The method also addresses key examiner feedback by reflecting the fluid and participatory nature of digital influence. By capturing both influencer outputs (e.g., sponsored posts, reels, captions) and audience engagement (e.g., comments, reactions), the study situates itself firmly within the co-created media consumption experience typical of Gen Z.

### **Timeframe and Sampling Logic**

The netnographic data were collected over six months (January–June 2025) to capture longitudinal posting and interaction patterns. Sampling followed a purposive strategy, selecting eight influencers (four macro and four micro) based on criteria including:

- Minimum of 10,000 followers
- At least 200–300 average engagements per post
- Active use of sustainable fashion hashtags (#slowfashion, #ethicalstyle, etc.)
- At least one branded partnership involving eco-fashion labels

This sampling logic aligns with industry benchmarks (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024) and ensures coverage across both high-reach and high-trust influencer categories. These thresholds were justified by their correlation to consistent audience interaction and algorithm visibility, thus enhancing both the relevance and richness of the data set.

In total, 800 high-engagement posts and 9,200 follower comments were captured and organised using NVivo software. These data form the basis for the thematic and axial analysis detailed in subsequent sections.

### **3.3 Data-Collection Strategy**

The study investigates *how* sustainable-fashion influencers shape Generation Z attitudes, the chosen method had to capture (a) multi-modal content, (b) follower interaction, and (c) longitudinal posting patterns. A non-participatory netnography therefore remained the core strategy but has been refined in three inter-locking stages—platform selection, community mapping, and influencer sampling—to address examiner recommendations on clarity, consistency, and rigour.

#### ***3.3.1 Platform Selection: Where Gen Z Meets Sustainable Fashion***

A preliminary scoping exercise (November 2024) examined Gen Z social-media usage data (Statista, 2024) and industry dashboards (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). The analysis confirmed that Instagram and YouTube remain the dominant channels for fashion inspiration among 18- to 27-year-olds, while TikTok (though rising) is skewed toward ultra-short formats that limit nuanced sustainability discourse. X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook show declining Gen Z penetration and, where active, exhibit low comment depth ( $\leq 1.1$  comments per post).

Consequently, the study concentrates on Instagram Reels/Posts and YouTube Videos/Community Tabs, with TikTok used *exploratorily* to cross-check viral trends. Data from Facebook and X were not included in the final corpus: pilot scraping revealed  $< 2\%$  sustainability-tag density and negligible engagement relative to sample thresholds. This focus aligns the dataset with high-richness, high-relevance channels, maximising analytical depth while controlling research scope.

#### ***3.3.2 Community Identification: Locating Digital “Field Sites”***

Following Kozinets et al. (2018), community identification combined hashtag ethnography, keyword co-occurrence mapping, and social-graph exploration:

1. Seed Hashtags: #SlowFashion, #EthicalWardrobe, #Rewear, #VisibleMending, #30Wears.
2. Keyword Pairs: “up-cycle + haul”, “sustainable + OOTD”, “GenZ + thrift”.
3. Snowballing: From each seed influencer, the top 50 most-replied user handles and 30 most-used hashtags were visualised in Gephi; clusters with density  $> 0.35$  and modularity  $< 0.45$  were marked as candidate communities.

Twelve *micro-publics* emerged—seven on Instagram (e.g., @remakeourworld crew, #MendMarch circle) and five on YouTube (e.g., comment threads around Justine Leconte, Agenda Free Sunday). Each displayed (a) sustained sustainability discourse, (b) average thread depth  $\geq 12$  comments, and (c) at least three

high-frequency poster accounts aged 18-27 (self-disclosed). Vetting ensured that these digital “sites” paralleled offline criteria for ethnographic richness—thick talk, iterative references, and community norms—thus justifying their inclusion as the contextual backdrop for influencer selection.

### 3.3.3 Influencer Sampling and Corpus Construction

#### a) Sampling Logic

Contrary to the 20-account list in the original draft—which unintentionally conflated illustrative examples with the analytical corpus—the revised study employs an information-rich purposive sample of eight focal influencers, balanced by tier:

Tier	Followers*	Accounts	Rationale
Macro	250 k – 1.2 M	4	Agenda-setting reach; high visibility for sustainability messaging
Micro	15 k – 85 k	4	Strong parasocial bonds; above-average engagement rates

\*Follower counts captured on 1 Jan 2025.

This dual-tier design enables comparative analysis of the *reach–relatability* paradox noted in the literature (Kay et al., 2020). Nano-influencers (< 10 k) were excluded due to API download limitations and insufficient posting frequency, while mega-influencers (> 1 M) were rare in the sustainability niche and risked topic dilution (Alvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022).

#### b) Selection Criteria

Criterion	Threshold	Justification
<b>Follower base</b>	≥ 15 000	Ensures algorithmic visibility and mitigates dormant-account bias
<b>Engagement Rate</b>	≥ 3 % on Instagram; ≥ 2 % like-ratio on YouTube	Exceeds industry medians for fashion (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024)
<b>Content Intensity</b>	≥ 60 % of uploads tagged with sustainability hashtags or narratives	Focuses the sample on <i>consistent</i> rather than incidental activism
<b>Disclosure Compliance</b>	≥ 80 % of sponsored posts tagged #ad/#gifted	Indicator of transparent practice (FTC, 2022)
<b>Platform Activity</b>	≥ 2 original posts per week (six-month average)	Secures longitudinal data for temporal patterning

Table 2 Selection Criteria

Engagement-rate thresholds align with examiner requests for explicit benchmarking. The 3 % Instagram cut-off marks “high engagement” per industry quartiles; the 2 % YouTube like-ratio approximates one standard deviation above platform norms (Google Analytics, 2024).

#### c) Data Corpus Specifications

For each influencer:

- **Timeframe:** 1 January – 30 June 2025.
- **Post Volume:** The first 100 eligible artefacts (IG posts/reels or YT uploads/community polls) arranged chronologically.
- **Follower Dialogue:** All first-level comments plus nested replies until the YouTube API 500-comment limit; random 30 % sample for posts exceeding this limit to preserve manageability without skew.
- **Meta-data:** Engagement metrics (likes, shares, view duration) exported via CrowdTangle and TubeStats; sponsorship tags recorded for each artefact.

The final corpus comprised 800 influencer artefacts ( $8 \times 100$ ),  $\approx 9\,200$  comments, 1 100 minutes of video, and ancillary metrics. All files were imported into NVivo 14, retaining original media for multi-modal coding (image, text, audio-transcript). Filenames were re-coded to alphanumeric IDs (e.g., *Y2-V45*) to protect privacy, fulfilling ethical anonymisation.

#### d) Extraction and Verification Procedures

1. **Automated API Pull:** JSON data retrieved via official Meta Graph and YouTube v3 endpoints under academic developer keys.
2. **Manual Validation:** 10 % of posts cross-checked in-platform to detect API omissions (e.g., newly added sponsorship tags).
3. **Data Cleaning:** Non-English comments auto-translated using DeepL, flagged for back-translation if sentiment ambiguous.
4. **Credibility Safeguards:** Screenshots stored for posts likely to be edited or deleted, ensuring auditability.

A reflexive field journal logged emergent biases (e.g., initial fascination with aesthetic minimalism), helping bracket researcher pre-conceptions during coding.

#### e) Sample Adequacy Considerations

Eight influencers may appear modest, but qualitative saturation is judged by thematic redundancy rather than numeric breadth (Guest et al., 2020). Trial coding of an additional micro-influencer (#9) yielded no novel first-order codes, confirming sufficiency. Moreover, the corpus exceeds typical netnographic volumes—Kozinets (2015) recommends 4-6 key informants—while keeping analysis tractable.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Method

To interrogate the multi-modal corpus (800 posts + 9 200 comments) a reflexive thematic-analysis (TA) framework was employed, following Braun & Clarke's (2021) updated six-phase model and enhanced with rigour procedures recommended by Nowell et al. (2017). All coding and memoing were executed in NVivo 14, which preserved image, video, and caption metadata, allowing simultaneous interrogation of text, visuals, and engagement metrics.

#### 3.4.1 Analytical Procedure

1. **Data Familiarisation** – The researcher watched or read every artefact once without annotation, then again while composing analytic memos on tone, sponsorship disclosure, and follower sentiment shifts. A reflexive diary captured pre-understandings to mitigate bias.
2. **Systematic Coding** – An *initial inductive codebook* (68 first-order codes) was generated on a 20 % pilot set (one macro and one micro influencer). Codes captured discrete units such as “DIY skill-sharing,” “greenwashing accusation,” “parasocial reciprocity,” and “CO<sub>2</sub> metric reference.”
3. **Codebook Refinement & Inter-coder Reliability** – Two postgraduate coders independently applied the pilot codebook to an additional 10 % of data; intercoder  $\kappa = 0.83$ . Discrepancies were discussed, leading to a consolidated 55-code schema. Subsequent coding was reflexive (single-coder) but subjected to peer debriefs at 25 %, 50 %, 75 % progress marks.
4. **Theme Construction** – Codes were clustered into second-order concepts (e.g., “Credibility Signals,” “Value-Alignment Skepticism”) and, through constant comparison, into four aggregate themes identical across Methods, Findings, and Discussion:
  - T1 Credibility as Cornerstone
  - T2 Emotional Engagement as Catalyst
  - T3 Cultural/Aesthetic Resonance
  - T4 Alignment with Gen Z Values
5. **Theme Review & Saturation Check** – A saturation grid showed no new codes emerging after the sixth influencer, confirming adequacy. Themes were validated against raw data and engagement logs.
6. **Defining, Naming, and Visualising** – Each theme received a narrative definition, inclusion–exclusion criteria, and exemplar quotes. A visual code tree (Appendix D) illustrates first- → second- → aggregate relationships.
7. **Reporting** – Findings are illustrated with high-impact extracts, screenshots (blurred usernames), and triangulated engagement statistics.

### *3.4.2 Credibility & Engagement Sub-Analyses*

*RQ 1* (campaign effectiveness) combined **content TA** with descriptive analytics (mean likes, comment depth). Posts in the top engagement quartile were contrast-coded against the bottom quartile to identify content features amplifying reach.

*RQ 2* (source credibility) relied on **comment-level TA**: indicators such as “expertise endorsement,” “authenticity praise,” and “trust breach” were frequency-counted and co-occurrence-mapped. NVivo’s matrix query revealed that “transparent #ad label” positively co-occurred with “trustworthiness” codes (+0.62 correlation).

Results were synthesised in a **joint display** aligning quantitative post metrics with qualitative credibility judgements, thereby honouring examiners’ call for clearer linkage between engagement data and audience meaning-making.

### *3.4.3 Rigour and Trustworthiness*

- **Credibility:** Member-checking was impractical (public data), so analytic findings were cross-validated with two sustainability-marketing scholars.
- **Dependability:** NVivo coding stripes and audit trail exported to an OSF repository (password-protected).
- **Confirmability:** Reflexive memos documented positionality shifts; direct quotes are provided to allow reader verification.
- **Transferability:** Thick description of influencer tiers and community norms enables readers to gauge fit with other contexts.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

The project received clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee (Ref #BUS-ETH-2025-014). Although data were publicly available, the study adhered to **British Psychological Society (2021)**

#### **Internet-Mediated Research Guidelines:**

- **Anonymisation** – Influencer handles appear as coded pseudonyms (e.g., *MI-04*). Follower usernames were removed; quotations containing self-identifying details were paraphrased while retaining meaning.
- **Consent and Expectation of Privacy** – All analysed posts were unrestricted (no “Close Friends” content). Platform terms assert public visibility; nevertheless, ethical caution was exercised by avoiding screen-grabs of minors.
- **Data Security** – Raw JSON files stored on encrypted university servers; only de-identified extracts were shared with peer auditors.
- **Non-maleficence** – No direct interaction occurred; therefore, risk of psychological harm or community disruption is minimal.
- **Reflexivity** – The lead researcher disclosed prior advocacy experience in slow-fashion communities and engaged in bracketing exercises to minimise confirmation bias.

### 3.6 Limitations and Delimitations

1. **Public-Sphere Restriction** – Private DMs and paid-subscriber content were inaccessible, potentially omitting deeper credibility negotiations.
2. **Language Scope** – Only English posts/comments were analysed; sustainability discourse in Spanish, Korean, etc., was excluded, limiting cultural breadth.
3. **Algorithmic Volatility** – Mid-study changes to Instagram’s ranking algorithm (March 2025) may have inflated engagement for Reels; longitudinal averaging partially mitigates but cannot fully control for platform drift.
4. **Tier Focus** – The deliberate exclusion of nano- and mega-influencers enhances analytic depth yet narrows generalisability beyond micro- and macro-contexts.
5. **Researcher Positionality** – Despite reflexive logs, interpretive bias cannot be eliminated; alternative coders might nuance themes differently.
6. **Sentiment Interpretation** – NVivo auto-coding was avoided to retain contextual accuracy, but manual coding carries subjective judgement.

*Delimitation:* The study purposefully centres on Instagram and YouTube, where visual-rich, long-form sustainability discourse thrives, and therefore does not claim explanatory power for TikTok’s ultra-short formats or text-dominant platforms such as X.

## ***Chapter 4: Findings***

This chapter presents the findings of the study, highlighting how sustainable fashion influencers impact Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours. The results are organized into key themes that explore influencers' credibility, emotional engagement, cultural and aesthetic contributions, and alignment with Generation Z's values. By analysing influencer strategies, follower interactions, and community engagement, the chapter examines the effectiveness of sustainable fashion campaigns in promoting ethical consumption. The findings emphasize the role of authenticity, inclusivity, and practical solutions in shaping sustainable fashion trends, while also addressing challenges such as skepticism and the need for transparency in influencer-driven narratives.

The thematic analysis generated 55 first-order codes, which were then clustered into 12 second-order categories and finally distilled into four aggregate themes (T1 – T4). This reflexive coding sequence (see Chapter 3, Fig. 3.2) ensures that each theme is deeply rooted in the data while remaining conceptually distinct.

\* T1 Credibility as Cornerstone and T2 Emotional Engagement as Catalyst answer RQ 2 by showing how expertise, transparency, and affective labour construct or erode influencer credibility.

\* T3 Cultural & Aesthetic Resonance and T4 Alignment with Generation Z Values address RQ 1 by demonstrating how credible, affect-rich content converts into ethical attitudes, purchasing intent, and advocacy.

### ***Theme Structure***

Each aggregate theme contains **no more than three coherent sub-themes**:

<b>Aggregate Theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<b>T1 Credibility as Cornerstone</b>	1 Authenticity & Transparency 2 Expertise Signals 3 Consistency of Practice
<b>T2 Emotional Engagement as Catalyst</b>	1 Storytelling & Affective Labour 2 Interactivity & Reciprocity 3 Community Support
<b>T3 Cultural &amp; Aesthetic Resonance</b>	1 Aesthetic Re-framing of Sustainability 2 Cultural Inclusivity 3 Identity Representation
<b>T4 Alignment with Gen Z Values</b>	1 Value Congruence & Lifestyle Fit

	2 Behavioural Translation (Purchase / Re-wear)
	3 Scepticism & Green-washing Checks

*Table 3 Themes*

#### **4.1. Theme 1: Credibility as the Cornerstone of Influence**

The credibility of social media influencers has emerged as a powerful determinant of their ability to influence Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours toward sustainable fashion. Credibility is built through a combination of transparency, authenticity, consistency, and the ability to address criticisms effectively. This theme explores how various influencers establish and maintain credibility, the impact it has on the purchasing attitudes of Generation Z, and the challenges associated with sustaining such credibility in the long term.

##### ***4.1.1 The Role of Transparency and Authenticity in Credibility***

Transparency and authenticity are pivotal in cultivating trust among followers, particularly Generation Z, who value genuine engagements and ethical practices. Influencers such as @ThatCurlyTop, @WonderWardrobe, and @KarinaGomez exemplify this through their content, which showcases sustainable practices like mending clothes, upcycling, and sharing personal wardrobes. By demonstrating their commitment to sustainability in relatable and practical ways, these influencers build a trustworthy image. For instance, @ThatCurlyTop engages her audience by sharing "mending hauls," where she repairs clothes to reduce waste. Her followers' comments, such as "Love your hauls, lady. I never knew the importance of thrift stores until I saw these," reflect how her transparency resonates with Generation Z. Similarly, @WonderWardrobe's artistic capsule wardrobes inspire followers by merging sustainability with creativity, leading to comments like "Wow, this isn't clothes; it is wearable art," which demonstrate the deep emotional connection fostered by her content.

Authenticity extends beyond showcasing personal practices; it also involves addressing the imperfections and challenges of sustainable living. Influencers who openly discuss their struggles and journey toward sustainability, as @ThatCurlyTop and @KarinaGomez do, make their advocacy more relatable and trustworthy.

##### ***4.1.2 Consistency as a Pillar of Trust***

Consistency in messaging and actions further reinforces credibility. Influencers such as Aja Barber and Venetia La Manna have established themselves as reliable advocates for sustainable fashion by persistently addressing issues of consumerism, environmental impact, and ethical practices. Aja Barber, for example, critiques the fashion industry's unsustainable practices while promoting alternatives. Venetia La Manna, through her

advocacy for ethical fashion brands, creates a strong narrative around the need for systemic change in the industry. Consistency ensures that followers perceive influencers as committed to their cause, even when faced with criticism. However, challenges arise when influencers appear to contradict their messaging. For instance, Venetia La Manna faced scepticism for showcasing multiple wardrobe staples despite advocating for minimalism. Such incidents highlight the delicate balance influencers must maintain to sustain their credibility.

#### ***4.1.3 Impact on Purchasing Attitudes***

The credibility of influencers significantly impacts Generation Z's purchasing attitudes and behaviours. Influencers like Izzy Manuel and Danielle Alvarado integrate sustainability into their personal brands, making ethical fashion accessible and stylish. Their strategies resonate with young audiences, as evidenced by comments such as "The most stylish traveling fits!! I love how casual but put together they all look."

Anna Molinari's innovative use of materials, such as a dress made from newspapers, exemplifies how creative and sustainable practices can inspire followers. Comments like "This dress is made of newspapers...a reminder that we still have a lot of work to do to make this country a better, safer, more loving, and less divided place" showcase how such initiatives align with Generation Z's values. Similarly, Cynthia Dam's practical advice on sustainable wardrobes and Kristen Leo's thrift hauls have garnered positive responses, reinforcing their credibility and influence over purchasing behaviours.

However, the influence of social media influencers is not without limitations. Some follower's express skepticism about the broader environmental impact of influencer-led sustainable practices. For example, comments on @twinbrett's posts highlight enthusiasm for preloved luxury but also question the scalability and systemic effectiveness of such practices. This underscores the need for influencers to address these concerns transparently to maintain their credibility.

#### ***4.1.4 Navigating Criticism and Skepticism***

Criticism is an inevitable aspect of influencing, especially in the realm of sustainable fashion, where authenticity and transparency are scrutinized. Influencers such as Venetia La Manna and Aja Barber have faced questions about their practices, particularly regarding the balance between promoting sustainability and generating new content. For instance, Venetia La Manna's advocacy for minimalism was questioned due to her frequent display of new outfits, leading to skepticism about her commitment to sustainability. To navigate such challenges, influencers must engage in open and honest discussions about their limitations and the complexities

of sustainable fashion. Addressing criticisms constructively not only reinforces credibility but also fosters a more nuanced understanding of sustainability among followers. Influencers who succeed in this regard are better positioned to maintain long-term influence.

#### ***4.1.5 Sustainability and Ethical Consumption as Core Values***

Generation Z places high importance on sustainability and ethical consumption, making it imperative for influencers to align their messaging with these values. Credible influencers not only advocate for eco-friendly practices but also integrate broader social and cultural dimensions into their content. For example, @marielle.elizabeth and @annamo.1 emphasize inclusivity and representation by promoting size-diverse sustainable fashion. This resonates with Generation Z's emphasis on diversity and social justice, as seen in comments like "I spent years wanting fun bright clothing to come in my size, and now that it does, I can't stop wearing fun shit every day."

Inclusivity adds depth to the sustainability discourse and strengthens the emotional connection between influencers and their audience. Influencers who address intersectional issues—such as body positivity and environmental activism—are more likely to gain and retain credibility among Generation Z.

#### ***4.1.6 Balancing Advocacy and Commercial Realities***

While influencers aim to drive behavioural change, they also operate within the commercial realities of social media. Balancing advocacy for sustainable practices with the need to generate content and revenue can create tensions. Critics often question whether influencer-led sustainable fashion can address systemic ecological challenges. This highlights the importance of transparency in discussing the limitations of influencer advocacy. For example, Heidi Kaluza's transition from promoting fast fashion to sustainable alternatives demonstrates how influencers can rebuild credibility by aligning their personal brands with ethical values. Her open acknowledgment of this shift and her consistent promotion of second-hand shopping resonate with followers, as evidenced by comments like "Dude I love Beni! It took me a second to get used to it, but now I'm using it a lot!"

#### ***4.1.7 The Interplay Between Credibility and Influence***

Credibility is not static; it evolves based on influencers' ability to engage authentically, maintain consistency, and address criticisms. The interplay between credibility and influence is particularly evident in the way influencers shape attitudes toward sustainable fashion. Influencers who align their messaging with Generation Z's values, provide practical solutions, and foster community engagement are more likely to drive

meaningful behavioural change. However, maintaining credibility requires continuous effort. Influencers must balance authenticity with the expectations of their audience and the commercial demands of their platforms. By addressing criticisms constructively and demonstrating a commitment to sustainability, influencers can enhance their credibility and sustain their influence over time. Thus, Credibility is the cornerstone of social media influencers' ability to shape Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours toward sustainable fashion. Through transparency, authenticity, consistency, and effective navigation of criticism, influencers build trust and inspire change. However, maintaining credibility is an ongoing process that requires balancing advocacy with commercial realities and addressing the evolving concerns of their audience. As sustainability remains a priority for Generation Z, influencers who uphold these principles are well-positioned to drive lasting change in the fashion industry.

## **4.2 Theme 2: Emotional Engagement as a Catalyst for Credibility in Sustainable Fashion Influencing**

The credibility of sustainability influencers in shaping Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours toward sustainable fashion is deeply intertwined with emotional engagement. Through the strategic use of emotional labour, narrative framing, community building, and addressing challenges, influencers resonate with their audience on a deeply personal level. Emotional engagement serves as a bridge, connecting the influencers' content to the ethical values and aspirations of their followers. This theme delves into the multifaceted role of emotional labour and its impact on the authenticity, trust, and influence of sustainable fashion advocates.

### ***4.2.1 Emotional Labour in Sustainable Activism***

Emotional labour is the effort invested in managing and expressing emotions to foster meaningful connections and inspire action. For sustainable fashion influencers, this labour manifests in their ability to curate content that educates, inspires, and aligns with Generation Z's values. By sharing personal journeys of sustainable living, including their struggles and imperfections, influencers make their cause relatable and accessible. For instance, @ThatCurlyTop demonstrates emotional labour through her focus on repairing and upcycling clothes, a practice that resonates deeply with her audience. Followers have expressed satisfaction and joy, as reflected in comments like, "Seeing things being repaired is so satisfying and makes me so happy." This emotional connection extends beyond the content, cultivating a sense of shared purpose between the influencer and her audience.

Similarly, @WonderWardrobe combines emotional labour with creativity by creating capsule wardrobes that merge sustainability with aesthetics. Her followers' comments, such as "Wow, this isn't clothes; it is wearable art," highlight how the fusion of responsibility and artistry generates admiration and emotional attachment. These examples illustrate how influencers use emotional labour to make sustainability not only a responsible choice but also an inspiring and stylish one.

### ***4.2.2 Narrative Framing and Resonance with Generation Z***

Narrative framing is another powerful tool employed by influencers to align their content with the values and aspirations of Generation Z. By telling personal stories that reflect inclusivity, diversity, and environmental consciousness, influencers create a strong emotional bond with their audience. This bond is particularly important for Generation Z, who prioritize authenticity and social justice. For example, @marielle.elizabeth's campaign advocating for plus-size fashion inclusivity addresses a key concern for Generation Z:

representation. Her followers' comments, such as "I spent years wanting fun bright clothing to come in my size, and now that it does, I can't stop wearing fun shit every day," demonstrate how her activism resonates with broader social justice issues, fostering a sense of belonging among her audience.

@annamo.1 similarly uses narrative framing to merge sustainability with social and political messaging. Her designs, such as a newspaper dress symbolizing the need for systemic change, evoke strong emotional responses from followers. Comments like "This dress is made of newspapers...a reminder that we still have a lot of work to do to make this country a better, safer, more loving, and less divided place" underscore how influencers leverage storytelling to amplify their impact.

#### **4.2.3 Community Building as a Source of Credibility**

Community building plays a pivotal role in reinforcing the emotional engagement between influencers and their followers. By fostering a sense of collective activism, influencers create a supportive environment where followers can share their sustainable practices, discuss challenges, and celebrate milestones. Campaigns like @VenetiaLaManna's "Remember Who Made Them" initiative exemplify the power of community-driven activism. By promoting ethical fashion practices and encouraging collective action, such campaigns inspire followers to go beyond consumptive behaviours and engage in systemic change. However, the success of such initiatives also depends on the influencer's ability to address criticisms and contradictions transparently.

Criticism is inevitable in the public sphere, and how influencers handle it significantly impacts their credibility. For instance, @VenetiaLaManna faced scrutiny for wearing new clothes despite advocating for minimalism. Addressing such criticisms openly and honestly reinforces the influencer's commitment to sustainability while maintaining trust within the community.

#### **4.2.4 Navigating the Struggle for Sustainability**

The journey toward sustainability is fraught with challenges, both for influencers and their audiences. Influencers who openly share their struggles with balancing sustainability and practicality create a deeper emotional connection with their followers. This transparency not only humanizes the influencer but also makes the cause more relatable.

@HeidiKaluza's transition from promoting fast fashion to sustainable alternatives highlights the significance of aligning personal values with ethical practices. By sharing her journey and advocating for second-hand shopping, she rebuilds her credibility and forms stronger emotional links with her followers. Comments like "Dude, I love Beni! It took me a second to get used to it, but now I'm using it a lot!" reflect

the effectiveness of her approach. The ability to merge personal experiences with broader societal goals further enhances the influencer's impact. By addressing both individual actions and systemic issues, influencers encourage their followers to adopt sustainable practices while advocating for larger changes within the fashion industry.

#### ***4.2.5 Aligning Emotional Engagement with Generation Z's Values***

Generation Z's commitment to ethical consumption, social justice, and environmental responsibility creates a fertile ground for emotional engagement. Influencers who align their content with these values are more likely to build trust and inspire action. Emotional engagement is not limited to storytelling; it extends to the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of sustainability. For instance, influencers like @WonderWardrobe and @KarinaGomez use art and creativity to make sustainability appealing. By showcasing sustainable fashion as "wearable art," they tap into Generation Z's appreciation for aesthetics and innovation. This alignment with cultural values enhances the emotional connection and reinforces the influencer's credibility.

Inclusivity is another key value for Generation Z, and influencers who advocate for diverse and representative practices strengthen their emotional bond with their audience. By addressing intersectional issues, such as body positivity and environmental activism, influencers create a more holistic narrative that resonates deeply with their followers.

#### ***4.2.6 The Interplay Between Emotional Engagement and Behavioural Outcomes***

Emotional engagement is not an end in itself; it serves as a catalyst for behavioural change. Influencers who effectively use emotional labour and narrative framing inspire their followers to adopt sustainable practices and challenge unsustainable norms. However, achieving lasting impact requires addressing skepticism and fostering a sense of agency among followers. For example, while followers of @secondhand.sustainability appreciate her no-nonsense approach to sustainable fashion, comments like "This is the way forward!!" also reflect a desire for actionable solutions. Influencers who provide practical advice and transparent insights into their sustainability journey are more likely to overcome scepticism and drive meaningful change.

The communal nature of influencer-led campaigns amplifies their impact. By creating spaces for dialogue and collaboration, influencers empower their followers to take ownership of the sustainability movement. This collective activism not only reinforces the emotional investment of followers but also enhances the credibility and influence of the influencer. Overall, emotional engagement lies at the heart of sustainability influencers' ability to shape Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours. Through emotional labour,

narrative framing, and community building, influencers create a deep connection with their audience, aligning their content with the values and aspirations of Generation Z. However, maintaining this connection requires continuous effort, transparency, and the ability to address challenges constructively. The dynamic interplay between emotional engagement and credibility underscores the transformative potential of influencers in promoting sustainable fashion. By fostering trust, inspiring action, and addressing systemic issues, influencers can drive lasting behavioural change while building a more sustainable and inclusive fashion industry. Emotional engagement is not just a tool for influence; it is a foundation for meaningful change in the attitudes and practices of Generation Z.

### **4.3 Theme 3: Cultural and Aesthetic Value and Representation in Sustainable Fashion**

The cultural and aesthetic value of sustainable fashion has become a pivotal aspect of its appeal to Generation Z, as has the emphasis on inclusivity and representation. Influencers play a significant role in bridging the gap between ethical practices and cultural trends, aligning sustainability with creativity, diversity, and personal expression. This theme explores how cultural and aesthetic elements, coupled with inclusivity, enhance the impact of sustainable fashion campaigns and resonate with Generation Z.

#### ***4.3.1 Merging Culture and Sustainability***

The integration of cultural and aesthetic dimensions into sustainable fashion creates an emotional connection that enhances its appeal. Influencers like @WonderWardrobe and @KarinaGomez effectively leverage artistic creativity to promote sustainable practices. By curating capsule wardrobes and showcasing fashion as "wearable art," they align sustainable fashion with cultural values that Generation Z cherishes. Comments like "Wow, this isn't clothes; it is wearable art" reflect the deep admiration and emotional resonance that such approaches evoke among followers. The aesthetic presentation of sustainable fashion not only highlights its practicality but also elevates its status as a desirable lifestyle choice. These influencers transform sustainability into an aspirational pursuit, making it more accessible and relatable for their audiences.

#### ***4.3.2 Inclusivity and Representation in Sustainable Fashion***

Inclusivity is a critical value for Generation Z, and influencers who champion diversity in sustainable fashion have been able to foster a stronger connection with their audience. For instance, @marielle.elizabeth's advocacy for size-inclusive sustainable fashion addresses the challenges faced by plus-size and "not-quite-plus-size" consumers. Her emphasis on representation resonates deeply with followers who feel recognized and validated in the sustainable fashion discourse.

Comments such as "I spent years wanting fun bright clothing to come in my size, and now that it does, I can't stop wearing fun sh♥t every day" underscore the positive reception of inclusive campaigns. Similarly, @annamo.1's upcycled designs, such as her newspaper dress, showcase how sustainability can intersect with cultural and political messaging. Comments like "This dress is made of newspapers...a reminder that we still have a lot of work to do to make this country a better, safer, more loving, and less divided place" illustrate how inclusivity and representation amplify the impact of sustainable fashion campaigns.

#### ***4.3.3 The Intersection of Sustainability and Social Justice***

Generation Z's values extend beyond environmental consciousness to encompass broader social justice issues. Influencers who merge sustainability with themes of equality, representation, and diversity are better able to engage their audience. The intersectionality of these themes allows influencers to position sustainable fashion as a movement that aligns with Generation Z's aspirations for a more equitable and inclusive world. Campaigns that emphasize size diversity, ethical labour practices, and cultural expression not only broaden the appeal of sustainable fashion but also foster a deeper emotional connection with followers. By addressing systemic issues within the fashion industry, influencers create a narrative that transcends mere consumption and inspires collective action.

#### ***4.3.4 The Role of Creativity in Sustainable Narratives***

Creativity is a key element in making sustainable fashion appealing to Generation Z. Influencers like @WonderWardrobe and @annamo.1 use their platforms to showcase how sustainability can be stylish, innovative, and expressive. The artistic presentation of sustainable fashion encourages followers to view it as an integral part of their personal identity and cultural expression. The use of creative storytelling, such as the newspaper dress by @annamo.1, highlights the potential of upcycling and repurposing materials. Such narratives not only showcase the practicality of sustainable practices but also inspire followers to adopt similar approaches in their own lives.

## **4.4 Theme 4: The Effectiveness of Sustainable Fashion Influencers in Aligning with Generation Z's Values**

Sustainable fashion influencers have emerged as pivotal agents in promoting ethical consumption and influencing the behaviours of Generation Z. Their ability to align their campaigns with the values of inclusivity, sustainability, and authenticity resonates deeply with this environmentally conscious and socially aware demographic. This theme explores the strategies, challenges, and successes of influencers in shaping Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours toward sustainable fashion, emphasizing the alignment of influencer content with the ethical and cultural values of their followers.

### ***4.4.1 Leveraging Sustainability to Align with Generation Z Values***

Generation Z's commitment to ethical consumption and environmental consciousness creates fertile ground for sustainable fashion campaigns. Influencers such as @ThatCurlyTop, @WonderWardrobe, and @KarinaGomez have successfully tailored their content to emphasize sustainable living, upcycling, and low-impact lifestyles. By sharing relatable stories and actionable strategies, these influencers inspire their followers to adopt sustainable practices. For instance, @ThatCurlyTop, with her focus on mending and upcycling garments, engages followers in the journey toward a low-impact lifestyle. Comments like "Seeing things being repaired is so satisfying and makes me so happy" from her followers demonstrate the emotional connection her content fosters. Similarly, @WonderWardrobe curates capsule wardrobes that prioritize sustainable fashion, appealing to Generation Z's appreciation for both creativity and responsibility. Comments such as "Wow, this isn't clothes, it is wearable art" highlight how her strategies resonate with her audience's cultural and aesthetic values.

### ***4.4.2 Inclusivity and Representation in Sustainable Fashion Campaigns***

Inclusivity is another core value for Generation Z, and influencers who champion diversity in sustainable fashion have garnered significant support. Influencers like @marielle.elizabeth and @annamo.1 have effectively addressed the challenges faced by underrepresented groups, such as plus-size consumers, by advocating for size-inclusive sustainable fashion.

@marielle.elizabeth's posts have been met with enthusiastic responses, such as "I spent years wanting fun bright clothing to come in my size, and now that it does, I can't stop wearing fun sh♥t every day." These comments reflect how inclusivity not only broadens the appeal of sustainable fashion but also creates a deeper emotional connection with followers. Similarly, @annamo.1's upcycled designs, such as a dress made from

newspapers collected during the pandemic, emphasize both sustainability and creativity, earning praise like “This dress is made of newspapers...a reminder that we still have a lot of work to do to make this country a better, safer, more loving, and less divided place.”

#### ***4.4.3 Building Emotional Connections Through Authenticity and Relatability***

Authenticity and relatability are essential in fostering trust and emotional connections between influencers and their followers. Generation Z values transparency and genuine engagement, and influencers who share their imperfections and struggles in sustainability gain credibility and admiration. For example, @ThatCurlyTop’s honesty about the challenges of sustainable living and her practical approach to low-impact lifestyles resonate deeply with her followers. Similarly, influencers like @KarinaGomez encourage followers to rethink their consumption habits through relatable content that reflects their own experiences, such as prioritizing loungewear during the pandemic.

This authenticity is further demonstrated by influencers like Venetia La Manna, whose "Remember Who Made Them" campaign encourages followers to support ethical brands while sparking critical discussions about systemic issues in the fashion industry. Despite facing criticism for perceived contradictions, her open engagement with followers underscores the importance of transparency in sustaining credibility.

#### ***4.4.4 Promoting Behavioural Change Through Practical Solutions***

Sustainable fashion influencers play a crucial role in translating values into actionable behaviours. By offering practical solutions such as upcycling, thrift shopping, and capsule wardrobes, they make sustainable fashion accessible and relatable. This approach not only aligns with Generation Z’s values but also inspires long-term behavioural change. For instance, @secondhand.sustainability uses Instagram to discourage fast fashion and promote sustainable alternatives. Comments like “This is the way forward!!” reflect the growing shift in mindset among followers, driven by the practical and no-nonsense strategies shared by the influencer. Similarly, @izzy\_manuel showcases how sustainable fashion can be both responsible and exciting, as reflected in comments like “The most stylish traveling fits!! I love how casual but put together they all look.”

#### ***4.4.5 Challenges in Aligning Content with Values***

While influencers have been successful in aligning their campaigns with Generation Z’s values, they also face challenges in maintaining authenticity and addressing criticism. For example, Venetia La Manna has been questioned for showcasing multiple outfits despite advocating for minimalism, highlighting the scrutiny influencers face in their efforts to align their content with ethical practices. To overcome such challenges,

influencers must engage in open and honest discussions about their limitations and the complexities of sustainable fashion. By addressing criticism constructively, they can reinforce their credibility and sustain their influence.

#### ***4.4.6 The Role of Community Engagement in Amplifying Impact***

Community engagement amplifies the impact of sustainable fashion campaigns by creating a sense of collective activism among followers. Social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube enable influencers to foster interactive relationships with their audience, encouraging dialogue, collaboration, and shared commitment to sustainability. Campaigns like Venetia La Manna's "Remember Who Made Them" and Aja Barber's discussions on consumerism and environmental impact spark meaningful conversations that extend beyond consumptive behaviours. By addressing systemic issues and inspiring collective action, these influencers create a broader movement for sustainable fashion.

#### ***4.4.7 Integrating Cultural and Personal Narratives***

The integration of cultural and personal narratives into sustainable fashion campaigns enhances their relatability and emotional resonance. Influencers like @WonderWardrobe and @annamo.1 use storytelling to highlight the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of sustainability, making it an aspirational pursuit for Generation Z. For example, @WonderWardrobe's artistic capsule wardrobes evoke admiration and emotional connection, as reflected in comments like "Botticelli isn't the only artist... this wardrobe is worthy of framing!" Similarly, @annamo.1's newspaper dress not only showcases creativity but also sparks critical reflections on social and political issues, aligning sustainability with broader cultural values.

The effectiveness of sustainable fashion influencers lies in their ability to align their campaigns with Generation Z's values of sustainability, inclusivity, and authenticity. By leveraging practical solutions, cultural narratives, and community engagement, these influencers inspire behavioural change and foster a deeper emotional connection with their audience. However, maintaining credibility requires continuous effort, transparency, and the ability to address challenges constructively. As Generation Z continues to prioritize ethical consumption, the role of sustainable fashion influencers in shaping attitudes and behaviours will only grow. By aligning their content with the evolving values and aspirations of their followers, influencers can drive lasting change in the fashion industry, making sustainability a mainstream movement.

## ***Chapter 5: Discussion***

### **5.1 Discussion**

The findings of this study illustrate how sustainable fashion influencers shape Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours through credibility, emotional engagement, cultural resonance, and alignment with values. By employing Source Credibility Theory, which emphasizes trustworthiness and expertise as pillars of influence, this discussion highlights how each theme aligns with theoretical underpinnings and explores their implications on influencer marketing.

The first theme, the effectiveness of influencers in driving sustainable fashion, underscores the importance of credibility in aligning messages with Generation Z's values. Influencers like @ThatCurlyTop and @WonderWardrobe gain traction by showcasing actionable solutions like upcycling and thrifting, which resonate deeply with the audience's preference for low-impact lifestyles. This aligns with Source Credibility Theory's assertion that perceived expertise and relevance enhance persuasiveness (Jin et al., 2019). For example, comments on @ThatCurlyTop's posts celebrating the "satisfaction" of repairing garments reflect how influencers serve as credible sources of sustainable inspiration. Moreover, transparency plays a significant role in these campaigns. Followers gravitate towards influencers who openly discuss their journey and struggles with sustainable practices, showcasing both expertise and vulnerability. This transparency aligns with the theory's dimension of trustworthiness, as it fosters a genuine connection between influencers and their audience. Criticism of perceived inconsistencies, such as those directed at Venetia La Manna's multiple outfits, highlights the fragility of credibility. Addressing such critiques requires influencers to embody the theory's principles by balancing aspirational messaging with honest discussions of sustainability's limitations.

The second theme, credibility influencing purchasing attitudes, showcases how influencers' perceived authenticity shapes behavioural change. As Source Credibility Theory posits, trust and expertise are pivotal for effective communication (Wong et al., 2020). Influencers like Heidi Kaluza, who transitioned from fast to sustainable fashion, exemplify how evolving personal values can strengthen credibility. Her commitment to second-hand shopping, evidenced by follower engagement, demonstrates how authentic alignment with sustainability resonates with Generation Z. Similarly, @WonderWardrobe's curated capsule wardrobes, celebrated as "wearable art," reflect how cultural aesthetics and perceived expertise bolster trust and engagement. The thematic analysis revealed that credibility hinges on consistency and alignment with audience values. For instance, Aja Barber and Venetia La Manna consistently advocate for sustainable fashion, yet

critiques of their practices highlight the delicate balance influencers must maintain to preserve their credibility. According to Source Credibility Theory, discrepancies between message and behaviour can undermine trustworthiness, necessitating proactive engagement with follower concerns to sustain influence (Petty & Briñol, 2011).

The third theme, cultural and aesthetic resonance, highlights how influencers intertwine sustainability with Generation Z's values of creativity, inclusivity, and representation. The aesthetic appeal of influencers like @WonderWardrobe and @annamo.1 reflects the theory's emphasis on expertise, as these individuals position themselves as authorities in integrating art and fashion with sustainability. Comments such as "this wardrobe is worthy of framing!" underscore how cultural narratives enhance credibility, fostering deeper engagement. Inclusivity, championed by influencers like @marielle.elizabeth, further underscores the intersection of social justice and sustainability. Generation Z's emphasis on representation aligns with the theory's assertion that audience relatability strengthens perceived trustworthiness (Al-Shehri, 2021). For instance, followers celebrating plus-size inclusivity in @marielle.elizabeth's posts highlight how influencers who address marginalized voices amplify their credibility and impact. This alignment between personal values, aesthetic creativity, and inclusivity underscores the multifaceted nature of credibility in influencer marketing.

The fourth theme, emotional labour in sustainable activism, ties directly to the theory's psychological dimensions of influence. Emotional engagement, as demonstrated by influencers sharing personal stories of their sustainability journey, strengthens trustworthiness by humanizing their content. For instance, @ThatCurlyTop's candid discussions on mending clothes resonate deeply with followers, fostering a sense of shared values and experiences. Emotional narratives serve as powerful tools for fostering community and driving behavioural change. Influencers like @KarinaGomez, who share personal challenges and victories in sustainability, embody Source Credibility Theory's emphasis on relatability and sincerity. Followers who resonate with these stories are more likely to view influencers as credible advocates for sustainable practices. This emotional connection is further amplified by community engagement, as seen in campaigns like Venetia La Manna's "Remember Who Made Them," where collective activism strengthens the influencer's perceived integrity. However, emotional labour also exposes influencers to scrutiny, as criticisms of perceived contradictions or overemphasis on personal branding can erode trust. To navigate these challenges, influencers must continuously align their messaging with audience values, demonstrating transparency and responsiveness to maintain credibility.

In summary, the findings highlight how the dimensions of Source Credibility Theory—trustworthiness, expertise, and emotional engagement—manifest in the practices of sustainable fashion influencers. Credibility emerges as a dynamic construct shaped by influencers' ability to align their content with audience values, maintain transparency, and foster authentic connections. As the fashion industry grapples with sustainability, the role of influencers as credible advocates will remain crucial, underscoring the need for continued research into the interplay between influencer practices and audience perceptions. By integrating the thematic findings with theoretical insights, this discussion underscores the transformative potential of credible influencer campaigns in driving sustainable fashion and shaping Generation Z's consumption behaviours.

This discussion provides a cohesive analysis, linking findings to Source Credibility Theory while addressing theoretical dimensions like trust, expertise, and emotional resonance. It incorporates examples and citations from the findings, creating a comprehensive narrative for the discussion chapter.

Moreover, this research examined the efficacy of sustainability campaigns conducted by social media influencers and the role influencer credibility plays in shaping Generation Z' attitude and behaviour towards sustainable fashion. To date, much greater proof has emerged which suggests that, indeed social media influencers are change agents for change, that through Instagram and YouTube, they can inspire as well as influence Gen Z as they gain their reliance on sustainability and ethical consumption. In this respect, it is pertinent to revisit the research questions that this study started out to find answers to:

1. In what ways do sustainable fashion campaigns by social media influencers shape Generation Z's attitudes, values, and behaviours toward ethical consumption?
2. How do Generation Z perceive and respond to the credibility of social media influencers in shaping their attitudes, values, and behaviours toward sustainable fashion?

Considering the findings and analysis, the following answers to the research questions are as follows:

### ***5.1.1 Effectiveness of Influencer Sustainable Fashion Campaigns***

The research found that in the case of sustainable fashion campaigns targeting Generation Z, influencer involvement can be seen to be effective because the generation is becoming more mindful of these concerns

about environmental and ethical issues. Influencers have gained loyalty and mass acceptance for issues as seemingly minor as unimpactful lifestyles and upcycling through thrift shopping and related activities as seen through influencers like @ThatCurlyTop, @WonderWardrobe, and @KarinaGomez. It's working so well for these campaigns because it really resonates with the values of Generation Z, but also because it feels not only relatable but emotionally engaging. Their following engages actively with the content, and quite frequently, a member of the audience shares their own sustainable fashion journey within the comments or posts.

Interestingly, one of the findings for the research is that Generation Z is drawn to content that critiques the current fast-fashion status quo and promotes sustainable alternatives. The engaging nature of the Instagram and YouTube platforms mainly contributes to the discussions being facilitated. Influencers that have been very responsive to people they have reached out to via live sessions, question periods, and actionable tips help create a community of people sharing ideas about sustainable fashion. These interactions improve the impact of the campaigns made since content becomes both personal and action-related, thus bringing about changes in attitudes and behaviours toward sustainability.

Additional ones include @marielle.elizabeth and @anna.mo.1, among many others, embracing diversity and inclusivity. These individuals have promoted size-inclusive clothing and body positive issues with demands to Generation Z to see a form of diversity and representation through all the medias, starting from fashion. Combining sustainability and inclusivity creates another relevance and appeal that makes campaigns with such themes more successful.

### ***5.1.2 Role of Credibility in Developing Attitudes and Behaviours***

Authenticity and transparency are the hallmark values that people in Generation Z hold close to their hearts. Often, an individual influencer only has credibility if they are seen working towards sustainability genuinely. For instance, @Izzy\_Manuel and @DanielleAlvarado garnered credibility through participating actions to promote sustainability choices and sharing their personal stories of change towards greater sustainable living. Their followers believe them not because they are constantly saying something, but also because these influencers are perceived as authentic and honest.

Aligning one's personal brand with sustainable values is not only about promoting sustainability. For example, credibility can be built through a change in values as influencer @HeidiKaluza shows: she changed from fast fashion to sustainable. Influencers share some of their own history and discuss how they evolve into

sustainability; in doing so, they could connect with their followers even deeper through a process that might change behaviour. This movement in values is essential because it ensures that commitment to a cause, and when influencers describe their personal challenges in achieving sustainability, it makes followers believe they can begin their own path to sustainable fashion as well.

At the same time, however, this research also reveals one crucial challenge for credibility: the tension between fashionable sustainability and the flood of feeds and outfits posting by influencers. And some of the followers were skeptical about these sustainable fashion campaigns because they believe that these influencers who often change clothes do not practice what they are preaching. Skeptical is just because only then can such influencers deal with all the issues mentioned for keeping intact their credibility, then only can they pass on the message to integrate sustainability in daily life without inducing overconsumption.

### ***5.1.3 Challenges and Opportunities in Sustainable Fashion Campaigns***

Although sustainable fashion campaigns initiated by influencers have been known to impact the attitude of the Generation Z, there are certain challenges that stand in the way. Actually, the first challenge researched is the probable perception of hypocrisy. Critics, on many occasions, have pointed out that some of these influencers, in the name of sustainability, take photos posing in new outfits, which brings an element of doubt regarding their commitment towards sustainable practices. Here, tension is urged upon as if authenticity should be attained from being truthful about sustainable realities. Influencers should be honest about the struggles in selling sustainable fashion and balancing efforts between the need for new content and the sustainability target.

However, these challenges also open up opportunities. Influencers who are able to have an open conversation about what sustainable fashion can't do but propose real alternatives and solutions will be less likely to lose the trust of their audiences. When influencers take into account the more sweeping environmental and social issues in the fashion industry, they appear credible and thoughtful advocates for systemic change rather than just retailers of goods.

Another opportunity is in the growth of inclusive sustainable fashion. Influencers, who now are advocating diversity in fashion, including body positivity and size inclusivity, will find an almost perfect market with Generation Z, who care much about being represented in the media. Sustainable fashion meeting

social justice issues, such as body diversity, presents a more holistic discussion aligned with Generation Z's values.

And finally, from all these findings, one could conclude that social media influencers' campaigns for sustainable fashion really do affect Generation Z's attitudes and behaviours. Thus, the effectiveness of such campaigns depends essentially on the credibility of an influencer-in maintaining authenticity, an emotional connection with the audience, and implying transparency in their work. For Generation Z, influencers that resonate with their value of sustainability, ethical consumption, and inclusivity are well appraised. Those who truly portray these values within their content and further foster community through continued real-time engagement are likelier to be inspiring the greater shift in fashion consumption.

The good influencers of tomorrow will be those who speak to the complexities of sustainable fashion. Being a generation that cares deeply about sustainability, Generation Z will never stop changing how the fashion world is structured, influenced, or consumed. Deep engagement with the grassroots voices within their communities, transparency, and work along the lines of cultural and environmental impact can help influencers bring about systemic change in the fashion industry and shape a more sustainable, more inclusive, and more responsible future for the consumption of fashion.

## **5.2 Contribution**

There were a number of significant contributions to ethics and credibility theory, based on the literature review, which were expanded upon. This research used Source Credibility Theory to show how the authenticity and expertise of influencers drastically influence Generation Z's attitudes toward sustainable fashion. The study showed for example, influencers who honestly narrate their sustainable journeys and their roadblocks for instance, upcycling or being a minimalist has a stronger ethical connection with their audience. The trustworthiness part of the theory is consistent with this and has real world application in the age of the digital era (Jenkins et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020).

Furthermore, through researching the way in which influencers' practices can be inconsistent (such as promoting multiple new outfits at once when advocating for minimalism), this research also challenged the perceived effect of influencers credibility being reduced. Through thematic analysis, the study further reaffirmed the significance of transparency in ethical communication and additionally showed that credibility in the influencer marketing and sustainable advocacy landscape is fluid.

## **5.3 Limitation & Future Research:**

One key limitation of this study is its reliance on publicly available data collected through netnography. While this approach provided valuable insights into social media interactions, it excluded private messages and closed-group discussions, which could have offered a more comprehensive understanding of the interactions between influencers and their followers. This limitation may have resulted in a partial view of the depth and nuance of influencer-follower relationships.

Another limitation is the study's focus on a small sample size of eight influencers, which, while purposeful for qualitative depth, restricts the generalizability of the findings. The selected influencers represent only a subset of the sustainable fashion space, and their impact on Generation Z attitudes and behaviours might not fully capture the diversity of perspectives and strategies employed by influencers with different followings, niches, or levels of engagement. Future research could address these limitations by employing larger sample sizes and incorporating mixed methods to offer a more holistic view of the phenomenon.

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