

Sustainability-Focused Social Media Influencers on TikTok and Influence on Gen Z Perceptions of Sustainability and Behavior

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Executive Summary

Sustainability influencers are public figures who try to turn complex environmental topics into palatable, bite-sized pieces of information that provide audiences with an overview of sustainable living and action. As Gen Z (ages 18 to 27) increasingly relies on social media for information, sustainability influencers represent a niche within the broader influencer economy, aiming to promote ethical consumption rather than overconsumption like their traditional social media influencer counterparts. The purpose of this two-part study is to explore how sustainability influencers view their role and how Gen Z audiences engage with sustainable information on TikTok.

In Study 1, sustainability influencers ($N = 8$) were interviewed to understand their goals of producing engaging sustainability-related social media content and the impact of encouraging the adoption of more sustainable behaviors in their audiences. Study 2 surveyed Gen Z TikTok users ($N = 443$) to understand how they perceive sustainability content and their general sustainability beliefs. In Study 1, the interviewees indicated that they want to inspire individual and collective action, and show their audiences that sustainability can be a cheaper, more time efficient, and healthier alternative that simultaneously takes care of the environment. Study 2 suggests that Gen Z is broadly aware of and interested in sustainability, underscoring a clear opportunity for influencers to drive meaningful behavior change. This research highlights both the potential and the limitations of sustainability messaging on TikTok, offering insight into how influencers might better align their language, content, and strategies to resonate with younger audiences and encourage sustainable action. The takeaways from this research can be used to demonstrate the ways sustainability influencers are reaching and resonating with Gen Z TikTok users but also illuminate the shortcomings and areas for improvement when it comes to their messaging, language, topics, product promotion, and other key factors that can influence more sustainable action.

Key Findings

Influencer Self-Ascribed Language and Trust of Influencers within Gen Z

- Study 1 demonstrated that sustainability influencers prefer not to associate themselves with the word “influencer” and instead use terminology like “content creator”, which is a language choice they believe changes the way they are perceived on social media. The

studies identified a misalignment between the self-describing language sustainability influencers use and the language to describe influencers in which Gen Z trusts the most.

- The Gen Z users have the most trust in “sustainability influencers” or “social media educators”, rather than “content creators” which was the common preference identified by influencers in Study 1.
- Based on Study 2, Gen Z does not associate “influencer” as untrustworthy when paired with the word “sustainability”. Placing “sustainability” ahead of a more negatively associated word, “influencer”, may change the context in which the word is interpreted and instead clearly identifies the sustainability influencer’s role to the audience, making them more receptive to this title as a trusted figure.
- The stigma against the word “influencer” could be a more internally facing stigma within the cohort of sustainability influencers and may have no real negative connotation to the audience.

Challenges with Sponsored Content and Balancing Sustainability Ethics

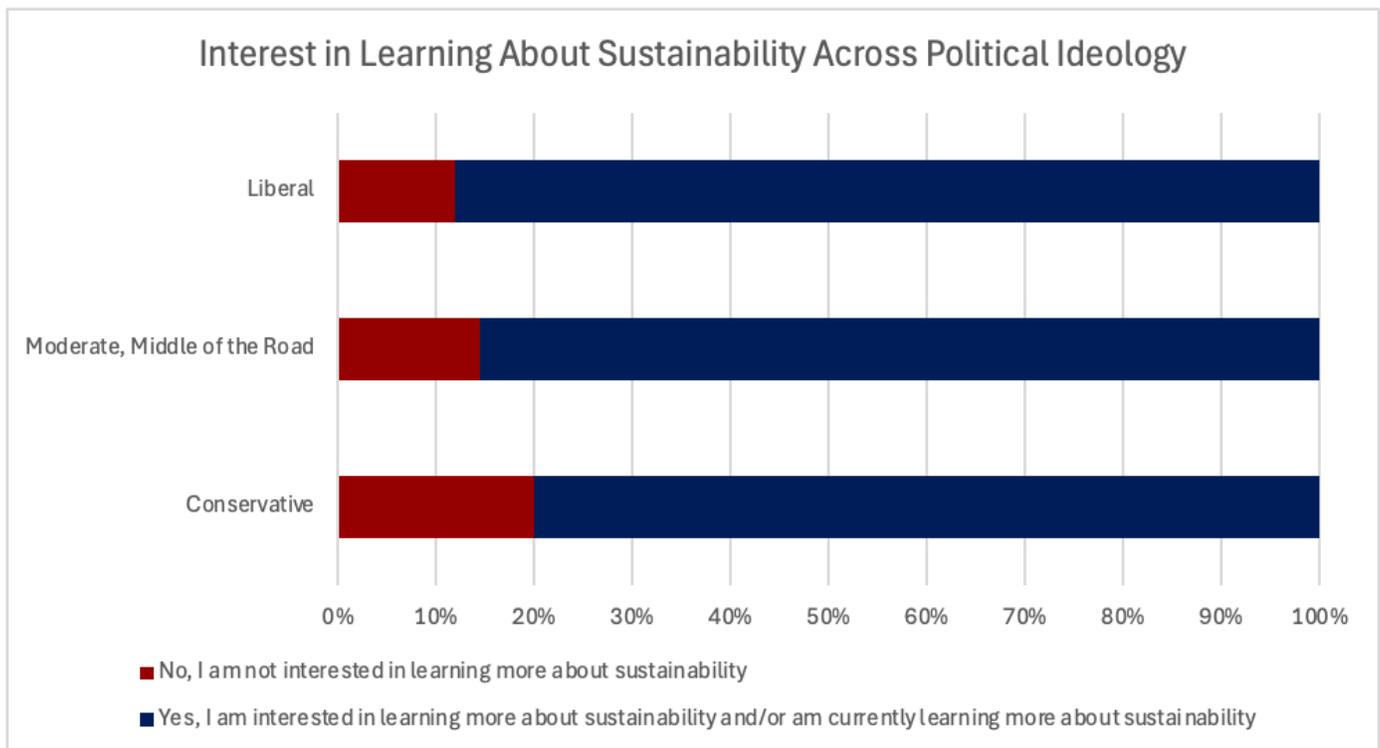
- In Study 1, multiple influencers emphasized brand partnerships as their least favorite part of their job, but that it is difficult to find authentically sustainable partnerships. They expressed an added burden of balancing their ethics and morals relating to sustainability with the need to make a profit and livable wage working as an influencer.
- In Study 2, we found that Gen Zers trust influencers and the products they endorse, creating an added layer of complexity in understanding the intent behind the content. In Study 2, Influencers must maintain a balance of coming across as authentic and sustainable in order to maintain trust with Gen Z.
- The difficulty of balancing morals with the obligation to post sponsored content is not unique to sustainability-focused influencers, and other studies have demonstrated a similar dilemma of ethics in influencers that focus on topics like travelling and motherhood¹.

Desire to Reach Diverse Audiences

- During the Study 1 interviews, the influencers discussed a desire to reach audiences across the political spectrum even though their existing follower base leans largely liberal. They must find a balance between tailoring content that engages their existing audience while trying to use neutral enough language that the message can still resonate with a more Republican or right-leaning audience who may not automatically support environmental issues.

¹ Hudders, L., De Jans, S., & De Veirman, M. (2021). The commercialization of social media stars: A literature review and conceptual framework on the strategic use of social media influencers. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(3), 327-375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1836925>.

- Due to the algorithm of TikTok, their content is shown to audiences who don't follow them and people who have varying ideologies. The influencers discussed the difficulty of navigating the app's algorithm, which appears to suppress polarizing terminology like "fossil fuels" or "electric vehicles", while allowing videos including words like "eco-friendly" and "low-waste" to reach virality.
- In Study 2, Gen Z respondents were asked about their political affiliation and ideology, and the survey was composed of 56% liberal-leaning respondents, 19% moderate respondents, and 25% conservative-leaning respondents. Even with roughly 25% of respondents being more conservative, around 84% of total respondents said they were interested in learning more about sustainability which demonstrates an overall interest in sustainability across ideology.
- 80% of Conservative-leaning respondents stated they would be interested in learning more about sustainability or are already actively learning more about sustainability.
- 77% of respondents who are Moderate, Middle of the Road stated they would be interested in learning more about sustainability or are already actively learning more about sustainability.
- 88% of Liberal-leaning respondents stated they would be interested in learning more about sustainability or are already actively learning more about sustainability.



Introduction

TikTok hosts more than 150 million monthly active users from the United States alone,² representing a large market for advertising to and educating consumers. Users of TikTok can follow accounts, search for content, or explore popular videos accounts via their “For You Page” within the app. TikTok’s algorithm plays a role in the types of content shown to any given user typically curating a specific genre of videos the platform believes the user would enjoy. Some mainstream and so-called “viral” videos surpass the algorithm and are pushed to a wider audience once they reach a certain threshold of engagement, some gaining millions of likes. This virality of videos allows for any average user to potentially gain popularity and build a following on the app, and people who dedicate their careers to creating videos on platforms like TikTok are commonly referred to as social media influencers or content creators. TikTok is especially relevant for sustainability communications because it allows for visibility, editability, and association that makes it easy to build an engaged audience.³ Success on social media platforms depends on multiple factors including number of followers, likes, views, comments, shares, and saves. Influencers tend to be figures on social media with sizable followings and interactions with their content, ranging from thousands to millions of followers. Influencer marketing contributes over \$13.8 billion in the United States alone with over 50 million active creators across social media platforms.⁴

“Sustainability Influencers” can be defined as public figures who promote discussion of specialized environmental topics, ranging from vegetarian and vegan food recipes, thrifting and upcycling, ocean conservation, and many other subject areas. Sustainability influencers are a niche group of people who have a less significant presence on TikTok as compared to the “mainstream” influencers who have tens of millions of followers. They can turn complex environmental topics into palatable, bite-sized pieces of information that provide audiences with an overview of sustainable living and action without making it seem too daunting and fear-provoking and increasing their interest and awareness in environmental issues. One of the unique opportunities for sustainability influencers is their ability to reach younger audiences with less existing sustainable knowledge⁵. This means that through strategic use of the algorithm,

²TikTok. Celebrating our thriving community of 150 million Americans - newsroom: TikTok. (2023). <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/150-m-us-users>.

³ Hautea, S., Parks, P., Takahashi, B., & Zeng, J. (2021). Showing they care (or Don't): Affective publics and ambivalent climate activism on TikTok. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211012344>.

⁴Li, S., & Cong, L. W. (2023). *A model of influencer economy*. National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w31243>.

⁵Johnstone, L., & Lindh, C. (2018). The sustainability-age dilemma: A theory of (un)planned behaviour via influencers. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 17(1), 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1693>.

sustainability influencers can reach audiences outside of their immediate followers and educate TikTok users about sustainability.

Social media users view social media influencers like trustworthy friends, providing an enhanced persuasive effects on their audience⁶ due to the more direct, two-way interaction where influencers can respond to their audience in a way brands cannot. Social media influencers hold a unique position as persuasive figures even though they are not necessarily experts on the topics they discuss, and they still gain high levels of engagement and are deemed credible by their audiences.⁷ Influencers appear to be people who have tested and used the product, and also make it seem more desirable with their public figure status. Information about eco-friendly products from nonexpert sources like influencers has been reported to lead to enhanced credibility and reduced uncertainty in customers even though they may not actually be experts in sustainability.⁸

Given that sustainability influencers have the platform to reach audiences, it is also important to consider how audiences view sustainability content on TikTok. Sustainability influencers not only aim to entertain and educate their followers and audiences, but they hope to inspire real action from demographics like Generation Z (Gen Z). Gen Z stands out for its proactive stance on environmental advocacy, with social media serving as a pivotal tool for engaging this demographic and fostering broader environmental awareness.⁹ Environmentalism and the broader concept of climate change can often feel like a distant threat that isn't personally relevant, sometimes eliminating the feeling of empowerment to take actions that are impactful and will lead to tangible change.¹⁰ Sustainability influencers could be a way for younger generations to feel like they have more control over climate change and can incorporate small but actionable changes in their lives which lessen their environmental impact and encourage behavioral shifts in their surrounding communities. Since sustainability influencers suggest small habitual changes their followers can adopt, it can ease the struggle for their followers to relate climate change to themselves and feel more empowered by the steps they do choose to take.

⁶ Breves, P., & Liebers, N. (2022). #Greenfluencing. The Impact of Parasocial Relationships with Social Media Influencers on Advertising Effectiveness and Followers' Pro-environmental Intentions. *Environmental Communication*, 16(6), 773-787.

⁷ Dekoninck, H., & Schmuck, D. (2022). The mobilizing power of influencers for pro-environmental behavior intentions and political participation. *Environmental Communication*, 16(4), 458-472.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2022.2027801>

⁸ Gerrath, M. H. E. E., Olya, H., Shah, Z., & Li, H. (2024). Virtual influencers and pro-environmental causes: The roles of message warmth and trust in experts. *Journal of Business Research*, 175, 114520.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114520>.

⁹ Wood, J. (2022, March 18). *Gen Z cares about sustainability more than anyone else – and is starting to make others feel the same way*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2022/03/generation-z-sustainability-lifestyle-buying-decisions/>.

¹⁰ Sinclair, A. H., Cosme, D., Lydic, K., Reinero, D. A., Carreras-Tartak, J., Mann, M. E., & Falk, E. B. (2025). Behavioral interventions motivate action to address climate change. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences - PNAS*, 122(20), e2426768122. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2426768122>

Gen Z and Millennials exhibit the highest engagement with climate-related content on social media platforms¹¹, indicating the potential of these channels to instill a sense of agency regarding sustainability. Gen Z, people between the ages of 18-27, were chosen as the demographic to investigate due to their prevalence on social platforms like TikTok and tend to exhibit more pro-environmental behaviors. It was reported by Pew Research Center that 59% of U.S. adults under 30 reported that they use TikTok¹², demonstrating how TikTok is becoming an increasingly relied upon channel for information and entertainment. Gen Z was chosen as the demographic to investigate due to their prevalence on social platforms like TikTok, and they were identified as a major target audience for the influencers in Study 1. It is important to understand how they intend to communicate to this younger audience as they tend to exhibit more pro-environmental behaviors.

The purpose of Study 1 was to hear from the influencers themselves in a qualitative interview format where they could reveal the inner workings of their day-to-day career as an influencer and what challenges or successes they've had as they've built their platform. There are elements of influencer marketing that cannot be seen outside of the influencer-consumer relationship, and it was vital to understand why certain words, visuals, products, and other elements were chosen to engage their audiences and deliver their intended message. Study 2 compliments Study 1 by understanding the audience (content consumers, i.e. Gen Z) and their understanding of influencer messaging, and it was important to sample Gen Z TikTok users to see if they have been exposed to sustainability content, especially considering specific language and mechanism to communicate the message. Together these studies work to understand the messenger (i.e. influencer) and audience (i.e. Gen Z), and what elements of communication are effective in motivating Gen Z to behave sustainably, since this is the end goal that influencers strive to achieve.

Social media has become an important tool for opening the door for global conversations about pressing subjects like sustainability, and sustainability influencers are becoming trusted voices as social media becomes saturated with misinformation. Platforms like TikTok are still relatively new and unexplored by academic research. This study can help understand how sustainability influencers are leveraging their platforms to simultaneously promote their brand and sustainability information with the hopes of inspiring tangible behavior changes.

Study 1: Sustainability Influencer Interviews

¹¹Tyson, A., Kennedy, B., & Funk, C. (2021, May 26). Gen Z, millennials stand out for climate change activism, social media engagement with issue. *Pew Research Center Science & Society*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/05/26/gen-z-millennials-stand-out-for-climate-change-activism-social-media-engagement-with-issue/>

¹²Eddy, K. (2024). 8 facts about Americans and TikTok. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/12/20/8-facts-about-americans-and-tiktok/>.

In Study 1, we qualitatively examined how sustainability influencers perceive their own impact and role on social media as part of the larger sustainability field. The interviewed influencers were identified via TikTok search and met criteria including having a sizable following (more than 10,000 followers), posting content related to sustainability as a central focus of their platform (waste reduction, ocean conservation, low-waste, vegetarian recipes, etc.). The influencers (N = 11) were then contacted via email and asked to complete a short pre-interview survey about the sustainability topics they cover, their follower count, audience demographics, income, and sociodemographic data. After completing the survey, we scheduled hour-long semi-structured interviews with available participants (n = 8). Participants were asked the same series of questions which focused on which topics they posted about, their audience demographic, their goals for their own platform, challenges they've faced, words and phrases they use, among other related questions to gather a sense of their perceptions of their role and impact on their target audiences.

Results of the pre-interview survey showed that the influencers' primary follower demographic are women between the ages of 18-36. Hashtags allow social media users to search directly for keywords that bring them to topic-specific content. Each participant curates their own hashtags to use on their videos. The influencers reported using hashtags which help attract new audiences as social media users can quickly locate videos within that topic, such as *#sustainability*, *#climateaction*, *#zerowaste*, and *#sustainableliving*. Influencers stated that their aim was to reach and speak to audiences across the political spectrum. Most participants believed their audience members were somewhat liberal or liberal. Together, these findings suggest that sustainability influencers have similar audience demographics and use similar hashtags in their content.

The semi-structured interviews revealed four major themes: (1) self-perception, (2) platform goals, (3) audience demographics and reach, and (4) brand partnerships.

Self-perception

The first theme that emerged was how participants viewed their profession and role in promoting sustainable lifestyles and sustainable behavior. Nearly all the participants (7 out of 8) stated that they refer to themselves as "content creators", as opposed to other terms like influencer, green influencer, or sustainability influencer. Although the social media creators view and label themselves as content creators, many of the interviewees still realize that the public may only be familiar with the word influencer since it has reached mainstream audiences. Most situations result in the influencer staying away from the term "influencer" due to their perceived capitalistic association of the word. The sustainability influencers expressed concern over the term "influencer" because they feel it is met with a negative connotation, particularly in the eco-

content creator niche since they try to distance themselves with actions taken by traditional influencers, like going on brand trips and posting videos of product hauls. When asked how they felt about the term “sustainability influencer”, Influencer 7 and Influencer 4 responded:

Influencer 4: “I know that I wouldn't use it because I don't use the term influencer. Typically, people think of influencers as people who push product and content creators as people who tell stories or push education. So, I like to lean towards the education side.”

Influencer 7: “Yeah, it's not ideal. I just feel like influencer, the term has been around for a long time, and traditionally when you think of an influencer it's usually like a young woman who is influencing you to buy a certain pair of shoes like the fall boot right now is what I see a lot of, or like a certain hairstyling tool or like a sweater. And I feel like when you think of an influencer it doesn't feel like there's much importance to it, right? It's just influencing people to buy this or consume that.”

The participants were aware of the hypocrisy of posting sponsored brand videos about purchasing products, while also telling their audiences to limit their overall consumption.

The influencers believe the products they're promoting are cleaner, healthier swaps that would reduce their audience's overall environmental impact. Participants indicated they must balance accepting brand deals to provide their income and their environmental values. For example:

Influencer 2: “And if it's a brand like a physical product, it either has to be made from something recycled, something that is kind of I guess more necessary. I've seen overconsumption to an extreme where it's an addition to your water bottle or a bag specifically for a certain thing, I won't do that. But people are always going to need toilet paper, and there's an eco-friendly toilet paper brand out there, I'll recommend something. Even clothes I don't like to do too much of, because there's just so many brands out there. But you know, if it's like a company that reuses fabrics, or they've found a way to recycle plastics and make new fabrics, I'll recommend something like that. But I try to stay on more products that we need day to day versus other materialistic things that maybe we don't really need.”

Platform Goals

Most influencers stated they wanted to build community and bring social media users together. They attempt to approach sustainability in a way that can educate audiences on what sustainability means and how to integrate it into a daily routine and lifestyle. Influencer 1 did so by appealing to their audience via limiting food waste, stating:

Influencer 1: “My focus with food waste started because I was of the mindset that food waste is something every single person can get behind the reduction of. It really crossed party lines. It was like, if you're a Conservative, you still don't want to be wasting money, or let's say a person who considers themselves a philanthropist. Or maybe you're a religious person who wants to get back to people in your community. The fact that 40% of our food supply in the U.S. is wasted is disturbing to everybody.”

The participants felt as though many social media users do not know where to begin and do not feel as though their individual actions can have a meaningful impact on the larger environmental movement. They shared the common goal of helping people feel empowered and focus on their own role to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the scale of environmental issues. Many of them believe their role is making sustainability easy and digestible and giving their audience small actions they can incorporate into their daily lives:

Influencer 5: “Mostly about individual action as far as what individuals can do. So, everything from joining a community group or community organization grassroots, climate organizations to at home climate solutions like composting or repairing your things, instead of buying new practicing underconsumption, instead of falling into the temptations of over consumption.”

Influencer 6: “So I try to meet people where they're at. Inclusivity is a big part of what I try to do. Even if people are short on time or space or money, I'm trying to give them some ideas to garden. And then joy is a big thing, so just trying to make the process as joyful as possible.”

Influencer 7: “I mostly talk about easy day to day tips, advice, tricks, lifestyle, things that you can do daily that are a little bit more eco-friendly than the alternative. So, my target audience is people who are newer to being more eco-friendly or more sustainable people who aren't sure where to start. I try to focus on topics that I wish I would have known when I was getting into this, you know, 5+ years ago.”

Based on participants' experience as creators on TikTok and other social platforms, a common misconception is the idea of perfect environmentalism. The public and their audiences tend to believe that to consider yourself an environmentalist, you must act perfectly sustainable and have no negative impact on the environment. This is a negative thought spiral and a standard of living that is unattainable to many, including the influencers themselves. As part of their role, the influencers felt a sense of responsibility to demonstrate how sustainability and environmentalism can be easy, cost-efficient, and imperfect, with one expressing:

Influencer 8: “Making it free, easy and fun. And just showing people that zero waste has other benefits to your life. It can save you money. It can teach you skills and that we need everybody to care about the planet a little bit. We don't need everybody living perfectly.”

As part of their platforms, many of the participants share tips and tricks they feel would appeal to inexperienced environmentalists and the average person who wants to make minor adjustments to their daily routine to be more environmentally conscious:

Influencer 1: "...I feel that so much of my work has been inspired by this zero-waste chef...she has this quote that has stuck with me for like 5-6 years about how we don't need a handful of people doing zero waste perfectly, we need millions of people doing it imperfectly. So I try to focus my content on being more broad and more appealing to people from different walks of life because we're really running out of time and we need to make some changes."

Influencer 4: "The short term and the long-term goal is the community aspect. The majority of Americans are thinking they're in this fight alone. And it can feel like you're in this fight alone. So even just getting people talking about that, Yale has great climate communication studies. We don't talk about it. I think short term, it's getting people talking. My goal is normalizing it, making it feel like something another 20-something year old would just do and talk about."

Participants were not focused on ensuring their many thousands of followers are living a completely zero-waste lifestyle, but rather they wanted to expose their audiences to the many easy adjustments that could allow them to live more sustainably. For example, one participant said:

Influencer 3: "I always wanna keep my value of honesty and authenticity. Education, but in a very easy to digest kind of way. That's how I want to do all of my information, because sometimes I think they're quite heavy topics, and it's a bite size amount of time that I have with these people for 60 to 90 seconds. And so you want to give them a core message and then try to give them a little bit else, probably in the caption."

Sustainability influencers have set the goal for themselves to be a spokesperson via social media where they can educate and promote sustainable lifestyles to their audiences, with the hopes of encouraging them to become more sustainable in their everyday lives even if it is small adjustments that will add up to make a bigger impact if widely adopted.

Audience Demographics

Each interviewee discussed how their followers are primarily women across their social media platforms, with female followers accounting for an estimated 80% of their following. Although a few participants noted that the range can shift, their audience base is also primarily within the 18-35 age range. Some also noted that women typically tend to leave more positive comments on their videos, possibly due to women tend to be generally more interested in sustainability. Two interviewees shared:

Influencer 5: "So I think, on TikTok it's even like 90% women whereas Instagram, I think it's like 68 or 70 and they're majority 18- to 34-year-olds. So, it's predominantly Gen. Z and millennial women who follow me."

Influencer 8: “Yeah. Typically, the positive is women, young women probably like the 18 to 35 demographic. And I think that's just because that's the demographic that's most interested in sustainability.”

Polarization and Reach

Participants shared a common difficulty of balancing relatable content for their current liberal, environmentally-conscious followers while also trying to reach new audiences like conservatives. One way participants tried to get their message across to all audiences is by refraining from using polarizing language that would disengage moderate to conservative audiences. This includes refraining from using terms like “climate change”, “global warming”, “fossil fuels”, and even “electric vehicles”. As participants had discovered these terms were polarizing through trial-and-error processes and created more tension than productive conversation. However, participants noted that the terminology they use is not entirely up to them, as the algorithm of each social media platform operates differently. On TikTok, participants learned words like “climate change” and “fossil fuel” appear to be flagged by the algorithm and ultimately suppressed where the content receives minimal engagement. During their interviews, the influencers expressed how they cross-post their content, meaning they will upload the same video on TikTok and Instagram in order to access audiences from both applications and therefore increase overall engagement. The influencers mentioned that it is a gamble on what content will perform better on which platform, and they avoid similar words on both platforms. The influencers shared similar practices of copying and pasting similar hashtags for all content across Instagram and TikTok, indicating they avoid the same words on both platforms.

The way some words are perceived and the inherent polarization of discussing environmental topics can get in the way of their efforts and is something they must be cognizant of. Other methods of avoiding polarization include approaching sustainability from angles outside of the environment, like how sustainability can be a cheaper, quicker, and healthier alternative. For example, one stated:

Influencer 4: “Yeah, particularly like anything that has to do with the transportation sector and energy as well. Energy and transportation. Although they are super effective changes. They are extremely polarizing, especially when you talk about where people are getting energy from their homes and cars. When you talk about decreasing or even diversifying the modes of transportation, there's a lot of pushback on that.”

Many of the participants include the hashtags “sustainability”, “zero waste”, “eco-friendly”, “minimalist”, “conscious living”, and other similar keywords. Ultimately, participants’ livelihood and jobs rely upon getting engagement from their videos and receiving views, likes, shares, and comments. If they post videos with language that TikTok disagrees with, it is a waste of time and energy from the creators. Influencers 5 and 7 discussed:

Influencer 5: “I feel like it's less about avoiding polarization and more, just about like making sure it gets seen. Because if we say things like climate change. I think the algorithm flags it, and it just doesn't get the reach that you would like. I even try to avoid saying climate change sometimes. So, unless I'm really calling it out, I avoid seeing climate change. I avoid fossil fuels. I avoid saying capitalism and colonization.”

Influencer 7: “Yeah, surprisingly, I stay away from climate change or climate crisis. I think in my experience, when, even if I'm personally scrolling through my social media page, and somebody's like the climate crisis is gonna doom us all like that causes me anxiety, I'm like I'm tapped out, I am not listening to that video. And so I kind of apply that into whatever I create.”

The responses from Influencer 5 and Influencer 7 allude to two different problems that the sustainability influencers are facing. Influencer 5 is pointing to the difficulty of censorship experienced by the TikTok algorithm, while Influencer 7 discusses a form of self-censorship where they want to avoid rhetoric that might elicit feelings of doom or fear. Both responses uncover how sustainability influencers must work within the confines of TikTok and how they anticipate the audience receiving their message.

Brand Partnerships

A typical influencer tends to partner with brands to maximize profit and may only consider whether it would appeal to their followers and pay well. Sustainability influencers are in a unique position where they post brand deals or partnerships to create some level of income, yet the partnerships must align with their personal values and sustainability. Many participants mentioned that posting brand content is their least favorite part of their job, yet it is a requirement for many to be financially independent. Participants typically investigate brands before agreeing to partner and ensure they are environmentally friendly rather than greenwashing. Some interviewees discussed having to turn down high-paying opportunities because the company was not actually sustainable. The brands tend to seek the influencers out, and it is up to the influencers to vet the brand. For example, several stated:

Influencer 2: “I probably only take about maybe 30% of people.”

Influencer 3: “I always leave it up to the client side to decide what I can and can't say, honestly and authentically, that doesn't conflict with my views. I wouldn't want to put anything out there that does. I would rather just not do it.”

Influencer 7: “I do branded collaborations and branded partnerships that are paid. That's probably the majority of my income since I've been a full-time content creator for a few years now. I would

say I would never accept a partnership that I didn't fully like back or stand behind so usually like if it's somebody who is looking to have a paid partnership collaboration with me, I definitely research the brand. 90% of the time it's a brand I do know.”

The pre-interview survey with 11 influencers and the semi-structured video interviews with 8 of the 11 influencers were crucial in understanding the self-described role of a sustainability influencer, current challenges they're facing, and where they see themselves in the sustainability space long-term. This was a way of understanding the influencers' perspective, and Study 2 intended to understand the audience perspective from Gen Z users of TikTok.

Study 2: Survey of Gen Z Tik Tok Users

Participants in Study 2 included people between the ages of 18-27, or the Gen Z demographic within the United States, who had a TikTok account. Gen Z was chosen because of their overall interest in sustainability and the environment, and they account for a majority of social media users. The survey respondents were recruited via Prolific and completed a 10-minute survey in Qualtrics with a total of 443 participants. The survey included questions about how much time they spend on the app, their exposure to sustainability influencers and sustainability-related topics, their likelihood to engage with sustainability topics, and other demographic information to capture their overall sentiments and knowledge about sustainability. Participants were asked questions about five core topics: (1) Care for environment and climate beliefs, (2) Sustainability knowledge, (3) Consumer habits and language, (4) Trust, and (5) Potential action.

Care for Environment and Climate Beliefs

Roughly 7 in 10 (69%) participants said they cared about the environment a lot or a great deal, whereas very few (3%) are not at all worried about climate change. About 6 in 10 participants indicated that they are moderately or extremely worried about climate change (61%) and that the issue of climate change is very or extremely important to them personally (60%).

Sustainability Knowledge

A majority of participants (84%) responded that they are interested in sustainability but don't know where to begin or gather information on the subject. Roughly the same percentage of participants (83%) reported that they have heard of sustainability and know what it means. The given definition of sustainability was “Sustainability refers to creating and maintaining the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations.” Participants were then asked if they are interested in learning more about sustainability. About half (53%) of the participants responded that yes, they are interested in

learning more about sustainability but haven't taken any actions to do so yet, and nearly one-third (31%) said yes, they are currently learning more about sustainability.

Sustainability Language on TikTok

Once a baseline of knowledge of sustainability was established, participants were asked if they had seen TikTok videos about sustainability on TikTok (Figure 1), and which environmental topics in specific they had seen on TikTok (Figure 2). When asked if they had ever seen a TikTok about sustainability, nearly half (47%) of participants said they had (Figure 1). Participants were asked which sustainability topics they recall seeing on TikTok (Figure 2). The videos with most prevalence were eco-friendly or sustainable lifestyle products and climate change education or awareness and one-third (33%) of participants recalled seeing these topics.

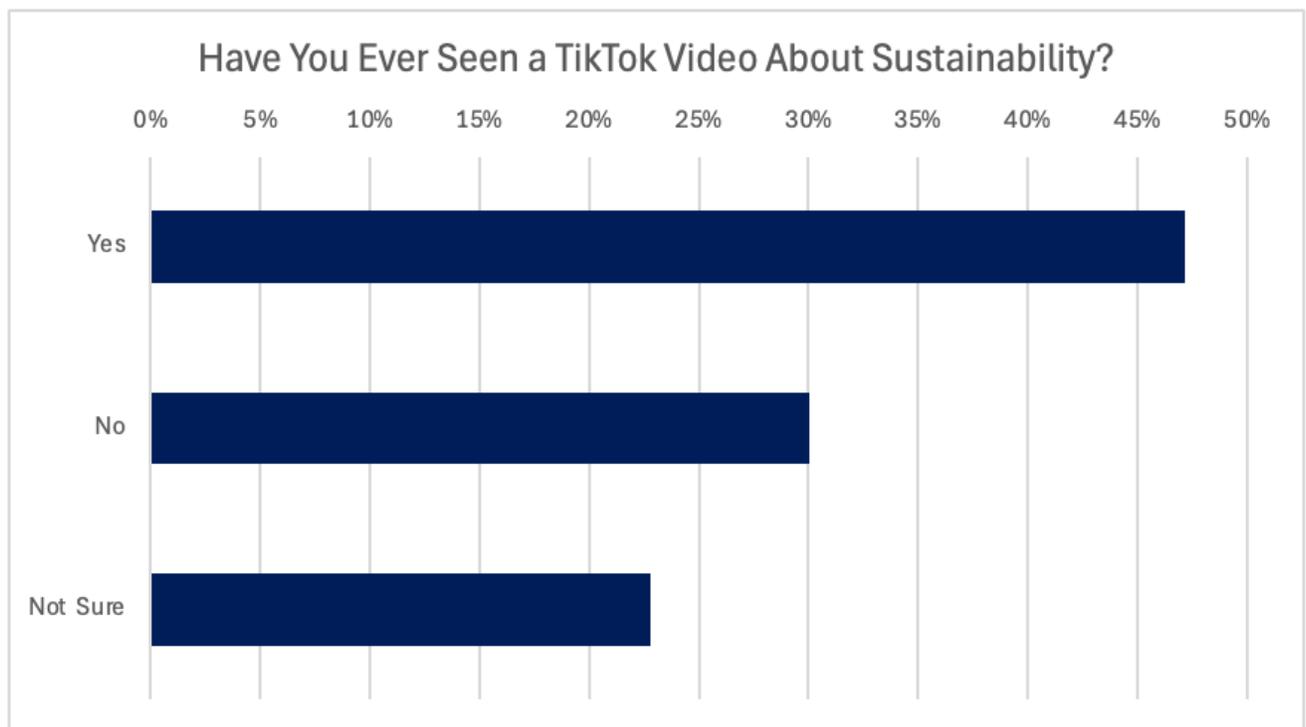


Figure 1. Exposure to Sustainability Content on TikTok

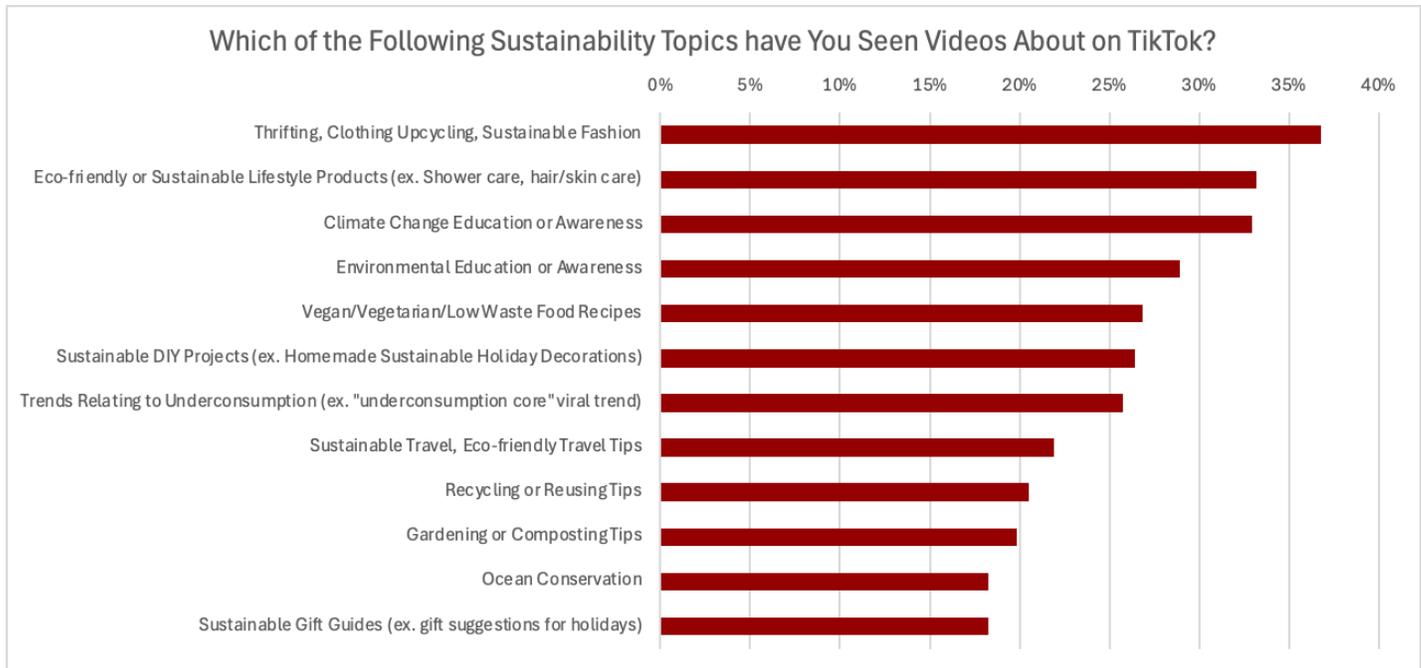


Figure 2. Exposure to Specific Topics within Sustainability on TikTok

Consumer Habits and “De-influencing”

Participants were asked how they feel about consumerism in relation to the environment and were asked how much they agree or disagree that consumerism harms the environment (Figure 3). More than 3 in 4 participants (76%) said they agree that consumerism harms the environment, demonstrating an awareness of the environmental impacts of capitalistic behaviors and rapid consumption of products.

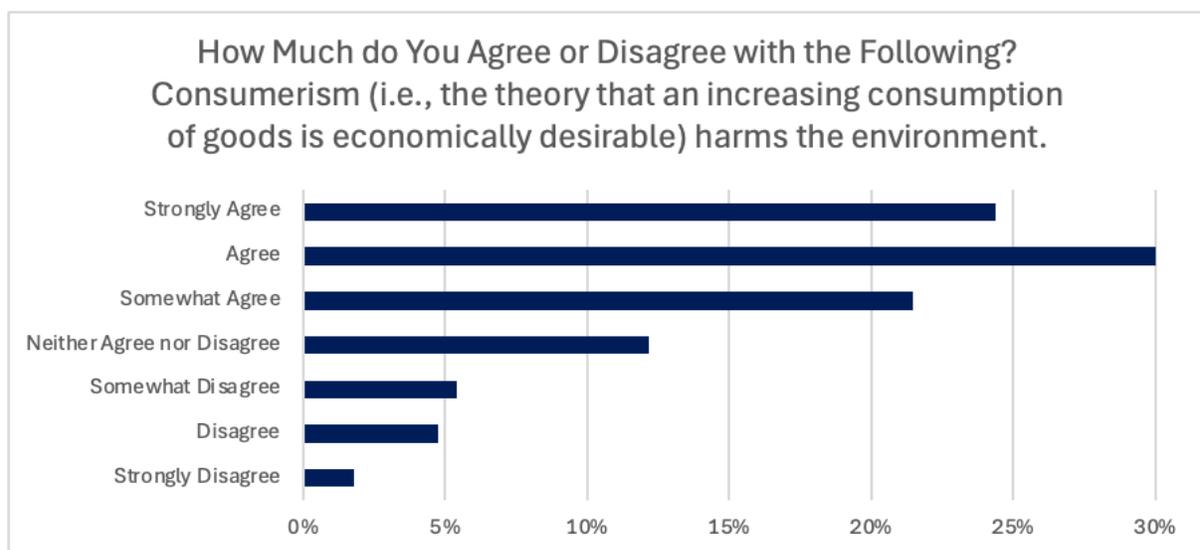


Figure 3. Perspective on Consumerism

TikTok Video Terminology

Participants were asked if they had ever heard the term “de-influencing” in relation to social media, and just over half (55%) of respondents stated they had heard the term before (Figure 4).

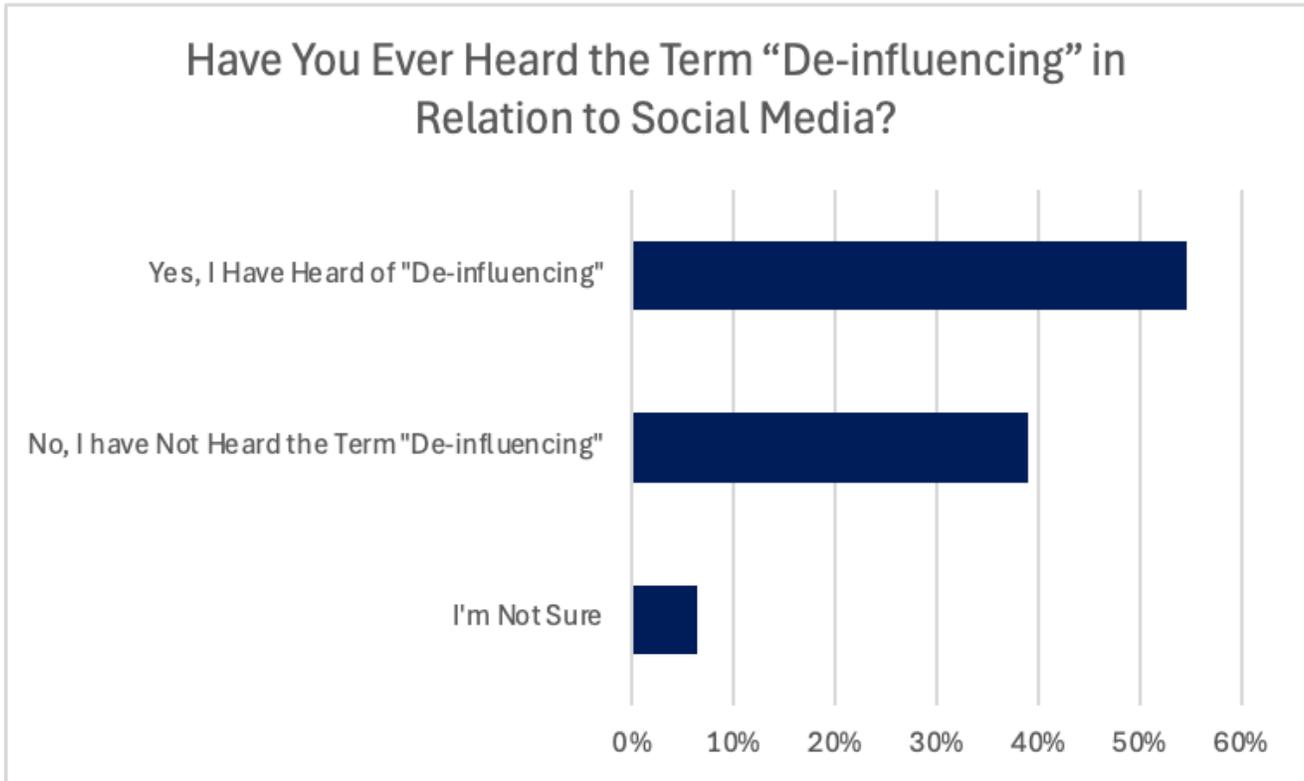


Figure 4. Exposure to “De-influencing” as a Concept

Participants felt “de-influencing” was most important for limiting unnecessary consumption, with 88% participants noting it was between moderate to extreme importance (Figure 5).

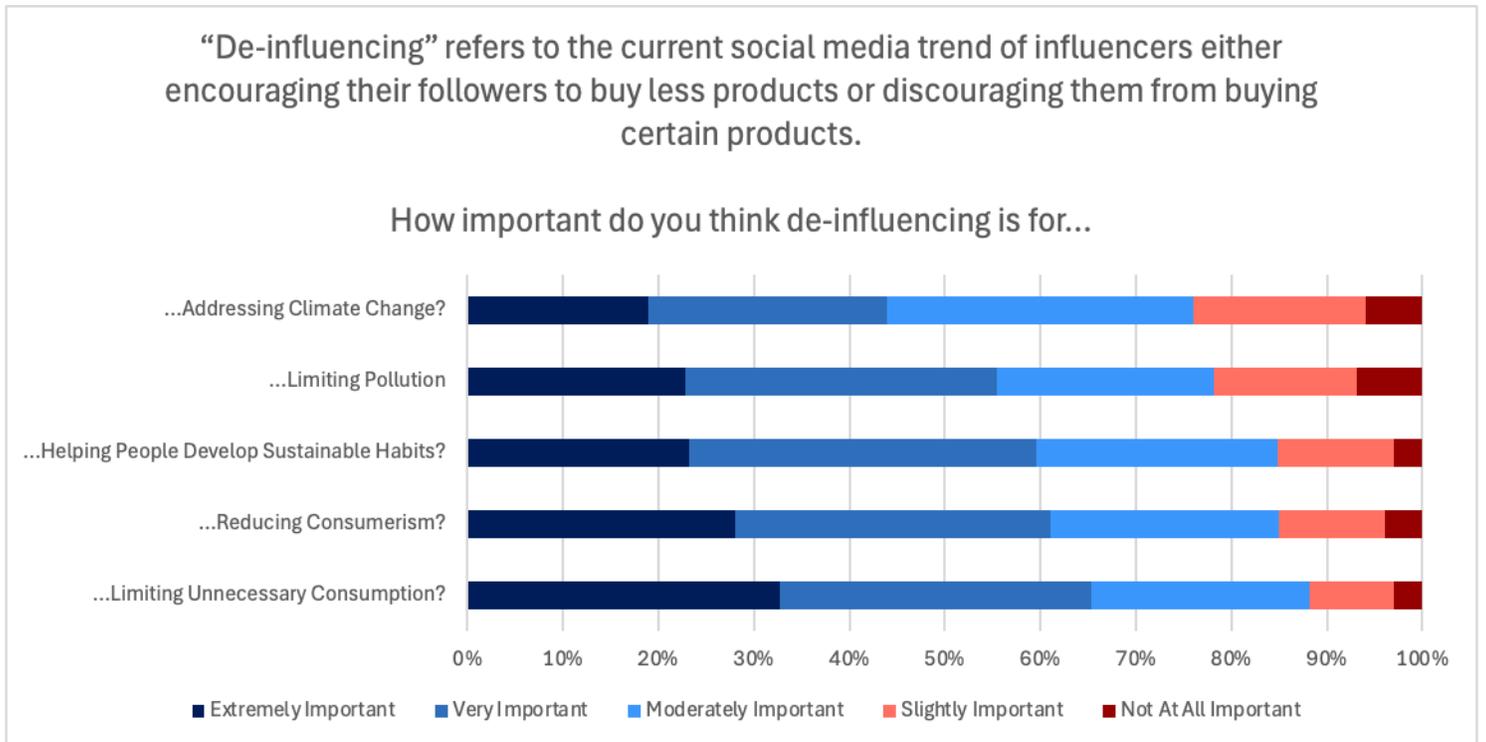


Figure 5. “De-influencing” Importance via Sustainable Action

Participants responded they would react most positively from the milder terminology like “eco-friendly”, “sustainable”, “climate action”, “zero waste”, “low waste”, and “plastic free” (Figure 6).

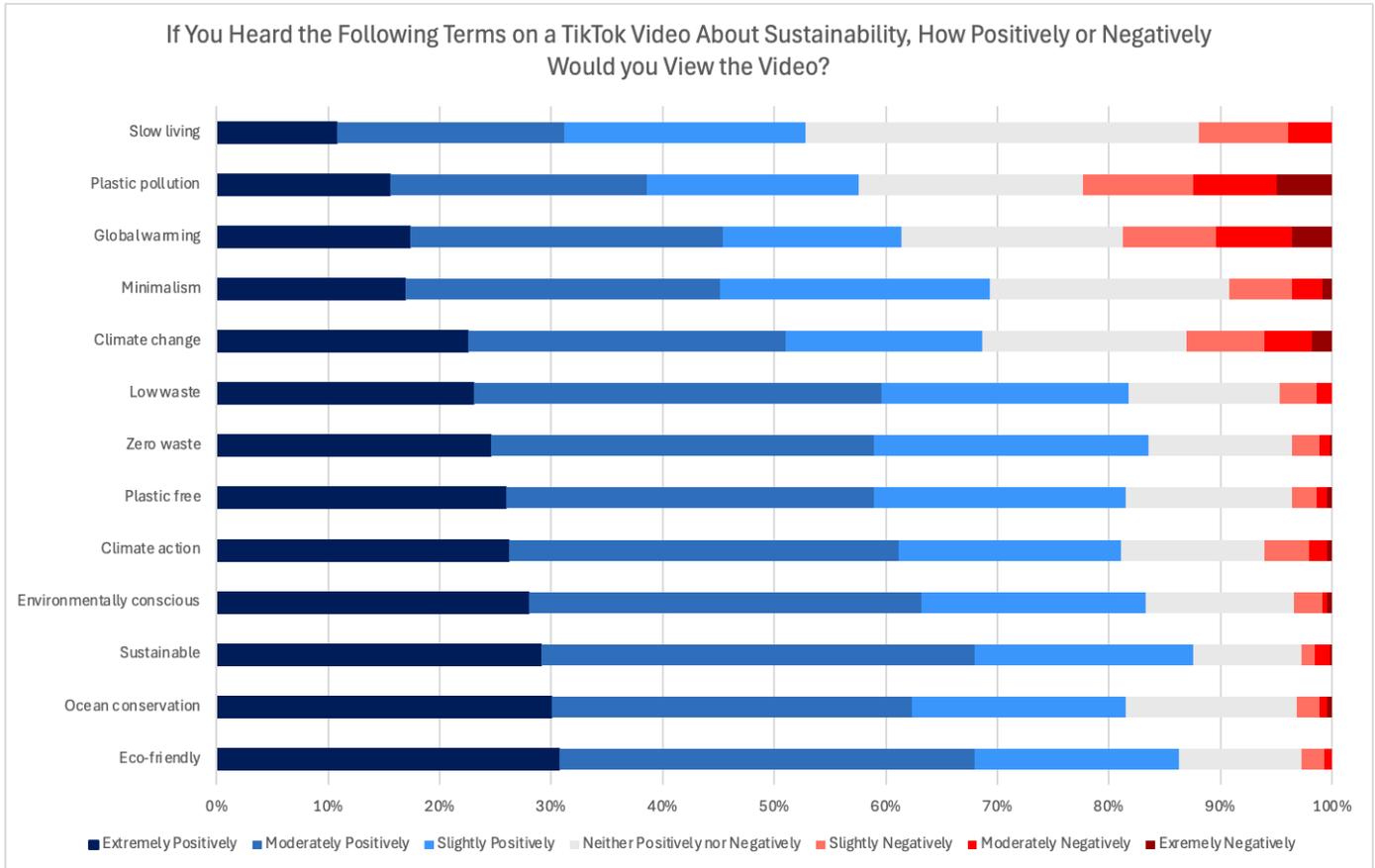


Figure 6. Sentiments about Sustainability-Related Language

At most, over one-third (37%) of participants had seen a TikTok about any sustainability topic, with the highest prevalence being about thrifting, clothing upcycling, sustainable fashion, eco-friendly or sustainable lifestyle products, and climate change education or awareness.

The next question centers around interaction with sustainability TikTok videos (Figure 7). Respondents were asked to identify what action they would be most likely to take if they saw a video about sustainability, and the most popular responses were watching the full video, saving the video, and liking the video.

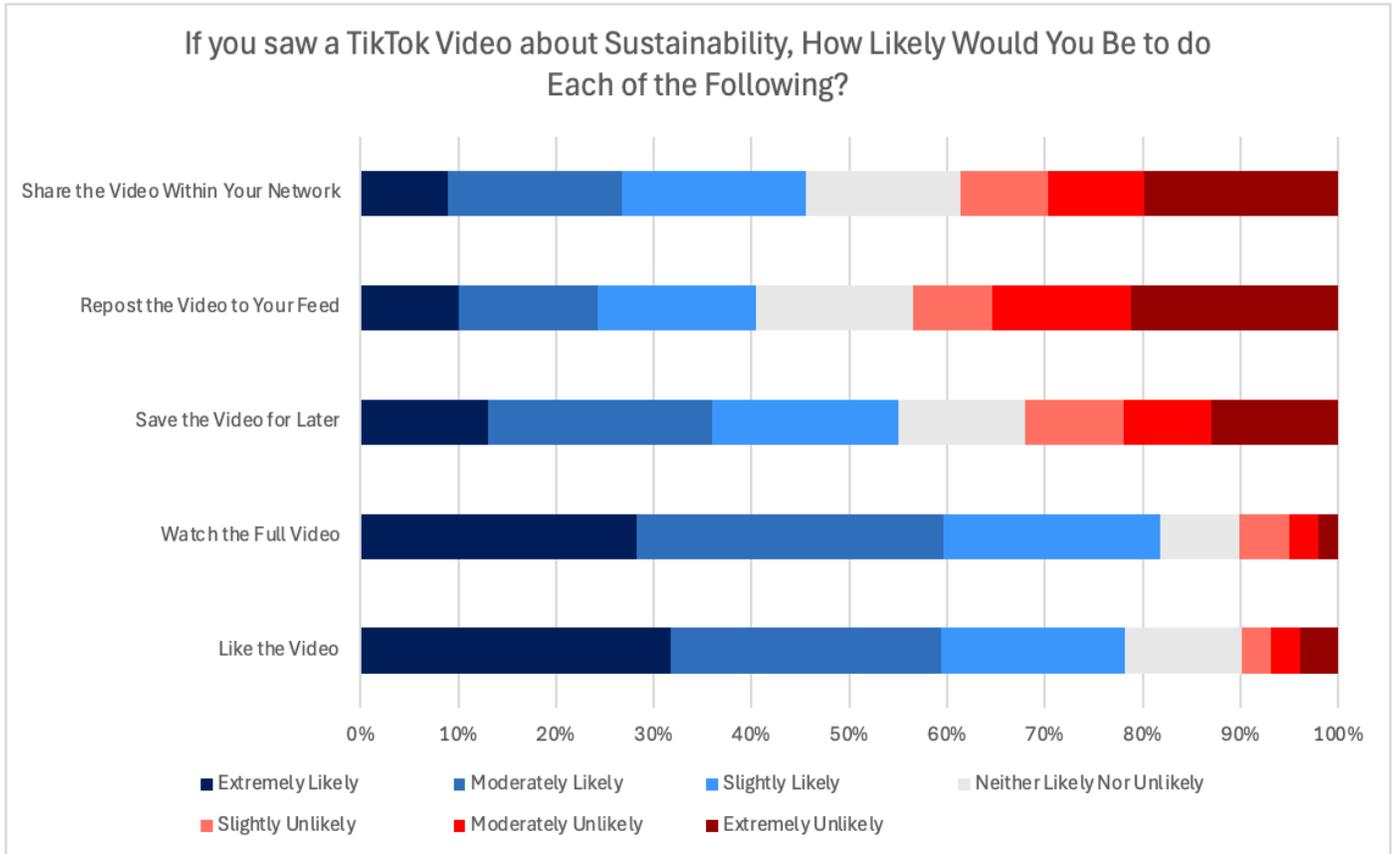


Figure 7. Interaction with Sustainability TikTok Video

Trust

The goal of this question asked in Figure 8 was to understand the significance of titling and if certain words like “influencer” have a less trustworthy connotation like the influencers had perceived. Participants were asked to identify which figures they would trust the most based on title. Participants reported the most trust in social media educators (65%) and sustainability influencers (64%), with less positive sentiment surrounding content creators and social media influencers (Figure 8).

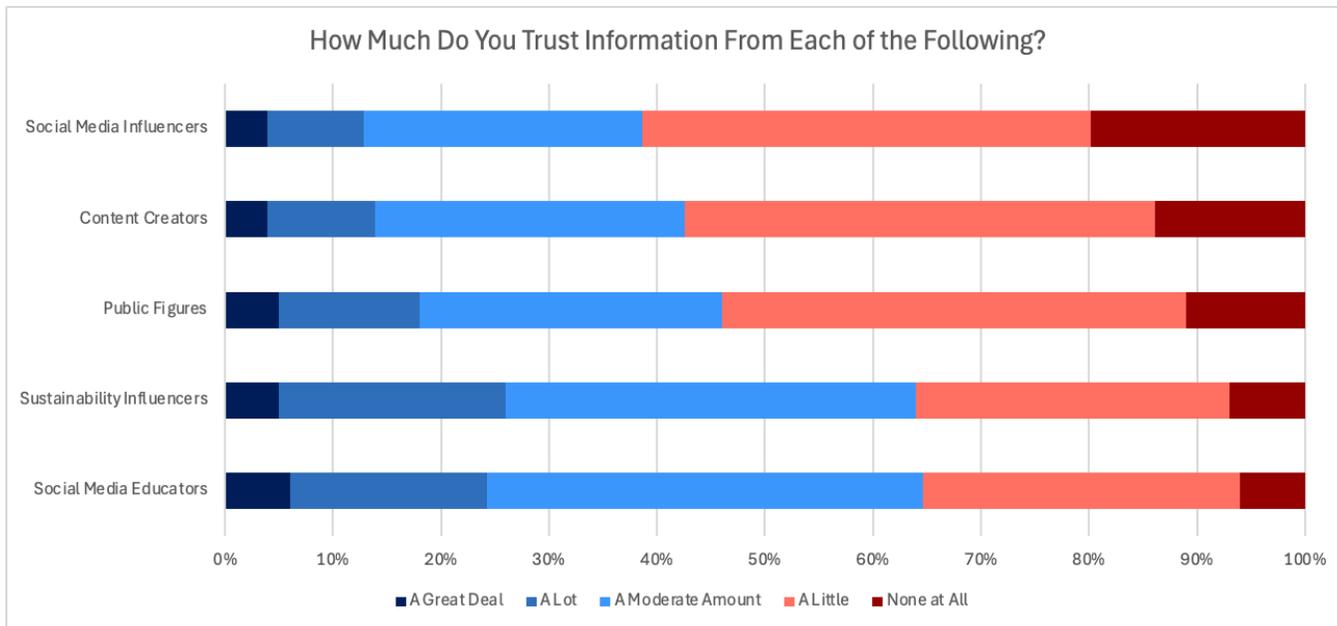


Figure 8. Gen Z Self-Reported Trust In Information from Social Media Figures Based on Title.

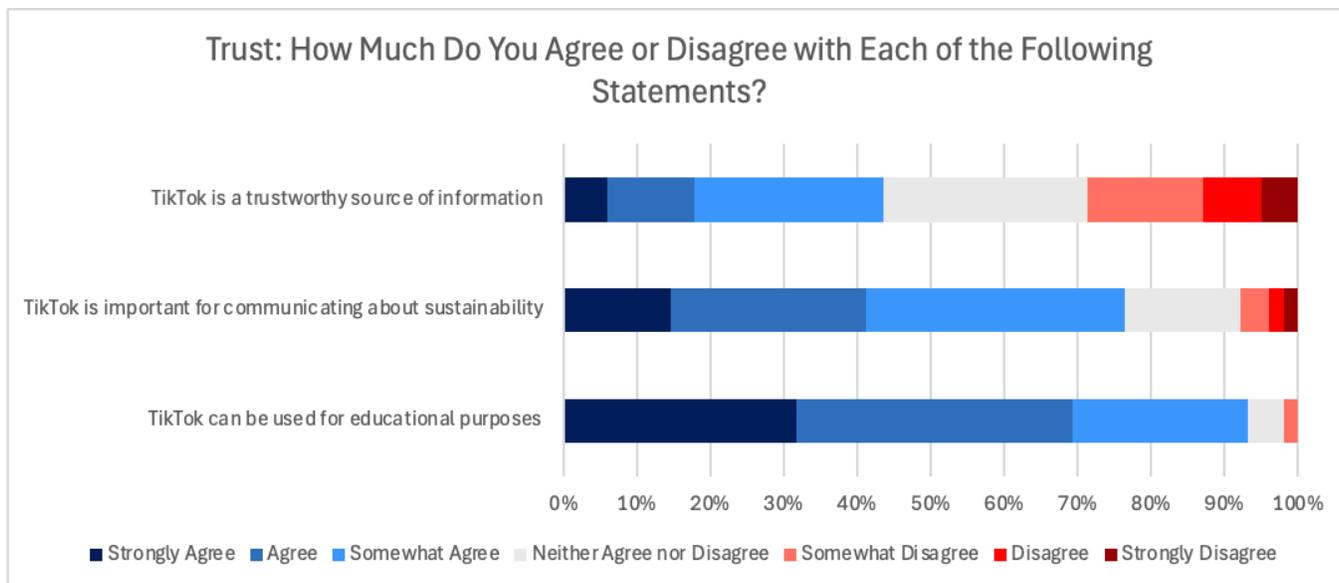


Figure 9. How Gen Z Perceives the Use of TikTok and Its Trustworthiness as a Platform and Use as a Platform.

Over 3 in 4 participants (78%) of participants believe that TikTok is important for communicating about sustainability, and the majority (93%) of participants believe TikTok can be used for educational purposes (Figure 9). The statement “TikTok is a trustworthy source of information” received more polarizing results, with just over one-fourth of respondents (28%) stating they neither agree nor disagree.

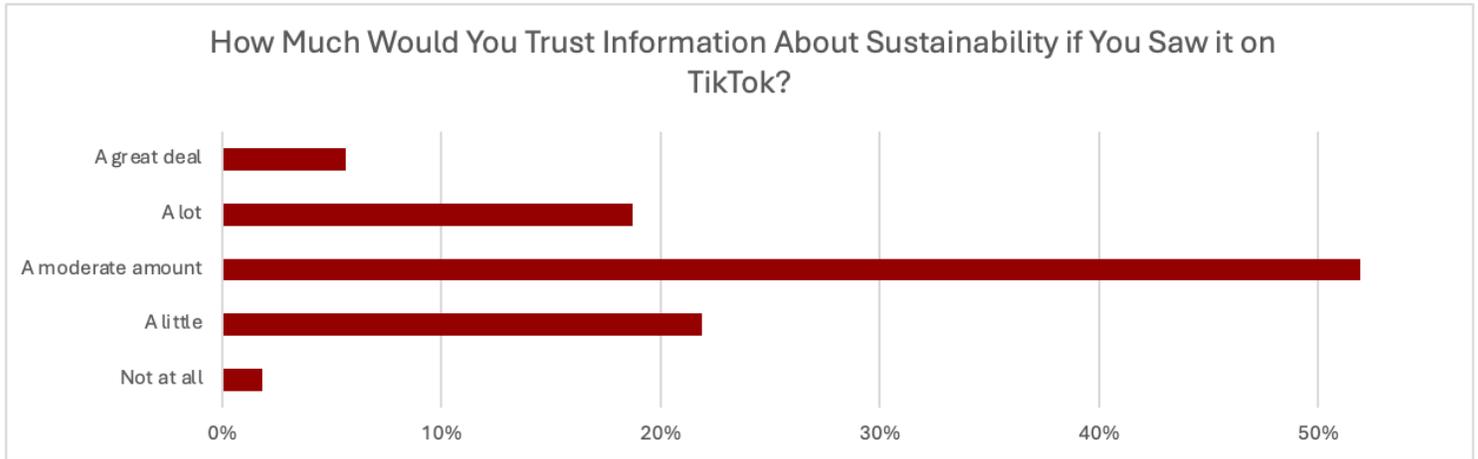


Figure 10. Trust in Sustainability Content on TikTok

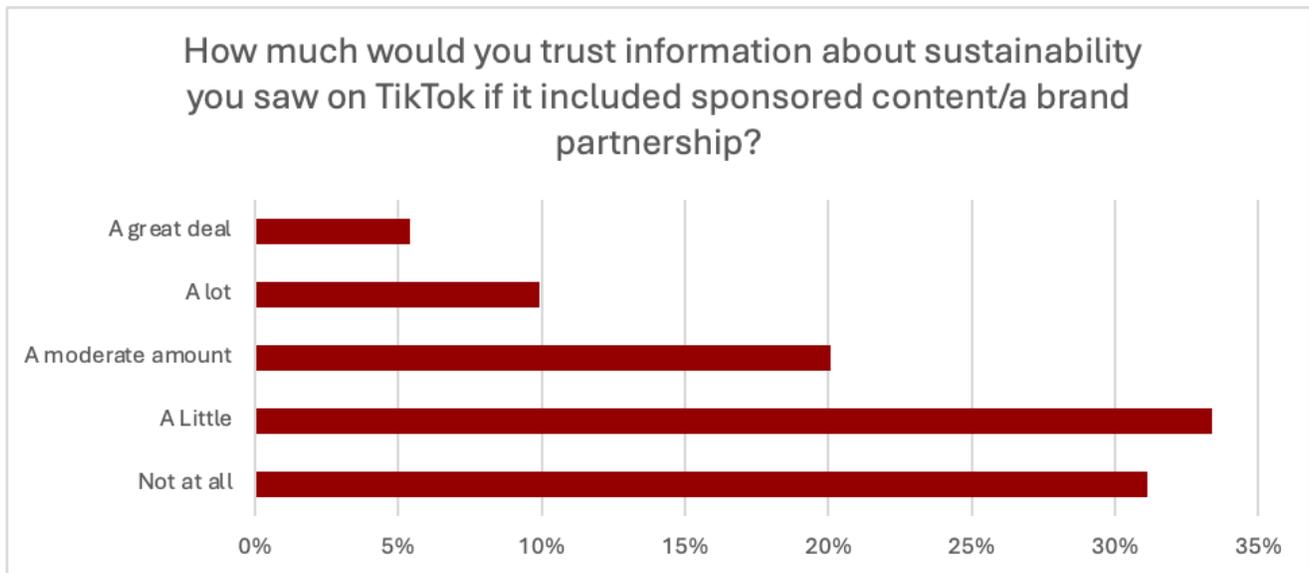


Figure 11. Trust in Sponsored Content or Brand Partnership

Action Likelihood

The general sentiment of participants displayed a lack of trust in sponsored content. More than 6 out of 10 (64%) participants said they would trust the information a little or not at all (Figure 11). Out of all listed actions, voting for pro-environmental candidates received the highest share of “extremely likely” responses, accounting for about 1 in 5 participants (19%) (Figure 12). Reducing food waste in your home was the action that received the most positive responses ranging from slightly likely to extremely likely (Figure 12), with more than 7 in 10 (71%) participants responding that this was the action they would be most inclined to take. This action was closely followed by buying sustainably sourced products (69%), limiting use of single-use plastics (69%), and signing an online petition about environmental issues (65%).

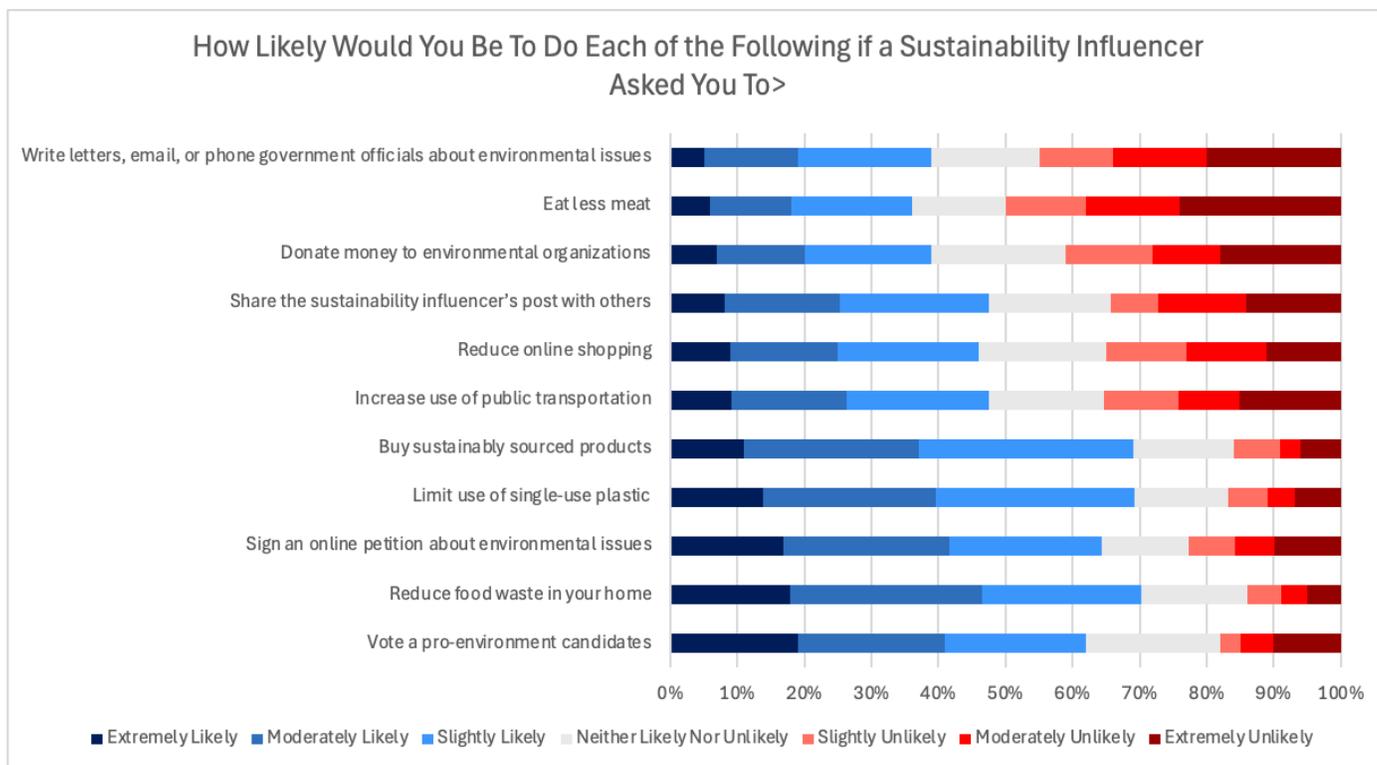


Figure 12. Actions Based on Sustainability Influencers

Discussion

Sustainability influencers aim to promote accessible, affordable, and healthy sustainability practices, aligning with Gen Z’s demonstrated interest in sustainability education and action. Study 1 sheds light on the common challenges and opportunities for sustainability influencers, and the findings from Study 2 can assist them in tailoring their language and content to mitigate the identified challenges and better resonate with Gen Z. By making these changes, it could lead to reaching a wider audience on how to become more sustainable and help people across demographics and political spectrums that sustainability can be cheaper, healthier, and more efficient than traditional consumption.

A key finding is the misalignment in what influencers title themselves and which titles Gen Z perceives positively and trusts. Sustainability influencers try to stay away from the word “influencer” and instead align themselves with terminology like aligning themselves with useful terminology like “educator”, yet Study 2 shows Gen Z respondents are most trusting of the term “sustainability influencer”. This suggests the stigma surrounding the term "influencer" may be internal to the influencers rather than audience-driven.

While Gen Z exhibits skepticism toward TikTok as a reliable source of information, this may reflect a false confidence in Gen Z’s ability to identify misinformation. Misinformation is rampant on social platforms like TikTok, and this poses a challenge due to psychological

processes that make it difficult to correct and unlearn fake news once exposed.^{13,14} Despite this skepticism, Gen Z continues to engage with sustainability content, especially when influencers maintain transparency and authenticity.

Gender dynamics played a central theme in both studies. Gender differences play an influential role in shaping environmental attitudes and engagement in environmental beliefs. In order to understand message efficacy, it is essential to examine who is receiving these messages and how they are being interpreted. All sustainability influencers that were interviewed identified as women and most reported their target audience to be women between the ages of 18-30. Influencer marketing that is geared towards women can include makeup, beauty, clothing, home goods, and other feminine products, which can receive large viewership from women due to the larger share of women users on Instagram and TikTok. Women are also more likely to support climate action than men and express concern about environmental issues.¹⁵ These gendered patterns have been linked to traits such as prosociality, altruism, and empathy, which are often more strongly expressed among women.^{16,17} Women tend to have an elevated level of nurturing characteristics due to feminine social norms and marketing tactics, like marketing stuffed animals and baby dolls to young girls.¹⁸ The presence of sustainability-feminine stereotypes can shape consumer responses to sustainability messaging. Environmentalism and conservationism correlate with caring and nurturing behaviors towards the environment, which are often associated as typically feminine traits.¹⁹ Therefore, since women are likely already more inclined to act sustainably, products featured by sustainability influencers may resonate more strongly with women audience members as opposed to men. For some, these stereotypes may reinforce engagement, meanwhile for others who are particularly concerned with maintaining traditional

¹³ Ecker, U. K. H., Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J., Schmid, P., Fazio, L. K., Brashier, N., Kendeou, P., Vraga, E. K., & Amazeen, M. A. (2022). The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1(1), 13-29. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-021-00006-y>.

¹⁴ Huber, B., Lepenies, R., Quesada Baena, L., & Allgaier, J. (2022). Beyond individualized responsibility attributions? how eco influencers communicate sustainability on TikTok. *Environmental Communication*, 16(6), 713-722. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2022.2131868>.

¹⁵ Leiserowitz, A., E. W. Maibach, C. Roser-Renouf, G. Feinberg, and P. Howe (2013). "Climate Change in the American Mind: Americans' Global Warming Beliefs and Attitudes in April 2013." SSRN Scholarly Paper No. 2298705. Social Science Research Network. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2298705>.

¹⁶ BROUGH, A. R., WILKIE, J. E. B., MA, J., ISAAC, M. S., & GAL, D. (2016). Is eco-friendly unmanly? the green-feminine stereotype and its effect on sustainable consumption. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 43(4), 567-582. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucw044>

¹⁷ Zhao, Z., Gong, Y., Li, Y., Zhang, L., & Sun, Y. (2021). Gender-Related Beliefs, Norms, and the Link With Green Consumption. *Frontiers in psychology*, 12, 710239. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.710239>

¹⁸ Zhao, Z., Gong, Y., Li, Y., Zhang, L., & Sun, Y. (2021). Gender-Related Beliefs, Norms, and the Link With Green Consumption. *Frontiers in psychology*, 12, 710239. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.710239>

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gender identities like some demographics of men, may result in disengagement or resistance²⁰ from fear of being labelled as feminine if they act sustainably. However, the majority of participants (84%) said they were interested in learning more about sustainability, suggesting there may be an opportunity to utilize social media to engage Gen Z men with the issue. This gender dichotomy poses a potential challenge for women audience members, as they are more likely to resonate with the products that women sustainability influencers are promoting, which increases consumption and purchasing. This can create an internal struggle for women audience members, much like that experienced by sustainability influencers as they balance a need for brand partnerships and income generation from influencer marketing with conscious consumerism and sustainability.

A significant element of influencer marketing is advertising and brand partnership. The difficulty of finding authentically sustainable partnerships has encouraged many of the sustainability influencers to work with influencer management agencies. Since influencer marketing is an evolving field, it has proven difficult to regulate advertising on platforms like TikTok. This makes it difficult for users, especially younger audiences, to distinguish between entertainment, information, and paid promotion.²¹ For Gen Z, trust in influencers often translates to trust in the products they endorse.²² The Gen Z responses about brand partnerships demonstrated a lower level of trust for sponsored posts on TikTok, and these responses are consistent with previous research which found that when followers perceived a post was sponsored it triggered skepticism about the post and overall motivation behind the sponsorship.²³ Followers of influencers are more likely to have trust in the influencer since they have already formed a parasocial relationship and have more trust in their recommendations for products,²⁴ meanwhile audience members who have no prior knowledge or relationship with the influencer will likely have less trust in the sponsored content posted by the influencer.²⁵ Even if the sustainability influencers tie their morals to the sponsored content, there still may be resistance by audience members who do not follow the influencer, which was likely reflected in the survey as

²⁰ BROUGH, A. R., WILKIE, J. E. B., MA, J., ISAAC, M. S., & GAL, D. (2016). Is eco-friendly unmanly? the green-feminine stereotype and its effect on sustainable consumption. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 43(4), 567-582. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucw044>

²¹ Liu, Q., Yu, S., & Yang, Y. (2024). The effects of sponsorship disclosure in short-form video: A moderated mediation model of sponsorship literacy and perceived features of sponsored short-form video. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 150, 107969. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2023.107969>.

²² Pittman, M., & Abell, A. (2021). More trust in fewer followers: Diverging effects of popularity metrics and green orientation social media influencers. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 56(1), 70-82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2021.05.002>.

²³ Hartmann, P., Apaolaza, V., Paredes, M. R., & D'Souza, C. (2025). How Greenfluencers Boost Climate Action: Why Inspirational Green Leadership Matters. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 49(3), e70050.

²⁴ Breves, P., Amrehn, J., Heidenreich, A., Liebers, N., & Schramm, H. (2021). Blind trust? the importance and interplay of parasocial relationships and advertising disclosures in explaining influencers' persuasive effects on their followers. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(7), 1209-1229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1881237>.

²⁵ Breves, P., Amrehn, J., Heidenreich, A., Liebers, N., & Schramm, H. (2021). Blind trust? the importance and interplay of parasocial relationships and advertising disclosures in explaining influencers' persuasive effects on their followers. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(7), 1209-1229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1881237>.

the sample was random TikTok users and not specifically followers of the sustainability influencers. The sustainability influencers expressed the struggle of finding meaningful and aligned brand partnerships, and it is critical for the influencers to thoroughly vet their partnerships so as not to overly promote a company that may be greenwashing²⁶ and in turn lose credibility for their own brand reputation as a sustainability influencer. Influencers' proven ability to achieve higher likes, engagement, and empathy than individual brands in respect to their corporate social responsibility messages,²⁷ influencers must realize the leverage and value they can add to a brand and must ensure they aren't misled by false sustainability claims.

Sustainability influencers expressed desire to reach diverse audiences across political spectrums and serve as an educational resource for topics across sustainability and the environmental space. The right words and messaging style can motivate Gen Z to educate themselves about climate change and sustainability and relate sustainability to themselves and their own actions. The interviewed sustainability influencers focus on emphasizing the impacts of individual action and how minor changes in a person's daily routine can amount to significant reductions in their overall environmental impact and consumption. Although the influencers encourage personal lifestyle changes, they also encourage individuals to become involved in their communities and connect with others who are trying to lessen their environmental impact and create solutions. While the sustainability influencers are passionate about promoting sustainability, some are cautious about using "climate change" consistently within their content due to the polarizing responses the word can garner (as seen in Figure 6). Roughly 61% of Gen Z respondents indicated that they are moderately or extremely worried about climate change, and that the issue of climate change is very or extremely important to them personally. On a larger scale, 84% of registered voters between 18-34 believe climate change is happening²⁸ and roughly 72% of people in the United States believe climate change is occurring whether it is caused by anthropogenic or natural causes.²⁹ This shows that there is awareness and concern about climate change in Gen Z, and sustainability influencers could be a potential resource for better understanding climate change if they are equipped with the correct information and tools. While individual action is a starting place for sustainability, there is still room to improve literacy on climate change, which is the larger issue that people who work in sustainability hope to mitigate. Once sustainability influencers excel in reaching their target audiences and inspiring sustainable

²⁶ Boerman, S. C., Meijers, M. H. C., & Zwart, W. (2022). The importance of influencer-message congruence when employing greenfluencers to promote pro-environmental behavior. *Environmental Communication, 16*(7), 920-941. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2022.2115525>.

²⁷ Yang, J., Chuentrawong, P., & Pugdeethosapol, K. (2021). Speaking up on Black Lives matter: A comparative study of consumer reactions toward brand and influencer-generated corporate social responsibility messages. *Journal of Advertising, 50*(5), 565–583. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1984345>.

²⁸ Yale Program on Climate Change Communication (YPCCC) & George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication (Mason 4C). (2025). *Climate Change in the American Mind: National survey data on public opinion (2008-2024)* [Data file and codebook]. doi: [10.17605/OSF.IO/JW79P](https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/JW79P).

²⁹ Sinclair, A. H., Cosme, D., Lydic, K., Reinero, D. A., Carreras-Tartak, J., Mann, M. E., & Falk, E. B. (2025). Behavioral interventions motivate action to address climate change. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences - PNAS, 122*(20), e2426768122. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2426768122>

action, it could be worthwhile to challenge themselves to find rhetoric and messaging styles that would allow them to fully become climate educators.

Finally, some influencers noted their participation in the ongoing TikTok trend of “de-influencing” where overconsumption is challenged. By participating in this trend, sustainability influencers are combating narratives promoted by mainstream influencers and are attempting to create a more environmentally conscious audience who can monitor their consumption habits and act more sustainably. Gen Z users expressed there is a strong link between de-influencing and its impact on limiting unnecessary consumption, again showing how highly aware Gen Z audiences are and they can listen and learn from sustainability influencers messaging.

Conclusion

As younger generations like Gen Z increasingly turn to social media as a primary source of information, understanding how they perceive sustainability influencers is essential. It is equally important to understand the goal of sustainability influencers and what they see their role as in relation to promoting sustainable behavior and limiting overconsumption. While sustainability influencers are attempting to use TikTok as a means of education and are reaching a sizable number of Gen Z users, many feel constrained to partnering with brands to make a living and use the platform to encourage the purchase of sustainable products. Gen Z seems receptive to learning more about sustainability and appears to have high overall literacy in sustainability, and they tend to gravitate towards messaging with less polarizing language which aligns with the goals of sustainability influencers. As more young people in the United States turn to social media as a main source of information, equipping public figures with the right tools and communications strategies is essential. Together, the findings from Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate how sustainability influencers hope to influence Gen Z, and in turn how the Gen Z audiences are open to receiving content and ideas surrounding sustainability. By including insights from peer influencers as well as Gen Z, influencers can learn and modify their communications methods to become an even larger source of inspiration for sustainable action.