Driving the Circular Economy on Social Media: Sustainability Influencers and Their Business Models

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Abstract: Influencers who advocate for environmentally friendly and ethical practices play a crucial role in promoting the principles of the circular economy, including the 4 Rs: repair, reuse, recycle, and reduce. This paper investigates the business models utilizsed by sustainability influencers and discusses the role of influencers in driving the circular economy. Through qualitative research, including in-depth interviews and a netnographic analysis, three primary business models are identified: (1) Educational Advocates, (2) Lifestyle Marketers, and (3) Change Leaders. The findings reveal significant opportunities for sustainability influencers to mainstream sustainability and extend their impact beyond social media. The paper contributes to the academic literature on business models in the circular economy by bridging the gap between influencer marketing and the circular economy.

Keywords: Sustainability influencer, circular economy, influencer marketing, environmentalism, 4Rs, business models

Die Kreislaufwirtschaft in den sozialen Medien vorantreiben: Nachhaltigkeitsinfluencer und ihre Geschäftsmodelle

Zusammenfassung: InfluencerInnen, die sich für umweltfreundliche und ethische Praktiken einsetzen, spielen eine zentrale Rolle bei der Förderung der Prinzipien der Kreislaufwirtschaft – insbesondere der 4R-Strategien: Reparieren, Wiederverwenden (engl. *reuse*), Recyceln und Reduzieren. Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Geschäftsmodelle von NachhaltigkeitsinfluencerInnen und beleuchtet ihre Rolle bei der Förderung der Kreislaufwirtschaft. Auf Basis qualitativer Forschung – einschliesslich Tiefeninterviews und einer netnografischen Analyse – werden drei zentrale Geschäftsmodelle identifiziert: (1) Educational Advocates, (2) Lifestyle Marketers und (3) Change Leaders. Die Ergebnisse zeigen bedeutende Potenziale auf, wie NachhaltigkeitsinfluencerInnen Nachhaltigkeit in den Mainstream tragen und ihre Wirkung über die sozialen Medien hinaus entfalten können. Der Artikel leistet einen wissenschaftlichen Beitrag zur Literatur über Geschäftsmodelle in der Kreislaufwirtschaft, indem er eine Brücke zwischen Influencer-Marketing und Kreislaufwirtschaft schlägt.

Stichwörter: Nachhaltigkeitsinfluencer, Kreislaufwirtschaft, Influencer-Marketing, Umweltbewusstsein, 4Rs, Geschäftsmodelle

1. Introduction

Traditionally, marketing and sustainability have been perceived as conflicting paradigms. Marketing focuses on fostering consumer demand, driving the consumption of products and services (Fronell et al., 2006; Sozuer et al., 2020), which contrasts with sustainability principles that emphasize reducing consumption and promoting environmentally responsible behaviours (Haws et al., 2014; Heiskanen & Pantzar, 1997). This contradiction is especially evident on social media, where conspicuous consumption often encourages overconsumption. Originally designed for personal communication, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have evolved into powerful tools for brand communication and marketing (Hudders et al., 2021; Kozinets et al., 2010).

However, social media also serves as a platform for sharing meaningful content and inspiring consumers (Hudders & Lou, 2023; Riedl et al., 2021). In light of the pressing climate crisis, sustainability-themed influencers are on the rise (Zukunftsinstitut, 2019). These influencers advocate for the integration of ethical and eco-friendly practices into everyday life. In doing so, they serve as intermediaries between businesses and consumers, bridging the gap between theoretical sustainability principles and practical applications in daily life.

This approach sets them apart from more conventional influencers, who are often primarily motivated by self-presentation and commercial interests (Erz et al., 2018; Leung et al., 2022). Quite the opposite, sustainability influencers rarely include branded posts in their content. This approach raises questions about how they monetizse their social media presence, given their distinct values and approach. Thus, understanding the business models (BMs) of sustainability influencers is crucial, yet research in this area remains limited (Ye et al., 2021). This study addresses this gap by investigating the predominant BMs of sustainability influencers and exploring their role in driving the circular economy (CE).

To gain deeper insights into this emerging field, we adopt a qualitative methodology, including in-depth interviews with sustainability influencers and a netnographic analysis of their social media profiles. We identify three predominant BMs: *Educational Advocates*, *Lifestyle Marketers*, and *Change Leaders*. The findings highlight the potential of sustainability influencers to bring knowledge of sustainability and the CE into mainstream discourse, generating impact beyond social media. This research contributes to the understanding of sustainability influencers and their BMs within the CE, offering practical insights for influencers, brands, and policy makers to leverage sustainability in their digital strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1 Business models in the circular economy

In the context of escalating environmental crises – such as extreme weather events, species extinction, and ecological disasters driven by climate change – the need for pro-environmentalism has become more urgent than ever. While significant responsibility is placed on individual consumers, environmentally conscious consumers exert equal pressure on companies, brands, and governments to adopt environmentally friendly practices (Connors et al., 2017; Fronell et al., 2006). Consequently, businesses striving to actively combat climate change must realign their BMs with the principles of the CE (Takacs, 2021).

2.1.1 Circular economy principles

The CE is an economic model that aims to decouple economic growth from resource consumption (Velenturf & Purnell, 2021). Several frameworks conceptualize the CE, often centring around three core principles: (1) designing processes to eliminate waste and pollution, (2) keeping products and materials in use for as long as possible, and (3) regenerating natural ecosystems (Kirchherr et al., 2017).

Recent CE literature has proposed comprehensive frameworks, such as the 10R hierarchy (e.g., Potting et al., 2017), which expands the scope of circular strategies to include Refuse, Rethink, Reduce, Reuse, Repair, Refurbish, Remanufacture, Repurpose, Recycle, and Recover. These strategies reflect a broader and more systemic view of circularity across production and consumption systems.

At the same time, a particularly influential and widely used framework within public discourse is the 4R model, which focuses on four key strategies: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Recover (Alcalde-Calonge et al., 2022). This approach is increasingly seen as a viable solution to address environmental challenges while maintaining economic viability (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). The wide recognition and consumer applicability makes this framework particularly useful – especially in the context of influencer communication, where accessibility and simplicity are key.

2.1.2 Business model frameworks

Adopting CE principles often requires businesses to rethink and adapt their BMs to align with circular strategies. A firm's BM articulates its specific business logic (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2002). Various interpretations of BM components exist (Zabel, 2021). In contrast to more detailed and multifaceted approaches like the business model canvas by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2002), Gassmann et al.'s (2013) conceptualizsation adopts a more streamlined model, referred to as the "magic triangle", which focuses on four central dimensions: The Who, the What, the How, and the Value. Its concise yet holistic perspective makes the model particularly useful.

The "Who" dimension centres on the question: 'Who is the customer?' (Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2011). It identifies the target audience that the business aims to serve, placing this decision at the core of the business model. The "What" pertains to the business's offerings to its customers, often referred to as the value proposition (Johnson et al., 2019). The "How" encompasses the activities and processes the business must excel at in order to deliver its value proposition (Hedman & Kalling, 2003). Lastly, the "Value" dimension defines the revenue model, specifying how the business generates financial returns (Gassmann et al., 2013).

While a substantial body of research has explored BMs in general (Chesbrough & Rosenbloom, 2002; Johnson et al., 2019), the examination of sustainable BMs has only recently garnered scholarly attention (Centobelli et al., 2020). These studies predominantly focus on the BMs of companies adhering to CE principles. However, little attention has been given to the BMs of human brands in the sustainability industry such as sustainability influencers. Unlike traditional companies, influencers drive sustainable behaviours through content creation, personal branding, and digital engagement (Ki et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2021), rather than directly managing material flows and focusing on operational efficiency (Centobelli et al., 2020). Therefore, the BMs of sustainability influencers are

inherently different to the ones researched so far. Understanding these differences is crucial for comprehending how sustainability influencers contribute to the broader adoption of CE principles, such as the 4Rs.

2.2 Business models of influencers

In recent years, research on influencers has attracted significant scholarly attention (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). While most studies have examined influencers from a marketing effectiveness perspective (Hudders et al., 2021; Ki & Kim, 2019), research on the strategic and entrepreneurial decisions of influencers – such as their BMs – remains limited (Edeling & Wies, 2024; Ye et al., 2021). One exception is Zabel's (2021) literature review. In essence the paper describes the BMs of influencers as follows: Influencers create value by combining community-driven and commercial content (the "What"). Their core activities include content creation, distribution and community engagement (the "How"). Additionally, they engage in collaboration processes, which involve initiating and managing partnerships, as well as evaluating performance. Compensation is frequently non-monetary, such as product samples, while direct financial payments become more prevalent as influencers grow in professionalism and audience size (the "Value"). While this review provides a holistic overview of influencer activities, it remains general and overlooks critical elements such as the customer segment (the "Who"). Moreover, unlike conventional influencers, sustainability influencers primarily use social media to educate the public about sustainability and advocate for behavioural change (Aboelenien et al., 2023), rather than focusing on traditional commercial activities like product endorsements. As such, their motivations and social media strategies differ significantly, indicating that their BMs are distinct and merit dedicated scholarly investigation.

3. Methodology

To address the research question, we combined qualitative interviews with sustainability influencers and a netnographic analysis of their Instagram profiles (Kozinets, 2015; Kozinets, 2019; Scaraboto, 2015). Our focus was on Instagram (Perera et al., 2021) given its substantial user base of over 1.4 billion active users worldwide in 2024 (Insider Intelligence, 2022) and its prominence as a leading platform for influencer marketing campaigns (Fourstarzz Media, 2020).

We utilizsed purposive sampling to identify profiles of sustainability influencers (Spiggle, 1994). We searched directly on Instagram for sustainability influencers and reviewed recommendations of profiles. To ensure the relevance and frequent engagement of Instagram in disseminating content, we included only profiles with at least 1,000 followers. This approach resulted in a list of 110 profiles of sustainability influencers, who we contacted. We were able to interview 16 of them from June 2023 to February 2025. The interviews averaged 1:04:20 hours in length, totalling 21:55:38 hours. Our sample consisted of only women aged between 24 and 44. Table 1 lists all sustainability influencers interviewed in this study including a summary of characteristics.

Influencer	Country of residence	Content focus	Follower count*	Business model classification	Number of posts examined
Alina	Switzerland	Sustainable lifestyle	15,300	Lifestyle Marketer	111
Maya	USA	Sustainable fashion	53,800	Educational Advocate	54
Andrea	Switzerland	Slow lifestyle, veganism	2,800	Lifestyle Marketer	36
Jenna	USA	Science of sustainability	5,900	Educational Advocate	33
Sonja	UK	Sustainable fashion, journalistic work	16,100	Educational Advocate	93
Karen	Spain	Sustainable lifestyle	4,600	Lifestyle Marketer	78
Ayla	USA	Sustainable lifestyle, thrifting	4,400	Change Leader	329
Yalle	USA	Sustainable lifestyle, sustainable living	4,600	Change Leaders	75
Lauren	Belgium	Sustainable lifestyle	13,500	Educational Advocate	161
Jules	USA	Sustainable living, low waste	2,500	Lifestyle Marketer	190
Sally	Canada	Sustainable living in the suburbs	44,900	Lifestyle Marketer	121
Katharina	New Zealand	Sustainable living	61,700	Educational Advocate	150
Alena	USA	Ocean science	8,800	Educational Advocate	18
Jess	USA	Sustainable lifestyle	4,000	Lifestyle Marketer	171
Mary	Denmark	Political environmentalism, zero waste	195,000	Change Leader	255
Ally	USA	Community education and action	116,000	Change Leader	220

Table I: Summary of sustainability influencers interviewed.
* on March 10, 2025

In the interviews, we first asked informants to describe their social media profiles, including their primary motivations, the purpose of their profiles, their posting strategies, and their audience. As the interviews progressed, we explored their individual perceptions of sustainability, focusing on their decision-making process regarding content creation and their rationale. Additionally, we inquired about their approaches to brand collaborations and other sources of income.

We analyzsed the data using a hermeneutic iterative approach (Spiggle, 1994), which allowed us to develop the different BMs. Emerging themes were identified throughout the analysis and continuously tested and refined to ensure the validity and robustness of our interpretations (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Bajde & Rojas-Gaviria, 2021; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019).

To enrich our interview data, we also conducted a netnographic analysis of the Instagram profiles of our 16 informants. Netnography is a qualitative method that adapts traditional ethnographic research practices – namely, the immersive study of cultural practices and meanings within communities – for digital environments, enabling the study of online behaviours and meaning-making (Kozinets, 2015; Kozinets, 2019). As part of this netnographic analysis, we examined all posts published in the 12 months preceding data collection (September 2024 to March 2025), resulting in a total sample of 2,095 posts. We focused specifically on the content of the posts – namely, the images and accompanying captions – while disregarding follower interaction metrics (e.g., likes, comments, shares), as they provided limited added value to the aims of the study. The netnographic analysis was guided by our interview questions and themes. Notably, the online content closely reflected the themes identified in the interviews, thereby reinforcing the emerging BMs and primarily serving to complement our data with rich visual material.

4. Findings

Based on the conceptual framework proposed by Gassmann et al. (2013), we identified three distinct BMs employed by sustainability influencers: *Educational Advocates*, *Lifestyle Marketers*, and *Change Leaders*. The following section elaborates on each model, using the components of Gassmann et al.'s (2013) framework. While these BMs are distinguishable from each other, some sustainability influencers don't strictly adhere to one of them but rather follow a hybrid approach where they follow strategies from different models. However, for analytical clarity, we classified our informants into one of the three BMs identified.

4.1 Educational Advocates

Influencers who adopt the BM of Educational Advocates primarily use their social media platforms as tools for disseminating knowledge and raising awareness about sustainability-related topics. Their central motivation lies in providing in-depth insights into various aspects of sustainability and equipping their audience with the information needed to make more environmentally responsible choices. As Lauren explains:

> "I try to dive deeper into topics and educate people about things."
> *(Interview, Lauren)*

Lauren's statement underscores the pedagogical focus of this model, where the influencer's role is framed as that of a teacher or guide. The BM of Educational Advocates is built around the creation and distribution of educational content aimed at increasing public awareness of sustainability issues. Through this approach, they seek to position themselves as trusted sources of information, offering value to their followers by enhancing their understanding of sustainability practices and principles.

Who: The target audience of Educational Advocates consists of followers who seek explanatory and informative content, often possessing limited prior knowledge of sustainability topics. These influencers tailor their content to individuals at the beginning of their sustainability journey, as evidenced by Maya's experience: *"What I realized with my first couple of reels that went viral is that a lot of people don't know the basic things that I thought everybody knew. What plastic is, what fast fashion is."* Recognizing the knowledge gap among many of her followers, Maya adjusted her content to focus on basic sustainability concepts, targeting consumers who are not yet experts in the field. Despite addressing a novice audience, Educational Advocates primarily attract individuals who are already inclined toward sustainability and eager to learn more. As Sonja describes her community: *"I don't think there's any doubt that the people who comment on my page already have a similar interest in sustainability. They already care about the topics I write about."* This illustrates that, while the audience may lack expertise, they share a fundamental interest in sustainability, forming a community that values education and growth in their understanding of these topics.

What: The primary value proposition of Educational Advocates is to provide accessible and comprehensible information on sustainability. These influencers often incorporate principles of the CE, such as the 4Rs, into their content, breaking down complex concepts into digestible formats for their audience. For instance, Jenna offers an in-depth explanation of what recycling (one of the 4Rs) truly entails, highlighting the nuances that are often overlooked:

> "I started with a packaging recycling program at my children's school. I took them [my followers] along. I took pictures of where did I get the boxes? […] And then I showed them how I was making the containers to be able to recycle the packaging and then I took pictures at school and […] then I created a post explaining what I did and how I did it and then I said, do you have questions."
>
> *(Interview, Jenna)*

As Jenna's explanation illustrates, her primary motivation is to educate her followers on specific aspects of sustainability, such as recycling. By guiding her audience through the intricacies of recycling programs step-by-step, she tailors her content to be easy to follow and accessible. In this way, Jenna acts as a knowledge translator for her followers, transforming complex sustainability concepts (i.e., one of the 4 Rs) into information that is both digestible and actionable and eventually leads to behaviour changes among her followers.

How: The core processes employed by Educational Advocates align with those of conventional influencers, centring around content creation and dissemination (Borchers & Enke, 2021). However, given the educational focus of their content, a significant portion of their efforts involves conducting independent research and experiments to answer specific questions or gain valuable insights for their audience. Jenna, for example, not only consults scientific studies to support her content with up-to-date statistics and research but also conducts her own experiments:

> "I got a package in the mail and the internal packing material inside the box looked compostable, but I wasn't sure. So, I thought I should test that and probably video this. It was styrofoam. A really easy way to see if it's starch versus a petroleum-based

> styrofoam is to put it in water and if it's starch based it'll dissolve in water. So, I videoed that."
>
> *(Interview, Jenna)*

By conducting her own experiments, Jenna gained the confidence to share her newly acquired insights with her followers, including practical advice on identifying sustainable packaging materials and how best to manage them. This extra effort is an integral part of her role as a sustainability influencer with the BM of an Educational Advocate and requires a considerable amount of time. The emphasis on independent research and experimentation highlights the distinction between Educational Advocates and other influencer types.

Value: Many Educational Advocates perceive their social media profiles primarily as educational platforms rather than consumption-focused spaces. Consequently, most of them are unable to sustain a full-time livelihood solely through their social media activities, often treating this work as a secondary endeavour. Some Educational Advocates, like Sonja, have made deliberate choices to avoid commercialisation entirely. She states, *"I've made a purposeful decision that I would never take money from brands to promote their stuff."* This stringent policy naturally limits her capacity to generate income directly through her social media presence. However, it resonates with the authenticity consideration of many sustainability influencers as they fear to be perceived as untrustworthy if they promote brands and their products but otherwise advocate for less consumption in general. Nevertheless, they are still able to monetise their social media profiles by using it to promote their additional offerings that emerged out of their social media presence and reach.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the Post by Katharina from the 12th of October 2023; Netnographic data

Educational Advocates often translate their content into tangible products, such as books, allowing them to derive value from their BM as sustainability influencers. For instance, Katharina authored a book that compiles her extensive knowledge of sustainability and provides practical guidance on how to incorporate sustainable practices into everyday life (see Figure I).

By translating her knowledge on sustainability and the CE into a tangible product she is able to monetise what she does on social media in a way that does not contradict the inherent principles and values of her profile. Her popularity on social media further enables her to reach a broader audience, enhancing the potential sales of the product.

4.2 Lifestyle Marketers

Lifestyle Marketers are sustainability influencers who utilise their social media profiles to highlight the benefits of adopting a sustainable lifestyle, aiming to inspire their followers through engaging and relatable content. As Alina articulates:

> "I believe that the biggest impact I can have is that I set an example and don't impose it on others in a missionary way, but simply showing 'ok, she's trying something different and she's doing well and seems to be having fun'."
> *(Interview, Alina)*

As Alina's description illustrates, the primary intent of her BM as a sustainability influencer is to demonstrate the positive impact individuals can have by fostering a more sustainable future. Her approach centres on serving as a role model who offers inspiration without resorting to proselytising. In this way, Lifestyle Marketers strive to bring sustainability into the mainstream rather than confining it to niche audiences. The following section outlines how Lifestyle Marketers construct their BM to achieve this objective.

Who: The primary goal of Lifestyle Marketers is to demonstrate the feasibility of a sustainable lifestyle while addressing and overcoming common misconceptions about sustainability (e.g., expensiveness, inconvenience). Consequently, their target audience consists of sustainability-conscious consumers who aspire to adopt more sustainable practices but may be uncertain about how to do so or hesitant to impose significant restrictions on their lifestyles. Karen elaborates on this target demographic:

> "I'm excited to work with them [a sustainable make-up brand] because I use them every day and because they use all natural ingredients and because their packaging is really great. […] People are going to be buying the non-sustainable version of these products no matter what. So, if we can illuminate them to the realities of it and get them to buy the more sustainable versions of these necessary products then I consider that a win."
> *(Interview, Karen)*

Karen's explanation of her collaboration with a sustainable brand and the promotion of its products highlights the characteristics of her target audience. With her BM as a Lifestyle Marketer, she aims to engage consumers who are not yet aware of more sustainable alternatives they can incorporate into their daily lives. Acknowledging the reality that it is unlikely she can persuade consumers to cease consumption altogether, Karen emphasises that her approach focuses on introducing her followers to more sustainable options. Consequently, the BM of Lifestyle Marketers targets consumers who are open to

adapting their consumption practices toward more sustainable alternatives, although most are not inclined to pursue a perfectly sustainable lifestyle that may impose restrictions.

What: The primary motivation of Lifestyle Marketers is to highlight the feasibility and benefits of adopting a sustainable lifestyle and following CE principles. They achieve this by inviting their followers into their daily lives and providing inspiration for what a sustainable lifestyle can look like. As Andrea articulates:

> "I show what I wear and show where I got it from. A lot of the times I repeat outfits, and you know, like I have the saying 're-wearing is caring'. So, a lot of times my shoe wear is the same just because I don't buy a lot of shoes."
> *(Interview, Andrea)*

Andrea's description illustrates her commitment to providing her followers with concrete examples of what a sustainable lifestyle can entail. By showcasing how affordable and fashionable a sustainable wardrobe can be, she positions herself as both a role model and a source of inspiration for her audience. In doing so, Andrea also incorporates principles of the circular economy (i.e., reusing), embodying her motto, *"re-wearing is caring"*. This approach allows her followers to observe a practical application of CE concepts, offering a tangible illustration of how these principles can be integrated into the daily life.

How: The core processes of Lifestyle Marketers closely resemble those of conventional influencers, centring around content creation and dissemination (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Their content predominantly features snippets of their daily lives, including their consumption activities and living practices. In doing so, they often highlight the products they utilise throughout the day which are mostly sustainable alternatives and thus help promoting a sustainable lifestyle. Karen elaborates:

> "I actually really like what they [collaboration partner] sell in their shop, and I use it all the time. So, that comes a bit more naturally to me because it doesn't feel like I'm selling a product that I wouldn't normally use, I have my house filled with them, and I use them all the time. So, shooting content for those kind of products makes sense to me."
> *(Interview, Karen)*

Karen's description illustrates that content production is a fundamental component of her BM as a Lifestyle Marketer. Because she genuinely uses the products she promotes and collaborates with brands whose offerings align with her values, she is able to create content naturally and seamlessly integrate promotional elements into her posts.

Value: Lifestyle Marketers primarily generate revenue through branded posts. Compensation for these partnerships typically takes the form of either monetary payments or product exchanges. As Andrea explains:

> "That means I advertise for them. In other words, they request a certain number of contributions and posts from me and if enough people order using my code, I can then order things from them for free."
> *(Interview, Andrea)*

In order to receive payment from her collaboration partners, Andrea must not only integrate the brand's products into her social media stories and post a predefined number of times but also ensure that a specific number of consumers purchase from the brand using

her promotion code. This dual requirement underscores the performance-based nature of her compensation as an influencer. Additionally, Andrea has established clear criteria for her partnerships, stating, *"I'm in favour of anything vegan or organic."* She strictly declines inquiries that do not align with these values. However, this high standard can complicate financial success for Lifestyle Marketers. As Sally notes *"It's still really tricky to make money in the sustainability place if you're really true to your values and in alignment with the other things that you talk about."* This difficulty arises from the inherent conflict between promoting consumption and adhering to sustainability principles.

4.3 Change Leaders

The third BM identified is that of Change Leaders. These influencers concentrate on raising awareness of systemic environmental issues and advocating for meaningful policy change rather than focusing solely on individual actions. Ayla explains it in the following:

> "Ultimately, big corporations should be responsible. […] In the seventies, what they did in the US is they shifted that perception, that corporations are good but you as an individual, you need to recycle, you need to do all of this. But it's like no, you guys are massive and you produce so much waste and somehow me, a small individual, has to do it. The responsibility should be on corporations and on legislation."
> *(Interview, Ayla)*

As Ayla's description illustrates, Change Leaders often extend their focus beyond individual consumption behaviours. They leverage their platforms to raise awareness for larger-scale and more systemic views on the climate crisis and environmental actions.

Who: Change Leaders target a diverse audience, including socially-conscious consumers who are concerned with sustainability and systemic change, as well as activist communities such as grassroot movements and NGOs. Yalle describes her followers in the following way:

> "I think they are people like me, who start doing advocacy for themselves and end up influencing the government. It really starts at a personal level – you're not going to join a group banning plastics unless you're already consuming less plastic."
> *(Interview, Yalle)*

Yalle's description underscores that her followers are already engaged in sustainable practices and share a similar mindset regarding societal change. However, the influence of Change Leaders extends regular consumers to policy influencers and decision-makers, including lawmakers and government bodies involved in environmental policy.

What: The BM of Change Leaders is centred on promoting systemic change and mobilising their audience toward collective action. Instead of focusing on showcasing sustainable product alternatives, their core value proposition lies in advocating for large-scale environmental and social reforms. A fundamental aspect of their model is the provision of expertise and credibility. Change Leaders often establish themselves as knowledgeable figures within the environmental activism space, offering well-researched insights, engaging in policy discussions, and presenting solution-oriented content. Moreover, the BM of Change Leaders is built on empowerment and mobilisation. They inspire their audience to actively participate in movements for change, such as organising protests, advocating for legislative reforms, or joining community initiatives.

For instance, in her post, Ally uses her reach for raising awareness for a governmental agency supporting climate protection and calls her followers to action by providing a link to sign a petition to support their work (see Figure II).

Figure II: Screenshot of the Post by Ally from the 6th of March 2025; Netnographic data

Thus, the focus of Change Leaders lies less on educating about the CE or showing products from companies who follow CE principles but rather fostering systemic change in accordance with the CE.

How: At the core of Change Leader's operations is the development of content centred around environmental policies, social movements, and collective action. Unlike conventional influencers, their content emphasises broader societal issues rather than individual consumer choices, aiming to influence public opinion and government policy. Therefore, partnerships with NGOs and advocacy groups are an essential component of their model. These partnerships enable them to amplify their message, engage in campaigns, and support wider environmental and social initiatives.

Additionally, public speaking and events play a crucial role in their strategy. Change Leaders often participate in conferences, protests, panels, and other in-person events to convey their messages directly to their audience. This face-to-face engagement facilitates immediate and personal connections, fostering a sense of community and collective action.

For example, due to her significant reach on social media, Mary had the opportunity to participate at a session at the European Parliament, highlighting the importance of the messages she shares through her platform (see Figure III).

Figure III: Screenshot of the Post by Mary from the 28th of November 2024; Netnographic data

Value: Change Leaders primarily generate revenue through channels that align with their mission of driving systemic change and advocating for environmental and social justice. Unlike conventional influencers, their focus shifts away from product promotion toward securing support from individuals and organisations committed to sustainability.

Consequently, a key source of revenue comes from partnerships with NGOs and advocacy groups that resonate with the influencer's environmental or social causes (see Figure II).

Additionally, paid speaking engagements constitute another significant revenue stream for Change Leaders. As thought leaders in their field, they are frequently invited to participate in panels, conferences, and events where they discuss topics related to sustainability, policy reform, and environmental activism. In doing so, they receive compensation for their expertise and influence, further supporting their advocacy work. For instance, Mary lists her work, which provides her with income and is linked to her social media profile, as follows.

> "I am also a lecturer and give public talks, workshops and work with people. I'm also an advisor and also work with teaching companies as well as politicians about current political climates and climates relating to environment and sustainability."
>
> *(Interview, Mary)*

This quote exemplifies how Change Leaders strategically monetise their expertise while remaining aligned with their advocacy. Instead of relying on traditional influencer revenue models such as product endorsements, Mary derives income from speaking engagements, advisory roles, and educational collaborations. Her social media presence serves as a key enabler of these opportunities, as it is the primary reason she is invited to – and compensated for – such events. These monetisation strategies not only ensure financial sustainability but also enhance her credibility and influence within the sustainability space. As a result, her online and offline activities are mutually reinforcing.

5. Discussion and contribution

This study has identified three distinct BMs employed by sustainability influencers: Educational Advocates, Lifestyle Marketers, and Change Leaders (see Table II). Educational Advocates focus on disseminating knowledge and fostering awareness about sustainable practices, effectively positioning themselves as trusted sources of information. Lifestyle Marketers showcase how sustainability can be seamlessly integrated into everyday life, thereby appealing to a broader audience. Meanwhile, Change Leaders advocate for systemic change, mobilising their followers to engage in activism and policy discussions that drive momentum for sustainability initiatives. The findings emphasise the importance influencers play in promoting sustainability such as CE principles and fostering behaviour change among followers.

Business Model Components	Educational Advocates	Lifestyle Marketers	Change Leader
Who	Followers with a limited knowledge of sustainability seeking educational content	Sustainability-conscious consumers who seek practical alternatives without major lifestyle changes	Socially conscious individuals, activists and NGOs
What	Provide knowledge on sustainability, circular economy (4 Rs) and simplify complex topics	Showcase practical, stylish sustainable living and how CE principles can be integrated into the daily life	Advocate for systemic reforms and focus on policy change and corporate accountability
How	Create educational content and share own research	Content on daily sustainable consumption and collaborate with sustainable brands	Promote policy discussions, mobilise action and partner with NGOs and speak at events
Value	Social impact through education and monetisation via own products (e.g., books)	Revenue through branded posts and product collaborations	Income from NGO partnerships and paid speaking engagements

Table II: Summary of distinct business models of sustainability influencers based on the business model framework by Gassmann et al., 2013

5.1 The role of influencers in driving the circular economy

While sustainability influencers adopt diverse approaches on social media and operate under different BMs, they collectively contribute to promoting more sustainable behaviours among their audiences and, in doing so, advance the CE. We elaborate on this below.

Knowledge dissemination: Misconceptions surrounding sustainability and the CE remain prevalent (Aschemann-Witzel & Zielke, 2017). Sustainability influencers – particularly Educational Advocates – use their platforms to share actionable insights and raise awareness about sustainable practices. Their ability to distill complex concepts into accessible, engaging content plays a vital role in enhancing public understanding of CE principles.

Mainstreaming sustainability: Sustainable consumption has traditionally been associated with more radical consumer behaviours – such as zero-waste living, minimalism, or product boycotts (Thompson & Arsel, 2004; Wilson & Bellezza, 2022) – implying that meaningful contributions to climate action require full commitment. In contrast, sustainability influencers – particularly Lifestyle Marketers – adopt a more pragmatic approach, demonstrating that sustainability can be integrated into everyday consumption practices. This balanced positioning enables them to engage a broader audience beyond the niche communities typically reached by traditional sustainability advocates, thereby facilitating behaviour change on a larger scale.

Behaviour change: Similar to conventional influencers, sustainability influencers act as role models and opinion leaders (Casalo et al., 2020). Leveraging this influence, they are able to drive behaviour change among their followers (Ki et al., 2020). Educational Advocates facilitate this change by demystifying the complexity of sustainability, making it more accessible and achievable for consumers. Lifestyle Marketers increase the likelihood of sustainable practices being adopted in everyday life by presenting them as convenient, aspirational, and aesthetically pleasing. Change Leaders scale behaviour change by promoting systemic shifts and fostering a sense of collective responsibility among consumers (Luukkonen et al., 2024).

In addition to promoting sustainability more broadly, sustainability influencers also support sufficiency-oriented strategies within the CE, such as reducing consumption or extending product lifecycles (e.g., Centobelli et al., 2020; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2023). These contributions are reflected not only in their content but also in the structure of their BMs. The following outlines two key mechanisms through which influencers advance sufficiency: by shaping social norms and by helping overcome barriers to reduce-oriented practices.

Supporting social norm change: Sustainability influencers help shift social norms around sufficiency by highlighting alternatives to consumerist behaviours (Suski et al., 2022). Educational Advocates and Change Leaders frequently share content that encourages practices such as "using what you already have," repairing instead of replacing, or buying second-hand. By embedding sufficiency into everyday content – rather than presenting it as a radical lifestyle shift – they help normalise consumption reduction. Even Lifestyle Marketers, though more commercially oriented, occasionally promote circular or durable products and collaborate with service-based brands, broadening what is seen as aspirational consumption (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Overcoming barriers to reduce strategies: Sufficiency is one of the most challenging pillars of the CE, requiring not only individual restraints but also a redefinition of soci-

etal consumption norms (e.g., Bohnenberger, 2021; Jungell-Michelsson & Heikkurinen, 2022). Sustainability influencers lower psychological barriers to sufficiency by making it feel more attainable and rewarding through relatability, storytelling, and visual appeal. Many avoid promotional content or reject conflicting brand offers to stay aligned with their values, signalling authenticity and maintaining audience trust (Audrezet et al., 2020; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019). Their BMs – especially among Educational Advocates and Change Leaders – reduce reliance on product promotion by generating income through speaking engagements, educational resources, or NGO partnerships. These strategies help influencers navigate resistance and structural limitations, contributing to circular economy goals through sufficiency-led practices and monetisation models.

5.2 Challenges of sustainability influencers

Despite their positive impact, sustainability influencers face several challenges that hinder their financial sustainability and reach.

Limited monetisation opportunities: Unlike mainstream influencers, sustainability influencers have fewer brand collaboration options since their content prioritises ethical consumption and systemic change over product promotions. Many brands hesitate to invest in them due to audience scrutiny and lower commercial appeal, making revenue generation more challenging. Furthermore, as of their strict ethical vetting of collaborations, they often decline lucrative offers.

Algorithmic bias: Social media algorithms favour high-engagement, entertainment-driven content, often sidelining educational or advocacy-based posts. To maintain visibility, sustainability influencers may feel pressured to adopt more commercial content strategies, potentially compromising their values.

High expectations and accusations of greenwashing: Sustainability influencers face intense audience scrutiny, with every decision evaluated against strict ethical standards. Even ethical monetisation efforts or partnerships with sustainability-focused brands may invite accusations of greenwashing, damaging credibility and limiting income opportunities.

5.3 Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the academic literature by bridging the gap between influencer marketing and the CE. While prior research has focused primarily on conventional influencers (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Casaló et al., 2020), this research sheds light on how sustainability influencers operate within the principles of the CE, particularly in promoting the 4Rs (Alcalde-Calonge et al., 2022). The findings emphasise the critical role that influencers can play in educating and inspiring their followers to adopt more sustainable consumption habits.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the limited literature on BMs of influencers, a research area that has remained largely underexplored (Ye et al., 2021; Zabel, 2021). By identifying and analysing the distinct BMs of Educational Advocates, Lifestyle Marketers, and Change Leaders, this research enhances our understanding of how these influencers operate within the framework of the CE. This contribution is particularly significant as it aligns with the emerging discourse on BMs in the CE (Centobelli et al., 2020; Takacs, 2021; Takacs et al., 2020). By acting as intermediaries, sustainability influencers

bridge the gap between individual consumer actions and broader sustainability initiatives, demonstrating how their unique models can advance CE principles.

This study also advances the theoretical understanding of how BMs in the CE can support sufficiency-oriented strategies (Bocken et al., 2016; Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2023) which are often overlooked in both marketing and sustainability scholarship. By showing how different influencer models enable the communication and normalisation of "reduce" behaviours – whether through educational content, lifestyle inspiration, or activist discourse – our findings highlight the potential of influencers as agents of social norm change. In doing so, we extend prior work on CE BMs (Centobelli et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2017) by demonstrating how they can actively support behavioural levers central to CE transitions.

5.4 Practical implications

Influencers: Sustainability influencers play a vital role in driving the CE by fostering awareness, educating their audiences, and advocating for systemic change. To enhance their impact, influencers should leverage transparency in brand partnerships, ensuring their collaborations align with their sustainability values, as seen in the reluctance of Educational Advocates to engage in sponsorships that could compromise their credibility. By focusing on authentic engagement and demonstrating real-life applications of sustainability principles – whether through education, lifestyle inspiration, or activism – sustainability influencers can maintain audience trust and drive long-term behavioural change. Additionally, navigating algorithmic challenges by adopting engaging storytelling formats can help maintain visibility without resorting to commercial content that may dilute their mission.

Brands: Brands seeking to engage in sustainability marketing must ensure that their partnerships with influencers are value-driven and credibility-enhancing (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The study highlights that Lifestyle Marketers are more open to collaborations, but strict vetting processes are necessary to avoid accusations of greenwashing. Brands should prioritise long-term relationships with influencers whose values align with their corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals. Rather than viewing influencers merely as promotional tools, brands can co-create educational and advocacy-driven content, reinforcing authenticity and trust among ethically minded consumers.

Policy makers: The study emphasises that Change Leaders extend their influence beyond social media, actively engaging with policymakers and organisations to advocate for corporate accountability and systemic sustainability efforts. By recognising sustainability influencers as key players in policy discussions, governments and institutions can collaborate with them on environmental campaigns, policy awareness initiatives, and funding opportunities for sustainability education. Furthermore, regulations ensuring transparency in sustainability claims within influencer marketing can help mitigate greenwashing and maintain public trust. Given the algorithmic challenges that limit sustainability content visibility, policymakers should also encourage digital platforms to promote credible, advocacy-driven content, fostering greater public engagement with CE initiatives.

5.5 Future research

Future research should explore the long-term sustainability of these BMs, particularly as the CE continues to evolve. Further investigation into alternative monetisation strategies, such as crowdfunding, could provide sustainability influencers with additional pathways to financial sustainability while remaining true to their ethical values. Additionally, given the female-dominated sample in this study, future research might explore the dynamics of male sustainability influencers and whether they face different challenges or opportunities in this space.

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