



Digital Influencers and the Cultural Diffusion of Sustainable Consumption: Audience Reception in YouTube Comment Communities

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Abstract: Sustainable development involves more than regulatory intervention; it also requires the gradual normalization of environmentally responsible ways of living. In today's world, where sustainability has gained immense value in every field, 17 fundamental goals have been identified under the title of Sustainable Development Goals. These 17 development goals can be said to encompass core objectives such as protecting natural resources, ensuring gender equality, and making coexistence sustainable through mutual cooperation. The rise of social media has created a new sphere of interest for both followers and those following it, and the relationship between these activities and development goals has become a subject of curiosity. Nutrition, fashion, goods, lifestyles, and many other topics have found a wide reach through social media under the theme of sustainability. Social media accounts promoting a green life represent a significant area of research for individuals of all ages, lifestyles, and circumstances, helping them understand the characteristics of sustainability in both local and global contexts. As sustainability discourse increasingly circulates through digital media, relatively limited attention has been paid to how such narratives are publicly interpreted and negotiated within participatory online spaces. This study explores how sustainability lifestyle influencers frame ecological responsibility and how audiences respond to these narratives within YouTube comment communities. The analysis is based on 9,000 publicly accessible comments drawn from sustainability-focused videos produced by ten highly visible sustainability influencers representing varied lifestyle orientations, including anti-consumption, circular practices, ethical purchasing, slow living, and renewable transition. Comments serve as the primary unit of analysis and are examined as observable instances of audience reception. The study categorizes evaluative tone (positive, neutral, mixed, negative) and identifies recurring interpretive patterns such as emotional support, identification, behavioral motivation, practical exchange, structural reflection, and credibility assessment. The findings indicate that sustainability influencer discourse is structured through multiple distinct lifestyle pathways rather than a singular, uniform model of “green living.” Audience engagement displays consistent patterns of alignment, accompanied by negotiated interpretations and comparatively limited oppositional responses. Comment environments are predominantly characterized by relational affirmation and identity-based resonance, while smaller yet persistent forms of critique reflect ongoing evaluation of authenticity and intent. From a sustainable development standpoint, these results suggest that influencer comment spaces operate as participatory arenas where sustainability norms are translated into everyday language and reinforced through visible peer interaction. By centering audience interpretation, the study contributes to development-oriented sustainability scholarship and offers insight into how sustainable consumption becomes culturally embedded in ways that conceptually align with SDG 12 and SDG 13.

Keywords: Digital Media, Influencers, SDG 12, Sustainable Consumption, Sustainability Communication

Introduction

Contemporary societies are shaped by intensified consumption rhythms in which purchasing, upgrading, and disposal are woven into the fabric of everyday life. Environmental degradation, in this context, is not only the outcome of industrial production systems but also the cumulative effect of normalized daily practices. Sustainable consumption therefore cannot be reduced to the market availability of environmentally preferable products. Rather, it involves rethinking how responsibility, aspiration, and material well-being are culturally constructed and socially reproduced. Scholars of sustainable consumption have long argued that meaningful ecological transition requires transformation in routines, habits, and shared expectations—not merely technological innovation or product substitution.

At the same time, digital communication infrastructures increasingly shape how these meanings circulate. Social media platforms function as interactive arenas where sustainability is demonstrated, debated, and reinterpreted in real time. Within these environments, sustainability lifestyle influencers translate ecological concerns into embodied practices—reducing consumption, repairing and reusing materials, experimenting with low-impact mobility, cultivating local food systems, or aligning identity with environmental ethics. Unlike institutional sustainability campaigns, influencer communication unfolds within participatory comment spaces in which audiences respond visibly through encouragement, identification, skepticism, and credibility evaluation.

Existing research on sustainability influencers has expanded rapidly, yet it predominantly emphasizes persuasion outcomes, green purchase intention, or behavioral impact. In this literature, audiences are frequently treated as endpoints of influence rather than as active interpreters engaged in meaning construction. This focus leaves a critical analytical gap: how sustainability narratives are publicly received, negotiated, and stabilized within visible interaction environments remains comparatively underexplored. The omission is particularly significant in light of broader sustainable development debates. International frameworks such as SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) emphasize awareness-building and lifestyle transformation as foundational to sustainability transitions. However, how ecological norms become culturally embedded through everyday digital interaction is still insufficiently understood.

Moreover, sustainability communication is not without tension. Critics have questioned whether influencer-led sustainability discourse risks individualizing responsibility while sidelining structural inequalities, infrastructural constraints, or systemic reform. Others highlight concerns regarding greenwashing and authenticity in digital environments where commercial partnerships intersect with environmental messaging. These debates underscore the importance of examining not only what influencers communicate, but how audiences interpret, evaluate, and negotiate such messages.

Against this backdrop, the present study conceptualizes sustainability influencer communication as a participatory reception process observable in YouTube comment spaces. Drawing on reception theory and attribution theory, it approaches audience comments as interpretive acts through which viewers decode sustainability narratives, infer communicator intent, and position themselves emotionally and morally in relation to influencer discourse. Rather than measuring persuasion effects, the study investigates how sustainability meanings are collectively negotiated within visible interaction environments.

The study pursues three interrelated aims: (1) to identify the sustainability lifestyle orientations that structure influencer narratives; (2) to examine how user-generated comments articulate emotional alignment, negotiated positioning, and attribution of intent; and (3) to analyze how these interpretive processes contribute to the normalization, adaptation, or contestation of sustainability norms within participatory digital spaces conceptually linked to SDG-related awareness efforts.

Methodologically, the analysis draws on qualitative content examination of 9,000 publicly available YouTube comments sampled from sustainability-centered videos produced by ten sustainability lifestyle influencers. By connecting influencer storytelling with observable audience reception, the study advances sustainability communication research beyond linear persuasion models and toward an understanding of digital micro-publics as sites where ecological responsibility is culturally translated and relationally stabilized. In doing so, it contributes to development-oriented sustainability scholarship by illuminating how everyday digital participation participates in the broader diffusion of sustainability norms.

Literature Review

Sustainable Consumption as Cultural Transformation

Modern economic systems are sustained by institutional, political, and media structures that normalize consumerist values such as material success, individual achievement, technological progress, and expanded choice [1]. Within this framework, consumption increasingly becomes a self-referential activity rather than a means of enhancing well-being. [2] conceptualizes waste as an inevitable outcome of production-driven societies, arguing that environmental degradation is structurally embedded within prevailing consumption patterns. From this perspective, ecological harm is not incidental but deeply intertwined with the routines and expectations that define contemporary lifestyles.

In sustainable development discourse, addressing this condition requires more than technological innovation or efficiency gains. It involves reshaping social norms, everyday practices, and public awareness—an emphasis reflected in SDG Target 12.8, which calls for ensuring widespread access to information and sustainability literacy ([3], [4]). The transition toward sustainability therefore entails cultural as well as structural change.

[5] contrasts the dominant consumerist paradigm—where success is measured through accumulation—with an alternative sustainability paradigm that foregrounds social and ecological well-being. In this context, sustainable consumption emerges as a corrective response to environmentally harmful production and usage patterns, promoting more resource-efficient and less polluting forms of consumption [6]. Contemporary sustainability strategies increasingly focus on behavioral change, drawing from psychological and practice-based

perspectives that highlight the centrality of everyday routines [7]. As [8] emphasizes, sustainability should not be equated simply with reduced consumption volume. Rather, it involves consuming differently—more efficiently, more responsibly, and, where necessary, with deliberate restraint. [9] further connect sustainable consumption debates to concerns about ecological limits and the unequal distribution of environmental costs and economic benefits. At the international level, these transformations are institutionalized within sustainable consumption and production (SCP) agendas. [10] defines SCP as improving quality of life while reducing resource intensity and decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation. Such frameworks position sustainability not as an isolated market niche but as a systemic reorientation of production and consumption systems.

Importantly, scholars argue that sustainability cannot be achieved solely through the substitution of conventional products with “green” alternatives. It requires the reorganization of daily habits and social practices. [11] call for a fundamental restructuring of consumption patterns, while [12] identifies practices such as recycling, resource conservation, simplified living, and energy-efficient technology adoption as indicative of broader lifestyle shifts. Similarly, [13] frame sustainable consumption as the avoidance of unnecessary purchases and the minimization of ecological impact, reinforcing the idea that sustainability entails modifying routines rather than merely adjusting product choice. Within this broader transformation, the concept of a sustainable lifestyle is frequently positioned as an alternative to consumption-driven living. Describe sustainable lifestyles as socially embedded configurations of habits and behavioral patterns shaped by institutional arrangements, cultural norms, and infrastructural conditions. Such lifestyles aim not only to reduce resource use and waste but also to promote social equity and collective well-being. Because sustainable practices are socially learned and culturally reinforced, communication environments play a significant role in diffusing and normalizing sustainability norms ([14], [15], [4]). However, access to sustainable lifestyles remains uneven across socioeconomic contexts, reflecting disparities in infrastructure, education, and resource availability. The diffusion of sustainability therefore depends on broader cultural and institutional shifts. [1] argues that widespread adoption of sustainable consumption requires transformations in values, public imagery, and institutional positioning. Organizational communication, sustainability reporting, and mediated public discourse contribute to legitimizing and stabilizing sustainable practices within society [16]. In this sense, communication infrastructures are not peripheral but central to embedding sustainability within everyday life and public awareness processes ([3], [4], [15]).

Sustainability Communication, Digital Media, and Influencer Culture

Marketing thought has gradually shifted from production-driven logics toward approaches that prioritize consumer orientation and broader societal responsibility [17]. Within this evolution, environmental awareness and social accountability have become increasingly embedded in contemporary marketing paradigms. Sustainability communication has thus developed beyond a narrow promotional function into a discursive arena where environmental values, corporate responsibility, and consumption practices intersect.

Environmental advertising is typically defined as communication that foregrounds ecological concerns and encourages behaviors intended to mitigate environmental harm ([18], [19]). Such messaging often connects products to environmental consequences, signals corporate environmental commitment, and frames sustainable lifestyles as socially desirable [20]. Yet sustainability communication cannot be reduced to visual “green” symbolism or affective appeals alone [21]. Increasingly, scholars conceptualize sustainability messaging as part of broader societal transformation processes in which communication contributes to shaping environmental norms and public awareness ([3], [15]). In this sense, mediated sustainability narratives serve not only strategic brand positioning but also the gradual normalization of environmentally responsible behavior.

The digitalization of communication infrastructures has significantly altered how sustainability discourse circulates. Social media platforms enable interactive exchange, networked visibility, and user participation across institutional and non-institutional actors [22]. Within sustainable development debates, digital media are often understood as enabling systems that support awareness diffusion, peer learning, and collaborative engagement ([4], [15]). This transformation shifts sustainability communication away from purely top-down persuasion toward participatory processes of meaning construction. Within this evolving landscape, social media influencers have emerged as prominent mediators of sustainability narratives. Building on the logic of the two-step flow model [23], influencers function as contemporary opinion leaders who interpret and translate messages between institutions, brands, and audiences. Unlike conventional advertising formats, influencer communication embeds sustainability themes within personal storytelling and routine practices. Empirical research indicates that perceived authenticity and relational trust enhance influencers’ capacity to shape green consumption attitudes and behavioral intentions ([24], [25]). At the same time, digital sustainability communication operates within a credibility-sensitive environment. Heightened public awareness of greenwashing has led audiences to scrutinize environmental claims, particularly when corporate or commercial interests are visible [26]. As a result, transparency and perceived intrinsic motivation become central determinants of persuasive effectiveness ([27], [28]). Sustainability influencers must therefore navigate a communication context in which legitimacy is continuously evaluated.

Participatory affordances further distinguish digital sustainability discourse from traditional advertising formats. Platforms allow users to comment, share, and publicly assess sustainability narratives, thereby externalizing audience interpretation ([29], [30]). These interaction spaces resonate with SDG Target 12.8’s emphasis on awareness-building by rendering sustainability discourse visible and collectively negotiated [3]. Research demonstrates that interactive sustainability content can enhance reflective engagement and strengthen willingness to adopt sustainable behaviors [31], while social media activity related to sustainability has been linked to greener consumption practices [32].

Beyond measurable persuasion effects, influencer environments also function as informal learning contexts where sustainable practices are observed, discussed, and socially reinforced [33]. Emotional engagement plays a reinforcing role, as affective identification increases pro-environmental intention [34]. Micro-influencers, in particular, may exert notable influence due to perceived closeness and authenticity ([35], [36]). Among digital platforms, YouTube offers a particularly relevant setting for examining these processes. Comment sections transform reception into publicly observable interaction, enabling emotional alignment, critique, and credibility judgments to unfold in visible form. Although politically polarized environments may foster hostility [37], influencer-centered communities frequently display more affiliative interaction when relational trust is established [38]. Such dynamics support the interpretation of sustainability influencer spaces as relational micro-publics in which ecological norms are interpreted, negotiated, and gradually normalized through visible participation ([39], [40], [41], [41]). Taken together, this body of scholarship suggests that sustainability influencers should not be viewed solely as marketing intermediaries. Rather, they function as cultural translators who embed ecological values within everyday narratives and routine practices. Within sustainable development frameworks, these actors can be understood as informal communicative agents who contribute to the diffusion of sustainability awareness and literacy beyond formal institutional channels ([4], [15]).

Theoretical Framework: Audience Reception and Attribution

Audience reception theory departs from linear models of media influence by positioning viewers as active interpreters rather than passive recipients. Emerging from cultural studies traditions, the framework challenges cause–effect assumptions and instead conceptualizes meaning as something produced through socially situated interpretation ([43], [44]). Media texts, from this perspective, are inherently polysemic: they offer structured meanings, but those meanings are neither fixed nor guaranteed. Interpretation develops through the interaction between discourse and the audience’s cultural background, lived experience, and ideological positioning [45]. [43] encoding/decoding model provides a foundational articulation of this process. While media producers encode preferred meanings into texts, audiences may

decode them in different ways. Dominant readings align with intended meanings; negotiated readings partially accept but adapt those meanings to lived realities; and oppositional readings reject or reinterpret the ideological framing altogether. Meaning, therefore, is not embedded in the text alone but emerges through the encounter between communicative intention and audience interpretation. Subsequent reception scholarship further expands this view by situating interpretation within identity formation and affective experience. Media engagement operates across cognitive, emotional, and symbolic registers ([46], [47]). Interpretation becomes a space where viewers articulate belonging, morality, and social positioning ([48], [49]). Rather than viewing audiences as isolated decision-makers, reception research emphasizes that meaning-making unfolds within shared cultural contexts shaped by collective norms, social networks, and subcultural affiliations [44].

Digital media environments intensify these dynamics by making interpretive processes publicly visible. Online platforms externalize what was once private decoding through comments, reactions, and participatory exchanges ([30], [50], [41]). Participatory culture scholarship demonstrates that users do not merely interpret content; they circulate, reshape, and collectively negotiate meanings within networked publics ([39], [40]). In this context, comment spaces function as observable reception arenas in which emotional alignment, critique, and negotiated positioning become empirically traceable.

Within the present study, YouTube comments are treated as reception traces—written expressions through which audiences position themselves emotionally and morally in relation to sustainability narratives [47]. Rather than categorizing comments as simple reactions, they are conceptualized as interpretive performances situated within networked publics ([42], [41]). This perspective allows audience commentary to be analytically mapped onto structured reception positions, moving beyond decontextualized sentiment analysis toward theoretically grounded interpretation ([43], [30]). Accordingly, the tonal patterns identified in the findings are interpreted through the dominant–negotiated–oppositional schema. Positive and affiliative responses indicate dominant alignment with preferred sustainability meanings. Neutral comments are treated as low-intensity dominant positions, signaling discursive acceptance without strong affective reinforcement. Mixed responses reflect negotiated readings in which viewers combine agreement with contextual qualification. Explicitly critical comments correspond to oppositional readings that challenge framing or question intent. This interpretive structure underlies the reception spectrum model presented in Figure 1, where tonal variation is theorized as patterned meaning positioning rather than isolated evaluative polarity.

While reception theory accounts for interpretive diversity, attribution theory clarifies how interpretation extends into judgments about motive and credibility. Attribution research explains how individuals infer causal explanations for behavior and how these inferences shape affective and behavioral responses ([51], [52], [53], [54]). In mediated contexts, audiences evaluate not only message content but also the perceived intentions of the communicator ([55], [56]). This dimension becomes particularly salient in influencer communication, where legitimacy rests less on institutional authority and more on perceived authenticity. Persuasion knowledge research shows that audiences actively assess strategic intent and adjust trust accordingly ([57], [56]). When communicators are interpreted as intrinsically motivated, trust and identification are strengthened; when motives are attributed to self-interest, skepticism increases ([58], [59]). In sustainability contexts—where messaging carries moral and ethical weight—evaluations of sincerity become especially pronounced ([25], [26]). Attribution thus operates as a relational filter through which sustainability narratives are legitimized or problematized in digital interaction. From an integrated reception–attribution perspective, decoding and motive inference occur simultaneously. Dominant readings often coincide with positive credibility attribution; negotiated readings involve conditional alignment coupled with reflective evaluation; oppositional readings frequently emerge alongside skepticism regarding authenticity or consistency. Comment environments therefore capture not only positions of agreement or disagreement but also publicly articulated credibility assessments embedded within meaning negotiation ([42], [41]). In participatory digital settings, these processes become socially visible and empirically observable. Credibility is not treated here as a fixed characteristic of the influencer but as an emergent property of repeated interpretive and attributional exchanges within relational micro-publics ([42], [41], [57]). Trust and legitimacy are continuously negotiated through visible interaction.

Taken together, reception and attribution frameworks conceptualize sustainability influencer spaces as dual-layered interpretive arenas in which meaning construction and credibility evaluation unfold in tandem. Audience commentary is therefore positioned as a central analytical site where ecological norms and influencer legitimacy are co-produced. This integrated approach provides the conceptual grounding for examining comment environments as structured reception spaces and for understanding sustainability discourse as a participatory process through which ecological responsibility is normalized, adapted, or contested within everyday digital interaction.

Research Gap and Study Positioning

Although scholarship on sustainability influencers has expanded considerably, much of the existing work concentrates on measurable persuasion outcomes, green purchase intention, or behavioral impact ([24], [32], [31]). In this dominant framing, audiences are frequently conceptualized as endpoints of influence rather than as active participants in interpretive processes. Consequently, the emotional, relational, and meaning-making dynamics that unfold within public comment environments remain insufficiently theorized. In addition, sustainability influencers are often examined as a relatively uniform category, with limited attention given to the internal diversity of lifestyle orientations and thematic framings through which ecological norms are culturally articulated ([60], [61]).

From an international development perspective, this omission is analytically consequential. Sustainable development is not secured solely through regulatory design or technological innovation; it also depends on the gradual cultural embedding of sustainability norms within everyday social life ([4], [15]). How sustainability is interpreted, negotiated, and normalized in digital public spaces therefore has implications that extend beyond marketing effectiveness to broader SDG-related awareness processes. Examining audience interpretation in participatory media environments allows insight into how ecological responsibility becomes socially stabilized—or selectively resisted—outside formal institutional channels.

This study responds to these gaps by repositioning sustainability influencers as interpretive actors and their audiences as co-participants in visible meaning construction within YouTube comment communities. Rather than assessing attitudinal change or persuasion metrics, the analysis investigates how sustainability narratives are framed by influencers, how they are emotionally and relationally received, and how credibility and intent are publicly evaluated through interaction.

Situated within the broader literature on sustainable consumption and digital sustainability communication, the study engages analytically with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), with particular attention to SDG Target 12.8's emphasis on awareness-building and sustainability literacy [3]. Contemporary sustainability scholarship increasingly interprets the SDGs not only as policy objectives but as normative reference frameworks shaping societal discourse and cultural transformation ([4], [15]). In this context, the SDGs function here as an interpretive lens rather than as operational performance indicators, providing a developmental frame through which influencer discourse can be situated within wider processes of sustainability diffusion and cultural normalization.

By foregrounding audience reception, the study contributes to development-oriented sustainability research in two ways. First, it clarifies how sustainability norms circulate through differentiated lifestyle narratives rather than through a singular model of “green living.” Second, it demonstrates how legitimacy and meaning are co-produced in participatory media settings, where interpretive alignment and credibility judgments unfold through publicly visible interaction ([42], [41], [15]). From this perspective, the following research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1: What sustainability lifestyle orientations structure the narrative frameworks of highly visible sustainability influencers?

RQ2: How do user-generated comments articulate emotional alignment, negotiated positioning, and attribution of intent in response to sustainability influencer communication?

RQ3: In what ways do audience interpretations contribute to the normalization, adaptation, or contestation of sustainability norms within participatory digital environments aligned with SDG-related awareness processes?

Methodology

This study examines sustainability influencer communication as an observable process of public reception. It analyzes how influencers narratively frame sustainability and how audiences interpret, evaluate, and negotiate these narratives within YouTube comment environments. Individual comments constitute the primary unit of analysis and are treated as discursive artifacts through which identification, credibility assessment, and interpretive positioning become publicly expressed.

YouTube was selected as the research site because it operates as a participatory platform where audience interaction is visible and archived. Platform affordances—particularly commenting and threaded replies—externalize reception by making evaluative, emotional, and relational responses traceable within structured interactional sequences ([30], [41], [50]). This visibility allows systematic examination of sustainability discourse as it unfolds within networked publics rather than relying solely on inferred audience reactions.

From a sustainable development standpoint, the analysis of publicly articulated audience discourse offers insight into how sustainability norms are culturally interpreted and reinforced—or questioned—within informal digital awareness environments. By focusing on comment-level interaction, the methodology captures micro-level processes through which sustainability literacy and ecological responsibility are negotiated in everyday digital participation.

Analytical Approach

The analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis, a method designed to enable systematic and context-sensitive interpretation of textual material ([62], [63]). Although computational sentiment techniques are effective in identifying polarity patterns, they are less capable of capturing negotiated meaning, credibility assessment, and moral positioning embedded within discourse. Because the present study centers on reception dynamics rather than numerical frequency alone, a qualitative approach was adopted to preserve interpretive nuance and contextual depth.

Comments were approached as discursive units situated within interactional contexts rather than as isolated evaluative fragments. The coding process unfolded iteratively. Initial categories were informed by sensitizing theoretical concepts—such as dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings, as well as attribution of intent—while remaining open to patterns emerging inductively from the data. Theme development followed principles associated with reflexive thematic analysis [64], allowing theoretical guidance without constraining emergent interpretive variation.

Data Preparation and Familiarization

Before initiating the coding process, all collected comments were carefully compiled and reviewed to ensure consistency across the dataset. The research team engaged in multiple readings of the full dataset (N = 9,000 comments) in order to develop a close familiarity with the content, tone, and interaction patterns present in the comment sections. This stage helped identify recurring expressions, communicative tendencies, and initial interpretive patterns within the data. Rather than being treated as a one-time preliminary step, familiarization continued throughout the analysis and informed both coding decisions and the development of thematic categories.

Unit of Analysis

In this study, the unit of analysis was defined as the individual YouTube comment. Each comment was treated as a distinct interpretive unit through which audience members expressed their reactions, evaluations, and positions toward sustainability-related content and influencer communication. This approach allowed the analysis to capture variations in tone, meaning construction, and credibility attribution at a granular level. By focusing on individual comments, the study preserves the immediacy of audience expression while enabling systematic comparison across different influencer communities.

Development of the Coding Frame

The coding framework was developed using a hybrid approach that combined both deductive and inductive strategies. Initially, a set of sensitizing categories was derived from the theoretical framework, particularly reception theory (dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings) and attribution theory (credibility and intent evaluation). These theoretically informed categories provided an initial structure for interpreting audience responses.

At the same time, the analysis remained open to patterns emerging directly from the data. Through iterative engagement with the comments, additional thematic categories—such as emotional support, identification, behavioral inspiration, and credibility assessment—were inductively identified and incorporated into the coding scheme. This combined approach allowed the analysis to remain theoretically grounded while also capturing the diversity and nuance of audience interpretations as expressed in the comment environment.

Pilot Testing and Refinement

Before proceeding to full-scale coding, the preliminary coding framework was tested on a subset of the dataset to assess its clarity, applicability, and internal consistency. During this pilot phase, a sample of comments was independently reviewed and coded by the research team, allowing potential ambiguities and overlaps in category definitions to be identified.

Based on these observations, the coding scheme was refined through iterative revisions, including clarifying category definitions, adjusting decision rules, and incorporating illustrative examples into the codebook. This process helped ensure that the coding framework was both analytically robust and consistently applicable across the full dataset.

Full Dataset Coding

Following the refinement of the coding framework during the pilot phase, it was applied systematically to the full dataset of 9,000 comments. Each comment was carefully reviewed and coded using the finalized codebook, which provided clear definitions, decision rules, and examples for each category. Particular attention was paid to ensuring that all relevant comments were meaningfully categorized and that no substantive audience response was overlooked.

Throughout this stage, comments were examined not only in terms of their evaluative tone but also with regard to their broader interpretive role within sustainability discourse. This made it possible to capture both the tonal orientation of responses (positive, neutral, mixed, or negative) and the different ways in which audiences engaged with the content—such as expressing support, identifying with the message, sharing practical insights, or reflecting on broader structural issues.

Summarizing and Identifying Patterns

Following the completion of the coding process, the coded data were systematically organized and compared across categories in order to identify recurring patterns and broader thematic structures. Rather than treating codes as isolated units, the analysis focused on how different categories clustered together and interacted within the overall sustainability discourse.

Through this process, related codes were grouped into higher-level thematic categories reflecting distinct forms of audience engagement, such as emotional support, identification, behavioral inspiration, practical exchange, and critical reflection. These thematic groupings provided the analytical basis for the findings presented in the next section, linking individual comment-level interpretations to broader patterns of meaning-making within influencer communities.

Assessing Trustworthiness

To ensure the reliability and consistency of the coding process, a subset of the dataset (10%, $n = 900$ comments) was independently coded by two trained researchers. Inter-coder agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa, yielding a value above .80, which indicates strong agreement according to established benchmarks.

Any discrepancies between coders were resolved through discussion and refinement of category definitions rather than through mechanical agreement. In addition, both coders underwent a structured training process prior to independent coding to ensure a shared understanding of the coding framework. These procedures enhanced the trustworthiness and methodological rigor of the analysis.

Sampling Strategy

To capture variation across sustainability narratives, the study employed stratified purposive sampling [65]. Rather than treating sustainability influencers as a homogeneous group, the design intentionally incorporated multiple lifestyle orientations to facilitate structured comparison across distinct communicative models of sustainable living. Within qualitative logic, this stratification strengthens analytical transferability by preserving thematic diversity.

The sampling frame was restricted to videos published within the twelve months preceding data collection in order to reflect current interaction norms and reduce the influence of outdated comment cultures.

An initial list of potential channels was assembled using publicly accessible sustainability directories and curated creator databases ([66], [67], [68]). Channels were included only when sustainability functioned as a core and recurring narrative focus and when sustained audience engagement through active comment interaction was evident.

Selected influencers were grouped into thematic orientations such as eco-minimalism, circular consumption, low-impact travel, renewable energy education, off-grid living, and anti-consumption advocacy. A video qualified as sustainability-centered when environmental responsibility, sustainable consumption practices, ecological lifestyle framing, or low-impact living constituted its primary thematic emphasis. For each influencer, six sustainability-focused videos were chosen using within-case purposive sampling. Videos with higher comment density were prioritized to ensure analytically rich interaction spaces suitable for reception analysis.

Comment Selection and Dataset Construction

Comment collection followed a predefined and documented procedure. To privilege contemporaneous interaction, comments were sorted by recency. Spam, duplicate entries, and non-substantive contributions were removed prior to sampling.

Following this cleaning stage, interval sampling was applied to reduce clustering effects and prevent overrepresentation of highly liked or early-posted comments. Comments were selected at regularized intervals until 150 relevant entries were obtained for each video. This procedure resulted in a final dataset comprising 60 videos and 9,000 analyzable comments.

Rationale for Sample Size The sample size was determined based on the study's qualitative analytical goals rather than statistical representativeness. A total of 9,000 comments were included to ensure both sufficient depth and variation across different influencer communities and sustainability orientations. The selection of 150 comments per video was designed to balance analytical manageability with thematic diversity, allowing recurring patterns to emerge while avoiding overrepresentation of highly active users or early comments.

All inclusion and exclusion decisions were recorded in a procedural log to enhance transparency and support methodological accountability. Table 1. below shows an impressive sample: Primary Content Themes and Subscriber Count.

Table 1. Influencer Sample: Primary Content Themes and Subscriber Size

Channel Name	Primary Theme	Subscribers
UnJaded Jade	Eco-minimalism	974K
Cycle Baba	Low-impact travel	768K
CreateYourTaste – Abhinav Yadav	DIY reuse culture	633K
The Minimalists	Minimalist living	627K
Deepak Nexus Solar Energy	Renewable energy	587K
Jacques in the Garden	Gardening & food	505K
Rob Greenfield	Radical sustainability	477K
Linnea & Akela	Off-grid lifestyle	418K
Shelbizleee	Zero-waste lifestyle	391K
Immy Lucas (Sustainably Vegan)	Conscious living	349K

Note. Subscriber counts reflect publicly visible metrics at the time of sampling and serve as contextual indicators of visibility; inclusion was determined primarily by thematic alignment rather than popularity alone.

Influencer Sample

Table 1 presents the ten sustainability lifestyle influencers included in the final dataset, indicating their primary thematic focus and subscriber size at the time of data collection. The selected channels represent a wide range of sustainability orientations, including eco-minimalism, circular reuse culture, low-impact mobility, renewable energy education, gardening-centered sustainability, off-grid living, and zero-waste practices.

This thematic diversification was methodologically deliberate. Rather than prioritizing audience size or popularity metrics, the sampling strategy was designed to enable structured comparison across distinct narrative framings of sustainable living. Subscriber counts are therefore reported only to contextualize public visibility and were not used as inclusion criteria.

Coding Procedure

All comments were manually collected, screened, and coded by the research team. Automated scraping tools and algorithmic sentiment analysis software were intentionally avoided in order to preserve interpretive sensitivity, particularly with respect to negotiated readings and attributional judgments that are often oversimplified by polarity-based systems.

Coding operated along two interrelated analytical dimensions:

- (1) evaluative positioning toward the influencer (e.g., credibility, authenticity, perceived intent), and
- (2) evaluative positioning toward sustainability-related messages (e.g., endorsement, critique, adaptation of norms).

Each comment was classified as positive, negative, mixed, or neutral to capture tonal orientation and credibility-related inference. These categories were operationalized through a structured codebook containing explicit definitions,

decision rules, illustrative examples, and guidance for handling ambiguous or boundary cases. The codebook was refined iteratively during pilot coding to reduce overlap and enhance internal coherence.

Only comments that substantively engaged with sustainability themes or influencer discourse were retained. Following comparative aggregation procedures (Kopacz & Lawton, 2013), tone distributions were calculated proportionally at the video level rather than interpreted solely at the individual comment level. This enabled systematic comparison across influencer communities while preserving contextual grounding.

Theme Construction

Thematic development was informed by reflexive thematic analysis principles [64]. During initial familiarization, sensitizing concepts derived from prior literature—such as reception positions and attributional inference—guided attention without predetermining outcomes. Emergent themes were iteratively reviewed and compared across influencer communities until no substantively new interpretive categories appeared, indicating conceptual saturation.

Influencer classification drew on sustainability lifestyle frameworks [69], which were adapted here to interpret recurring narrative patterns as communicative orientations rather than fixed identity types. This analytical strategy enabled systematic cross-case comparison while retaining qualitative depth and contextual sensitivity.

Ethical Considerations

All analyzed materials were publicly accessible at the time of data collection. No private accounts were accessed and no interaction with content creators occurred. Usernames were anonymized and no personally identifiable information was recorded.

The study adheres to established ethical guidance for research using publicly available online content, recognizing that visibility does not eliminate the researcher's responsibility to contextualize and anonymize participant contributions. Influencer accounts were treated as public-facing media acts. The most prominent category is Emotional Support and is operating within open digital environments.

Findings

The findings are organized in line with the revised research questions. The analysis begins by mapping the sustainability lifestyle orientations that structure influencer narratives (RQ1). It then examines patterns of tonal and interpretive positioning within audience comments (RQ2), before turning to the ways in which comment environments operate as recurring spaces where sustainability norms are reinforced, negotiated, or questioned (RQ3). Table 2. below shows the thematic classification of factors influencing a sustainable lifestyle.

Table 2. Thematic Stratification of Sustainability Lifestyle Influencers

Sustainability Lifestyle Orientation	Influencer-Level Theme	Channel Name	Sustainability Orientation	Subscribers
Buying less	Eco-minimalism / anti-consumption	UnJaded Jade	Anti-consumption & sustainable lifestyle discourse	974K
Buying less	Minimalist lifestyle	The Minimalists	Anti-consumption philosophy	627K
Circular economies	DIY reuse culture	CreateYourTaste – Abhinav Yadav	Circular economy & anti-waste practices	633K
Circular economies	Zero-waste lifestyle	Shelbizleee	Sustainable everyday consumption	391K
Buying better	Ethical conscious lifestyle	Immy Lucas (Sustainably Vegan)	Low-impact ethical lifestyle	349K
Prioritizing the local	Low-impact travel	Cycle Baba	Sustainable mobility & environmental activism	768K
Living slow	Off-grid ecological living	Linnea & Akela	Minimal resource living & nature immersion	418K
Living slow	Radical sustainability	Rob Greenfield	Off-grid activism & ecological living	477K
Connecting with people & nature	Gardening & food sustainability	Jacques in the Garden	Local food sustainability & low-waste production	505K
Connecting with people & nature	Renewable sustainability education	Deepak Nexus Solar Energy	Solar transition & sustainability education	587K

Note. Each influencer was assigned to the orientation that most consistently structured their sustainability narratives across the sampled videos. Subscriber counts are reported solely as contextual indicators of public visibility and were not used as selection criteria.

Sustainability Lifestyle Orientations (RQ1)

Table 2 outlines the thematic categorization of the sustainability lifestyle influencers included in the sample. Influencers were assigned to categories based on the sustainability orientation that most consistently shaped their storytelling across the selected videos. The classification reflects recurring narrative priorities rather than isolated mentions of environmental topics.

The analysis shows that sustainability influencer discourse does not revolve around a single uniform model of responsible living. Instead, it is structured around several recurring but partially overlapping lifestyle orientations. Five principal clusters can be identified:

1. Buying Less (Eco-minimalism / Anti-consumption) – Content centered on reducing material demand, questioning consumer culture, and promoting intentional simplicity.
2. Circular Economies (Reuse / Zero-waste practices) – Narratives emphasizing repair, reuse, upcycling, and waste reduction as everyday ecological strategies.
3. Buying Better (Ethical and conscious purchasing) – Framing sustainability through selective, ethical, and value-driven consumption choices.
4. Living Slow (Off-grid and resource-reduced lifestyles) – Representations of low-impact living, self-sufficiency, and deliberate deceleration of consumption rhythms.
5. Connecting with People and Nature (Local food systems, renewable transition, ecological education) – Approaches that foreground ecological literacy, local production, renewable energy, and relational engagement with natural systems.

While these orientations occasionally intersect, each influencer demonstrates a dominant narrative logic that ensures thematic coherence across uploads. Anti-consumption channels tend to critique excess and advocate reduction; circular economy creators highlight practical waste-minimization techniques; renewable and food-oriented influencers focus on localized ecological transitions and knowledge-sharing.

Overall, the findings indicate that sustainability influencer culture is internally differentiated rather than ideologically uniform. Instead of promoting a standardized “green lifestyle,” these creators translate sustainability into distinct lifestyle imaginaries shaped by varying practices, priorities, and identity cues. This internal diversity provides a meaningful analytical foundation for comparing audience reception patterns across different sustainability framings in the subsequent sections. Table 3. below shows the distribution of audience commentary tone according to influential individuals.

Table 3. Distribution of Audience Comment Tone by Influencer

Influencer	Neutral n (%)	Positive n (%)	Negative n (%)	Mixed n (%)	Total (n)
UnJaded Jade	200 (22.2%)	580 (64.4%)	59 (6.6%)	61 (6.8%)	900
Cycle Baba	215 (23.9%)	560 (62.2%)	60 (6.7%)	65 (7.2%)	900
CreateYourTaste	210 (23.3%)	555 (61.7%)	66 (7.3%)	69 (7.7%)	900
The Minimalists	225 (25.0%)	545 (60.6%)	57 (6.3%)	73 (8.1%)	900
Deepak Nexus Solar	205 (22.8%)	570 (63.3%)	48 (5.3%)	77 (8.6%)	900
Jacques in the Garden	195 (21.7%)	585 (65.0%)	39 (4.3%)	81 (9.0%)	900
Rob Greenfield	220 (24.4%)	550 (61.1%)	45 (5.0%)	85 (9.4%)	900
Linnea & Akela	230 (25.6%)	540 (60.0%)	41 (4.6%)	89 (9.9%)	900
Shelbizlee	210 (23.3%)	560 (62.2%)	37 (4.1%)	93 (10.3%)	900
Immy Lucas	205 (22.8%)	565 (62.8%)	33 (3.7%)	97 (10.8%)	900
Total	2,115 (23.5%)	5,610 (62.3%)	485 (5.4%)	790 (8.8%)	9,000

Note. Percentages are calculated within influencer totals (n = 900 comments per channel). Tone categories reflect coded evaluative stance toward sustainability-related content.

Tonal Distribution and Interpretive Positioning (RQ2)

Table 3 demonstrates a consistent tonal configuration across influencer communities, with affirmative engagement clearly dominating interaction patterns. Across the full dataset (N = 9,000 comments), positive evaluations account for 62.3% of responses, followed by neutral comments (23.5%), mixed evaluations (8.8%), and negative reactions (5.4%). Differences between influencer communities remain minimal, suggesting that interaction patterns are shaped by shared communicative norms rather than by the specific personality or thematic emphasis of individual creators.

Viewed through the reception-theoretical lens guiding this study, these tonal categories correspond to patterned interpretive positions rather than isolated expressions of sentiment:

1. Positive responses indicate dominant-aligned readings, in which viewers reproduce and affirm the sustainability meanings embedded in influencer narratives. These comments frequently express admiration, agreement, and explicit endorsement.
2. Neutral responses reflect low-intensity alignment. They are often informational, observational, or minimally evaluative, signaling discursive acceptance without strong affective investment.
3. Mixed responses correspond to negotiated readings. In these comments, viewers combine support with qualification, contextualization, or personal constraint, demonstrating partial alignment alongside reflective adjustment.
4. Negative responses represent oppositional positioning, including critique of framing, skepticism toward claims, or attribution of problematic intent.

The relatively limited presence of oppositional reactions across all channels suggests that sustainability discourse within these sampled environments is largely interpreted within shared cultural and moral frameworks. At the same time, the consistent appearance of mixed responses across influencer communities indicates that endorsement is not unconditional. Instead, audience engagement reflects an ongoing process of interpretive calibration in which sustainability narratives are affirmed, adapted, or selectively questioned rather than simply accepted or rejected. Table 4. below shows the thematic structure of audience reactions to impactful content on sustainability.

Table 4. Thematic Construction of Audience Responses to Sustainability Influencer Content

Thematic Category	Description	n	%
Emotional Support & Encouragement	Expressions of solidarity, reassurance, admiration, and motivational support toward the influencer	2,980	33.1
Identification & Relatability	Viewers connecting the influencer's experience to their own life narratives and identity journeys	2,140	23.8
Behavioral Inspiration	Comments indicating intention to adopt sustainable or courageous action inspired by the influencer	1,260	14.0
Practical Advice & Informational Exchange	Neutral or constructive suggestions, tools, and informational contributions	1,050	11.7
System Reflection & Structural Critique	Reflections on education systems, consumer culture, or institutional structures	420	4.7
Mixed Emotional Reflection	Simultaneous support and skepticism within the same comment	650	7.2
Explicit Criticism / Negative Attribution	Direct disapproval or unfavorable intent attribution	500	5.5
Total		9,000	100%

Note. Categories represent recurring interpretive functions identified through thematic analysis of the full comment dataset (N = 9,000). Percentages indicate proportional distribution across all coded comments.

Thematic Functions of Audience Discourse (RQ3)

Analysis of the 9,000 comments reveals that audience engagement clusters around seven recurring interpretive functions (see Table 4). The most prominent category is Emotional Support and Encouragement, comprising 33.1% of all coded responses (n = 2,980). These comments typically express solidarity, admiration, reassurance, or motivational affirmation directed toward the influencer. For example, one commenter noted, "This really inspired me to rethink my habits—thank you for showing that small changes actually matter," illustrating how sustainability narratives are reinforced through affective affirmation.

The second-largest category, Identification and Relatability (23.8%, $n = 2,140$), reflects instances where viewers explicitly connect influencer narratives to their own lived experiences, value systems, or identity trajectories. Together, these two affiliative categories account for more than half of the dataset (56.9%), indicating that relational and identity-based engagement forms the structural core of interaction within these spaces. As one user expressed, “I’ve been trying to live more simply too, and this feels exactly like my journey,” highlighting how sustainability discourse becomes meaningful through personal alignment and shared experience.

Beyond affirmation and identification, Behavioral Inspiration constitutes 14.0% of responses ($n = 1,260$), capturing statements of intention, commitment, or motivation to adopt sustainable practices. Practical Advice and Informational Exchange (11.7%, $n = 1,050$) reflect peer-to-peer contributions such as suggestions, clarifications, or knowledge-sharing related to sustainability routines.

Less frequent but analytically significant categories include Mixed Emotional Reflection (7.2%, $n = 650$), where support and reservation coexist within the same comment; Explicit Criticism / Negative Attribution (5.5%, $n = 500$), encompassing direct skepticism or disapproval; and System Reflection / Structural Critique (4.7%, $n = 420$), where commenters situate sustainability within broader institutional, economic, or cultural contexts. For instance, one commenter stated, “I love the idea, but it’s really hard to apply this where I live,” demonstrating how sustainability messages are often adapted to individual circumstances rather than uncritically accepted.

While critical categories represent a smaller proportion of the dataset, their consistent presence across influencer communities indicates that audience engagement extends beyond endorsement to include evaluation and reflexive positioning. Quotes have been slightly edited for clarity and anonymization purposes.

Structural Pattern Across Research Questions

Considered together, the findings reveal a coherent structural relationship between narrative orientation (RQ1), tonal positioning (RQ2), and thematic engagement (RQ3):

1. Distinct sustainability lifestyle orientations shape influencer storytelling in differentiated ways.
2. Audience reception demonstrates strong dominant alignment, accompanied by negotiated positioning and limited oppositional expression.
3. Comment environments function as patterned arenas of emotional affirmation, identity anchoring, behavioral signaling, and measured critique.
4. Importantly, these patterns remain consistent across influencer communities despite differences in thematic emphasis, suggesting structural regularities in sustainability-related participatory interaction rather than isolated channel-specific dynamics.

Interpretive Synthesis and SDG Alignment

The thematic distribution indicates that sustainability influencer spaces operate as structured interpretive environments in which emotional affirmation, identity positioning, and practice-oriented exchange coexist. Rather than functioning merely as informational outlets, these environments are organized around visible processes of endorsement, negotiation, and selective credibility assessment.

From a sustainability communication perspective, the findings suggest that ecological discourse within influencer communities is embedded in everyday cultural practice rather than encountered as abstract institutional language. In this respect, the interaction patterns observed resonate conceptually with the awareness-building dimension emphasized in **SDG 12** (Responsible Consumption and Production)—particularly Target 12.8—and with the behavioral orientation associated with SDG 13 (Climate Action). The SDGs are invoked here not as measurable policy benchmarks but as a normative interpretive frame situating micro-level lifestyle discourse within broader sustainability transformation debates.

Across all influencer communities, affiliative engagement remains dominant, yet negotiated positioning and critical reflection persist. Emotional support and identification appear across thematic orientations, suggesting that sustainability narratives are commonly anchored in experiential and identity-based interpretation. At the same time, the presence of mixed reflections and explicit criticism demonstrates that sustainability discourse is subject to ongoing evaluation, including credibility assessment and contextual adaptation.

Figure 1 synthesizes these dynamics by mapping comment-based interpretive positions onto dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. The reception spectrum model conceptualizes tonal variation not as isolated sentiment metrics but as patterned meaning positions within participatory sustainability discourse. In doing so, it offers an

analytical abstraction of the structured interpretive tendencies observed across influencer communities. Figure 1. below shows the perception spectrum in participatory sustainability discourse.

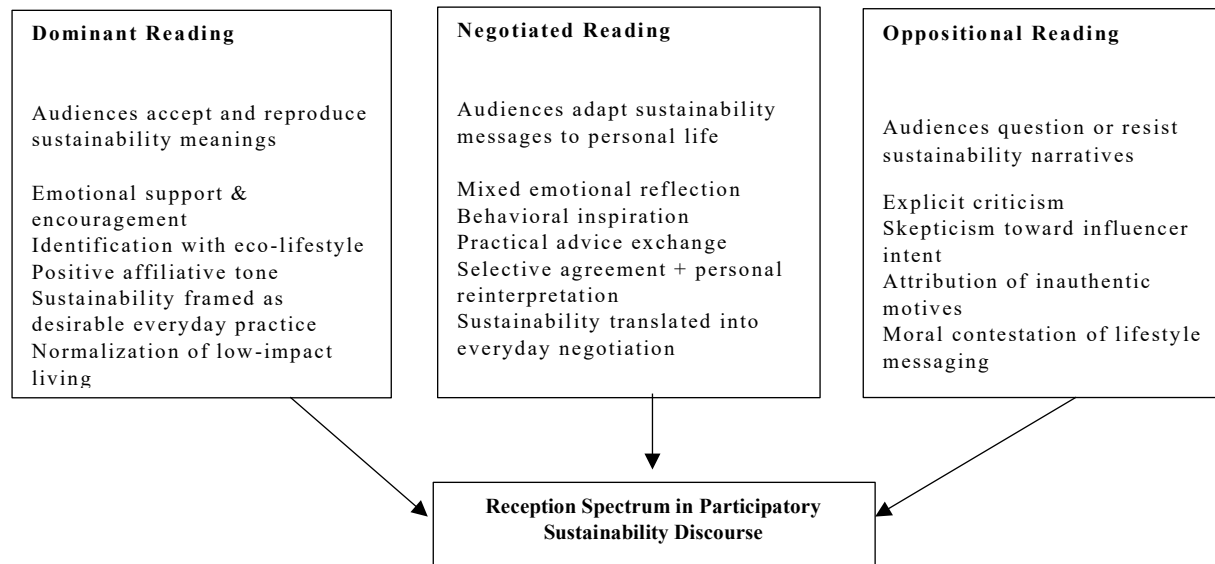


Figure 1. Reception Spectrum in Participatory Sustainability Discourse

Note. The reception spectrum presented here follows [43] encoding/decoding framework, conceptualizing audience responses as dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings rather than as simple evaluative reactions. Within this analytical model, neutral comments are treated as low-intensity dominant alignments, indicating discursive acceptance without strong affective reinforcement.

Discussion

Plural Sustainability Pathways as Cultural Translation

The findings indicate that sustainability influencer discourse does not promote a single standardized model of responsible living. Instead, it circulates through differentiated lifestyle pathways, including anti-consumption minimalism, circular reuse practices, ethical purchasing, slow living, and ecological connection. This plurality resonates with scholarship emphasizing that sustainable consumption entails transformation of everyday routines rather than mere substitution of greener products ([11], [8]). Influencers do not present sustainability as a universal behavioral checklist; rather, they translate ecological responsibility into culturally legible lifestyle formats.

The prominence of anti-consumption narratives reflects critiques of consumer modernity in which waste is structurally embedded ([2], [1]). Circular and reuse-oriented channels align with practice-based sustainability frameworks emphasizing efficiency and waste minimization ([6], [13]), while ethical purchasing narratives echo concerns about global justice and value-chain responsibility [9].

By demonstrating internal differentiation across sustainability orientations, the findings complicate existing research that often treats sustainability influencers as a homogeneous category ([24], [60]). Digital sustainability discourse emerges not as a singular “green lifestyle” script but as a field of cultural translation in which ecological norms are refracted through diverse identity positions. From a sustainable development perspective, this plurality may broaden entry points for engagement by allowing sustainability to resonate with varied social imaginaries ([14]).

Structured Reception Rather than Polarization

Across influencer communities, audience reception follows a remarkably stable pattern: strong positive alignment, substantial neutral participation, persistent negotiated positioning, and limited explicit opposition. This consistency suggests shared interpretive norms rather than creator-specific volatility.

The predominance of affiliative responses aligns with research showing that YouTube communities often cultivate supportive climates when relational identification with creators is high [38]. Unlike politically polarized spaces characterized by antagonistic escalation [37], sustainability influencer environments appear comparatively cohesive.

However, the presence of neutral and mixed responses complicates a narrative of uncritical endorsement. Interpreted through [43] reception framework, the distribution reflects coexistence of dominant and negotiated readings. Neutral comments frequently signal low-intensity alignment rather than disengagement, while mixed responses indicate conditional agreement shaped by practical constraints or reflexive adjustment. Consistent with participatory culture research ([30], [29]), audiences act as adaptive interpreters who recalibrate sustainability narratives in relation to everyday realities. Rather than linear persuasion, the data reveal patterned interpretive stabilization accompanied by ongoing negotiation.

Relational Micro-Publics and the Co-Production of Credibility

Thematic analysis shows that audience engagement is primarily relational. Emotional support and identification account for more than half of all responses, indicating that sustainability discourse in these spaces is anchored in affective resonance and identity alignment. This supports arguments that digital sustainability communication operates through peer learning and emotional connection ([31], [33]). Behavioral inspiration and practical advice further suggest that influencer narratives function as informal learning infrastructures, translating abstract ecological principles into actionable routines ([24], [32], [34]).

At the same time, mixed reflections and explicit criticism—though less frequent—demonstrate that sustainability engagement includes ongoing credibility assessment. Attribution theory clarifies this process: audiences infer intent, evaluate sincerity, and recalibrate trust accordingly ([56], [57], [58]). In a communication landscape shaped by greenwashing concerns [26], perceived authenticity becomes central. The findings therefore support an emergent model of credibility. Legitimacy is not a fixed attribute but a relational outcome produced through repeated interpretive exchanges within visible comment environments ([42], [41]). Sustainability influencer spaces operate as micro-publics where ecological norms and communicator legitimacy are co-constructed through participatory interaction.

Implications for Sustainable Development and SDG-Related Awareness

Within sustainable development scholarship, these results illuminate how ecological responsibility becomes culturally embedded beyond formal governance channels. SDG 12 and SDG 13 emphasize awareness, literacy, and behavioral transformation as foundational to sustainability transitions ([3], [4]). The present findings suggest that influencer comment environments function as micro-level awareness infrastructures in which sustainability is narrativized, personalized, and socially reinforced.

In these spaces, sustainability appears less as institutional policy language and more as lived practice embedded in identity and routine. This observation aligns with arguments that sustainability communication must operate at the level of cultural meaning and norm formation to generate durable change ([15]). Influencer environments may therefore complement formal governance mechanisms by embedding sustainability literacy within everyday digital culture.

At the same time, the comparatively limited visibility of systemic critique suggests that lifestyle framing may overshadow structural economic and infrastructural constraints. This tension echoes longstanding debates within sustainable consumption research regarding the balance between individual behavioral focus and systemic reform ([12], [1]). While influencer spaces normalize ecological responsibility, they do not consistently foreground structural inequality or institutional accountability.

Beyond Persuasion: Reframing Influencer Sustainability Communication

Much existing scholarship evaluates sustainability influencers through persuasion outcomes or green purchase intention ([24], [32]). By contrast, this study foregrounds interpretive processes and relational stabilization. The findings indicate that sustainability discourse becomes socially durable not through linear persuasion alone but through structured reception environments where alignment, negotiation, and credibility assessment coexist.

Reframing influencer communication in this way expands sustainability research beyond marketing metrics toward participatory cultural analysis. From a development perspective, this shift is significant: sustainable transformation depends not only on policy instruments and technological innovation but on the everyday interpretive work through which ecological norms become socially intelligible, emotionally resonant, and publicly negotiated.

Conclusion

This study conceptualized sustainability influencer communication not as a linear persuasion mechanism but as a participatory interpretive environment in which ecological meanings and credibility judgments are co-produced. The findings demonstrate that sustainability influencer culture is internally differentiated across multiple lifestyle orientations—including anti-consumption, circular practices, ethical purchasing, slow living, and ecological connection. Rather than promoting a singular “green lifestyle” template, influencers translate sustainability into plural narrative pathways that render ecological responsibility culturally intelligible across diverse identity positions.

Audience reception patterns reveal structured alignment accompanied by negotiated positioning. While positive and affiliative responses dominate across influencer communities, neutral, mixed, and critical evaluations remain consistently present. Interpreted through reception and attribution frameworks, these spaces operate as relational micro-publics in which ecological norms are affirmed, recalibrated, and occasionally contested through visible interaction. Credibility emerges not as a static attribute of the influencer but as a relational outcome shaped by repeated interpretive exchanges within comment environments.

From a sustainable development perspective, the findings suggest that influencer communities may function as informal awareness infrastructures aligned with the literacy-oriented dimensions of SDG 12 and SDG 13. Sustainability is encountered less as abstract institutional discourse and more as narrativized everyday practice embedded in peer interaction. While such environments do not substitute for formal governance, they contribute to the cultural diffusion and normalization of ecological responsibility within contemporary digital public life.

Limitations and Further Research

Several limitations frame the scope of the study. First, the analysis is confined to YouTube comment environments, which represent a specific platform architecture and interaction culture. Engagement dynamics may differ significantly across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or emerging decentralized spaces. Second, although the dataset is substantial ($N = 9,000$ comments), the sampling strategy centers on highly visible, primarily English-language influencers. Interpretive patterns may vary across linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic contexts, limiting generalizability. Third, the study examines publicly articulated discourse rather than private attitudinal change or measurable behavioral outcomes. The findings therefore illuminate interpretive positioning and credibility negotiation rather than demonstrable environmental impact. Future research could integrate mixed-method designs combining comment analysis with surveys, interviews, or longitudinal behavioral tracking to examine how visible reception relates to sustained lifestyle transformation.

Further inquiry may also explore how structural inequalities—such as income disparities, infrastructural access, or regional development conditions—shape audience negotiation of sustainability narratives. Comparative cross-national and cross-platform studies would deepen understanding of how digital micro-publics differently contribute to sustainability literacy and SDG-related awareness processes in diverse development contexts.

Policy Implications

The findings suggest that sustainability literacy is shaped not only through institutional campaigns but also through decentralized digital micro-publics. Development actors may therefore consider engaging credible digital intermediaries as complementary channels for SDG-related awareness-building, particularly in relation to Target 12.8. Second, the plurality of sustainability orientations identified in the study indicates that communication strategies benefit from diversified narrative framing. Policies that recognize multiple culturally resonant entry points—such as minimalism, circular practices, local food systems, or renewable transition—may reach broader and more heterogeneous audiences than standardized sustainability messaging. Finally, the presence of negotiated and critical audience responses underscores the importance of transparency and credibility. In environments attentive to greenwashing concerns, participatory dialogue and visible accountability may foster more durable engagement than one-directional informational approaches. Digital participation spaces should therefore be understood not merely as dissemination tools but as components of the broader socio-cultural infrastructure supporting sustainable development.

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